

Tamara Trojanowska, Joanna Niżyńska, Przemysław Czapliński. *Being Poland: A New History of Polish Literature and Culture since 1918.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. 856 pp. \$125.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4426-5018-3.

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In 2006, several scholars decided to do something about the lack of a comprehensive, up-to-date, research-based work dealing with Polish literature and culture. It took over a decade to complete this ambitious project of delivering a new and updated history of this vast subject for a non-Polish-speaking audience. Published by the University Toronto Press and supported by the Adam Mickiewicz Foundation, *Being Poland: A New History of Polish Literature and Culture since 1918*—the result of the combined efforts of sixty scholars from both sides of the Atlantic—is both impressive and voluminous (792 pages, plus useful subject and name indexes). Although “culture” is included in the title, the focus of the work is on the written word, meaning that dance, music, and the visual arts are not included. The scope of the work does, however, reach beyond novels and poetry, with chapters dedicated to theater, comics, film, and cabaret songs.

Histories of Polish literature have been written before, and the editors, Tamara Trojanowska, Joanna Niżyńska, and Przemysław Czapliński, cite the works of Manfred Kridl (*A Survey of Polish Literature and Culture* [1956]), Julian Krzyżanowski (*A History of Polish Literature* [1978]), and Czesław Miłosz (*The History of Polish Literature* [1969]) as their baseline. These books

provide the English-speaking audience with a history of Polish literature but do not cover the modern and postmodern periods, hence the focus on recent developments in Polish literature and culture in this volume. Also, unlike its predecessors, this is a collective and international undertaking that aims at a “polyphonic model of cultural analysis” (p. xv). This allows for the inclusion of multiple theoretical approaches and intellectual perspectives and is well suited to the subject matter—the contradictory and varied contemporary Polish literature and culture, created and received both in Poland and abroad. Polish culture is analyzed and interrogated by literary scholars from a wide array of institutions across Poland, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Belgium.

The editors present the aims of the work and provide content for all the contributions, but just as important, they provide a reading key. The volume is designed so that it does not have to be read in sequence or in its entirety. The editors’ suggestion that the reader adopt the attitude of a flaneur is indeed appealing when facing such a heavy volume. Care has been taken to facilitate different reading strategies (linear, selective, random, associative). The authors of all the individual contri-

butions provide the necessary context and background to their arguments, allowing the chapters to stand alone. The experience of moving between different periods and genres allows for reflection and creativity on the part of the reader, which I very much appreciate. This structure is also practical for instructors who wish to select specific reading assignments for their students.

The chronological limits of this volume span from the sixteenth century up to 2015, providing the necessary historical background that non-Polish readers will need to appreciate fully the complexities of modern and contemporary Polish literature and culture. The volume is organized into four distinctive parts with different but complementary logics, providing diverse perspectives and entry points to Polish culture.

The starting point is an introduction of the three paradigms that constitute the framework of Polish culture: Sarmatism, Romanticism, and modernism. Each paradigm is presented by two authors with different perspectives. In dealing with Sarmatism (the cultural idiom of the Polish gentry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which proposed that Poles were the descendants of the Sarmatians, a warlike ancient Iranian people who dominated the Pontic steppe during classical antiquity), for example, Ewa Thompson's contribution focuses on understanding this cultural paradigm and its philosophy from within, on its own terms and within its historical context. Jan Sowa's approach, on the other hand, critically examines it from the perspective of the effects of Sarmatism on social policies, economic development, and the contemporary political scene. So, if you read both, you will first fall in love with Sarmatian culture and then realize it also had a dark side. The main takeaway, however, is that Sarmatian culture has made a great impact on Polish society and remains important today.

Romantic literature played a central role in shaping Polish society's response to the trauma of loss of sovereignty during the nineteenth century.

With political activity in partitioned Poland severely curtailed, writers took the place of politicians and philosophers to construct a narrative and a roadmap for the future. Romanticism became the other main ingredient of Polish culture, the source of the insurrectionary tradition and ideas of sacrifice, as well as the messianic role of Poland as "the Christ of nations." The essays by Stanley Bill and Dariusz Skorczewski examine the presence of and responses to Romanticism in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and society.

The prominence of Romanticism and Sarmatism raises the question of the evolution, specificity, and nature of modernism in Polish literature. Włodzimierz Bolecki traces the development of a specific eastern European modernism and its specific Polish variant, while Ryszard Nycz develops a new typology of Polish modern and contemporary literature, organized along the oppositions between elite and popular, and autonomous and engaged literature. Nycz also discusses the relationship between modernism and postmodernism in Polish literature.

Part 2 (titled "Strategies"), which comes after the introduction to the main Polish cultural paradigms, should be of particular interest to HABSBURG readers. An important question for historians dealing with contemporary Poland is how the traumas of loss of sovereignty and the ensuing repressions, followed by two world wars, affected and still affect Polish society. How did the experience of war and traumatization affect the way Poles thought about the meaning of life, the role of the individual, and human nature? I posit that literature remains the best source for accessing the individual and group level of this collective experience. Polish writers and artists have devoted their talent, intellectual capacities, and years of work to these questions. We should all heed their voices and findings. This volume, and in particular part 2, makes this substantive and important body of knowledge about individual and group re-

sponses to trauma accessible for international audiences.

Grażyna Borkowska's essay on emancipative strategies in Polish modernist prose provides an interesting perspective on how modernist novelists in Poland dealt with the concept of freedom, so central to both Sarmatian and Romantic cultural paradigms. Trojanowska's chapter on "modes of cultural transgression" delves into the way the trauma of total war was approached by five different authors in their plays and theatrical productions (Witkacy, Witold Gombrowicz, Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, and Tadeusz Różewicz). Her analysis of the "Polish theatre of transgressions" shows how artists grappled with the tremendous impact of the experience of war on individuals and society: the cost of dealing with the evil, sorrow, and loss of meaning. Trojanowska shows how profound and intense the examinations of the trauma was in the work of these artists. However, she also points out that none of them could find or offer a way out of the trauma.

Niżyńska's investigation into "modes of affective compensation" identifies and analyzes a central feature of Polish culture and history: the role of affect in dealing with traumatic historical events. She uses the example of the Warsaw Uprising to show how the interplay of psychological responses and political control over narratives and commemorations prevents both critical approaches to the past and healing of the traumas that are reproduced and transmitted to new generations. She also discusses the gap in Polish society's understanding of itself and its future, caused by the de-actualization of the long-time central paradigm of Romanticism (in its watered-down popular version). In contemporary Poland, peace, growing prosperity, and the return of independence have made Romanticism's messianism and cult of sacrifice superfluous. Consequently, Niżyńska raises the questions whether contemporary literature should try to adopt a new Polish cultural paradigm. Indeed, as the relevance of two

out of three constituent parts of Polish culture is waning, the question of whether they will now evolve or if something substantially new is to be expected is relevant. The two chapters by Trojanowska and Niżyńska link up, as they arrive at the same diagnosis—that a central element of Polish culture is the inability to move beyond historical traumas.

Bożena Shallcross takes up the topic of a literary canon, a notion that, although criticized and debated, cannot simply be ignored. Her discussion includes a relevant reflection on the differences between studying Polish literature in Polish in Poland and doing so in English in North America. Equally relevant in the transatlantic context are the chapters about translations of Polish literature into English in part 3. Here the focus is on Polish literature in languages other than Polish, émigré literature, and the interaction between Jewish and Polish culture. Marta Skwara's discussion of the many languages of Polish literature shows how the multicultural reality of Polish lands was reflected in literature and how authors moved between Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, and Latin, in different ways and for different reasons.

In part 4, "Genres and Their Discontents," which constitutes half of the volume, each genre/period is presented in an introduction. Most of them are also examined in in-depth essays, which focus on particular writers or directors. The editors problematize the concept of genre and use of genres to organize a history of literature, while the contributors highlight the limits of and movement across genre boundaries. In addition, genres in which Polish authors have made an impact internationally but that have not traditionally been part of the histories of literature are included: reportage, essays, literary theory, popular culture, mass media, and diaries.

For the benefit of HABSBURG readers looking for input on particular individuals, I am including a list of those who have entire chapters dedicated

to them. They include novelists Bruno Szulc, Witold Gombrowicz, Zofia Nałkowska, Leopold Buczkowski, Stanisław Lem, Olga Tokarczuk, and Andrzej Stasiuk; poets Bolesław Leśmian, Julian Przyboś, Tadeusz Różewicz, Miron Białoszewski, and Anna Świrszczyńska; and essayists Karol Irzykowski, Czesław Miłosz, Leszek Kołakowski, and Jolanta Brach-Czaina. Journalists Melchior Wańkowicz and Mariusz Szczygieł are featured in their own chapters. For the drama field, readers will find chapters on Witkacy, Stanisława Przybyszewska, Leon Schiller, Juliusz Osterwa, Tadeusz Różewicz, Sławomir Mrożek, Tadeusz Kantor, and Jerzy Grotowski. And in the field of film, the collection has essays on Andrzej Wajda, Jerzy Skolimowski, Krzysztof Kieślowski, Wojciech Jerzy Has, and Dorota Kędzierzawska.

The interplay of historical events and literature is tightly intertwined throughout this volume. As the contributors demonstrate in the case of Polish Romanticism, for instance, literature can formulate new approaches and initiatives on which the society may follow up, thus shaping its path. Although designed to cater to the needs of students of Polish studies and literature, this volume will also be of great use to all scholars interested in central and eastern European history, culture, and literature, and indeed to the general public. For readers not versed in literature studies, some looking up of terms may be necessary in some of the more theoretical chapters, but this should not be a hindrance. Also, anyone not proficient Latin should keep a dictionary at hand, as Polish Sarmatian culture's extensive use of Latin in the seventeenth century still affects the way it is spoken about today. However, even if some effort might be required, it will be well worth it, as the authors, translator, and editors have all succeeded in ensuring both the scholarly solidity of the volume and its accessibility. The ambition of a self-reflective and critical approach set out by the editors is realized both in the choice of topics and the content of the contributions. It also delivers on the multidisciplinary ambition, as the various

contributors draw heavily on psychology and philosophy as well as sociology in addition to literary theory and history.

The one thing that I missed was a companion volume, a reader with at least a few excerpts of the works discussed. This would have enhanced the kind of eclectic and exploratory approach the editors aimed for.

Last but not least, this work is important to anyone interested in understanding contemporary Polish society, both because the cultural luggage of Poland is thoroughly analyzed and because several of the authors make the effort of addressing recent events and trends that were unfolding even as they were writing and completing this collective work.

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