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# Polish Literature in the Shadow of Censorship. A Lecture

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**1.**

Abolishing the countrywide censorship measures and dissolving the Main Office of Control of the Press, Publications and Performances (on June 6, 1990) were examples of those rare acts, political and legal in nature, whose implications – clearly visible today – have definitely exceeded the initial, rather local effects (the removal of restrictions on the content of public communication and means of expression used to disseminate it). It has affected both our understanding of Polish literature in its historical entirety and specificity (instead of just the forty-five postwar years), and has also affected the appreciation and evaluation of Polish literature, at the very least because it has essentially nullified the *raison d'être* of a substantial portion of the literature and called the variety of techniques and conventions it employed into question. It becomes fairly easy to imagine how this has been the case once we realize that Polish literature has had a history of growing and defining its qualities – generally considered peculiar, specific only to itself – under the supervision of institutions of control; it has either been forced to develop in the shadow of political censorship or it has deliberately (and at high social, cognitive and artistic cost) situated itself beyond censorship's reach.

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Akin to Atlantis, this entire literary continent has sunk into a mythical, although not quite distant past. Presently, tried and true techniques and literary devices have suddenly proved useless. Even topics that were once the most appealing, mostly due to their political brazenness, have ultimately been made banal. Widely known and used methods of “reading” between the lines have become outdated and defunct – this, in turn, has resulted in a large portion of Polish literature becoming incomprehensible (and uninteresting) to Polish readers, especially the younger ones. These observations are only a handful of the many explanations concerning the transitory, critical state Polish literature finds itself in, the feverish reevaluations and the overarching search for new syntheses and criteria that contemporary literary criticism has embarked upon. Undoubtedly, the situation has been shaped by a multitude of other factors, including a general shift in sensitivities, cultural transformations, and new intellectual and artistic trends; among them, however, the lack of censorship has undoubtedly been the most substantial and fraught with consequences.

Given, therefore, the scale and complexity of the problem, which is impossible to explore exhaustively in a short introduction to the main body of the analysis, I would like to suggest a couple of short reflections on some basic aspects (basic at least in my opinion) of this nexus of issues, beginning with a look at early instances of censorship in the history of Polish literature, following a long trail of already published studies, as well as different strategies of employing Aesopian language as a way of dissembling, examining its contemporary, final incarnation, and concluding with an overview of the contemporary literary landscape since the abolishment of censorship, with a particular focus on literary institutions, writerly attitudes and readerly preferences, as well as transformations with regard to poetics.

## 2.

As we all know, institutions of control are as old as literature itself. It was no different in the case of Polish literature, overseen from its very beginnings by the watchful eye of the Church – or state – affiliated censor. According to scholars of this field, the first victim of censorship in Poland was Szwa-jpolt Fioł (a Franconian from Neustadt living in Krakow), sentenced to jail in 1491 for printing four Orthodox Christian books. The first censored book was Maciej Miechowita’s 1519 volume *Chronica Polonorum*, wherein the author questioned whether it was possible for the 17-year-old Sophia of Halshany, wedded to the 74-year-old king Władysław II Jagiełło in 1422, to bear the king’s three sons: Władysław III Warneńczyk (b. 1424), Casimir (b. 1426), and Casimir Jagiellonian (b. 1427). To strengthen his claim, Miechowita invoked

the opinions uttered by Vytautas the Great, who allegedly appeared at the assembly at Horodło to accuse Sophia of extramarital affairs with as many as seven knights, namely Hińcza of Rogowo, Piotr Kurowski, Wawrzyniec Zaremba of Kalinów, Jan Kraska, Jan of Koniecpol, and the brothers Piotr and Dobiesław of Szczekociny – the first four were captured and jailed while the rest fled. “Some wonder,” Miechowita concluded, “how a doddering old man was able to impregnate a blooming, young queen.” The entire argument of the acclaimed historian, including a slate of details on the mysteries of the House of Jagiellon and the validity of their claim to the throne, was meticulously scrubbed from the first and subsequent editions of the *Polish Chronicle*.

As we can surmise from the two examples, the role of the censor at that period of history was performed by either the Church or a representative of the royal court, and individual acts of censorship were local (and only sometimes provoked by the intervention of ambassadors of foreign powers) and summary in nature, incurring rather minor penalties. The final legislative act of the former Rzeczpospolita in this matter of censorship was the passage of the Cardinal Laws by the Great Sejm on January 8, 1791. Article XI guaranteed the freedom of speech to all citizens under threat of prosecution, though in reality only the nobility could claim that freedom. In any case, this first formal and legal guarantee of freedom of speech would remain only on paper because the Targowica confederates restored general censorship barely a year later, while neighboring countries extended their legal jurisdiction (including the enforcement of censorship measures) to annexed Polish lands.

Out of the three kinds of institutional censorship that Polish literature was subject to – Austrian, Prussian and Russian – it was undoubtedly the latter that authors found the most sophisticated and, in consequence, the most punitive. It was the Russian censors who devised and established forms of coercion and control that were later widely adopted by Communist censorship institutions in Poland after The Second World War. Authors who remained subject to Russia’s authority devised forms of resistance that remained effective long afterwards, even during the forty-five-year-long period of postwar Communist domination. I would like to explore these phenomena in-depth here.

In Congress Poland governorates, all printed material was subject to Russian censorship which employed a combination of the previous preventive censorship system, preserved as law, with repressive and (in practice) prescriptive censorship measures. Books were subject to much more severe censorship measures than the press, and so were publications aimed at the general population and literary works accompanied by music. Certain books published abroad were also banned in the Kingdom, including books encouraging the youth to work on restoring Polish independence, and those that

portrayed Western governorates of the Empire as Polish (e.g. “our Ukraine, Volhynia, and Podolia” in Eliza Orzeszkowa’s *The Last Love*) or suggested that any lands within the borders of the Empire may have any Polish element to them – “wherever on Polish lands.” No quarter was given to scientific and specialist publications if they were found to contain any trace of patriotic ideas (like Józef Supiński’s *Polish School of Social Economy*). From religious publications, the censors meticulously removed (in fear of their political undertones) any prayers that called Holy Mary the “Queen of Poland” as well as prayers “for the homeland” and “for the prisoners.”

Both the name “Poland” and the adjective “Polish” were rigorously scrubbed from public discourse and replaced with terms like “domestic” or “ours.” During periods when censor control was particularly tight (e.g. 1867, 1873), the list of prohibited words was expanded to include any instance of the words “homeland” or “motherland.” The censors also removed distinctively Polish honors, references to traditional garb, customs, musical elements (“confederate cap,” “kontusz,” a type of split-sleeve overcoat, or “karabela,” a type of Polish sabre), and replaced the word “king” with “prince.” It can be said that the strategic goal of these efforts was to scrub the language (and, as a result, the public consciousness) of any trace of Polishness; careful removal of the term “Poland” from print was intended to result in the breakdown of the very notion of a free and independent Poland, and eventually in the complete disappearance of Polish national identity. Thus, language regulations and policies were adapted to the political status quo, where even the official name “Kingdom of Poland” was replaced with the recommended term “Vistula Land.”

Society responded to these attempts to remove any and all manifestations of Polishness by boycotting Russianness in all spheres of life; writers responded to these efforts by eradicating all traces of anything Russian in their circles which they also described at length. Insofar as we can surmise, readers completely approved of the practice. Of all the authors publishing realistic novels in the Kingdom of Poland in the late 19th century, it seems that only Reymont was criticized for his inauthentic portrayal of a sprawling industrial city in the Kingdom in *The Promised Land*. It is symptomatic, however, that the allegation was put forward by none other than Roman Dmowski, a known proponent of Polish-Russian cooperation, in his review of the novel printed in the *Przegląd Wszepolski* [*All-Polish Review*] (1899, no. 2) outside the Kingdom’s borders. In the review, Dmowski alleged that Reymont depicted Poles, Germans, and Jews in his novels, but failed to introduce any Russian characters even though they were the actual administrators of Łódź in the period that the novel takes place. A similar allegation, however, could be made against all other widely acclaimed and popular writers of that era, including Orzeszkowa, Prus, Sienkiewicz, Berent, and Żeromski.

In short, Tsarist repressions were met with a boycott (which became a way of life for some – a patriotic duty to be fulfilled), while restrictive censoring was countered with the expulsion of Russia and Russians from the popular worldview. In literature, this removal translated into the elimination of Russians as potential characters, while in everyday life, it led to the limitation or even complete avoidance of contacts with Russian citizens. The transmission of forbidden or regulated content (either political or patriotic) – in the face of extant restrictions on freedom of speech and the repressions their violation resulted in – was accomplished with the help of a special “Aesopian” language, its widespread adoption and comprehension allowing it to remain conducive, durable, and effective throughout the period. As Eliza Orzeszkowa wrote to Malwina Blumberg, the translator of *On the Niemen* in 1887:

No dates and nothing to explicitly reference our nation’s struggles and suffering. We employ, one may say, a code fit for a prison: one word masked by these many events, another by that many, one sign meaning this term, this sign another. And we understand each other – the authors with their readers – perfectly.

### 3.

It is easiest to define Aesopian language as a method of formulating communications that conceal their explicit meaning – often moralizing or satirical – through allegory, symbols, and multifaceted fables. Aesopian language was often employed in occasional poetry and political writings during the Partitions period, and has been a staple of literature whenever subject to severe censorship measures. The emergence and durability of such language were usually compelled by specific historical circumstances, including harshly enforced prohibitions on public speaking (or writing) on certain subjects, and censorship institutions which often promulgated detailed indices of subjects and phrases that could not be uttered on stage or in print. Aesopian language can be treated as a variation of the allegorical code, wherein the layer of figurative meanings is supposed to create a hermetic shell for the meaning concealed from the watchful eye of the censor, while the stability of the code and the reading competencies of the audience (equipped with a proper key) ensure that the coded communication is decipherable.

In general, we can identify three types of artistic strategies that can be used to communicate “forbidden” patriotic, political, and nationalist messages. The first of these entailed the bypassing of censorship restrictions by choosing a historical subject or the historical novel genre, considered fairly “innocent” by censors. This is one of the reasons why the historical novel – against the

claims of European theorists of positivist philosophy and literature – was so prevalent in positivist literature. This particular method was employed by Walery Przyborowski in his novel on the January Uprising called *Upiory* [*The Phantoms*], which he set in Spain: Warsaw became Bilbao, Krakowskie Przedmieście became Madryckie Przedmieście, while Traugutt became Bona Fide. Similar intentions guided the hands of Kraszewski, Sienkiewicz, and Orzeszkowa, who chose to set their novels in ancient times and use them to explore the subject of “resistance against an imperial power.”

The second strategy entails the use of signals alerting the reader to censorial interference (either real or assumed as a means of self-censorship) as an indirect and special sign used in auxiliary communication. Read in the code of Aesopian language, censorial eliminations, signaled using an ellipsis for example, turned into rhetorical ellipses, conveying information by deliberate omission. Similar strategies were used wherever censors replaced the adjective “Polish” with the pronoun “ours” and the noun “Poland” with the word “country.” In the context of Aesopian language, these terms converted into deliberate rhetorical devices, like antonomasia (understood here as the replacement of a proper name with an epithet or a periphrasis), and indirectly evoked proper patriotic literary contexts, akin to Wincenty Pol’s *Song of Our Land* or the poetry of Lenartowicz. We may very well say that this strategy included a generally popular tactic of striving to recapture lost perspectives and introducing a politically charged message despite conspicuously eliminating all political undertones in public communications.

The third strategy can be found wherever the author engages in efforts to deliberately alter the style of the statement, elevating them to metaphors, allegories, or symbols of patriotic and political themes. This, in essence, is the reason that authors call uprisings and their results – fairly frequently, sometimes seemingly out of habit – as “tempests” and “disasters” respectively. Here is another example of such a periphrasis, drawn from Eliza Orzeszkowa’s *Anastasia*: “[...] he left for war and then spent long years in that peculiar, snow-white realm.” The sentence does not contain any mention of “uprisings,” “exile,” or “Siberia;” the latter two terms, however, have been periphrastically replaced with an outline of the place the character has been sent to. The circumlocution characteristic of a periphrasis allows the author to skip over or omit phrases and terms that the censors would definitely find “undesirable.” The semantic characteristics of Aesopian speech, implemented in the passage, encourage the inferential interpretation process, allowing the reader to acquire missing information about historical and political events.

According to general indicators of allegoric texts and reading methodologies befitting allegoresis, the interpretations of Aesopian language of all the aforementioned types reveal a proclivity towards attributing to the semantic

two-dimensionality of such constructions the function of differentiating between individual types of reading, dependent on the range of the intended audience's competencies. According to this somewhat "wishful" thinking, the literal reading, based on direct meanings and purged of all patriotic and political undertones, was intended essentially for the censor (considered to be quite naive); the other semantic plane, the allegoric spiritual reading, was intended solely for the (default and fully competent) Polish reader, with whom the patriot author was entering into a cultural and tribal covenant.

This simplistic vision of a peaceful, orderly coexistence of the control function performed by censorship institutions and the communicatory mission of literature was rarely corroborated by historical and literary realities. Indeed, the censor may have failed to understand implicit meanings in the text. He could also have pretended not to understand the second, politically charged layer of the text. But there still is a third option. The censor, as simple civil servant, may have been satisfied with certain phrases and subjects not appearing explicitly in the text; in this case, the primary reason for the publication of said texts would not have been the cleverness and ingenuity of the writers, but rather the censor's opinion that the authors' comical attempts at subterfuge were essentially harmless.

Generally speaking, it may behoove us to stop at this seemingly overly cautious conclusion. Strategies employed by both writers and censors were influenced by a host of unpredictable variables which – in practice – forced both parties to employ individual solutions which did not always follow the assumed power dynamic and sometimes even turned the structure on its head: the writer (or his editor or publisher), preempted expected interference and self-censored the text; the censor, on the other hand, was the perfect reader, easily deciphering even the most cleverly veiled allusions; the reader, finally, often moved between two extremes – either he employed the Aesopian code to decipher works that held no second meaning or, quite the contrary, was satisfied with just the literal level, and saw no reason to look for political undertones in every sentence. Undoubtedly, in each of the aforementioned cases, the existence of censorship institutions and their actual and potential efforts made a very specific mark on the nature and qualities of all literature.

#### 4.

Awareness of that peculiar state of affairs, awareness of the fact that in literature, created in the shadow of censorship, "thoughts and inspirations/ Peek from behind the words as if from behind prison bars" (to use Mickiewicz's words) was critically dissected for the first time in the late 19th and early



20th centuries. That particular period – the Young Poland period – saw the commencement of initial inquiries into historical symptoms of institutional political control, from early Polish statehood to modernity. The period also saw the first analyses of short- and long-term effects of, in the words of Antoni Potocki in *Polish Contemporary Literature*, “the influence of censorship on the style of our literature [...] and on the methods of formulating concepts in that particular era – deeply symbolic and replete with nods of tacit understanding.” These analyses revealed not only the positive, but also the negative (artistic and cognitive) consequences of that sort of “political interference in literary matters,” including, according to Potocki, the emergence of a new literary genre characterized by the banality of thought, “an addiction to platitudes and clichéd phrases,” and simplicity of expression with the author’s “words [...] not rais[ing] suspicion, the [unspoken] [...] encompassed by the ellipsis. The ellipsis is a Masonic symbol.” In this critic’s opinion, by introducing a “double standard for truth,” the genre led to the degradation of its own quality and introduced a dangerous relativization of more than just literary values.

To put things as simply as possible, the strategies that Polish writers employed in their games with censors in the Partitions period were dominated by different factors in different periods. The specific situation of Romantic literature is determined primarily by the fact that the most acclaimed works were created and published mostly abroad, beyond the reach of censorship officials, and only Polish editions were subject to their efforts – which allowed interested parties to trace the scale of those interferences introduced into the texts. In this regard, the situation of positivist literature was radically different – it was written with censorship more or less in mind. This, in turn, compelled it to accept the rules and regulations of publication and further cultivate the traditions of Aesopian speech. As is clearly apparent, censorship in this case was no longer an external threat to an already integral text; instead it became a constant factor in – and an important internal dimension of – the entire process of communication: from creation, through semantic construction, and up to the reading of a literary work.

From this perspective, the literary output of the Young Poland period can easily be distinguished by its much broader range of techniques and strategies of bypassing censorial restrictions: writers only sporadically made use of the possibility of publishing original versions of their work abroad, to be later disseminated in their homeland; they mostly released their work domestically, acceding to the demands of censors but recouping eventual losses through successful instances of establishing an Aesopian understanding with the reader; often enough, however, authors decided to release two versions simultaneously – one version was pruned by Russian censors, while the other

was closer to the author's original intentions and published in the more permissive Austrian partition. Nonetheless, if we were to try looking for specific situational aspects of such literature, we should do so in the context of a particular, symbolist variation of Aesopian language, that is a semantic structure wherein the Aesopian message is only one of many possible (although equally weak) interpretations of a complex, whilst fundamentally vague or indeterminate, conceptual symbolism of the work.

Due to the interpretational ingenuity of intellectually sophisticated readers (and the fact that writing circles strictly adhered to the Aesopian code of communicating with the reader), even the most abstract and "artistic" works were often imbued with clear, political intent and patriotic undertone. One instance of such a phenomenon is the reception of Leopold Staff's *The Treasure*, a typical example of the allegoric and symbolist poetics of Young Poland. In Henryk Elzenberg's *The Trouble with Existence*, the entry under June 28, 1912 explores how the vague sense of the eponymous symbol was easily decipherable by simply looking at the "purely" autonomous work of art through the prism of the contemporary political situation:

The treasure is clearly the motherland. The play celebrates the idea of a homeland, against waves of criticism coming from the cosmopolitans and practitioners of utilitarianism [...]. The motherland is the "temple," while the people are the "stones" making up the temple walls and there is no point in "asking a stone for opinions." Staff's characters possess a nearly superhuman will: they are no longer people, they're taut springs. [...] But *The Treasure* is an excellent read, and a timely one, given how the Polish Section in Petersburg obediently votes in favor of spending half a billion on the Russian war fleet, while our local one withdraws an already passed language bill only because the Austrian minister proposed its members do so. Those who do not like it have only the Unyielding Sentinel to cheer them up.

Censorship did not disappear after Poland regained independence in 1918, but those national institutions which took the place of Tsarist ones did not have the same reach, power, and character. Its efforts were focused primarily on anarchists, leftists, and Communist sympathizers among the avant-garde writers (including Jasiński, Stern, Wat, Peiper, Czuchnowski), but it did not spare authors associated with Sanationist circles (famously, its victims included the essays of Antoni Słonimski and one of the most acclaimed literary works of the interwar period, Julian Tuwim's *The Ball at the Opera*). Necessity forces us, however, to omit these issues and the issues of Nazi and Soviet censorship during the Second World War, so that we can talk a little about the

characteristics of censorial restrictions placed upon Polish literature after the war.

## 5.

I discussed the 19th century context at length here because I believe that one cannot properly examine strategies employed by both censors and writers without exploring the traditions which gave rise to both, that is 19th-century efforts of both Tsarist censors and the writers who tried to resist them. Such efforts provided the basic modes of behavior that later writers assumed in their relationship with the authorities in postwar Poland, and they also shaped the nature of the early relationship between literature and politics. Let us, therefore, try to apply the categories we outlined above – including censorial repressions, boycotts, and a multitude of variants of Aesopian language – to literature circulated in the 45 years after the Second World War.

Censorship efforts resulted in the removal of a large portion of historical knowledge associated primarily with Soviet repression against Polish citizens (including issues related to Polish martyrdom, warfare, uprisings, the Gulag, politics) from public consciousness, something which undoubtedly shaped the cultural and mental identity of the nation. Alongside it, censors purged contemporary émigré literature, the international canon of anti-Communist literature, the work of writers labeled as subversive for one reason or another, as well as a large, ever-shifting pool of subjects, phrases, beliefs and opinions, the selection and elimination of which is explored in depth in *The Black Book of Censorship*. The book is a collection of documents produced by censorship institutions between 1974 and 1977, smuggled outside Poland by Tomasz Strzyżewski, a censorship official, and published in London in 1977. Between 1949 and 1955, when censorship and publication control was particularly tight, even the refusal to print a government-approved text could lead to the shutdown of a circulation (a fate which befell *Tygodnik Powszechny* in 1953). These were all well-known methods employed by censorship authorities across the entire former Soviet Bloc.

There was no outright defiance of Communist authorities during the postwar period, comparable to the defiance of Russians and Russian influence during the Partitions period, except for maybe a short while after the introduction of martial law, when the boycott of state-controlled media became nationwide, organized and effective; it involved not only the creators of culture but also their audience – readers sent books back to writers, audiences booed actors or musicians or refused, *en masse*, to participate in theater performances or concerts.

This finally leaves us with Aesopian language. Generally speaking, it was an enduring and important component of literature written and published during the communist period, excluding maybe its socialist realist phase (due to particularly intense censorial efforts and an aesthetic doctrine which precluded the use of allegorical and symbolic forms of expression). Like in the 19th century, historical parables and allegories were popular among writers, especially during the so-called “thaw period” (post 1956). Here are a couple of examples: Hanna Malewska’s *Sir Thomas More Refuses*; Andrzejewski’s allegoric short stories and his novel *Darkness Covers the Earth*; Jerzy Broszkiewicz’s dramatic triptych *The Names of Power*; Jacek Bocheński’s novels *The Divine Julius* and *Nazo Poet*; the prose of J. J. Szczepański; as well as similar works which explored the events of March 1968, including the celebrated *A Mass for Arras* by Andrzej Szczypiorski. The second strategy – using censorial interference to transmit prohibited content – was utilized quite rarely (probably due to its ineffectiveness and indecipherability). It was, however, characteristic of literature published in the 1980s, primarily because of the fact that the 1981 censorship bill allowed to denote passages that were tampered with and to provide the specific article of the censorship law that the offending passage supposedly violated.

Undoubtedly, the most artistically valuable results were produced by the third stratagem – the invention of a special group of stylistic measures to communicate prohibited political and historical themes and undertones. The number of solutions available to artists under this strategy was enormous. One could follow the abstract and grotesque style favored by Stanisław Mrozek, a style that often acquires political topicality through an ostentatious disavowal of any such intention, like in the famous introduction to *The Police*: “This play does not contain anything besides what it contains, that is it does not allude to anything, it is not a metaphor in any way, and it does not have to be read.”

One could also employ a style engaging in overt dialogue with 19th-century traditions as well as with contemporary censorship, a style employed by Tadeusz Konwicki in *The Calendar and the Hourglass* and particularly in *New World Avenue and Vicinity*. Zbigniew Herbert was, without a doubt, the undisputed master of the style. His entire output is more or less allegoric and Aesopian in nature, and his *Report From the Besieged City* is an exemplary, monumental implementation of the artistic and ideological possibilities inherent in that sort of writing.

Such an overview of postwar literature from the perspective of 19th-century criteria allows us to realize that the latter do not include at least two new important phenomena which transcend outdated classifications and are specifically important to the literature of the postwar period. The first of

these is the critique of newspeak, pioneered by Mrozek (in his early satirical and grotesque works from the late 1950s), developed into a basic poetic strategy by poets of the 1968 Generation (mostly Barańczak and Krynicki), and later widely adopted as a default stylistic idiom by the younger generation of novelists and prose writers during the martial law period. The other new phenomenon was the emergence of an independent publishing industry, the so-called “second circulation,” in the late 1970s and its rapid development in the early 1980s. This underground movement introduced additional avenues of disseminating literature, but most importantly, it radically reshaped the situation of underground literature and evaluation criteria – from here on out, it was finally possible to judge work that was written as intended, the writing unrestrained and uncensored.

One rarely acknowledged and underappreciated pioneer of the movement was Janusz Szpotański, author of a number of satirical poems which combined sharp wit with political insight, astute psychological and sociological observation, and solid writing. Distributed as typewritten manuscripts, played back from tapes in the form of operas, and performed in private domiciles by the author himself – *The Silent and the Blabbers*, *Targowica* or *the Gnome's Opera*, *The Tsarina and the Mirror*, *Comrade Scumbag*, Szpotański's works were allegedly the first manifestation of independent artistic activity, realized completely beyond the reach of censorship and institutions of control. The most comprehensive anthology of Szpotański's work was released in 1990 by the London-based “Puls.” It was too late, however, to give the man the popularity he deserved by then as readers were more interested in translations of Western literature, especially popular fiction, thrillers, and spy novels. Thus, Szpotański remained a pioneer, or rather an unacknowledged and poorly appreciated classic of underground Polish literature, literature that was satirical and political.

## 6.

The brief survey above was meant to demonstrate that the efforts of institutional censorship, effective over many decades, have made an indelible mark on Polish literature as a whole, which can clearly be seen not only in 19th-century literature, but also in the literary output during the forty-five years after the Second World War. The consequences of the actions undertaken by political institutions of control, as well as the consequences of the use of Aesopian language that these actions inspired, were not limited to an isolated portion of the overall issue or one of many literary strategies. Rather, they determined (i.e. simultaneously shaped and deformed) the character of literature as a whole – its qualities and the competencies of its readers – not

to mention indicators and categories that described and evaluated literary life in a given period.

Firstly, the Aesopian language that dominated Polish literature has no definite and formal shape or form; it did not become a fully formed allegorical code, utilized in accordance with an “agreement” concluded between the authors and their audience, but remained fragmented in nature, partial, fickle (due to its dependence on historical, political, and cultural conditions of a given literary environment), and parasitical towards the tropological nature of language and traditional cultural connotations. For this reason, it generally cannot be fully “translated” or “deciphered” into coherent and complete allegoric meanings. In consequence, however, it has become something more than just a technical and historical measure of indirect communication and bypassing institutions of control; it has become a permanent and enduring component of individual poetics.

Some writers (especially those fond of the allegorical style) have been using it even when no threat of censorial interference has loomed over their work – take for example Mroźek’s and Herbert’s works written abroad or after the censorship office was abolished. It definitely improved the literary quality of the writings, refining style and augmenting the complexity of semantics, which sometimes led to critics or writers themselves ironically praising censorship for “coercing” authors into committing similar acts of stylistic and semantic ingenuity. In general, however, its use has permanently marked Polish literature as hermetic and occasional; this mark often makes it particularly hard to grasp the magnitude of significance that decides the historical and literary importance of a given phenomenon, sometimes even making it impossible for readers lacking proper competencies to come into full cognitive contact with the work.

Secondly, the prevalence of the Aesopian reading of literature in the past, a past characterized by the presence of institutions of control, has exerted a deforming influence on the semantics of literary texts, resulting in its over-interpretation – or rather hyperinterpretation – thus introducing political and topical undertones into texts that were created without any such intention in mind (like Kapuściński’s *Shah of Shahs* and *Emperor*). Obviously, allegory can always be appended, as it can make up not only a portion of the basic dimension of the text’s semantics, but also a type of supplementary, external semantic system which complements and enriches its significance and – in its capacity as a literary code – depends largely on its internalization, and its ability to persist and propagate in the readers’ consciousness. And so in this case (i.e. reading in Aesopian code) derivative, secondary meanings, introduced from outside or imposed by the readers became a permanent component of the meaning of a given literary work, despite having no direct relationship with

its internal structure, by participating in shaping (if not outright determining) the face of this sort of literary fact.

Thirdly, the mere existence of censorship institutions – not only actively restricting freedom of speech, but also creating permanent reference points for writing, reading, and evaluating literature – led to a peculiar situation, wherein even authors who were never in any way interested in taking up historical and political issues in their writing were perceived through its categories. This sometimes resulted in works being judged on what they did not talk about and on potential reasons for the lack of certain (Aesopian) techniques and meanings. This, in turn, imbued the choices made by “apolitical” writers with a certain political stigma (not always justified) of false apoliticism, a suspicious “asylum” or “reservation,” established in a “hell” for artists, which otherwise essentially provided them with (in Herbert’s word) “total isolation from life in hell,” and was not only approved of, but officially financed by the state. Those who bypassed censorial control and chose to publish their work through underground channels were often automatically subjected to the consequences of their decision, which led to their work being thrust into political immediacy, the cult of unambiguity, and a clearly dichotomous black-and-white range of values. Both phenomena were determined, fueled, and justified by the emergence (or rebirth, in an inverted form) of a special sort of critical doctrinarism, which evaluated work according to a single criterium: a pre-determined and “ideal” literary message.

The aforementioned attributes have largely influenced the dominant image of Polish literature as a whole, regardless of the fact that its past contains beliefs and poetics that were not subjected to the influences of Aesopian language and cannot be explained in categories of positive or negative reaction to institutions of control. The situation today, although still vague and lacking fully realized parameters, allows us to identify at least some basic tendencies in the three aforementioned areas, namely institutions and norms of literary life, readerly preferences, and tendencies of individual poetics.

Therefore, in the sphere of institutions and the norms of literary life, the end of censorship has allowed us to make up for lost time fairly quickly (e.g. the distribution of books that were heretofore banned or the dissemination of historical knowledge that was eliminated from public discourse by censorship), and also compelled us to reevaluate our own attitudes and expectations towards literature, while relieving it of the patriotic duty to surreptitiously communicate “illegal” ideas. It has also compelled us to reevaluate the status and role of writers in a normal, modern society in which the writers’ prior, privileged “missionary” role would essentially be unjustifiable. In the modern, open market of ideas, the writer needs to rebuild, or redesign his bond with

the reader; the publisher needs to create a market according to rules much different than before; and literary circles have to come together to recreate, from the ground up, proper cultural and literary institutions.

Uncompromising in its commitment to telling the truth, the underground literature has had great historic significance – in both meanings of the word – in these circumstances. Allegoric historical novels are nowadays of interest mostly to older historians of literature, who are much more attuned to Aesopian codes. The Aesopian style itself, fused in the readers' minds with the very concept of Polish literature and its specifics, still haunts its halls, but nowadays, however, it mostly lacks the political, cognitive, and artistic legitimacy it once enjoyed.

The most important event in the sphere of reader preferences is definitely the breakdown of the “national” covenant myth; the fiction of there being some sort of unanimity between Polish writers and readers. The literary and political agreement on utilizing Aesopian communication was based on the assumption of there being a national consensus on basic political, ideological, and axiological issues; Aesopian language required the acceptance of a one, true reading that would lead to the deciphering of the coded message; it did not allow any debates over its aptness. Pulling political discourse to the surface has revealed a basic uncertainty over its prior legitimacy and the existence of a pluralism of attitudes, forcing their mutual confrontation and, therefore, the necessity of providing justifications for presenting positions which no longer can simply invoke the presupposed “national consensus.”

## 7.

Finally, I would like to turn our attention to certain changes or shifts in literary styles or strategies. Generally speaking, the seat of previously dominant attributes of literature – occupied by a complex of special tricks and techniques to encipher information, construct entire systems of allusions and multilayer tropological substitutions, as well as deep-rooted meanings – has been taken over gradually but noticeably by techniques exposing the complexity of the organization and the semantic value of the superficial layer; saddling it with the burden of a given work's “ambiguousness.” Respectively, the traditional, vertical variant of allegory – heretofore employed by the use of Aesopian language, based on the opposition of superficiality and depth, the overt and the covert meaning – has been increasingly supplanted by the variant of narrative allegory, one derived solely from literal meanings and whose reading does not require any external augmentation. Comparing specific texts is the easiest way to spot the difference.



A good example of the former is a classic poem by Zbigniew Herbert, long published without a title but starting with the *incipit* "We stand on the border." As evidenced by the poem's reception over the years, the Aesopian meanings encoded in the texts turned out to be so difficult to decipher for the readers (Polish readers, too) that for many years it has remained essentially unavailable, hermetic. Only after it regained elements removed by the censors – those which were meta-textual (in the form of the title: *To the Hungarians*) and extra-textual (in the form of the date: 1956) – the readers were able to decipher that the poem was dedicated to the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, thus connecting individual phrases and seemingly extra-historical symbols with specific political and historical events (e.g.: "we stand on the border," "hold out our arms," "for our brothers for you/ we tie a great rope of air").

The latter variant of narrative allegory is represented by another well-known poem, Wisława Szymborska's *An Opinion on the Questions of Pornography*, which demonstrates how this particular literary discourse was embarked upon towards deep and far-reaching transformation. The poem, created in the mid-1980s, near the collapse of Communist rule as well as the decline of Aesopian language, can be considered as a farewell, a nostalgic and ironic death knell, a tribute to the "Poles' lengthy nocturnal conversations," as well as the bygone style of communicating lofty and secret meanings. In this case, they are no longer concealed by the veil of metaphoric substitutions, but stem directly from a rather successful exploitation of lexicalized homonymy and the idiomatics of "debauched" literal meanings, combining erotica and politics in an ambiguous game, sexual freedom with freedom of thought, and – more generally – the "treacherous" character of language (revealing its speaker) with a "dishonestly" used technique of enacted lyrics. Understanding the poem – including deciphering the "secret" message about a clandestine meeting of people interested in discussing politics – does not require from the reader additional, extra-textual knowledge from, for example, history or politics, but only a general idea of literary matters and cultural traditions plus a little experience in extracting the hidden message of literary works from peculiar configurations of literal meanings. The main weight of this sort of text is located – one might say – outside it, and all of its secrets are hidden within its rich surface.

The third phase of relinquishing Aesopian speech and traditional obligations of literature can be illustrated by the "flagship poem" of the "Brulion" generation – Marcin Świątlicki's *For Jan Polkowski*. The meaning of the poem – from the perspective assumed herein – lies in the liberating power of the gesture of protest against the restrictions and limitations of Aesopian speech which fulfills its social obligations, but produces spiritual and artistic paralysis in the process (branding writers as producers of "the poetry of slaves,"

for whom even love poems would be written using a “dragon alphabet”). Świetlicki is quite obviously employing a two-dimensional semantic structure in his poem – here embodied by the ironic metaphors of poetical discourse. He does so, however, to expose the consequences – heretofore mostly concealed or trivialized – of using such a method of communication and attempts to subvert the traditional hierarchy between overt and covert meaning, decidedly abiding by the freedom of using whatever speech one may want to, strictly on one’s own behalf. He does so to express the truth of individual experience rather than act as a conduit for obligatory social, patriotic, and religious messages and themes, coagulating into a deck of stale clichés and stereotypes employed in constant rotation.

Świetlicki’s poem already has an assured place in contemporary Polish literature as it serves as proof of an important breakthrough in literary consciousness, its revolutionary nature evidenced by the very structure of the message: announcing a program for a new poetry movement over the course of a sarcastic polemic and dramatic reckoning with the obligations of literature, fulfilled through Aesopian speech. However, there is much more to contemporary dialogues with poetic tradition of (un)censored “doublespeak” than just this. The fourth – and final, at least as of right now – phase could be documented in Miłosz Biedrzycki’s innovative poem *Akslop*, which I would like to quote here in its entirety as it is probably the least known:

Akslop, seems like a name of some Danish city  
 I’m just passing by, although I’ll be staying for  
 a while, because the ministers of agriculture  
 sat on milk cans and blocked  
 all the roads. I’ve been already a little steamrolled  
 by local peculiarities, like Diwron  
 or Cziweżór. I’ve loved a couple of local girls,  
 the cops have chased me a few times  
 through the sidewalks. the people are great,  
 they’re convincing me to stay. I promise you,  
 wherever I will be, Akslop will always be  
 on my mind<sup>1</sup>.

Biedrzycki’s poem should draw our attention primarily because it is a representative testament (full of deliberate offhandedness) of spiritual liberty in shaping one’s own poetic voice and vision; unimpeded by obligations and

1 Miłosz Biedrzycki, \* („Gwiazdka”), (Kraków–Warszawa: Fundacja „brulionu”1993).

missions imposed by history and circumstance, by resentments, or by negation or the desire to object, and yet still anchored in the traditional model of literature. The estrangement of the poetic vision is achieved here not only through employing otherization, but also through the use of a classic palindrome trick (based here on reversing the names to be read backwards), which encodes the solution to the riddle on the surface of the text and thus constructs its own dual meaning on a single, primary level (linguistic-symbolic) of its artistic organization. I personally consider this poem an example of the last phase of literary dialogue with censorship in coded speech mostly because of the nearly untrammelled distinctness of the perspective it assumes, enriched with additional programmatic value.

The ostentatious yet playful detachment from the Poland-centric perspective and its highest values, from the “automatic” identification with a nexus of characteristics denoting Polishness and the allegoric code used to read them, is a pretty telling testament to how far we have come. The long shadow that censorship cast over Polish literature no longer has any effect on this sort of work; as we know full well, phantoms cast no shadow. This demonstrates how radically different the situation has been for younger generations of writers and readers – not only have they been free of having to always keep the existence of censorship in the backs of their minds, but it has been increasingly more difficult to realize the sort of power that this strange institution once wielded, an institution whose name – to use Biedrzycki’s own trick – nowadays sounds more like *pihsrosnec*.

## 8.

To conclude, let us add just one more thing: in times like these, literature – for many, understandable reasons – occupies a marginal position in the hierarchy of human needs and interests. The writer, this time only on his own behalf, has to reestablish a connection with his readers and fight for their attention. The shape of each author’s work is decided by opaque circumstances, ambiguous situations, and heterogeneous factors. We may even say that post-Communism and post-totalitarianism entered into a peculiar symbiosis with post-modernism and other post-isms. Already these ambiguous, somewhat “provisional” definitions and terms clearly indicate that the current literary and cultural moment is deeply in flux.

Awareness of the fact can be found primarily in the work of the most acclaimed writers that have entered the literary stage in the late 1980s, and this is probably why an intensely experienced value of freedom is one of its defining characteristics – it is the generation that is both aware of the dangers as well as the opportunities it brings, devoid of fears and illusions. Therefore, it

is maybe of this generation that we should expect the fulfilment of the most difficult task – a task that demonstrates the breadth and depth of the changes we are witnessing: the formation of our own literary idiom of speaking, redefining the character of Polish literature.

*Translation: Jan Szelągiewicz*

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