

COMING OF AGE UNDER MARTIAL LAW

THE INITIATION NOVELS OF POLAND'S
LAST COMMUNIST GENERATION



SVETLANA VASSILEVA-KARAGYOZOVA

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Svetlana Vassileva-Karagyzova



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INTRODUCTION

For the past twenty years, Polish cultural historians and literary critics have debated inconclusively whether the politically transformative year of 1989—which saw the fall of communism in Poland—should also be seen as a turning point in Polish literary history. Literary historian Anna Nasiłowska argues that though it is indisputable that 1989 brought fundamental changes to the political life of Poland, it remains unclear whether the changes in its literary life were distinctive enough to constitute a new paradigm. She finds that the aspiration for thematic and aesthetic novelty was palpable in literary works as early as the second half of the 1970s, which is when, according to her, the actual transformation of the political system in Poland began to take place.¹ Nasiłowska points out that one of the reasons for the acceptance of 1989 as the year that brought literary transformation is the Poles' embarrassment at having to admit that their postcommunist literature has roots in the People's Republic of Poland.² Literary historian Włodzimierz Bolecki also notes that 1989, unlike 1918, 1945, 1956, or 1968,³ does not contain significant literary events but is commonly perceived as a literary watershed because the sociopolitical changes of that year drastically altered the literary milieu. Literary critics Przemysław Czapliński and Piotr Śliwiński argue in the same vein that the literary process is neither strictly determined by nor absolutely independent of the political, economic, and spiritual life of a nation. In this sense, a change of literary paradigm is not a mere consequence of a political revolution, but its cultural equivalent, one that is equally motivated by and motivational for the political realm.⁴

Despite its questionable status as a periodization marker, the year 1989 brought fundamental changes to the Polish literary landscape, with the lifting of censorship, discontinuation of state subsidies, establishment of a free literary market, and dismissal of the imperative of political engagement.⁵ The dismantling of the system had a snowball effect

and drew in other cultural components from local and foreign traditions that were woven into the regime's ideological fabric in order to enhance its legitimacy. In 1992, literary scholar and Romanticism expert Maria Janion announced the demise of the Romantic paradigm, the paradigm that had defined Polish culture for more than 150 years.⁶ She declared the Solidarity movement its swan song:

Martial law intensified the Romantic emotionality. Manifestations of national identity made use of symbols, gestures, and rituals typical for Romantic culture, especially messianic martyrdom. Today, however, we are witnessing a dramatic and painful process; a cycle in Polish culture has been completed. . . . The ideals of Romanticism have lost their power.⁷

The Romantic culture, whose symbols and myths were relied on in times of political adversity, fell prey to the process of democratization and liberalization that decentralized Polish national discourse and encouraged individualism and diversity. In her book *Zrozumieć swój czas: Kultura polska po komunizmie* (To understand your time: Polish culture after communism) literary theorist Teresa Walas subjects Janion's diagnosis to intense scrutiny and persuasively argues that the actual death of the Romantic code happened long before 1992. She offers an intricate analysis of the post-nineteenth-century metamorphoses of the Romantic paradigm, including its incorporation into socialist culture. Walas defines the culture of the People's Republic of Poland as a utilitarian creation that appropriated elements from the folk tradition combined with a selective form of patriotism that did not endanger the superiority of internationalism, carefully filtered mass culture values, and Catholic ritualism. The Romantic tradition played an instrumental role in this amalgam, however, as one might expect: not in its organic form, but rather as a mobilizing rhetoric. In the early postwar years, the attitude toward Romanticism was rather hostile because it was associated with the underground independence movement and the Home Army. Later, the regime realized the usefulness of the Romantic tradition in its efforts to prove its own authenticity and cultural continuity. Thus, selected Romantic works were included in the school literary curriculum, but they were stripped of their rich sociocultural and philosophical context and were repurposed to promote the values of socialist doctrine. Walas notes that in the Solidarity period Romanticism also fulfilled a decorative function. The revitalization of the insurrection tradition with its martyrological imagery and sensitivity had a therapeutic effect, but its downside was that it discouraged Poland's radical elites from developing an adequate

language for their then-current experience. After this final eruption of Romantic idealism, a sense of sobriety and disillusionment settled in as the transformation of the political system devalued utopian visions of society.⁸ The abandonment of Poland's grand narrative meant, among other things, the discontinuation of literature's function as the setter of moral norms and behavioral models. Janion points out that, unlike the earlier 1918 overthrow of the Romantic ideology, the post-1989 radical departure was not accompanied by an acquisition of alternative unitary ethical prescriptions. The concurrent invasion of mass culture and the rapid development of the media for mass communication were the two factors that, according to Walas, contributed to the definitive break with the Romantic tradition in the new Poland.

The sudden disappearance of some of the most powerful facilitators of national, political, social, and religious identification created an unprecedented crisis of authority in Polish society.⁹ The previously mandatory belief in cultural icons became optional, and Poles found themselves disoriented, having to navigate through the unknown territories of democracy and the free-market economy. This simultaneously liberating and frightening ethical vacuum gave impetus to a massive and multidirectional quest for self-identity. As Sheila Fitzpatrick aptly notes:

Successful revolutions tear off masks: that is, they invalidate the conventions of self-presentation and social interaction that obtained in pre-revolutionary society. . . . In such upheavals, people have to reinvent themselves, to create or find within themselves personae that fit the new post-revolutionary society. The process of reinvention is at once a process of reconfiguration (a new arrangement of data about oneself) and one of discovery (a new interpretation of their significance). It always involves strategic decisions (how should I present myself in this new world?) and may also prompt ontological reflection (who am I really?).¹⁰

The Polish artistic elite took the lead in search for self-defining, formative experiences. Czapliński and Śliwiński observe that the drastically altered sociopolitical context paradoxically equalized the chances of success of the older and younger generations of Polish writers.¹¹ It forced the older writers to reinvent themselves and the debutants to define their artistic profiles. The disintegration of the Romantic ethical code fostered an emphasis on previously marginal points of self-identification such as ethnicity, regionalism, gender, sexuality, and others. This led to the proliferation of new thematic trends in the post-collapse Polish literary realm such as the literature of "small homelands" (*małe ojczyzny*), Holocaust

literature, feminist literature, and queer literature, to name a few. The activity in the thematic sphere, however, did not match the slower rate of experimentation in the genre sphere, insofar as both the older and the younger generations of Polish writers overwhelmingly preferred the initiation novel over more experimental genres to stage the birth of their post-collapse personal and artistic identities.¹²

In his insightful examination of the reasons for the high proportion of initiation novels in post-1989 Polish literature, Czapliński argues that transitional periods in literary history favor the genre of the initiation novel, alongside pastiche and parody, for its effectiveness in abolishing existing social hierarchies and in rearranging the ethical and aesthetic priorities of new sociocultural paradigms. "This popular literary convention," claims Czapliński, "allows writers to deconstruct previous conceptualizations of history and articulate their own insights into the sociopolitical process in the form of naïve revelations."¹³ More specifically, the initiation novel offers an opportunity to take a fresh look at sociopolitical reality through the reenactment of the universal process of physical and social maturation. The recognizability of this formative experience creates an instantaneous bond between writer and reader (especially the reader who recognizes the authenticity of the experience) and facilitates the grasp of the new axiology by the latter. Thus, the initiation novel becomes, among its other functions, a vehicle for shaping generational self-awareness and for placing a particular generation in the historical process.

Sociologist Michael Corsten attributes the rising popularity of the idea of generational solidarity in the 1990s to three major factors: the crisis of collective identities; the disappearance of fundamental class conflicts; and the collapse of communism as an alternative model for modernization, coupled with prognoses about the end of history.¹⁴ Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman elaborates that the crisis of "prescribed" collective identities forced people to use all available means to construct and defend their new social positions. The notion of the generation allowed them to map the borders of the new social alliances through common facts from their personal biographies. Suddenly, an individual's own life and experiences became one of the most reliable reference points in the world of fragile and short-lived political projects and institutions.¹⁵ Molly Andrews similarly points out that "we become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell; our stories are a cornerstone of our identity. Narratives both construct and are constructed by individuals, but they are encased in larger ideological metanarratives. Thus, as individuals construct the

stories they tell about their lives, they do so as (but not necessarily for) members of a particular generation.”¹⁶ Underlying Andrews’s concept of a “larger ideological metanarrative” is the problem of generational consciousness, which is a crucial factor in the formation of generations. Sociologists Margaret Braungart and Richard Braungart posit that a demographic cohort becomes transformed into a generation only when “many of its members become aware that they are bound together by a shared group consciousness and mobilize as an active force for political change.”¹⁷ The author of the classical study “The Problem of Generations,” Karl Mannheim, distinguishes between *generation as location* and *generation as actuality*. He argues that “in order to share the same *generation location* one must be born within the same historical and cultural unit,” which is similar to the concept of the demographic cohort; *generation as actuality*, on the other hand, involves the creation of “a concrete bond between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic de-stabilization.”¹⁸

The preceding definitions allow one to infer that only a demographic cohort’s exposure to or participation in a social upheaval can produce a strong sense of generational belonging among its members and thus activate that generation’s inherent potential of becoming an engine of a social change (or, in other words, of distinguishing itself in the historical process).¹⁹ Philosopher Jan Garewicz observes that generational membership is not a matter of personal choice (not everyone belongs to a generation) but of historical chance. He describes a generation-defining event as a turning point (“a foretaste of the end of the world”) in the lives of the members of an age group that could not be erased from their memory and could not be surmounted by any other subsequent event with a similar or even greater magnitude: “It is like an initiation (one could lose his/her innocence only once), however not on a personal but on a communal level.”²⁰ Garewicz also brings up age by reaffirming the Romantic idea that a generation-constituting event is most deeply felt by that age group that is especially sensitive to sociopolitical cataclysms, that is, youth in the period between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five.

Not one of the above-quoted theorists of the concept of generation, however, elaborates on how exactly the common experience of sociopolitical upheaval translates into generational self-awareness. I conclude this brief theoretical overview by again evoking Andrews, who suggests that it is through acts of narration that a sense of generational distinctiveness is cultivated: “by participating in and attending to the stories of our own generation and those of others, we develop a consciousness of

ourselves as constituting a distinct group which in turn contributes to our becoming knowing actors in a historical drama we script.”²¹

The idea of a retrospective building of generations challenges the traditional understanding of this type of solidarity. But generations do not always develop group consciousness in the midst of their formative historical cataclysm. It often happens years later, when the memories of individual experiences gradually amount to a more or less coherent generational discourse. Historian Stephen Lovell points out that generations are closely bound up with the politics, economics, and social life of a country. They are connected with the ways different groups lay claims to political power and authority and with the struggle for the distribution of collective resources.²² Thus, generations come into being when they gain access to those collective resources and are able to exploit them to innovate in the political, economic, or cultural spheres.²³

This book is concerned with the generation of Poles who were born between 1960 and 1975 and their attempts to constitute themselves as a community marked by the experience of the cataclysmic fall of communism in 1989. I define a generation as an age group that possesses consciousness of a shared experience of social turbulence. The internalized effect of the formative event sets the group apart from its predecessors and mobilizes it to assert its identity by bringing about change in all spheres of social life. My main argument is that the proliferation of self-thematization narratives of the 1989 generation in recent years is connected with the anticipation of a long-due generational shift in Poland’s political life.²⁴ Turning forty, as many of these authors did in the first decade of the new millennium, is usually considered a time for evaluating one’s life and for making decisions about taking on more social responsibility. By examining the generation-formation process of the 1989 generation (or ’89ers), I hope to shed light on two important aspects of the political transition in Poland: its direction and its effectiveness. Young people are very sensitive to changes, and their reactions to them can be indicative of the trajectory of the democratic process. Also, the participatory nature of democracy means that young democratic states depended on the transitional generation’s acquisition and implementation of the principles and values of the democratic tradition.

Thus, my book seeks to fill a significant gap in the scholarship on Poland’s political transformation by examining its effect on the everyday life and psychologies of ordinary people. In particular, my aim is to reveal the effects of the rapid demolition of the communist system on the Polish youth who came of age during the initial transformative post-collapse phase. They represent a unique generation, “the omega-alpha

generation”—to use Van Hoorn’s label: the last adolescents of the communist system and the first adults of the emerging democracy.²⁵ These adolescents were brought up to survive the oppressive Communist regime, but were charged with the historical task of building up the democratic foundations of free Poland without preexisting models or competent experts to provide counsel. The overlap of the political cataclysm with an equally profound transformation in these young people’s lives—their transition from adolescence to adulthood—is what makes this generation an appealing and worthwhile subject of scholarly interest. As JoNell Strough and colleagues have aptly pointed out, “When examining the consequences of socio-cultural change on individual development, it is important to consider not only the occurrence of such events, but also their timing within an individual’s lifespan. Because identity formation is a salient developmental task in late adolescence, historical events that occur during this time in the lifespan are thought to have profound and long-lasting influences.”²⁶

Following Strough’s suggestion, I aim to examine the repercussions of the profound political and socioeconomic changes for the social adaptation of the transitional generation and the permanent marks that those changes have left on the emerging identities of its members. I seek the answers to these questions in a selection of post-1989 quasi-autobiographical initiation novels written by Polish writers born between 1960 and 1975 and now in their forties and early fifties. My argument is that, taken together, these novels express similar interpretations of a major social upheaval and represent a generation-defining project whose purpose is to validate the age group’s participation in that upheaval. The ultimate goal of these authors is to assert their generation’s distinctiveness and to locate it in the historical process. It is important to note here that this trend was not started consciously, but as time went by and more works began to appear with consistent regularity, the awareness of belonging to a generational community became more palpable in the texts, although it was very rarely verbally explicit. Thus, my goal is to demonstrate throughout the book something that was not yet evident to the novelists themselves and the generation at large, namely, that their self-thematization efforts resulted in a strikingly consistent biography of a unique generation whose most distinct feature is its ambivalence as determined by its transitional location in history. In other words, this book intends to entertain the question of how literature shapes generations and not how generations shape literature.²⁷ Although some of the writers of the 1989 generation (e.g., Izabela Filipiak, Cezary Michalski, Andrzej Stasiuk, and Piotr Siemion) have been associated with the literary generation “BruLion,” this book will not focus on their role in

the literary process but on the role of their works in shaping the identity of Poland's last communist generation.²⁸

French historian Pierre Nora has argued that the self-affirmation of a generation goes hand in hand with the construction of memory.²⁹ Hence my study is based on a selection of about thirty quasi-autobiographical coming-of-age novels that revive childhood memories from the 1970s and the 1980s and reveal the post-collapse fate of those who grew up in the final disintegrative phase of communism. A representative sample of these works includes: Krzysztof Varga's *Aleja Niepodległości* (Independence avenue, 2010); Dawid Bieńkowski's *Jest* (It exists, 2001) and *Nic* (Nothing, 2005); Cezary Michalski's *Siła odpychania* (The force of resistance, 2002); Izabela Filipiak's *Absolutna amnezja* (Absolute amnesia, 2006); Grażyna Plebanek's *Dziewczyny z Portofino* (The girls from Portofino, 2005); Andrzej Stasiuk's *Biały kruk* (White raven, 1995); Piotr Siemion's *Niskie łąki* (Low meadows, 2000); Tomek Tryzna's *Panna Nikt* (Miss Nobody, 1994); Ewa Madeyska's *Katoniela*, 2007; Joanna Bator's *Piaskowa Góra* (The sandy hill, 2009) and *Chmurdalia*, 2012; Jolanta Stefko's *Możliwe sny* (Possible dreams, 2003); Wojciech Kuczek's *Gnój: Antybiografia* (Muck: Antibiography, 2003) and *Senność* (Drowsiness, 2008); Mariusz Maślanka's *Jutro będzie lepiej* (Tomorrow will be better, 2008) and *Bidul* (Orphanage, 2004); Wojciech Staszewski's *Ojciec: PRL* (Father: PRL [Polish People's Republic], 2012); Jan Sobczak's *Dryf* (Drift, 1999); Jurek Zielonka's *Tadzio*, 2000; Sylvain Savoia and Marzena Sowa's *Marzi: Dzieci i ryby głosu nie mają* (Marzi: Neither children nor fish have a voice, 2007) and *Hałasy dużych miast* (The noises of the big cities, 2008);³⁰ Marek Stokowski's *Samo-loty* (Airplanes, 2005); and Radosław Lemański's *Szczury: Po drugiej strony tęczy* (Rats: On the other side of the rainbow, 2008).³¹

These books reflect more or less the basic characteristics of the genre of the initiation novel, or *Bildungsroman*: the protagonist must embark on a quest for self-identity, which is preceded by a conflict between individual aspirations and the demands of socialization; he or she must ponder questions of belonging, responsibility, and choice that are tied to his or her personal growth and development, and that may or may not actually occur. Although the selected novels meet these general criteria of the genre, they do not constitute a uniform group. In fact, they demonstrate great diversity in terms of fictionality, artistic quality, and intentionality. Some of the more consciously construed works became overnight bestsellers and launched their authors' successful careers, whereas others were noted for their documentary rather than aesthetic value and remained their creators' first and only attempts at fiction writing. Many

of these titles were labeled generational myths immediately upon their publication, whereas others were perceived as mere accounts of personal hardships. There is, however, something that unites this diverse selection: all of the novels treat coming of age in late communist Poland from a dual vantage point—from the point of view of a young adult coping with the challenges of the political transition and through the eyes of a child growing up during the last two decades of communism. This duality is reflected in the two distinct patterns of representation of the past. The authors of the earlier novels tend to construct their plots in chronological order, following the life of the protagonists from their communist childhoods to their postcommunist early adulthoods. The more recent novels, in turn, focus on the existential crisis of middle-aged protagonists in post-collapse Poland with occasional flashbacks to their teenage years in late communism. Some interesting variations within these patterns are worth a brief discussion here.

Mariusz Maślanka, Joanna Bator, and Wojciech Kuczok presented their characters' pre- and post-collapse lives in two separate books. Maślanka first wrote *Bidul*, the post-1989 life story of his fictional double, Marcin, and then went back to re-create his childhood in *Jutro będzie lepiej*. Bator followed her heroine's fate chronologically in *Piaskowa góra* and *Chmurdalia*. In Kuczok's case, the sequel to *Gnój* was not a novel, but a screenplay for the film *Pręgi*. However, he also wrote *Senność* with a new set of mature characters that more fitted the second, "midlife crisis" pattern. Jarosław Maślanek and Dawid Bieńkowski, both of whom are very conscious of their belonging to Generation '89, chose to illuminate their views on the pre- and post-1989 life of their age group in two independent novels, Maślanek in *Haszyszopenki* and *Apokalypsis '89* and Bieńkowski in *Jest* and *Nic*.

I find the need for a sequel or a second novel problematic with regard to the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, which presuppose "coherent identity, organic development, linear and teleological movement and a closure that avoids openness."³² The '89ers' appropriation of the classic genre suggests a prolonged maturation process and uncertain outcomes of the protagonist's quest for self-identity. This observation logically raises the following questions: Why, despite postmodernist attacks on the notion of the autonomous and coherent self, have Polish writers felt compelled to use the *Bildungsroman*, a genre that relies on that notion, to shape their maturation stories? What particular Polish tensions became enacted in the space of the "prototypical genre of individual development in society?"³³ And more broadly, what are the thematic, formal, and ideological specificities of the use of the genre in the Polish postcommunist context?