

Karol Wojtyla's Literary Milieu

THE FORMATION OF A MORAL CONSCIENCE

Ewa M. Thompson

EDUCATED Catholics raised in Western culture do of course share a common knowledge of certain writers, from Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to Cardinal Newman and Jacques Maritain. But within each national culture, there are lesser-known writers who play a formative role in the development of Catholic sensibilities within their immediate circle. The big and powerful nations manage to incorporate some of these writers into the canon of world literature. The smaller nations do so only sporadically. Such has been the case with Sigrid Undset, who has been widely read in eastern Europe but is little known in western Europe or in the United States. Among the hundreds of Polish Catholic writers, only a handful gained recognition abroad. A look at some of them might help us better understand the present Pope; in particular, it could help explain his extraordinary persistence in adversity and his fortitude in the face of criticism that all too often seems to be leveled at him with less than charitable intent.

To be sure, Christianity alone may suffice to explain this Pope, but at the same time, the range of virtues and shortcomings of individuals often resonates with the works of their national literatures, and a look at what a person read in his or her formative years—especially when the writers read are little known—can significantly illuminate great personalities.

Whether Polish Catholicism was weakened or strengthened by the bloodlettings that regularly occurred in Polish history of the last 300 years is open to discussion, but it is incontestable that a Catholic worldview established itself firmly in the literature of that period. Unlike Faust, the heroes of Polish literature do not crave power or superior knowledge. Unlike Madame Bovary, they lead largely ascetic lives, and unlike Mesdames de Nucingen and de Restaud, they do not strive to

rise in society. In many ways, they are too naïve to appeal to the “sophisticated tastes” of postmodern readers. These characters live in a world permeated with natural law and portray problems that have been locked out of modern literature.

Arguably, in Western literatures the border between good and evil began to be blurred with modernist stream-of-consciousness techniques. The total absence of the narrator interposing himself between character and reader allows for the uninhibited molding of desire into truth. While in Balzac's *Human Comedy* the very title is a comment on the characters' striving for power, in most twentieth-century novels moral judgment is seldom present. Indeed, it hardly ever inserts itself between the characters and their desires. Thus, novels of pure desire predominate. In contrast, even recent Polish literature has generally avoided moral neutrality, sometimes at the expense of depth.

THE DISTINGUISHING feature of Polish literature throughout the centuries is that it is almost invariably Thomistic. By Thomistic, I mean that it is firmly grounded in physical reality and common sense, with only moderate attention paid to the world of make-believe dreams, possibilities, subconscious motives and other modernist concerns. The underlying and unstated premise of these writers is the existence of a natural law. It is God's world that most Polish writers describe, however corrupt and unjust it turns out to be; and the God in whose care the world remains is personal and transcendent. The *is-ness* of the world is taken for granted; Polish writers hardly ever speculate about the veracity of our perceptions or about the world being a projection of the mind. The Jagiellonian University in Krakow (founded in 1364) taught scholastic philosophy well into the eighteenth century, when other universities had long abandoned it. At the Catholic University of Lublin today, Thomistic philosophy is taught and reflected

EWA M. THOMPSON is professor of Slavic Studies at Rice University.

upon with the kind of vigor that has all but evaporated from Catholic institutions of higher learning in this country. When the first semi-free elections in the former Soviet bloc took place in Poland in June 1989, one of the Solidarity slogans read: "2 + 2 must always be 4." This refusal to equivocate prevented Polish writers from drowning in the murky waters of self-absorption. On the negative side, it has made the descriptions of the characters' motivation somewhat arbitrary and schematic, especially in novels.

FIDELITY is a common motive that runs through Polish literature of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, when other European literatures turned inward to explore previously uncharted areas of the human psyche. This is fidelity to the tradition one represents, first religious and then national, a fidelity to tradition taken seriously by Polish writers since the days of the Counter-Reformation. It was particularly evident during the most recent ganging-up on Poland performed by the Nazis and the Soviets in September 1939. Even in recent decades, the models of discourse and patterns of sensibility still owe much to that older imagery, and those educated Poles seriously engaged in pursuing literary careers inevitably respond to them. Thus Adam Michnik, a left-wing agnostic and disappointed former communist, wrote a book entitled *Notes on the History of Honor in Poland* (1985). In it, the communist methods of dealing with dissidents are presented against the background of the noble precept of the honorable treatment of enemies. Recently, Michael Kaufman observed that the Polish ethos is not based on the dichotomy of success-failure but rather on those dichotomies of honor-dishonor and pride-shame. Unlike American and British writers who created characters climbing from a lower rung of the social ladder to a higher one, Polish writers depict people who struggle, and often fail, to accommodate themselves to the moral obligations which they do not fully understand and which they are not fully able to articulate.

In the writings of the Polish romantics, the discourse on fidelity seems to have been canonized in ways that most of us in twentieth-century America find uncomfortable. While Goethe sentimentalized love in *The Sufferings of the Young Werther* and created the prototype of the twentieth-century explorer in *Faust*, while Wordsworth pondered immortality and Byron rebelled against tradition, Poland's Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Slowacki, Cyprian Norwid, and Zygmunt Krasinski upheld and idealized tradition. The proximity of disasters (the last partition of Poland in 1795 was but a gen-

eration away) brought to the center stage personalities who struggled to accept the burden of defeat in a typically Catholic fashion. Some authors turned to the images of pastoral and idyllic Polish life as it existed in the poets' youth, others vacillated between rebellion and sublimation. Psychologically speaking, some Poles have never recovered from the disaster of 1795, when Poland's neighbors cannibalized her in ways previously unheard of in Christian Europe. Polish literature did not recover until well into the twentieth century.

Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* (1834) is a novel in verse; it presents country life in Polonized Lithuania, where honor was given to God, family, and the ideals for which the country stood. The greatest crime committed by *Pan Tadeusz's* heroes is the strife and factionalism of the petty nobles: there are no betrayals, no cowardice, and no shirking of duties. Jews live alongside the Christian Poles in patriarchal harmony or are ignored, a situation inconceivable in twentieth-century America, where any kind of exclusion is equated with discrimination. In Mickiewicz's drama *Forefathers' Eve* (1823-34), fidelity to the idealized Poland is taken for granted. In Part Three of this sprawling Romantic drama, Father Peter and the warrior Conrad try to come to terms, each in his own way, with the implications of such attitudes. Conrad hurls at God the greatest insult a Catholic Pole could conceive: in a fit of frenzy and surrounded by evil spirits, he tells Him that He is not God, but tsar. In contrast, Father Peter's meditation on defeat begins with the recognition of human limitations, the foundation of piety: "Lord, who am I before your countenance? I am dust and nothingness."

Nineteenth-century political prisons are powerfully invoked in Slowacki's *Anhelli*, a work of poetic prose in which Polish exiles spend their days in the Siberian wastelands working to multiply the wealth of the Russian state; then they die and are buried in unmarked graves. The only visitor to those graves is God's angel Anhelli, whose mournful presence makes up for family prayers and the last rites of the Catholic faith. As

AT THE CATHOLIC
UNIVERSITY OF
LUBLIN TODAY,
THOMISTIC PHILOS-
OPHY IS TAUGHT
WITH THE KIND OF
VIGOR THAT HAS ALL
BUT EVAPORATED
FROM CATHOLIC
INSTITUTIONS OF
HIGHER LEARNING
IN THIS COUNTRY.

POLISH WRITERS

DEPICT PEOPLE
WHO STRUGGLE TO
ACCOMMODATE
THEMSELVES TO
THE MORAL OBLIGA-
TIONS WHICH THEY
DO NOT FULLY UN-
DERSTAND AND
WHICH THEY ARE
NOT FULLY ABLE TO
ARTICULATE.

tics as the art of the possible, Poles tend to see it as a test of fidelity.

The consent to a lack of worldly success is another ingredient of literary narratives, an obverse side of the medal whose reverse side says that one has to be faithful. One may of course identify it with Nietzsche's resentment, and, undoubtedly, second-rate writers indulge in it from time to time. But consider Zbigniew Herbert's *Mr. Cogito* (1974), a cycle of poems which has nothing to do with Nietzsche's image of resentful dwarfs plotting to avenge themselves on a superior humanity:

Go where those others went to the dark boundary
for the golden fleece of nothingness your last prize

go upright among those who are on their knees
among those with the backs turned and those
toppled in the dust

you were saved not in order to live
you have little time you must give testimony

be courageous when the mind deceives you be
courageous
in the final account only this is important . . .

While Herbert's imagery borders on agnosticism, Zygmunt Krasinski in *The Undivine Comedy* (1833) gives a fine presentation of the failing *ancien régime* and of the Catholic attitude toward defeat. This Romantic drama contrasts Count Henry, the standard-bearer of the traditionalists, with Pancras, the leader of the revolutionaries. Henry is far from perfect, but his sins are not cowardice or treach-

George Kennan, Sr. put it in *Siberia and the Exile System*: "The Russian government does not take pains to perpetuate the memory of the political offenders whom it tortures to death in its Siberian prisons, and over the mouldering bodies of most of them there is not so much as a mound." The image of the exile, an upright man who was unjustly punished for being faithful to God, honor, and country, has remained in Polish memory, and it informs Polish attitudes to politics even today. Instead of viewing poli-

ery, but rather haughtiness, selfishness, and lack of charity. In a grand dispute with Pancras, Henry says contemptuously:

I too know the world and you. I looked amid the shadows of night upon the dancing of the rabble, upon whose necks you climbed. I saw there all the old crimes of the world, dressed in new robes, whirling in a new dance. But their end will be the same as it was thousands of years ago—vice, gold and blood. And you were not there, you did not deign to step down among your children, for, in the depths of your spirit you scorned them.

I saw that cross, blasphemer, in old, old Rome. At its feet lay the ruins of a mightier might than yours. A hundred gods like yours had gone down into the dust and durst not raise their mutilated heads toward Him. And He stood on the heights, stretching out His holy arms to the east and west, bathing His holy brow in the sun rays—and it was plain that He was Lord of all the world.

HENRYK SIENKIEWICZ reinforced such attitudes in a series of novels whose popularity surpassed anything hitherto written in Poland. The six volumes of his *Trilogy* (1884-8) deal with seventeenth-century wars. The heroes are members of the popular militia raised to defend Poland's eastern frontier. Poland was then a highly decentralized state and had no substantial standing army; the petty nobility, like the hidalgos of Spain, numbered about ten percent of the population and were supposedly always ready to give up their private pursuits to serve in the military (often they did so when a mighty aristocrat called, thus generating mini-wars between Poland's princes and potentates). In his Foreword to the new English translation of the *Trilogy*, James Michener said:

The Sienkiewicz *Trilogy* stands with that handful of novels which not only depict but also help to determine the soul and character of the nation they describe . . . [it is] the portrait of a nation. Its credentials have been forged in the affections of millions of Poles. . . . *The Trilogy* is a sacred book.

That of course is an exaggeration. But Pan Skrzetuski, Pan Wolodyjowski, Pan Podbipienta, and Pan Kmicic (all of the *Trilogy*) did serve as models for several generations of Poles. They all live in a world ruled by divine law, even though the just are not necessarily rewarded in it. This unshakable certainty that "God is in His heavens," as well as the characters' sense of moderation, make the *Trilogy* exasperating to those who do not share Sienkiewicz's religious views, even as its admirers continue to keep it on the bestseller list. The *Trilogy* ends with Polish defeat in the Turkish war. The hero, Pan Wolodyjowski, unsuccessfully strives for

marital happiness for many years, and when he finally finds a suitable woman, he is obliged to abandon her and dies performing his soldierly duties. Other characters reach a modicum of peace after years of strife, but the impending political disasters permeate the atmosphere and make impossible that leisurely family happiness with which Russian novels of the same period abound.

Not all novels about fidelity have as their heroes members of the upper classes. Boleslaw Prus wrote *The Outpost* (1886), a story of an otherwise unremarkable peasant named Snail, who refuses to sell his plot to German colonists even though his stubbornness ruins him and his family. The action takes place during Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, which brought misery to Polish farmers who had to compete against the German colonists sponsored financially by the Prussian government. Snail is one of those farmers.

Snail's attachment to the land is totally unglamorous. He feels that there is something wrong in the attitude of those rich and insolent people who come to the village offering money for the plot which fed his ancestors and now feeds his family. He won't sell the land to bad men. No notion of personal gain or loss enters his calculations, only the conviction that it would be wrong to sell. His refusal to accept a lucrative deal makes him, in sociological terms, a failure, but he accepts his status. He does not rejoice in his victory; indeed, there is nothing in his life to rejoice about. He is Pan Wolodyjowski's cousin in that he knows that certain things must not be done no matter what. His sense of the boundary which must not be crossed is a metaphor for our ability to draw the line between right and wrong.

IT WAS NOT always the Poles who were on the receiving end of injustice. In the eighteenth century, the problem played out differently: the Poles were the masters and the Ukrainians, Belarusses, and Lithuanians were the victims of the conqueror's pride. *Salomea's Silver Dream* (1844) by Juliusz Slowacki portrays a painful relationship between Poles and Ukrainians. While neither side is shown as virtuous, the Poles emerge as arrogant, short-sighted, and venal masters of the vast lands which constitute present-day Ukraine. The action of *Salomea's Silver Dream* takes place shortly after the fall of the Bar Confederacy (1768), whose goal it was to prevent the partitioning of Poland. The play shows the Polish nobles in Ukraine trying to enrich themselves and keep the peasants pacified. The Ukrainian Cossacks resent being treated as second-class citizens and plot bloody revenge. The Jews remain invisible, a society within a society

that spoke its own language and enjoyed an autonomy granted it by the Polish Crown. A Ukrainian uprising follows during which Polish children and women are slaughtered, together with the men. Eventually the Poles gain the upper hand and the leader of the rising is cruelly executed. But Polish victory is short-lived, and the first partition of Poland looms on the horizon.

Salomea's Silver Dream shows Polish blindness and haughtiness which contributed to the nearly total elimination of Polish presence in Ukraine. Slowacki's work is a warning to his compatriots who have been slow to learn the lesson. The Polish-Ukrainian slaughter continued until World War II, and both sides accuse each other of atrocities. The play warns against the arrogance which comes from being slightly wiser, slightly more sophisticated, or slightly more successful, than one's neighbor.

POLAND itself was an occupied country throughout the nineteenth century, and the literature of that period abounds in the descriptions of misery and injustice that invariably materialize under foreign occupation (an experience of which most inhabitants of Western countries remain blissfully unaware). In many novels and stories, the names of Polish villages symbolize the horrors inflicted upon Polish peasants by the Prussian, Austrian, and Russian occupiers who often fought their wars on Polish territory. In Sienkiewicz's "Bartek the Conqueror" (1882), the titular hero hails from Pognembin, derived from the word *oppression*, while the neighboring villages are called Krzywda (injustice), Wywlaszczynce (expropriation), Niedola (adversity), and Mizerow (misery).

If I were to recommend a single work of Polish literature to those unfamiliar with Polish history, I would choose "Bartek the Conqueror," particularly now that it has recently appeared in a new and excellent translation. Like Prus's *The Outpost*, "Bartek" depicts a Pol-

BARTEK'S MESSAGE

SEARCHED ITSELF IN
THE POPE'S MEMORY
AND, TOGETHER
WITH MANY OTHERS,
IT ACCOUNTS FOR
HIS UNCOMMON
SENSITIVITY TOWARD
THE DISINHERITED
AND DESPISED MASS-
ES OF HUMANITY.

ish village under Prussian occupation. After the Franco-Prussian war into which Polish peasants were massively drafted, the germanization efforts in the Duchy of Poznan (incorporated into Prussia in 1871) increased. Bartek single-handedly takes on several of the enemy's cannons, but he is not promoted or otherwise rewarded, because he did not go to German schools and he reasons like a Polish, not like a German, peasant. He is, however, copiously praised by his commanders, including a leading general. A war hero, Bartek returns home bemedalled and happy, only to discover that his son is being called names and beaten by the German schoolteacher who would not tolerate any traces of Polishness or Catholicism in his school. A bear of a man, Bartek takes matters into his own hands and beats up the teacher while his wife laments. The teacher sues and Bartek is sent to jail. In the meantime, to

make ends meet, his wife borrows money from a German settler. The farm is eventually sold for debt. As the story ends, the much-aged Bartek, his wife, and son are seen walking to a nearby city as beggars.

The story is told by a casual narrator who cracks jokes at Bartek's simplemindedness and his lack of worldly wisdom. Several subplots indicate that Bartek's story was not untypical, and that the trusting and inarticulate peasants of the entire region were taken advantage of by the settlers who then laughed at them for their naïveté. This poignant story is one of the best presentations in literature of calculated and petty dishonesty. I have no doubt that its message seared itself in the Pope's memory and, together with many others, it accounts for Karol Wojtyła's uncommon sensitivity toward the disinherited and despised masses of humanity.

SUCH WORKS were the staples of Polish literary diet in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Schoolchildren read them in the Second Polish Republic (1919-39), where Karol Wojtyła received his secondary education. They made the Poles skeptical of too much equivocation, too much subtlety in dealing with matters political, social, scholastic, and spiritual. From intellectual to peasant, most Poles believe that A cannot be non-A, period. Aristotelian logic is alive and well in the Polish mind and in Polish literature.

The abundance of works in Polish literature glorifying fidelity and noble endeavors that do not bring worldly success may help explain why this Pope is so serene when dealing with the largely hostile world and with some of his own prelates who are apt to behave in an adversarial fashion. The fate of the defeated, so often depicted in Polish literature, helped refine this Pope's responses to poverty and pain, to those who have been marginalized by the circumstances of history, to those who are truly insignificant, in terms of worldly success: Indians on remote reservations, mentally and physically handicapped children, inhabitants of tiny islands and countries. The firmness with which Polish literature holds on to the physical dimension of man and the world is probably not unrelated to this Pope's ability to stand firm unapologetically when public discourse requires it, and to see through the solutions which purport to alleviate humanity's problems, but in fact merely shift the balance of power to accommodate new élites. ✦