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(Review) Polish Literature from 1864 to 1918: Realism and Young Poland

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ing as a submarine commander on the Baltic front, takes up with another woman, and Danya's mother kicks him out and tells him never to return.

Perhaps the ending parallels the irrevocable loss that the country had experienced, except that the plot did not prepare us for this "surprise" ending. Many fathers die on the front, why not Danya's father? This morally despicable figure jars with the rest of the story, which portrays Danya's family as an organic whole. The reader has the sense that the author needed a way out and reverted to this unsatisfying—because unmotivated in the story—ending.

In fact, the prose in the stories is quite good and the portraiture and characterization are entirely professional. What doesn't work so well is the plotting. Endings seem the most difficult. In fact, it is no easy trick to make convincing endings. After all, a denouement should emerge naturally. If not, one feels the heavy hand of the author—*deus ex machina*. That feeling occurs too often in this collection. The weakest piece is "The Love of Akira Watanabe," because the reader knows from the start that the ESL teacher is a lesbian and only Akira, the Japanese student in love with her, is the last to know. This knowledge cleaves too closely to the reader's expectations.

The two other stories in the collection, "Summer in Yalta" and "Carp for the Gefilte Fish," also deal with the subject of love. The former takes place in Soviet Russia and describes a doctor/scientist desperately in love with one of his patients, an actress. His narrative is actually a long reminiscence, since in real time he has recently returned from a ten-year sentence and is working as a cab driver. He picks up a group of merry-makers, and his long-lost love is among them. It makes the hero recall the past, a relationship spanning many years in which the doctor constantly forgave his lady her latest fling. The absent-minded, self-destructive man elicits the reader's identification. He had been arrested when he stole a small boat and headed out into Black Sea in a fit of anger, and was then accused of attempting to leave the Soviet Union. This story is quite interesting because the characters are entirely believable in their own right.

In "Carp for the Gefilte Fish" Shrayer-Petrov tells an immigrant story about a mixed couple from Russia (she's Jewish, he's native Russian) who settle outside of Providence, Rhode Island. They are happy, but cannot have children due to his infertility, an inherited trait from generations of alcoholics. (It seems unfair to brand the representative Russian with a genetic deformation from vodka, and besides I suspect it has no scientific validity.) The pair works for a Jewish family, a widower and his adult daughter, who own a furniture store. Inevitably the two of them fancy the Russians and each makes a pass at his and her love object. The widower succeeds, while the daughter fails; the Jewish woman yields in the hope of having a child, the Russian man turns down the offer, remaining faithful to his wife. The single day in the life of our heroes ends with the return of the Russian to his home with the carp that he has caught so that his wife can make gefilte fish for the boss and his daughter.

I read these stories in English translation with interest. This may not be Chekhov or even Yury Trifonov, but Shrayer-Petrov has a certain quiet power. Shrayer-Petrov's prose continues a tradition that includes Aleksandr Kuprin, Vladimir Korolenko, and Viktor Erofeev. Although at times you have to wait for his best writing, the general level is very high. However, mostly you get caught up in the lives of the characters and read just to find out what will happen.

Brian Horowitz, Tulane University

Michael J. Mikoś, ed. and trans. *Polish Literature from 1864 to 1918: Realism and Young Poland. An Anthology*. Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2006. Bibliography. viii + 388 pp. \$34.95 (cloth).

This latest anthology selected and translated by Michael Mikoś is his fifth collection of Polish literature in English (previous volumes covered the Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque/Enlight-

enment, and Romantic periods), expanding his contribution to Polish studies by making available in English many previously untranslated Polish realist and modernist texts. The volume contains nearly a hundred works from twenty-two authors, as well as critical introductions to the periods "Realism" and "Young Poland," thirty-eight illustrations, brief introductions to each of the writers included, and comprehensive bibliographies of English translations and critical studies in both Polish and English for the two periods covered.

The eight-page introductory essay on Polish Realism briefly outlines the historical and philosophical foundations of Polish Positivism, as well as the political and cultural climate in each of the Polish partitions during the second half of the nineteenth century. Although somewhat episodic, it provides valuable background information on Polish painting, sculpture, music, theater, and literary activity (journalism, academic writing, poetry and prose fiction), and contextualizes the authors in the anthology (the prose writers Bolesław Prus, Eliza Orzeszkowa, and Henryk Sienkiewicz; the poets Adam Asnyk, Maria Konopnicka, and Wiktor Gomułicki; the playwrights Gabriela Zapolska and Michał Bałucki; and the Naturalist Adolf Dygasiński).

Taken together, the selections from these authors, which include excerpts from some of the best-known works in Polish literature (Prus's *The Doll* and *The Pharaoh*, Orzeszkowa's *On the Banks of the Niemen*, and Sienkiewicz's trilogy *With Fire and Sword*, *The Deluge*, and *Sir Michael*) and lesser-known works (by Gomułicki, Bałucki, and Dygasiński) provide a representative sampling and give the reader a good sense of the stylistic features and dominant themes of the period. The Polish Realists' interest in history, nature, religion, nationhood, and the lives of "average people," peasants and Jews permeates these selections and aptly conveys the spirit of the times.

Similarly, the introduction to the literature of Young Poland (or Polish Modernism) outlines some of the major political events from the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, and highlights the major accomplishments of Polish scientists, scholars, architects, visual artists, composers, and writers. The authors represented in this section are at once more numerous and diverse than in the first, illustrating the sheer variety of styles and influences (Decadence, Symbolism, Impressionism, Naturalism) that makes Young Poland one of Polish literature's most distinct and fascinating periods. Included here are selections from the poetry of Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer, Jan Kasprowicz, Stanisław Wyspiański, Tadeusz Miciński, Bolesław Leśmian, Leopold Staff, Maryla Wolska, and Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński; excerpts from Wyspiański's *The Wedding*; selected criticism of Stanisław Przybyszewski and Stanisław Brzozowski; and excerpts from the novels of Stefan Żeromski, Władysław Reymont, and Waclaw Berent.

One notable result of including both Realist and Modernist works in one volume is the thematic overlap in both periods, with nature, the peasantry, and Polish patriotism providing a consistent backdrop for innovations in literary styles. Also evident are clear moments of departure between the two periods, such as the emergence of erotic, mystical, and "Eastern" themes in connection with European Symbolism. There is a noticeable increase of flow in the Modernist poetry over that of the previous period, which has everything to do with the source material and indicates no fault of the translator. Mikoś was awarded the 1995 Polish PEN Club Prize for his translations of Polish literature into English, and it is easy to see why: his renderings beautifully convey the distinct style of each writer, and include many poetic gems.

This anthology will fill a significant gap in the material available in English for students of Polish literature, as well as for general readers interested in Polish history. There are a large number of excerpts, many of which are quite brief; this feature is obviously intentional and allows for a broad selection of texts, making this a superb introduction to the major authors and canonical works of fin-de-siècle Polish literature.



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