

PORTRAITS
OF
CONTEMPORARY
POLISH
WRITERS

RYSZARD
MATUSZEWSKI

POLONIA PUBLISHING HOUSE

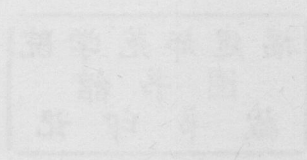
CONTEMPORARY
POLISH WRITERS

by
RYSZARD MATUSZEWSKI

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	7
ZOFIA NAŁKOWSKA	21
MARIA DĄBROWSKA	31
TADEUSZ BOY ŻELEŃSKI	45
STANISŁAW IGNACY WITKIEWICZ	57
JULIAN TUWIM	69
ANTONI SŁONIMSKI	85
JAROSŁAW IWASZKIEWICZ	93
JAN PARANDOWSKI	103
ZOFIA KOSSAK-SZCZUCKA	113
WŁADYSŁAW BRONIEWSKI	123
KONSTANTY ILDEFONS GAŁCZYŃSKI	135
MIECZYŚŁAW JASTRUN	147
JULIAN PRZYBOŚ	157
ADAM WAŻYK	165
LEON KRUCZKOWSKI	173
POLA GOJAWICZYŃSKA	183
BRUNO SCHULZ	193
ADOLF RUDNICKI	203
JERZY ANDRZEJEWSKI	213
KSAWERY PRUSZYŃSKI	225
JERZY PUTRAMENT	235
KAZIMIERZ BRANDYS	243
STANISŁAW DYGAT	257
TADEUSZ RÓŻEWICZ	265
POLISH PROSE AND ESSAYS IN THE POST-WAR YEARS	273
BIBLIOGRAPHY	283

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to introduce to foreign readers some of Poland's leading writers, especially those who, in the broadest sense of the word, can be considered contemporary writers. This term is used in its broadest sense because some of the writers included here are no longer living. Yet their names belong in any group of profiles of Polish writers from the past forty years, and their contributions to contemporary Polish literature are among those which will probably be of the greatest interest to foreign readers.

And why does this selection cover precisely the last forty years? It is impossible to give an exact definition of what is contemporary in literature. In broad terms, it can be said to include the period which the generation alive today has observed and helped create. If such a definition is accepted, the history of contemporary Polish literature must include the inter-war years, during which the entire older generation of our writers was productive. On the other hand, works written before World War I belong to the historical past; their authors are long dead and those of their writings which have enduring value, have taken their places alongside the classics of Polish literature.

This book cannot give a full picture of Polish literature in the period covered, for this would require a much more extensive work. The portraits included here were selected jointly by the author and the publishers. Among living writers only those who live in Poland are included; it is assumed that those who live abroad have other means of presentation to foreign readers.

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It is hardly a revelation to say at the outset that Polish literature is not one of the best known in the world outside the Slavic countries. Usually the reason for such a lack of knowledge about the literature of a country can be found in the general political and social role of that country and the extent to which its language is known abroad. As far as Polish literature is concerned, this is not the full explanation; two other factors prevent Polish authors from being known in other countries.

One of these factors is the circumstance that the entire 19th century, which throughout Europe was the period in which modern society was shaped and a national literature flourished, for Poland was also a period of slavery. The choice of literary subjects was decisively influenced by this fact, and Polish literature of this century dealt with one central problem — the recovery of independence.

All other problems — those of general human concern, psychological or moral problems — were subordinated to the problem of independence. Thus Polish literature of the 19th century can only be properly evaluated in relation to this problem.

The second factor that limited the knowledge of Polish literature abroad is connected with the first. The great national literature of Poland is primarily great poetry. This splendid poetic heritage, especially from the romantic period, is only partly equalled by the achievements of the prose classics. The poetry of Mickiewicz and Słowacki can well be compared to the works of Goethe, Byron, Pushkin and Hugo. It is more difficult to compare Sienkiewicz, Prus and Żeromski to Balzac, Tolstoy, Dostoyevski or Mann. The tradition that poetry predominates over prose has continued to the present. Poetry, however, is much more difficult to translate than prose. It is for this reason that in the present book certain outstanding poets are not included — quite consciously — since the reader would be in no position to verify comments about their gifts from texts of their work.

*

In order that the reader may better understand the material presented here, it is no doubt necessary to give some information about Polish literature of the past.

Although it is not within the scope of this book, a brief historical background is required for an understanding of contemporary literature.

Polish literature has passed through a long process of historical development. It is one of the oldest and richest of Slavic literatures. It first developed under the influence of Latin culture. If Latin texts and the first developments of the Polish language are included in this history, then it reaches back to the 12th century. The first literary texts in the Polish language

itself, such as religious songs and sermons, date back to the 14th century. Polish secular poetry appeared in the 15th century.

The 16th century is considered the "Golden Age" of Polish culture. It was then that the national language became fully formed as an artistic language and replaced Latin, which had dominated medieval texts. At this time appeared the works of the first great Polish poet, outstanding humanist and the leading figure of the Polish Renaissance, *Jan Kochanowski* (1530-1584). His verses, which every Polish child memorizes, remain to this day the inspiration of all Polish poets. The name of the poet's family estate, Czarnolas, and one old linden tree, in the shade of which he wrote his verses, have become the most common symbol of the great tradition of Polish lyricism.

The second half of the 18th century also witnessed a flowering of Polish literature, when the Enlightenment spread to Poland, paving the way for progressive rationalist thought and the slogans of the French Revolution. The political downfall of the Polish gentry took place at this time, and Polish literature of the period was permeated with civic problems, was concerned with the preparation of social reforms. Novels and comedies began to be written. In this epoch, the finest Polish writers were Bishop *Ignacy Krasicki* (1735-1801), satirist, story-teller and writer of didactic novels, who is known as the prince of Polish poets, and the poet *Stanisław Trembecki* (about 1735-1822).

The richest contribution to Polish literature came in the 19th century. This was a period in which Poland was enslaved politically but also a period of contin-

uous struggle for national and social liberation, in which literature played an active role. The masterpieces of the renowned poets *Adam Mickiewicz* (1798-1855) and *Juliusz Słowacki* (1809-1849) appeared in the first half of the 19th century, as part of a strong romantic movement. The leading Polish representatives of this movement, unlike their counterparts in Germany and to some extent in France, gave decidedly progressive social tones to their writings. They formed a strong contrast to the leaders of classicism who were writers of a conservative cast, in matters both literary and political. The young romanticists, led by Mickiewicz, raised the cry of the struggle for independence, and carried it to the whole nation — to the politically and economically persecuted masses. These writers became close to those who called for social reform — in particular, that land be given to the peasants and that they be granted full rights as citizens. Mickiewicz was the first to introduce peasant motifs extensively into poetry; he was a strong advocate of democracy. Towards the end of his life, he came close to the ideas of utopian socialism. He was the author of the great "Forefather's Eve" (Parts I, II, IV written in 1821-1822, Part III in 1832), a dramatic work which combines the universal type of drama which preceded the romantic, with the form of drama which played a role in the struggle for national liberation. He also wrote "Pan Tadeusz" (1832-1834) which is particularly beloved by Polish readers.

The genius of Mickiewicz undoubtedly influenced his contemporaries' appraisal of Poland's second great romantic writer — Juliusz Słowacki. To this day, this visionary and recluse amazes the reader by his mod-

ernity, yet he received his proper recognition only in later generations. Similarly *Cyprian Norwid* (1823-1883), of the late romantic period; was little understood in his lifetime and properly appreciated only years after his death. Norwid was a poet-philosopher who painstakingly penetrated the elusive meanings of words to find expression for thought conceptions which were as original as they were incomprehensible to his own generation.

Finally, the fourth great Polish romantic poet — or, in reality, the third, since he came earlier than Cyprian Norwid, is *Zygmunt Krasiński* (1812-1859). He was an aristocrat and distrusted the heralds of revolutionary ideas, but he was full of the spirit of the purest patriotism. Several of his fine dramatic works won him a place among the “seers” — the spiritual leaders of the fight for national liberation. Regardless of how one evaluates the poet’s convictions, his “*Nieboska komedia*” (The Undivine Comedy), 1833, a great romantic polemic against the idea of revolution, arouses interest even today by the timeliness of its problems and the force of its dramatic expression.

As a result of Poland’s unfortunate historic situation, all the great writers of this romantic period lived and did their writing abroad — mainly in France. Here many of the patriots who had fought in the 1830-1831 uprising took shelter after the failure of the revolt. First-rate works originating in Poland during this period were the exception. Outstanding among these exceptions were the works of *Aleksander Fredro* (1793-1876) whose comedies offer most original observations on the life and customs of his times, and

whose plays are to this day a permanent feature of the repertoire of Polish theatres.

A different situation existed in the second half of the 19th century. After the failure of the second of the great national uprisings (1863) came a period of sharp criticism of romantic "illusions," when the writers living in Poland consciously limited themselves to a minimum programme, expressed by the slogan of improving the economic level of the country and of spreading education among the people. These slogans for what was called "organic work" were advanced by the proponents of Polish positivism which flourished together with the gradual transformation of Poland from a feudal to a capitalist economy. In literature, this period was marked by the flowering of the realistic prose novel. From about 1870 there began to appear the works of the outstanding classical novelists: *Henryk Sienkiewicz* (1846-1916), *Eliza Orzeszkowa* (1841-1910), *Bolesław Prus* (1847-1912), and towards the end of the century *Władysław Stanisław Reymont* (1867-1925) and *Stefan Żeromski* (1864-1925).

Of all these, Sienkiewicz, Nobel prize winner and author of the world-renowned "*Quo Vadis?*" (1896), is doubtless best known internationally. His work includes a historical trilogy dealing with the Polish wars with Sweden, the Cossacks and the Turks in the 17th century — "*Ogniem i mieczem*" (With Fire and Sword), 1884, "*Potop*" (The Deluge), 1886, and "*Pan Wołodyjowski*," 1888. Though these are not so well-known abroad, they are very popular in Poland, especially with young people. A master of narrative, a creator of the most colourful vision of Poland's past, at the time he wrote, Sienkiewicz was a sort of physician to

the sorely tried soul of a subjugated nation, who "comforted the heart" with pictures of former heroism and splendour. His novels of the contemporary scene were less successful and even in his own time he was criticized for superficiality and naiveté of social thought.

Bolesław Prus, a quiet, modest and hard-working Varsovian is much less known abroad. Yet his portrayal of ancient Egypt in the novel "Faraon" (The Pharaoh), 1897, can safely be compared with Flaubert's "Salammbô", while his treatment of the problems of state power can still arouse considerable interest. Prus' greatest masterpiece, however, is not so much this tale of ancient times as "Lalka" (The Doll), 1890. In this novel, he painted with understanding, concern and sincere warmth, an extremely expressive picture of the life of Warsaw in the 1870's; and of the conflicts caused by the first offensive of capitalism in Poland. Both of these masterpieces, as well as his many other novels and short stories, assure Bolesław Prus a favoured position with Polish readers.

The end of the 19th century witnessed a decline of positivism in Polish literature; new slogans and art manifestoes appeared, as they did in the whole of European literature. On the one hand, naturalist tendencies were expressed in the violent muckraking of the plays by *Gabriela Zapolska* (1860-1921), the best known of which is "Moralność Pani Dulskiej" (The Morality of Mrs. Dulska), 1907.

The same trend was shown in the early works of Żeromski and Reymont, while symbolism, modernism and "art for art's sake" find their echo in the creations of the poets of the group called "Young Poland,"

which reflect a return to romantic traditions, a faith in the strength of the imagination and a sceptical attitude towards the cognitive tasks of art.

Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868-1927) was a writer well-known in Germany, since as a young man he wrote in German and took an active part in the formation of German modernism. He introduced a disturbing ferment into the sleepy, tradition-ridden walls of old Cracow.

Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907) wrote profound, symbolic dramas of a romantic cast, in which he combined the antique with a fantastically transformed history of Poland, and folk motifs. Of particular interest today is his semi-realistic, semi-symbolic drama "Wesele" (The Wedding), 1901, which is based on the actual marriage of a poet from Cracow's Bohemia with a village girl. This penetrating work, in which the author's contemporaries recognized well-known Cracow citizens, is a detached and ironic treatment of the bourgeois intelligentsia's bucolic faith that fraternization with the people would automatically be followed by a solution of the problems of a nation which longed for freedom.

At the same time, the first manifestations of the active struggle of the Polish proletariat, the culminating point of which was the 1905 revolution, were reflected in the works of those writers who sympathized with the socialist movement. The ideal of social justice and a romantic faith in the indissoluble unity of social and patriotic aspirations, is particularly vivid in the works of Stefan Żeromski, the outstanding writer of this period. He became the spiritual guide of that generation which was destined to see the

resurrection of an independent Polish state. His novels such as "Ludzie bezdomni" (The Homeless Ones), 1900, "Popioły" (Ashes), 1904, "Przedwiośnie" (Early Spring), 1925, and many others were a school of civic and social radicalism for an entire generation. They criticized both the past of the gentry and the present of the bourgeois-capitalists.

Władysław Reymont, the second outstanding prose writer of the same generation as Żeromski, and his victorious rival for the Nobel Prize, created works of a completely different character. Reymont won the prize for his novel "Chłopi" (The Peasants), 1904-1909, — a sweeping epic picture of the Polish village, unrivaled in Polish literature for its expressiveness and colour.

Żeromski and Reymont were the last of the great classic Polish prose writers of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The last years of their creative activity coincided with the new period in Polish history which dates from the First World War. As mentioned previously it was the older generation of contemporary writers which came to the fore in this period.

A number of fundamental features characterized the literature of the inter-war period. Above all, it was the literature of a country that had regained its independence after a hundred years of enslavement. This fact undoubtedly influenced the direction of its development. What had been the primary civil concern of the writers — the regaining of their own country — now disappeared. New aims and concerns took its place. Firstly, there was a tendency to concentrate attention on formalist, aesthetic problems and techniques, an