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(Review) Polish Literature from 1918 to 2000: An Anthology

Andrea Lanoux

Connecticut College, alano@conncoll.edu

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Michael J. Mikoś, ed. and trans. *Polish Literature from 1918 to 2000: An Anthology*. Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2008. Select bibliography. Illustrations. xiv + 490 pp. \$44.95 (cloth).

This is the crowning achievement in a series of six anthologies of Polish literature selected and translated by Michael Mikoś, and spanning the medieval period to the recent past. The present volume covers Polish literature from 1918 to the year 2000, and serves as a comprehensive compendium of the broad spectrum of literature produced throughout the century. The book is divided into the interwar (1918–1939) and postwar (1945–2000) periods, with each part containing its own historical introduction and select bibliography. The introductions to both parts sketch the political and cultural contexts, listing the major historical events, figures, and works of that period, while the bibliographies following the two parts point the reader to topics for future study. Both poetic and prose texts are amply represented here, with many texts given in excerpted form in order to provide a representative sampling. As in the previous volumes, one of the most striking features of this book is its breadth of coverage, comprising 62 authors and 218 selections in its pages; in this manner, the book conveys a sense of depth of experience through the very breadth of artistic scope portrayed.

Part 1, Interwar Literature (1918–1939), includes authors and texts from the Skamander, Switch, and Kwadryga literary groups, as well as representatives of the Catastrophist and Expressionist movements. Underground poets during World War II are also included here, effectively broadening the historical framework to the end of the war. Prose selections include historical, epic, psychological, and neo-realist texts. Polish literature appears here as a world literature (as opposed to its nineteenth-century, largely Polish-centric counterpart), treating such universal themes as love, death, nature, village life, and the poetry of the mundane event. Childhood resonates as a dominant theme in this period, reflecting the rebirth and new infancy of the independent Polish nation.

To give an example of the art of selection in Mikoś's volume, the texts chosen to represent Julian Tuwim convey in just ten pages the enormous scope of the poet's *oeuvre* on such themes as nature, the earthly divine, existential angst, love, the universal connection between all people, the poet's Jewish roots, and the Holocaust. Also showcased here is the poet's status as an unsurpassed virtuoso of language play and one of the world's best writers for children. Other notable selections include those for Iłakowiczówna, Przyboś, Czechowicz, Baczyński, Nałkowska, Schultz, and Gombrowicz. In several cases Mikoś provides a sample of an author's fictional writing, followed by the author's response to criticism of the work (e.g., Dąbrowska, Gombrowicz).

Part 2, Postwar Literature (1945–2000), opens with a powerful introduction that succinctly chronicles the horrific events of WWII and the subsequent Soviet occupation of Polish territory. Mikoś also touches upon the role of the Catholic Church in postwar Poland and as a vital source of political opposition, as well as the difficult circumstances for artists and writers in this period. He draws explicit attention, both in his introduction (209) and in the biographical sketches of individual authors, to the large number of writers who collaborated with the Soviet regime; at the same time he illustrates the culture of dissent that characterized this period (and others) of Polish history. Some of the more noteworthy selections in part two include Miłosz's speech at Catholic University in Lublin and Jeleński's essay on Tuwim, as well as those for Szymborska, Herling-Grudziński, Andrzejewski, Szczypański, Świrszczyńska, and Świetlicki.

Mikoś includes little from the new generation of writers: only Marcin Świetlicki and Olga Tokarczuk (both born in 1962) are represented here. Yet even these selections illustrate the major trends in Polish literature after 1989. Świetlicki's "Attention!" highlights a sense of cynicism toward consumer culture and mass media ("When I look into your / eyes—I feel like a salesman, small, / defeated, trying to sell a pile of junk / to no one. If you exist—send an email," 310). Tokarczuk, by contrast, distances herself from topics that were treated obsessively in post-

war literature while retaining them in iconic form. In her short story “The Wardrobe” she distills the principal themes of post-war literature into just two sentences: “Pushed into a floor crack, I found a fork with a swastika engraved on the handle. Scraps of a faded newspaper were sticking out from behind some wooden paneling and only one word ‘proletarians’ could be clearly identified” (467).

Among the most positive features of this volume, aside from the translations themselves, are the numerous explanatory notes, the biographical sketches introducing each writer, and the select bibliographies of texts available in English translation and of critical studies in both English and Polish. Together these sections serve to situate the works at hand and to bring history to life. The most noticeable omission is a lack of dates for most works, which would have aided the reader considerably in situating these works in their context of composition (although dates are given for the works of a few select authors, such as Baczyński, Wat, Rymkiewicz, and Miłosz). This minor exclusion, however, does not detract from the many virtues and enormous contribution of this volume. Mikoś’s anthology reads like a labor of love, and its selections at once bring together some of the best known Polish texts of the twentieth century while rendering into English for the first time many underrepresented works. This book promises to satisfy a wide range of possible audiences, from students of Polish literature to those who wish to learn more about Polish cultural history and the tragic and triumphant Polish experience in the twentieth century.

Andrea Lanoux, Connecticut College

Karel Michal. *Everyday Spooks*. Trans. David Short. Prague: Karolinum Press of Charles University, 2008. 222 pp. \$25.00 (cloth).

With a style reminiscent of the great Jaroslav Hašek, Karel Michal managed to evade censors in the 1960s and create a collection of works that, with all of the hidden meanings and underpinnings, became a literary sensation. As with many other cultural figures, the Soviet occupation forced him to leave his country for Switzerland. He died a mere five years before the Velvet Revolution occurred.

The first story, “Strength of Character,” concerns itself with the wage clerk Mr. Mikulášek. As a powerless figure in the working world, he flies under the radar with little notice and little influence on his fellow workers. That is, until he meets a mysterious old man who eagerly passes on to him a ring that can change him into a bear. Mikulášek finds out that by becoming a bear, his once powerless position is transformed into one of great weight, as he can intimidate and frighten. The story is representative of those common workers whose world never allowed them to follow their own paths to success. In the end, Mikulášek cannot morph back into his human form. He is captured and condemned to life in a cage.

“How Mr. Pimpl Struck Lucky” is the tale of a Šaraticce castle caretaker who sees a mysterious apparition, the White Lady. This allegorical story is perhaps the most fascinating in the collection. A psychiatrist and a doctor are called to witness Mr. Pimpl’s report of the White Lady, but the psychiatrist falls asleep and the doctor is the only one to actually see what Mr. Pimpl has seen. The White Lady is thus representative of knowledge—Mr. Pimpl is an empirical truth seeker, the doctor has seen the truth, but since the psychiatrist has not seen the ghost (most purposefully), the commission of enquiry cannot let the secret out, lest the castle become a point of pilgrimage. “So you think Pimpl should be suspended?” the commission asks. “If he isn’t, we would be harbouring an asp in our bosom,” said Dr. Tomeček (61). Pimpl is transferred and is last seen nailing a picture of Jan Hus to the wall of the Churchvalec castle. Tour groups are forbidden to view the room where the White Lady was last seen.

The body of a dead cat is thrown through the window of a reporter’s apartment in “The Dead



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