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A World of Slavic Literatures

Essays in Comparative Slavic Studies in Honor of Edward Mozejko

Edited by
Paul D. Morris

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Polish Émigré Literature and Polish Literary History

Readers and critics of Polish literature are not infrequently inclined to place into a single political paradigm both all of Polish exile literature in its historical entirety and that which comprises a separate section of twentieth-century Polish literature. As a consequence of this, émigré literature is perforce linked with politics, explained via recourse to political facts, interpreted in terms of political contexts and designated value according to the political stands and choices made by particular writers ("literature written in exile is and must be above all political and historic," wrote Józef Garliński in 1986).[1] The central issues that interest scholars of exile Polish literature are thus defined according to their formulation within this paradigm. The signs of this paradigm can be found in considerations of the division of émigré literature into temporal periods and of the ideas, topics, phenomena, and functions attributed to it. As a result, from the perspective of this approach, the émigré and political characteristics of literature result in two versions of the same page, both written at the same time and in the same handwriting.

The main indicator of this kind of approach to the study of exile literature is the conviction that the more extensive the description of the political signs indicating this literature's émigré character, the more precise the depiction of the émigré components indicating its literary character.

This strategy for understanding literature written in exile manifests itself most clearly in discussions of its character and temporal limits: What date sets the beginning of emigration: September 1st or September 17th 1939? The treaty in Teheran or Yalta? Is it the date when the international community denied recognition to the Polish government in London or the moment the iron curtain fell on Eastern Europe? Are we talking about political motivated emigration, literature written abroad or a diaspora? These are the most frequently asked

[1] Józef Garliński, "Pierwsze kroki" ["The First Steps"], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 10 (London, 1986), 39.

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questions that appear in considerations of the beginnings of Polish émigré literature in the context of WW II. Similar questions are asked about émigré Polish literature's final moments. This time, the indicated dates include the dates of the Round Table talks, the first free parliamentary elections, the abolishment of censorship, the handing-over of the insignia of the Polish government in London to the president, Lech Wałęsa, the withdrawal of the last Soviet army unit from Poland, and so on. The more precisely we attempt to indicate a *terminus ante quem* and a *terminus post quem* for post-WW II Polish émigré literature, the clearer it becomes that these dates are of limited use to historians of literature.

This choice of dates is nonetheless of importance, however, when one considers the history of the Polish State and its cultural life, as well as the history of different editorial offices, books, magazines, manuscripts, and various cultural, scholarly and editorial enterprises, but most of all the fates of people thrown into the violent currents of these events. For those looking at these facts (which begin and end the history of Polish émigré life) for signs indicating the character of particular works or the general phenomena of literature written in exile, however, this search is destined to end in vain. "Let us not deal with the émigré characteristics of literature,"—it is frequently suggested—"because there is only one Polish literature, and its divisions up until now have been artificial, meaning political. With the Third Polish Republic the time has come to assemble post-war Polish literature into a single unit." Such postulates are accompanied by opinions that question whether émigré characteristics are of defining significance to this literature. According to them, the émigré quality and providence of this literature cannot be an indicator of its literary quality because literature by its nature is either good or bad and its values do not depend on the contexts of its origins. These extreme positions show very well the range of differences among literary scholars, when, after the creation of the Third Polish Republic, political emigration lost its legal and formal justification. It has ceased to be a fact in current political and literary life.

There are many sources for these differences and one could dedicate separate considerations to them. The sources of controversy lie most often in the mixing of different ranges of meaning, and in the use of such terms as "emigration" and "émigré characteristics." No one in particular is to be blamed for this situation. Systematic research on twentieth-century exile literature has been conducted only in the last few years; the background documentation is scattered, and its network

of institutional support is still under construction. But the major problem, as above indicated, has been the placing of separate literary works and literary phenomena in their appropriate conceptual realms. Domestic scholars of émigré literature in exile, making up for the shortcomings of some interpretations which have remained unaddressed for a few decades, are required to construct an entirely new methodology and must, *ad hoc*, create horizons of understanding for these different expressions of émigré literature.

The problem is not that it is unclear how this ship called "émigré literature" is to moor itself to the land of "twentieth-century Polish literature" but that this "land" as a unified historical and literary construction does not yet exist. All the certainties which had allowed us to treat twentieth-century Polish literature as a rather well known entity, with clear indicators, hierarchies, and clusters of texts and hence stability, fell apart after 1990. The same indicators which put an end to the existence of "literature written in exile" around 1990, have led to the collapse of that *terra firma* called "domestic literature."

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Studies of literature written in exile treat different and very often distantly scattered areas. The creation of the Polish political diaspora, the fates of its participants and institutions, the different forms of its activities, time and the geography of the emigrants' work—all of the above create a line of contact between political and historic (and not only literary) issues.

The history of the formulation of the concept of émigré literature—with its specific characteristics, including the creation of the status of an émigré writer and the arguments which regulate issues of relations between exile and home—is a sphere where strictly political questions mutually intermingle with the phenomena of cultural and scholarly life in exile. When the objects of our studies are certain literary works or ideological quarrels within literature written in exile, however, "politics" as a tool for translating the specificity of this literature is very rapidly shown to be of limited value. As such, in research into the specificity of the subject matter of literature written in exile—its symbols, axioms and styles—the use of "political characteristics" as a category to differentiate the literature written in exile has often proved useless. The specifically émigré characteristics of this literature are a function of its existence in history—understood as its experience of a common fate—and not a matter of the relationship between literature

and politics. In other words, what constitutes the real political range of the émigré characteristics of Polish literature is related to its specific historicity. Thus, it is not politics but historicity that creates the basic context of study and delimits the boundaries of literature written in exile. How are we to understand this historicity? Does it mean inscribing literature within the temporal limits which inaugurate and terminate the history of political emigration after 1939/1945? If this were so, literature written in exile would exist for us as long as there were forms and institutions of political emigration. Thus, today it would be a finished phenomenon; although not yet fully transformed by literary scholars, it would nonetheless already be covered with the past and isolated from literature currently in the making, as Jerzy Jarzębski wrote in his book *Farewell to Emigration*:

> The passing away of emigration is an irreversible process, because nobody is going to replace Lechoń, Wierzyński, Gombrowicz, Stempowski, Vincenz, Grydzewski, Jeleński, Czapski. Their deaths create an emptiness no one is there to fill in. Along with the emigrants of the old generation the institutions of emigration are also dying away: journals and magazines of lengthy history are being closed down..., institutes of sciences and different cultural institutions are reducing their activities, and most of all the emigrants' houses are disappearing altogether—when their inhabitants die, their often valuable collections of books, documents, memoirs and souvenirs, everything that provided material support for cultural life in exile is scattered and lost. So what is then "farewell to emigration?" It is not only a passing away of a few generations of artists who had chosen the unstable fate of exiles. ... This is a passing away of a cultural model which was based on ideological and organizational dichotomy of the literary life, on a dialogue of attitudes and viewpoints. The specificity of literature between 1945–89 lay in the tension between the domestic and émigré sides, in the confrontation and filtration of values, the flow of people and books. When bidding farewell to the literature written in exile we bid farewell to "domestic literature." [2]

This is a most accurate evaluation. Nonetheless, I am going to place consideration of the inevitable end of émigré literature in an entirely

[2] Jerzy Jarzębski, *Pożegnanie z emigracją. O powojennej prozie polskiej* [Farewell to Emigration. On Post-War Polish Prose] (Kraków, 1998), 239–45.

different interpretative perspective. The point here lies not in simply stating that émigré literature as a historical phenomenon has reached its happy end because the political causes for its existence have disappeared—this is an unquestionable truth—but in asking the question what is the place of émigré Polish literature within the entirety of twentieth-century Polish literature? How are we to describe Polish literature when the literature written in exile is no longer considered a separate part? In order to give an answer to these questions, one must reject at least three practices now so seemingly self-evident that they are usually beyond the theoretical consideration of scholars of contemporary Polish literature. First of all, we must no longer look at literature written in exile from the perspective of domestic literature, a practice which would be not unlike looking from land out at a ship that after fifty years is returning from distant seas to her home port. Would not an opposite view, one directed from the perspective of literature written in exile at domestic literature be cognitively more fertile and simultaneously buttressed with stronger historical foundations? What are the specific criteria that lead us to treat domestic literature as the "High Center" from which we look at literature written in exile, making it subject to the domestic literature's categories, norms and principles of judgement? Relating further to the earlier metaphor of the "ship" and the "land," it is difficult today to select specific arguments that unquestionably settle the matter "what moors to what" because both of these objects drift simultaneously around each other. In addition, while constantly changing their locations, they change their shape and consequently their status within the realm of twentieth-century Polish literature.

To justify the necessity of such a change in discourse undoubtedly requires making several subtle distinctions which, due to lack of space, I will be unable to formulate here. The cognitive assumptions of this discourse were never of either a methodological or theoretical character but rather came as a consequence of several facts, such as the Polish state's existence on the Wisła river and not abroad; that several generations of scholars studying literature written in exile have been educated and conducting their research in Poland; and that it is in Poland where partial and general projects in the studies of literature written in exile have been carried out. These facts have never been the subject of thorough theoretical reflection by literary scholars. As a consequence, there has been a consolidation of an interpretative method based on the automatic linking of one category, defined by the presence of "émigré" characteristics, with another, defined by the "political" char-

acteristics of emigration. The "political" characteristic of literature written in exile is most often understood as a function of political history or a sphere of subjects the center of which is occupied by power; this is how politics was commonly understood in communist Poland. Yet what power did the literature written in exile supposedly serve? When speaking of the "political" characteristic of literature written in exile, we must more precisely differentiate what the "political" characteristics of exile literature are supposed to mean in serving as a category of description. Is it not rather the case that Polish literature, as seen from an émigré perspective, was inscribed into a political context throughout this whole period? And that the descriptive category of "political" would be better applied to the literary works published in Poland rather than those written in emigration in France or England. And if politics is a category which cannot be overlooked in the description of twentieth-century Polish literature, do not the completely different understandings of politics and political characteristics prove the important historical differences between domestic literature and that written in exile?

It may seem absurd to describe domestic literature using the categories and problems that have constituted exile literature and not the other way around. It is enough to broaden the historical perspective, however, to notice that this postulate is well rooted in the historical and literary practice of Poland. Do we not look at all of nineteenth-century Polish literature through the prism of the literature of the Great Emigration? Did not émigré writers create the basic aesthetic and ideological categories of Polish romanticism and did they not exercise the most influence in the development of domestic romanticism? Mickiewicz, whose 200th birth anniversary was celebrated in 1998 under the patronage of the president of Poland, and Słowacki, whose birth and death were celebrated in 1999 under the patronage of the highest authorities of Poland as well, were they not earlier both cursed émigrés? And finally, is the Polish national anthem not an emigrants' song? To put it briefly: nobody is searching for the émigré and political characteristics of this literature, even though Polish romantic writing was no less political than twentieth-century émigré writing.

An explanation for the main differences in treating the émigré (political) characteristics of the romantic writers and the post-WW II émigré writers would go far beyond the sphere of strictly literary studies. It is not enough to say that "time changes everything." The Dąbrowski Mazurka would not have remained the national anthem in 1918, and Mickiewicz's, Słowacki's, or Norwid's works would not

have created the basis for a canon for the Polish literary tradition had not the people of the Second Polish Republic identified unanimously with the emigration and émigrés. And what is the situation today? Isn't the comparison of the differences in the relationships "country—exile" after 1918 and 1989 a subject worthy of thorough reflection by historians?

Textbook accounts of the history of Polish romantic literature have not changed for decades: after information on the November Uprising, a chapter on the great romantics (émigrés), or on the phenomenon of émigré romantic literature, follows. In the People's Republic of Poland, the composition of literary textbooks was entirely different. Émigré literature was given marginal attention if any at all. The format of this type of composition has lasted longer than the regime that created it. Today's accounts of postwar literature (so far very few have appeared) repeat the old scheme, attributing to domestic literature the function of forming the main trunk in the literary and historical tree of communist Poland's literature and giving émigré literature the status of a branch, gradually drying off due to its old age. In this way, the political-schematic method enforced in the People's Republic of Poland to describe the history of twentieth-century Polish literature has changed into a methodological schema. Is this the result of habit? Most studies dedicated to Polish writing from *Młoda Polska* until WW II, however, leave no doubts that the evolution has not changed with the breaking down in 1945 nor died in 1949. Inter-war literature has changed into literature written in exile (with its roots in *Młoda Polska* and with all of its potential). To repeat this thesis: the Polish literature written in exile is the natural, personal, institutional, aesthetic, axiomatic and ideological continuation of the literature produced in the inter-war years. It was created mainly by writers who had their debuts in the 1930s and for whom emigration entailed a prolongation of their earlier activities as writers. While describing the writing of Cz. Miłosz, W. Gombrowicz, G. Herling, J. Mackiewicz, K. Wierzyński, Z. Haupt, A. Bobkowski, J. Lechoń, Z. Romanowiczowa, M. Czuchnowski, W. Iwaniuk, J. Łobodowski, W. Zbyszewski, W. Grubiński, M. Hemar, H. Naglerowa, B. Toporska, K. Jeleński, and A. Wat, it is impossible to overlook their inter-war roots and the natural continuity from their first appearances at this time and their most recent works. The same applies to the institutions of literary life. After 1945, the turbulent river of pre-war literature split, with its main, most forceful current "turning" towards emigration, where it has existed for the last few decades. That is where the historical characteristics of exile literature

lie. What was left of pre-war Polish literature were singular currents (streams) embanked by the cultural politics of the People's Republic of Poland, under the constraints of a variety of "settlement with the 1920s," while empowering a new literature in the making and its different system of literary communication—different, because its main constitutive reference point, an often invincible mark, was Stalinism and socialist realism. It was only after 1956 that émigré literature was gradually included into the corpus of domestic literature. The works of émigré literature by such writers as Miłosz, Gombrowicz, Herling, J. Mackiewicz, Lechoń, Wierzyński, Iwaniuk, Łobodowski, Stempowski, and Wat entered the country in waves and significantly influenced Polish literature and criticism. It has not been an overtly osmotic process, since it is hard to say whether the literature of the People's Republic of Poland influenced the literature written in exile, even though it was known, commented upon, published and presented with prizes by the émigrés from the 1970s onward.

The thesis to which these observations lead is as follows. The fall of communism has created a factual end of emigration as a political phenomenon. But the end of emigration, as paradoxical as it may sound, does not signify the end of literature written in exile. Literature is not only a cluster of books moored somewhere in the place and time of their publications. It is also the reception of that literature. The literature written in exile, which like a huge wave has been entering Poland for more than a decade, is being read, published and commented upon here in Poland and is becoming one of the central phenomena of our contemporary literary critical environment. For some writers it is a life "after life" and one that is just beginning; here it is enough to mention the lives of Haupt, Lipski, Łobodowski, Iwaniuk, J. Mackiewicz, Wat, Stempowski, or Vincenz. For others, it is a natural continuation—and here, of course, it is enough to name the writings of Miłosz, Herling, or Gombrowicz.

The specificity of this reception is that the works of many émigré writers constitute a more serious challenge to national readers than the works of domestic writers who are much younger. Domestic writers have their own critics, their own history of reception, along with rich and largely stabilized canons of interpretation. The émigré writers appear as if from nowhere—their works cannot count on the same, common context of understanding, which in a natural way links domestic literature with its domestic readers. Hence the works by émigré writers unknown to the Polish public for decades and published in the Third Polish Republic find themselves in a paradoxical situation, simi-

lar to that of works making their literary debut. The critics have similar interpretative problems with them as with the books of writers who published their first books in the1990s. In both cases—*toutes proportions gardées*—criticism encounters unknown pieces of writing. The interpretative schemes that were created earlier to explain domestic literature often lead to the establishment of "barriers" against the understanding of literature written in exile. Domestic critics of literature have problems with the writings of Haupt, Lipski, J. Mackiewicz, Bobkowski, or Herling.

When we read and study literature written in exile today, moreover, we do not read it only as a literature written in exile. We discover in it a lost link to the inter-war literary and intellectual tradition, a link outside of the national discourse of literature and criticism.

While pondering the phenomenon of the émigré characteristics of this literature, we in fact consider not only its difference from domestic literature, but also its position within Polish literature of the twentieth-century. While getting to know the specificity of literature written in exile, we reacquaint ourselves at the same time with the specificity of Poland's domestic literature. Only a contemporary view from different perspectives allows us to notice what these literatures share and what there individual characteristics are, what is universal or particular about them, what continues well known phenomena and what creates new artistic facts. In this sense, the study of the Polish literature written in exile may change the future picture of the Polish literature of this century taken as a whole. We have not assembled all of that literature yet; its synthetic construction will require going far beyond the relevant contemporary discourses, both domestic and émigré.

Even émigré literature has a discourse with its own particular stereotypes and preconceptions which literary scholars must be aware of. A typical example may be offered in a stereotypical juxtaposition of Giedroyć's *Kultura* with Grydzewski's *Wiadomości* according to their central differences based on their differing political environments and their separate political roots. These differences have been well described by historians. When different writers form the subject of literary study, however, this kind of dualistic and politically transparent picture is dramatically oversimplified. Enough to say that in the first decade of *Wiadomości*—that is, in the period regarded as the "toughest" and most "conservative" in its history, Herling was one of its main authors. His publications, and those of a few other writers, certainly did not match the journal's conservative profile as immortalized by Gombrowicz and Miłosz in their sound polemics with emigra-

tion. In still another example, Gombrowicz strongly criticized in his *Journal* the writer Zbigniew Gradowski, who was "annihilated" because of the inanities he wrote about the author of *Trans-Atlantic*. In the studies of Gombrowicz's writings, Grabowski has not come out as a perceptive critic, although one must remember that this somewhat limited and presumptuous teacher was, according to Gombrowicz, the author of some thoughts which belong among the central principles of the contemporary European conscience. In 1946, Grabowski wrote:

> Our living conditions demand the creation of an immense territory called Europe. They demand, as in the Middle Ages, one culture, one nationality, a new hierarchy of values. The fight for these values is going to be long. It will not be an easy process for Europe to create anti-bodies to destroy unfriendly powers. Yet the road towards such a future leads only through such a recovery of power, through putting herself on her feet again, linking the states across the continent and the abolishment of frontiers. Europe will either unify and put an end to all terrible domestic wars in its premises or this great continent will sink to the bottom. ... To rebuild and renew Europe constitutes today a plan and life's struggle for generations.[3]

Today, such sentiments dominate the thinking of the European Commission in Brussels. These are, however, the words of a man who, in the history of émigré writing, was placed in the group of so-called "London-hermits." It is not the only example.

And finally is the third of the above-mentioned practices which requires thorough revision. It regards the interpretative formula according to which the anti-Communist subject matter of the most important works written in exile, such as *The World Apart* by Herling, J. Mackiewicz's prose, *The Captive Mind* by Miłosz, Bobkowski's *Sketches with a Feather*, *My Century*, and the anti-Stalin essays by Wat, are considered a kind "political" writing from which their secondary layers of universal meaning may be developed. It is enough to go beyond the categories of the discourse shaped in Poland's domestic literature and write these works into the intellectual horizon of literature of the 1930s to see that categorization of these works according to putative "political characteristics" would entail a thorough misrepresentation of their qualities.

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[3] Zbigniew Grabowski, *Wiek klęski* [The Centry of Our Defeat], *Almanach Historyczno-Literacki* (London, 1946), 21.

World Apart is an autobiographical and educational story (a type of *Bildungsroman*) the central question of which is concerned with man's attitude towards evil—and the commentaries by the author leave no doubt that J. Mackiewicz's prose, quite contrary to what is commonly suggested, is apolitical and, like the essays by Wat, grew out of rebellion against politics as the central horror of the twentieth century. Even *The Captive Mind*, on the basis of which Miłosz became a well recognized sociologist and politologist in the United States, is primarily a literary piece, in which the description of the countries conquered by the "New Faith" is only a clever development of Witkacy's literary vision. It is time to read this book according to the conventions by which it was written—as a literary parable, growing out of the inter-war anti-utopia.

Literature written in exile does not avoid political topics of course, but the intellectual horizon in which these topics are discussed does not belong to politics. From this perspective, politics is what Goethe used to call "fate" (*Politik ist das Schicksal)* and the basic dimension (measure) of the common experience of history. The "political characteristics" of literature written in exile are, from this perspective, a continuation of pre-war reflections on European culture. Many exile writers continued their reflections, which stem from the inter-war period, on the madness of the world they lived in. Neither emigration understood as a political phenomenon nor the events of WW II provided the sources for the cultural diagnosis to be read in books by Miłosz, Gombrowicz, Herling and Bobkowski, J. Mackiewicz as well as Wierzyński, Stempowski, Terlecki, Haupt, Mieroszewski, Jeleński, Czapski, and many others. The analysis they offered was one common to Polish modernism as a whole and was based on recognition of the final collapse of the social order destroyed during WW I, after the earlier weakening of its foundations during the social revolutions that took place at the turn of the century.

In the eventful and politically hastened fragmentation of twentieth-century Polish literature into rapidly changing epochs, periods and generations, the continuity of the most important current of the twentieth-century, namely that of modernism, was lost. Modernism had drawn profusely on the artistic and intellectual ideas of the West, but had remained very different from Western modernism since it was shifted in time and shaped by different traditions and conditions, because the periodization of modernism in the West (that is, the final stages of the censorship of the 1960s) did not match the developments in the evolution of East European literature. One of the links in

this chain of Polish modernism is émigré literature. What distinguishes its émigré characteristics from the then contemporary literature written in the People's Republic of Poland links it at the same time with the modernist motifs of domestic literature. This is the place where, within a one-hundred-year time-frame, one encounters on the one hand works by Wierzyński and Wat, Stempowski and Haupt, Gombrowicz, Miłosz, and Herling, and on the other hand works by T. Różewicz, J. Iwaszkiewicz, Z. Herbert, W. Szymborska, or M. Białoszewski, probably the most distinguished modernists of the century.

Literature written in exile has been treated for several decades as a political ghetto isolated from modernity, as the birthplace of political ghosts and nightmares and religious phobias. Let us hope that these sentiments may be ended once and for all with the abolishment of the People's Republic of Poland. In the last few years, literature written in exile has shown its different face in studies conducted in Poland. It is the reflection of a generation which witnessed the meeting of two parts of Europe—the West and the East; of a generation which undertook an examination of pre- and post-war Poland from a European perspective while maintaining an Eastern-European perspective on Western Europe; of a generation whose activities, aimed at the abolishment of Yalta's consequences, were fulfilled while some of its representative were still alive; of a generation which returned to the central questions of the literature of the 1930s after the catastrophe of WWII concerning what man is, what endangers him, what values constitute a lasting basis for culture; and finally, of the first generation of Poles after 1945 to encounter the civil and cultural challenges of the Western world. It was a generation which reminded Polish society, at the time closed under the mono-ethnical cover of national communism, that the source of the cultural strength of the Second Polish Republic was its diversity as a multitude of nations, traditions, religions, and languages which created the natural wealth of pre-war society. Of what relevance was it that only a few people shared these thoughts and wrote about them? Statistics show that few people work in literature and art. The apostles, too, were few in number.

Emigration as a political phenomenon no longer exists, but the many issues formulated in émigré literature will continue to provide the standard against which we measure our strengths.

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