PART I

Revolutions and censorship

Comparative Criticism 16, pp. 3–6.

The poet and human solidarity

MIROSLAV HOLUB

After the communist coup in 1948 and after the Russian 'brotherly help' to the conservative and increasingly more inept communist establishment in 1969, there was a common feeling of isolation: isolation in fear, isolation in hate, isolation in hope. And it was connected with an almost physical feeling of the watchful eye of Big Brother or of the little policeman. Any time, any place. One was never sure.

We who never joined the Communist Party, on the other hand, were sure all the time that we were supervised, controlled, scrutinized and watched not only by the hidden eyes, and ears, but also by all full-blooded party members (the ratio of party members to non-members in scientific institutes and in most artistic and cultural communities was about 10:1 in the fifties). This increased our sense of isolation; it was an intellectual isolation of the minority who simply could not follow how people, sometimes even outstanding and bright personalities, could join the party after twenty years of Stalinism, about which they must have known as much as ourselves. We felt like children who do not understand adult stories and we were treated like somewhat mentally retarded children. And, in addition to the party supervision, we were a special target of the secret police who at times pressed non-party members to do the same things, involuntarily and under threat, as the party members did voluntarily.

Naturally, there was a deep and clandestine solidarity of mentally retarded children. And very soon we began to discover that we were on the same wavelength; in fact sympathetic with all other underprivileged citizens. Later, we realized that more and more privileged party members turned slowly into sympathizers, called revisionists in the late fifties (and dissidents in the seventies). The solidarity network increased considerably after 1954. It was a very organic and viable network, however hidden and cryptic.

Its language was poetry.

It was almost a biological solidarity; solidarity of survival and for

survival. No wonder that it could be denoted or defined only in very concrete terms, that it was resistant to any kind of eschatology, mythology and ideology: cells don't have religion, they have receptors, signals and adhesion molecules. Official ideology, mythology and eschatology were everywhere. Overwhelming. And poetry was the defence against them.

Poetry was the language, poetry was the communication, not only because it could be more loaded with hidden meanings than prose. Poetry was higher above the heads of censors, but it was not so much found in the words as in the suggested tacit solidarity, in the silence between words, between lines and between poems.

It was, in a way, a very concrete poetry, contrary to the concept of 'concrete poetry' as a literary category after Helmuth Heissenbüttel. The concrete was again, not in words, but empty spaces. The concrete was the general understanding and consonance by concrete people, too tiny but real in comparison to the giant rules of totality.

Let me illustrate the point by four personal experiences.

In September 1956, my poem 'The Statue' was published in the magazine *Novy zivot* (New Life). It was a typical poem of the coming style. Of course it did not mention Stalin's monumental statue which was imposed on Prague at that time. The poem just said 'We have put a fist on the city ... the heavy giant pulling to the ground and searchlights tearing the sky ... But I have seen a little girl playing nearby ... and she was bigger than the statue ... and a little dog did its duty on the statue's granite base ...'

Even more typical than the poem were the consequences. I heard (as a retarded non-party member) about them only in 1990. The poem provoked a heated discussion in the Politburo, the editor of the magazine was reprimanded or sacked and I was labelled for very special attention which lasted for thirty-four years. Not knowing it, I was struck by an official statement at the party congress in June 1958, that I was (and all my roughly ten poems published so far) 'the weed of Czech poetry etc'.

This statement in 1958, before my first book managed to appear, planted me firmly in the solidarity network of plain people.

Not knowing what was ahead and not knowing that solidarity was going to shape one of the last modernist movements or groups in Czech literature, I wrote some sort of theoretical, self-centred article about the need for 'Poetry of Everyday', poetry connected with the safe ground of real people, real events and real memories. I submitted the article to

a new 'young literature magazine' *Kveten* (May), although I had never met any of its editors or contributors. I just felt that it was a little less official and much less conservative, and this was closer to my heart. To my astonishment, the article was printed on the first page and became the manifesto of the Kveten Literary Group.

So a concrete, working, viable and friendly literary grouping could be established without any links, just from the common atmosphere, and solidarity. The hidden, a priori solidarity was enough to shape literary programmes.

But the most metaphoric event followed in 1959.

With my first book out and as a promising, and suspect, and thanks to the official disfavour, fairly well-known physician–scientist–poet, I thought that I must meet my dignified predecessor, Antonin Tryb, Professor of Dermatology and Venereology, poet and novelist in Brno. He was seventy-five then. He answered my letter promptly and invited me to his office in a Brno hospital. I came in time and entered the secretariat. The lady there seemed to be a little distraught, but told me that I should 'step in right away, the Professor eagerly awaits you'.

The Professor was sitting stiffly behind his desk, head raised somewhat unnaturally. As a greeting, he made a grumbling sound and offered his right hand, supporting it with his left.

Then we started to talk about poetry, medicine and science. The dialogue consisted of my sentences and his grumbling, gruesome, totally incomprehensible sounds.

I realized that he had had a stroke the day before, but that he was not fully aware of his condition and believed that he could be understood. All he had was the hope that he could still communicate; he wanted to be assured that he could speak. With all my powers of concentration and all the energy I could muster, I kept trying to figure out what he was trying to express and how I should respond. After a while, I was positive that we were speaking about the meaning of poetry at that time and about the meaning of science for the poet. In a way, no words were really needed, we were in the same solidarity network; all was obvious and logical. It was thirty minutes of the most intensive poetry and the most intensive solidarity; both were expressions of the same thing at that time.

I must say that seven years later I met Ezra Pound under analogous conditions. I tried to speak and he did not speak at all, he just stared into eternity. And there was not the slightest sense of any mutual

understanding whatsoever. It was no network, just humble respect on my part.

Professor Tryb died five months after our meeting.

The solidarity died thirty years later when we all achieved what we all wanted, to get rid of the totality, the Russians, the police and supervision by dummies and dumbheads. The solidarity existed as a defence, as an *against*. In our free society, we discovered we were free even of solidarity, I mean of a broad human solidarity, not solidarity of eggheads or rightists or leftists. We have discovered that we are isolated again but this time in the individual's general tendency to express – in poetry – his or her isolation, disjunction and/or disintegration. Poetry of the collective complaint has been replaced by poetry of individual complaint; solidarity replaced by solitude.

This leads to the inevitable question: do we really need life-endangering situations, limiting pressures, oppressions, hypertensions and strokes to generate poetry of a more general human concern, to produce what I might call positive poetry. Of course the Poetry of Everyday was in a way a poetry of protest, but a reasonable protest is a positive phenomenon. Now we have a poetry of protest without reason or with a much smaller reason. We are all writing negativistic poetry, willing or not. I can't believe that this is an obligatory state for modern poetry. I believe, although I am unable to really achieve it myself, that some new poetry of solidarity, some new kind of concrete poetry of Everyday will emerge, sooner or later, with all the attributes of counter-ideology, counter-mythology and counter-eschatology, just for people, other people, people outside.

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'Writing and translating during the cold war in a country of which I know something': exiled in England[1]

ADAM CZERNIAWSKI

I

In 1952 I enrolled as a student at London University. I became editor of the King's College literary review *Lucifer* and published in it my translations of Cyprian Norwid, Leopold Staff and Maria Pawlikowska, and a review of Miłosz's *The Captive Mind*. At the same time my first poems and literary essays were beginning to appear in various Polish *émigré* periodicals in London and Paris. I joined the editorial board of a Polish students' magazine which was outgrowing student concerns and was transforming itself into a periodical of young radical intelligentsia: under by editorship the magazine finally broke with the Polish students' union at a stormy meeting in 1958. The chief reason for the implacable disagreement lay in attitudes to the cold war: the students were intransigent in their refusal to have anything to do with communist Poland, we were convinced that it was essential to forge such contacts – not of course with the regime's aparatchiks but with writers and intellectuals. The belief in *émigré* circles was that we couldn't perform such a balancing act, that we were therefore either dupes or the regime's agents. Many years later, when the dust had long settled, Wacław Iwaniuk was to report in a Canadian paper that the poet Julian Przyboś, whom I had invited in the late fifties to write a preface for our poetry anthology, flew over from Warsaw with the specific mission to recruit us for the regime's cause. The basic rule of *émigré* polemics, as of those in communist Poland, was that facts were dispensable: the fact that Przyboś had never set foot on British soil did not worry Iwaniuk.

The successive changes in our periodical's name from *Życie*

Akademickie (Student Life) (1950–5) to *Nowy Merkuriusz* (The New Mercury) (1955–8)[2] and finally *Kontynenty* (Continents) (1958–66) indicate the gradually evolving and broadening outlook of the publication which over the years could boast of publishing works by the majority of the older *émigrés* including Iwaniuk, Jan Brzękowski, Czesław Miłosz, Jerzy Niemojowski and Witold Gombrowicz and by new writers in Poland, as well as of course by members of its editorial committee which, beside a dozen or so poets, included the film-maker Bolek Sulik and the historian Jan Ciechanowski.

Thus, right at the beginning the parameters of my writing career were clearly delineated: I was to be a Polish writer and a translator of Polish literature with part of me steeped in Polish culture and the other part absorbing English culture and in the process seeking ways of making Polish culture available to the natives. This shaping of my career was determined by the cold war: I began writing when it began; my latest book of poems appeared in Poland in 1989: the censors restored to it those poems which only six months previously they thought fit to remove from the proofs. And my tentative beginnings as translator of Polish literature have over the years led to the publication of some twenty volumes of poetry, drama and philosophy. Had a different order emerged in post-war Europe, my parents would have taken me back to Poland in 1945 and, needless to say, my writing would have followed a very different path.

II

As a pupil at an English grammar school and as a student, I became acutely aware of the abysmal ignorance in the West of Polish culture and history. I had also early on formulated a judgment that culture can be a powerful factor in determining the status of a country in the eyes of the world, in the eyes even of barbarians. Hitler's systematic destruction of Polish culture was balanced by his readiness to preserve French culture, and even to encourage it. The cold war coincided with an explosion of Western interest in East European cultures. Submitting in 1951 my first clumsy Norwid translation to the editor of my school magazine I could not have dreamt that within a decade Polish poetry, drama, fiction, films and music would take the West by storm. I deliberately use the neutral term 'coincided': many would argue that it was thanks (and thanks implies gratitude) to the cold war that these cultures attracted such unprecedented attention: the texts, the images,

the sounds even, were analysed by stony-faced, boring kremlinologists exclusively for signs of malaise under communism, for signs of revolt and disintegration. One has only to recall the fuss and excitement that greeted the publication of Adam Ważyk's supreme piece of hackery, his pseudo-anti-party 'Wiersz dla dorosłych' [Poem for Adults]. Significantly, it was one of the first post-war poems to be translated into English, significantly by a political scientist at the London School of Economics and published, no less significantly, in an anthology edited by Robert Conquest, the scourge of Stalin. The heaps of second-rate literature, especially coming out of the Soviet Union, that followed Ważyk's piece and were greeted with adulation in the West, confirm how wrong I was in my idealistic belief that culture directs politics and not the other way round. Yet, while it is true that Ważyk and many others were no more than fodder for Western political hacks, it is surely beyond doubt that Polish post-war poets not only stand comparison with British, French, German or Italian poets, but that they surpass them. A number of British critics and poets – Al Alvarez, Donald Davie, John Bayley, Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin and Anthony Thwaite being the most vocal and significant – are on record in their admiration for that poetry; and the *Faber Book of Modern European Poetry* (1992) edited by Alvarez gives pride of place to Poles. I need to add that Davie's admiration is confined to Miłosz, as the controversy over *The Poetry of Survival* edited by Daniel Weissbort which raged in the columns of *The London Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *PN Review* testifies.[3] But the fact that such a controversy has been generated and that fundamentally it concerns the challenge issued by Alvarez, Paulin and Heaney that British poets could improve themselves greatly by learning from Polish poets, demonstrates how far we have travelled from the period when Polish poetry was known here mainly on the basis of dismal renderings of second-rate patriotic effusions published in obscure pamphlets aimed at the already converted Britons who sympathised with the Polish predicament.

However, doubts remain: in the preface to *The Mature Laurel, Essays on Modern Polish Poetry* (1991), I wrote:

> The publication of this book coincides with the collapse of Communist order in Poland and the rest of Central and Eastern Europe. How will Herbert's poetry survive the change? ... This poetry undoubtedly deserves to survive on its merits in the face of even the most radical political and ideological upheavals, as against a great many more recent works by younger authors too closely concerned with the machinations of Communist power ... The poetry of Miłosz and Różewicz has also found favour in recent

> years... One hopes that all three have established a secure enough base for appreciation... which will... serve as a point of departure for the discovery of other poets, eventually resulting in the formation of a sizeable map of Polish poetry...

In 1994 I am not so sure of my optimism. I am gradually reverting to the pessimistic view of culture as being led by politics, and as Poland ceases to interest the world as a crucial player in the cold war, so will interest in its culture cease. Possibly Herbert will be the most significant victim: precisely the qualities of his poetry that seemed so appealing – the Aesopian irony, the quasi-Orwellian double-talk, the learned references and historical parallels – may increasingly be seen as a cold war strategy to outwit the censor, now just of historical interest.

The evidence of crisis is much clearer in the poetry of Stanisław Barańczak. Only recently it enjoyed huge popularity because it so skilfully parodied and ridiculed the communist system but now it is pretty well unreadable. Perhaps the very special conditions of the cold war were required to give rise to such a strange phenomenon: a poet devoid of imagination. The fact that I was tempted to translate a couple of his poems I now attribute to the corrupting influence on me of the cold war.

In its editorial published during the controversy over the Weissbort anthology I have already referred to, *PN Review* asked:

> How will these writers... like Miłosz and Herbert, and the dissidents who stayed at home and are now in positions of authority, be valued in decades to come? How will their politics develop and change now that history seems to bend its course in their direction?

This reads like an echo of the passage I quoted from my introduction to *The Mature Laurel* but there are significant differences. The editorial poses the problem in purely political terms and its concern about the future it also expressed in terms of anxieties that the new order in Eastern Europe – witness Yugoslavia – may turn out to be not much better than the old. It continues with another question: 'And where now – in Albania, North Korea, China – will western liberals find the conscience-salving writers with "real experience" against whom to measure, and with whom to cajole, their co-patriots?' Here the message is clear: during the cold war the West turned its attention to the East not in search of new literary models but in order to find 'conscience-salving writers', who have now performed their duties and may be duly discharged.

In his satire *After Martial* Peter Porter confesses, seemingly meekly: