

# GOODBYE, SAMIZDAT

by Stanislaw Baranczak



In mid-December 1989, poetry buffs in Poland received a Christmas present they had long been waiting for: the first “official” (that is, neither underground nor émigré) publication in Polish of the selected poems of Russian-American Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky. The fact that the book was just a reprint of an earlier émigré edition could not detract from the readers’ satisfaction: Another taboo had been broken, another long-vilified author had made his way into aboveground circulation. But the book contained one glaring omission. Three bracketed periods indicated that a poem had been struck out by the Polish state censors.

A friend employed at the publishing house told me that the cuts could have been more extensive. The censors had originally planned to delete other poems or fragments that sounded politically offensive. A tug-of-war ensued between the censors and the publisher, the latter arguing that, in these turbulent times, what sounds offensive today may not tomorrow. Meanwhile, the world around was changing at breathtaking speed. One after another, the reasons for deleting Brodsky’s poems lost their validity. A 1982 poem expressing solidarity with Polish writers imprisoned under martial law was restored, for example. Why suppress it after Solidarity won the elections and particularly after General Jaruzelski expressed his remorse about the “state of war” he had once proclaimed?

About one poem, however, the censors remained firm. “Sorry,” they told my friend, “but here we must be absolutely ad-

amant. This poem will never pass.” “But what if the situation changes and this poem doesn’t sound offensive anymore either?” the editor wanted to know. “This poem? With such a theme and attitude? You must be kidding. It will be considered offensive and unfit to print as long as the Soviet Union exists.”

The poem’s title was “The Berlin Wall Tune.”

When the book finally arrived in the bookstores in the middle of December, the Soviet Union still existed. But the Berlin Wall no longer did. The impossible had come to pass once again—perhaps the most spectacular “impossibility” of that miraculous “Autumn of Nations” of late 1989. Once again history had worked faster than the brains of socialist censors and the printing presses of Polish publishers.

This single anecdote characterizes, I think, the situation of culture amid the momentous changes that have swept the former Soviet bloc. The fundamental paradox is this: While, on the whole, culture in those nations played a major role in precipitating the recent political upheaval, the scope of this upheaval has gone far beyond culture’s grasp.

Anything that an observer may say must be qualified with an exact date and safeguarded by the absolute refusal to predict—after all, each passing day surprises us with another unexpected turn of events. And truly, an inhabitant of that part of Europe, tested by so many historic disappointments, is understandably reluctant to hope too much or to assume “this is it”: that the transformation taking place is, this time, for

real and not merely another cyclic “thaw” or “renewal” of the politically oppressive system. That said, the rejection of the Stalinist system and the return to democracy, if they endure, will have a fundamental significance for culture. They will change everything—from how culture supports itself to the ways in which artists deal with “reality” in their work.

Over the past few decades, Western observers have made the common mistake of assuming that culture in countries such as Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, East Germany, or Romania was a noble victim, squirming helplessly under the totalitarian oppressor’s heel. Differences in oppression notwithstanding (obviously, the situation in Poland or Hungary hardly compared with Ceaușescu’s ruthless erasure of any trace of free speech), the perfidy of totalitarianism in its modified, late 20th-century form was that it was by no means bent on completely silencing arts and letters. Rather, it actually sponsored culture that served the regime’s ideological principles while also satisfying at least part of the masses’ need for bread and circus. Writers or artists in whom the motives of ambition or greed were stronger than the pangs of conscience could always count on selling their goods to the state at a fairly high price. If such a writer had been, spiritually speaking, a prisoner, he was kept, as one dissident put it, in a “velvet prison.” The important difference between the last decades and the earlier years was that the pure-and-simple Stalinist principle of “who is not with us, is against us” had been quietly replaced with the dictum “who is not against us, is with us.”

In short, the more lenient regimes tolerated and even encouraged literature and art that were ideologically neutral. The artists’ basic task was simply to stay out of the regime’s way and to provide either mass entertainment (as in countless socialist thrillers praising the virtues of the secret police and in pop songs extolling the charms of military service) or semblances of authentic culture for the benefit of the West (as in just as numerous examples of avant-garde art). The artist was to be nothing more than another employee at that enormous monopolistic enterprise, the post-Stalinist socialist state.

**T**he relative stability of communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1960s and ’70s can be explained only by the fact that both the rulers and the ruled derived certain advantages from the existing system. On the strength of an unsigned agreement—the Czech émigré economist Anton Liehm called it the “New Social Contract”—the regimes guaranteed their citizens a basic degree of well-being and safety, while the citizens, in exchange, agreed not to rebel against the system’s injustice. This unwritten Social Contract made sure that artists were published and paid and that consumers were supplied with cultural products—as long as nobody demanded creative freedom or genuine artistic works.

What has now happened (over startlingly different lengths of time: “ten years for Poland, ten months for Hungary, ten weeks for East Germany, ten days for Czechoslovakia,” in Timothy Garton Ash’s celebrated dictum) is that one of the par-

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ties—society—has cancelled the New Social Contract. It did so because, in each of these countries, the other party—the regime—proved incapable of fulfilling even the basic provisions of the Contract.

In culture something similar happened. Beginning in 1976 in Poland, an independent, uncensored publishing network undermined the Contract: At the cost of forfeiting protection, producers of cultural goods freed themselves from state control. The present dismantling of communist rule in Central Europe consists, culturally, of nothing more than removing the last vestiges of such control.

But the ultimate removal of state control will also mean the disappearance of state protection for artists and writers. I am not talking here about those writers and artists who, as outright dissidents, have long been trained in the school of independence and its twin, adversity. Rather, I have in mind the average producer of cultural goods. His changed situation is comparable to that of a clerk in some state office who one morning discovers that his building has been razed and his employment terminated. The building was ugly, the office inefficient, the employment a sham, and the work a crucifying bore; still, it meant a steady income plus fringe benefits. Now the clerk is told all that is gone but he is free to do anything he wants, even to go out and set up his own business. This permission would please him enormously, if not for one minor problem: He has no capital with which to start a business. Even if he did, he doesn't know the first thing about business management. And even if he did, the years spent toiling in the office have effectively killed in him any spirit of free enterprise that might make his future seem enticing rather than threatening.

Since no two Soviet bloc countries have had exactly the same experience, the sacked clerk of our metaphor will vary



*Mirror of Memory (1987) by Lukasz Korolkiewicz. The artist won the Solidarity Cultural Award in 1983.*

from country to country. Some artists and thinkers are surprised and thrown off balance by the abrupt change, while others, better prepared, are now more or less ready to take their chances in the private sector.

In some cases, notably in Poland, a cultural private sector had already been created. Despite recurring waves of oppression, Poles have since 1976 enjoyed an important alternative to state-controlled culture. Even earlier, the products of émigré publishing houses, smuggled into the country, formed a part of any young intellectual's informal education. Printed by an émigré publisher abroad, Czeslaw Milosz's *The Captive Mind* (1953), for example, was smuggled into Poland beginning in the mid-1950s; its dissection of the argument for the communist regime made it less likely that intellectuals would henceforth accept that regime.

With the emergence of the under-

## THE ÉMIGRÉ POET

1980 Nobel Prize winner Czesław Miłosz, in Berkeley, California. Miłosz chose themes impossible to depict openly in Poland—but at the sacrifice of living among his countrymen and hearing his mother tongue.



### *My Faithful Mother Tongue*

Faithful mother tongue  
I have been serving you.  
Every night, I used to set before you little bowls of colors  
so you could have your birch, your cricket, your finch  
as preserved in my memory.

This lasted many years.  
You were my native land; I lacked any other.  
I believed that you would also be a messenger  
between me and some good people  
even if they were few, twenty, ten  
or not born, as yet.

Now, I confess my doubt.  
There are moments when it seems to me I have squandered my life.  
For you are a tongue of the debased,  
of the unreasonable, hating themselves  
even more than they hate other nations,  
a tongue of informers,  
a tongue of the confused,  
ill with their own innocence.

But without you, who am I?  
Only a scholar in a distant country,  
a success, without fears and humiliations.  
Yes, who am I without you?  
Just a philosopher, like everyone else.

I understand, this is meant as my education:  
the glory of individuality is taken away,  
Fortune spreads a red carpet  
before the sinner in a morality play  
while on the linen backdrop a magic lantern throws  
images of human and divine torture.

Faithful mother tongue,  
perhaps after all it's I who must try to save you.  
So I will continue to set before you little bowls of colors  
bright and pure if possible,  
for what is needed in misfortune is a little order and beauty.

*from Poetry: 1981-1987*

ground presses inside Poland in 1976, the ungainly edifice of the official culture truly began to crumble. Thousands of uncensored books and periodicals—from factory newsletters to literary quarterlies, from the forbidden novels of George Orwell to manuals on how to strike—helped Polish society to educate itself. Authors and underground publishers joined scholars and artists, conducted courses in private apartments, and organized exhibits and performances in churches. A largely de-Sovietized consciousness began to emerge—one marked by an increased sense of individual responsibility for the nation's future, respect for human rights, rejection of violence, willingness to “live in truth” regardless of consequences, disillusion with the reformability of communism, and belief in the ultimate triumph of what Václav Havel called “the power of the powerless.” Without this consciousness, the unprecedented events of the 1980s—the birth of a ten-million-strong independent union that substituted for an opposition party and its underground survival throughout the grim experience of martial law—would never have taken place.

Thanks to this underground independence, Poland was prepared culturally

for the situation that it now faces. Writers, artists, and groups such as the critically acclaimed Theater of the Eighth Day have already experienced the unsettling combination of being relieved of state control while also being deprived of state protection.

**T**he case of the Theater of the Eighth Day is particularly revealing. Founded in 1964 as a university acting troupe, the group at first enjoyed protection and support from the official Association of Polish Students. During the early 1970s, however, the theater produced several performances based on contemporary political poetry which challenged sanctioned versions of Poland's recent history. As a result, the authorities attempted to destroy the group by disrupting performances and arresting actors on false charges. Most troupe members began earning their living by taking odd jobs; the theater's performances were staged—strictly speaking, illegally—in private apartments or even in the streets. After the harassment became unbearable, the troupe left Poland for Italy, where it somehow managed to conquer local audiences despite language differences. The theater has now returned to Poland and resumed its activity—its actors all the stronger for their experience. Indeed, to them and to other artists with similar experiences, the future in Poland may be difficult but at least not completely surprising. To a lesser extent, the same can be said about artists and thinkers in Hungary, where dissidents have been preparing the ground for many years.

In Czechoslovakia or East Germany, however, the quantitative difference becomes a qualitative one. In East Germany practically since its inception, and in Czechoslovakia since the suppression of Prague Spring in 1968, cultural dissent came down to a handful of heroic individuals who both withstood the totalitarian ap-

paratus of persecution and resisted the temptation to emigrate. Against the bleak background of cowardice and opportunism, individuals such as Václav Havel shone all the more brightly. Still, neither in Czechoslovakia nor in East Germany did such isolated individuals set the tone for culture as a whole: The overwhelming majority of writers and artists in these countries fit the definition of "state artist," an employee who now faces both the collapse of the ideology he served and the demolition of the professional structures he has been part of for his entire life.

Bulgaria and, in particular, Romania present even more depressing pictures. As the West only now begins to realize, the dictatorship of Ceaușescu, marked as much by hypocrisy as by cruelty, created a culture whose primary task was to sing unending

### THE AESOPIAN POET

*Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, a master of Aesopian expression, uses metaphors or allegorical situations to portray dangerous subjects—for example, politically compromised behavior.*



#### *Objects*

Inanimate objects are always correct and cannot, unfortunately, be reproached with anything. I have never observed a chair shift from one foot to another, or a bed rear on its hind legs. And tables, even when they are tired, will not dare to bend their knees. I suspect that objects do this from pedagogical considerations, to reprove us constantly for our instability.

—from *Selected Poems* (1968)



*In the Theater of the Eighth Day's performance, Auto da Fé (1985), self-immolation symbolizes life in communist Poland.*

praise to the tyrant whom all the nation hated. This sycophantic chorus drowned out the voices of authentic writers and artists. Even the most timid expression of dissent was a terrible risk in a country where every typewriter had to be registered and every third citizen was a police informer.

The Romanian experience under Ceaușescu demonstrates that while some political oppression can bring out the best in a nation's culture, there is a threshold beyond which resistance breaks down. From then on, fear and apathy prevail. This has nothing to do with national characteristics or local traditions. It is, quite simply, the inevitable result when persecution is sufficiently ruthless. Unbridled terror reigned in Poland and Hungary during the Stalinist period (1945–1956), and their cultures fared little better than Romania's under Ceaușescu. Today it is not enough to allow Romanian writers to own unregistered typewriters and to write what they wish. Entire areas of human thought and expression, strictly forbidden under the dictatorship, must now reenter the Romanian culture. The most basic works of Western literatures must be translated and made available. It will take years to absorb this enormous influx of information.

To be sure, Romania is an extreme case. Poland or Hungary face an easier task. But precisely because Poland possesses a relatively liberated culture, it shows just how much farther most Central European cultures must travel to reach complete freedom. Several major obstacles must be cleared, each more formidable than the other. Let us begin with Poland's most basic ones:

*Economic woes.* Before 1989, culture (at least "official" culture) was still subsidized by the state. Since the regime owned it and needed it for its purposes, the regime had to keep culture alive. Now that the state has practically ceased to own culture, it may stop subsidizing the arts in order to be able to feed the populace.

The new minister of culture, a well-known theater director, Izabella Cywińska, has so far taken no drastic measures. But many formerly state-owned enterprises, including publishing houses and periodicals, now depend on their own income rather than on state subsidies. On the one hand, a supporter of democratic changes can only rejoice: There is no other way for culture to start functioning in a normal, "Western" way. But with no transition, this policy may have dangerous consequences. Fewer and fewer people can afford the increasingly high price of a book. (A volume of Samuel Beckett's collected plays in Polish translation a year ago cost 1,500 zloty, then about one-thirtieth of the average retired person's monthly income; after the recent price hikes, the comparable book will cost several times as much, while pensions and salaries remain basically the same.) Even Solidarity's newspaper, *Gazeta*—the first and most prominent independent newspaper in Eastern Europe—is running into trouble. Forced by rising paper costs to double its price, the newspaper's circulation has dropped by almost half, and copies which used to sell out in early morning languish

on the newsstands throughout the day.

Some publishing houses, to avoid bankruptcy, have started producing shallow entertainment rather than serious literature. The venerated *Wydawnictwo Literackie* (Literary Press) in Cracow, for instance, has almost eliminated books of contemporary poetry while doing huge printings of some of the most kitschy romances written in pre-1939 Poland. What Polish culture at this moment faces is the short-term danger of dependence on a market economy before certain mechanisms (such as tax-exempt donations) mollifying the laws of supply and demand have been developed.

*Institutional difficulties.* After the government imposed martial law in 1981, the opposition to official culture acquired an additional moral dimension. When several actors agreed to appear on TV, they were booed the next evening by audiences in theaters. Similarly, after praising the military regime in the official media, the popular writer Wojciech Zukrowski found a huge pile of his own books dumped on his doorstep by angry readers. From that point on, participation in certain official forms of cultural life was considered—not merely by fellow artists but even more so by the public—as morally reprehensible collaboration. An honest actor was not supposed to perform on television (a state-owned institution which, during martial law, was so militarized that its news anchors wore uniforms). The actors' boycott of television from 1981 to 1983 was one of the most widely applauded acts of protest against martial law.

**N**ow that Poland is no longer ruled by a communist-military clique, black-and-white ethics no longer applies. To preserve the pluralism won during the long struggle against state censorship, while at the same time doing away with the distinctions between "official" and

"unofficial," is the task now facing Polish culture.

But as the underground culture surfaces, its situation changes. First, books published in an unhindered fashion by the erstwhile underground presses have lost the taste of a forbidden fruit; they are no longer so sought after. Second, underground publishers, accustomed to operating within the framework of black-market economy and primitive (but cheap) technology, are now subject to new financial difficulties, paper shortages, production delays, and so forth. The editors of the monthly *Res Publica*, the first underground periodical to come above ground (in 1987), have seen their journal, formerly a sensation, turn into just one of many interesting periodicals.

*Philosophical dilemmas.* After 45 years of communist rule, Polish artists and writers will soon find themselves in a position similar to that of their counterparts in the West: Free to express any view they wish, they may find that such freedom makes words lose their weight. They may discover that amid the multitude of voices an important message will go unheard. Subject to market laws, serious thought and innovative experiment may be elbowed out by cheap entertainment and easy convention. Under the old order, creative writers stepped into the gap left by the suppression of independent historiography, social analysis, and ethical evaluation; now they will have to accept the attenuation of their moral authority and spiritual leadership. All of this is a price that culture has to pay for its return to normality—and, after the initial euphoria fades, there may be quite a few writers or artists who will doubt whether it was really worth the price. And these writers or artists may include not only those who prospered under the old regime but also those whose previous resistance earned them, along with harassment,

a distinct voice and moral authority.

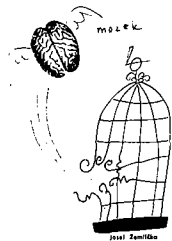
*Aesthetic quandaries.* What happens, aesthetically, when the stifling restrictions and prohibitions are finally gotten rid of: If you had been gagged for several decades, how is your voice going to sound after the gag is removed? It may well happen that someone allowed at last to speak at the top of his voice is unable to do so; he can only produce a hoarse whisper.

This is the problem of those Central European cultures where writers have been trained for too long in the school of "Aesopian language": Aesopian language relies on hints and allegories rather than on unequivocal names and precise depictions; it employs special techniques and genres to deceive the censor. (Using the historical genre, to take a famous example, the Polish writer Jerzy Andrzejewski published in the late 1950s a popular novel about the Spanish Inquisition, which every moderately intelligent reader interpreted as a critique of Stalinism.) Writers and artists may have to struggle before they retrieve, after so many years of racking their brains for ways to fool the censor, the simple ability to name things by their real names.

The harder task, particularly in countries such as Poland where the restraints of Aesopian language have already been overcome, is to overcome the one-sidedness of theme and tone that dominated even the best works of thought and art during the years of oppression. The human condition—as presented in such otherwise bold novels as Tadeusz Konwicki's depiction of

disillusioned intellectuals (*The Polish Complex* and *A Minor Apocalypse*) or Andrzej Wajda's films of rebellious workers (*Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron*)—was seen primarily in political, social, and moral categories. Konwicki's and Wajda's successors must recover the fullness of experience. The focus on the evils of the totalitarian system must be broadened to encompass the much more difficult issue of evil as such, evil that is not a passing and corrigible fault of a system but an ineradicable component of our existence on earth. The cramped style of doloristic complaints and scornful sarcasms must now evolve into a much more flexible and diversified way of speaking of reality.

All of these necessities, from financial to stylistic, are harsh ones. Central European cultures, differently shaped as they are, all face an extremely difficult transition. They may temporarily forfeit some of the characteristic qualities we came to admire in them—their complex use of irony or their union of ethics and aesthetics in a work of art; they may become too Western and not sufficiently Central European. Yet, although nobody can predict, one has every right to believe that the colossal wealth of experience gained by Central European writers and artists in our century cannot possibly be in vain. This is the capital with which they will start, under the new conditions of freedom, their business of portraying the human world and examining the human soul.





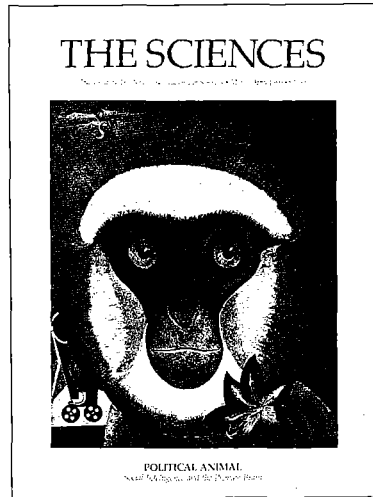
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