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The romantic forms of contemporary literature

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BOOK REVIEWS

COMPTE RENDUS DE LIVRES

The Romantic Forms of Contemporary Literature

Małgorzata Łukaszuk: *...i w kołysankę już przemieniony płacz ... Obiit...Natus est* w poezji Aleksandra Wata (... *and No More Tears but a Lullaby ...Obiit ...Natus est* in Aleksander Wat's Poetry), Kontra, London 1989

A wave of enhanced interest in the works of Polish authors living and writing abroad preceded in Poland the actual regaining of unhampered access to what was defined as „émigré literature”. Before the said works were available in bookshops, large numbers of readers had been competing in ingenious procurement of those books reaching Poland from abroad or issued by non-professional or informal publishers. This is to be noted especially now, when the enthusiasm for discovering novelties and tasting the forbidden fruit has abated and the book market starts being governed by the rigid laws of economy. And, regrettably, this means in most cases success of sensational and erotic literature and shrinking of the area of poetry and essay writing — intended as a rule for the élite and not likely to win over a large circle of reading public.

Małgorzata Łukaszuk's novel: *...i w kołysankę już przemieniony płacz* /...and No More Tears but a Lullaby/ derives precisely from that earlier period when the poetry of Aleksander Wat was a kind of fashion. Written in Poland within the frameworks of a university seminar, the book was published in London, by the Kontra Publishing House, in 1989. An outstanding contribution to popularization of Aleksander

Wat's creative output was also paid by Czesław Miłosz. It was due to him that *Mój wiek* (My Century) was published. Called „the poet's spoken diary” it is, in fact, a two-volume book of recorded talks. It was Czesław Miłosz as well who used to lay a stress on the exceptional position of Aleksander Wat as a „witness of his century”, as a person that experienced the depth of historical evil and survived. And, indeed, Wat's biography — which is inseparably connected with his creative production — abounds in many mysterious and thus intriguing incidents.

His début: *Ja z drugiej strony mego mopsożelaznego piecyka* (Me on the Other Side of My Puggy-Iron Stove), 1920, could be regarded as an irresponsible (or not fully controlled) outburst of a vanguard eccentricity had it not made the eighteen-year-old poet take a place of his own in the history of literature. The fact of Aleksander Wat's later association with communism, and his lapse into silence as a poet, was treated by him as logically connected events — as cause and effect. His vicissitudes in the following years — arrest in Lvov upon entering there of the Soviet Army, the investigation carried on the by N.K.V.D., imprisonment, deportation — which also afflicted his family — were the consequences of that fact but, at the same time, a process of Wat's regaining individuality and preparation for his rebirth as poet. His new creative output after his return to Poland does not in the least resemble his vanguard début. Yet, that was Poland of the Stalinist period. In 1953, Aleksander Wat fell prey to an incurable disease and the attendant terrible suffering. Laying a stress on his Jewish background, Wat regarded his illness as a punishment for his communist past. In 1967, the poet consciously chose death rather than further suffering. His works written at that difficult time, and dealing with matters of existential and metaphysical nature, reflect the enormity of Wat's suffering and painful experience. How much of that biography is fit for mythicizing! That illness is a metaphor. Wat's lot is an evidence of history. His poetry is metaphysical.

Małgorzata Łukaszuk approaches Wat's poetry from a Romantic perspective. The rebirth of the poet who gave up his day-dreaming is, after all, something like Gustaw's transformation into Konrad in Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (The Forefathers' Eve). Unity of life and creative

work — so clearly manifest in the case of Wat — is also an element of Romanticism. And so are the striving to reach to the very depth, the questions pertaining to ultimate truths, and the individual's facing the challenge of history. Wat's early poetry is imbued with surrealist imagination and as such penetrates to subconsciousness. Even in his new, later character of „a poet of culture”, readily employing various Mediterranean motifs, Wat defied convention and remained a visionary, a seeker of ultimate truths. Such an approach helps to see the logical continuity of that creative production. His destiny and work are considered by Małgorzata Łukaszuk as a whole. Hence her conscious submission to Wat's mythicizing of his disease. That approach, deriving from Romanticism, makes it possible for his works to be treated as open. Their fragmentary character and often lack of finish — due to illness — and numerous understatements are regarded as a manifestation of revolt against the tyranny of the form but also as a projection of the chaos of existence.

Revealing in contemporary literature elements of the Romantic mode of thinking is an attitude rather specific to Polish literary criticism and by no means exceptional. Małgorzata Łukaszuk, an author from the literary milieu of Lublin, is not a disciple of Maria Janion. And yet she does not even realize that somehow she is. For it was, above all, Maria Janion's works which popularized that type of approach to Polish contemporary literature. To her, the Polish destiny marked by unfulfilment, complexes and failures is, first and foremost, Romantic. Consequently, the set of Romantic problems is touched upon by any artist attempting to cope with it and combine that attitude with sensitivity to existential questions. But whereas Maria Janion places definite works against a broader background of the so-called „history of ideas”, and so within historical framework, and — by observing the origin or analogy of phenomena reaches into the past — most of critics drawing (whether consciously or not) on her assertions do not proceed that way. They rest satisfied with a kind of immanentism and treat the set of problems outlined by the work of one author as a sufficiently broad area.

Małgorzata Łukaszuk's book on Aleksander Wat ranks among those of the latter category. It gives the impression of reading his poetry but

does not exceed the boundaries of its „vast realm”. Consequently, its tasks certainly do not include that of integration of the image of the Polish poetry with what has for such a long time been a „too separate” phenomenon. It is a piece of „reading matter criticism”, which by its very nature is mainly an evidence of the individual’s contact with texts. And with this kind of approach much depends on personal culture of the scholar and his intellectual discipline.

Wat’s works — complex, abounding in allusions to culture, and not evading esoteric motifs, set their interpreter particularly high requirements. As a matter of fact, this also applies to the editor. The edition of Wat’s writings — started by the CZYTELNIK Publishing House — under the editorship of i. a. A.Micińska, J.Zieliński and W.Bolecki, with commentaries and annotations, will undoubtedly elucidate many detailed questions. A notable contribution to popularization of that poetry was also made by the late Olga Watowa, the widow of Aleksander Wat, who prepared for publication her husband’s notes and records regarded by him as unfinished. This does not mean, however, that his work will no more pose any mysteries. Its inscrutability is a great attractive force.

I have noted that Aleksander Wat has many readers. Some of them become, however, more than: they simply turn his followers.

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trans. by Teresa Święch