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What We Learned From the British Barbarians

The impetus to write about British and Polish Barbarians came from my response to the ideas expressed by the Polish poet and translator Piotr Sommer in an interview I had conducted with him (Sommer, 2010). In 1983, two years after the declaration of martial law, Sommer, very close to the generation of the Polish New Wave, edited an anthology of the “new” British New Wave Poets. In the conversation Sommer says:

. . . when I was priming myself to do this British anthology, I was meeting the poets every night, and then during one of these visits when I was recording our interviews [1975-1978], I really did feel I was a part of that literary landscape . . . , perhaps I should speak of it in terms of British and Irish-bound “generational consciousness.” Poets from Northern Ireland were crucial for me, because I connected them so much with Poland. It was in Northern Ireland where one could easily see the disgusting politics which was devouring everything . . . At the same time, the most interesting poets from Northern Ireland were saying ‘we shall not give any political lessons; there will be no direct gestures—we shall be in-direct. (Sommer, 2010 b)

In the *Anthology of New British Poetry (Antologia nowej poezji brytyjskiej)*, the term “Barbarians” is used in reference to the poets from “the islands,” poets who started writing poetry in the 1960s and at the turn of the 1960s. These poets came from “the fringes of the official culture,” fringes designating primarily their class background. Sommer included in this category Douglas Dunn, Tony Harrison, Seamus Heaney, and Glyn Hughes. Certainly, they were men of the fringes in more than one way. They were from the fringes of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and to a lesser degree from Wales.

They were beneficiaries of the free education reform which was introduced by the Conservative minister R.A. Butler, soon before the victory of the Labour Party in 1945. In his classic guidebook *English Poetry Since 1940*, Neil Corcoran writes about the Butler Education Act which provided secondary and tertiary education to children and youth from working class backgrounds, thus enabling their social advancement. Corcoran writes that the act “brought a range of new class and regional interests, histories and attachments into British poetry in 1960” (153). Corcoran remembers artistic interests and themes which were characterized by the work of “social advancement” artists. Both in poetry and in drama, they were interested in “otherness.” The cultural difference between an educated child and their parents, the geographical difference between English cities of the South and the pastoral landscape of the Northern family nest were themes addressed in poetry and in drama. Unlike Corcoran, Derek Mahon sees these differences in a much more political light. Speaking to Sommer, Mahon mistakenly associates the reform of secondary schools with healthcare and social reforms introduced by the labour government in 1948. He says:

. . . since this 1948 reform, the government has paid for our [working class children’s] education. As a result, a group with working class background came to have a say in public matters. They were highly articulate, they were close to one another especially in Queens University in Belfast where they studied; they started the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland. Because the response of the government was obscurantist and caused all the violence and bloodshed, this group of people is charged with responsibility and the ensuing Troubles.¹

In the introduction to his anthology Sommer writes about a shared search for values to help the “new” poets familiarize with the world. We are talking

¹ D. Mahon, *Stworzyliśmy to wszystko prawie z niczego [We Created All This Almost from Scratch]* (Sommer, *Zapisy rozmów* 251). Civil Rights Movement (initially American Civil Rights Movement fighting against racial discrimination in the United States) inspired Northern Irish Civil Rights Association (1966), an organization established to protect the rights of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. With Mahon’s statement in view, it seems a paradox that the Butler Educational Act introduced by a conservative minister on behalf of the British Empire paternalism led to the revival of a civil resistance movement in Northern Ireland at the turn of the 1960s. The euphemistic term “the Troubles” refers to bloody fighting which occurred in Northern Ireland from the end of the 1960s until the late 1990s.

about people for whom WWII was but a “vaguely remembered fact from childhood;” people who developed their sense of history based on their experience of the cold war and the Suez Canal Crisis, this last phase of the disintegration of the Empire, as well as the Irish crisis. New categories of identity and experience were being built on the personal fields of experience of the “little poor street in the port town of Hull,” of “looking at fellow passengers in the metro, workers on a building site, salesmen in a local store, and the last, traditional farms in Scotland and Ireland” (Sommer, 1983: 17-18). Sommer writes about “Barbarians from the poems” by British poets, not about “barbaric” poets. These qualifications certainly call for a note of explanation.

English literary critics reserve the term “Barbarians” to refer to Douglas Dunn and Tony Harrison. Dunn is considered a “Barbarian” primarily because of his 1969 collection *Terry Street*, one of the most political books of this Scottish poet. He is identified as a “Barbarian” also because of his political and engaged, in tone, volume *Barbarians* from 1979. Harrison, a native of Leeds, is a “Barbarian” because of his use of language. In England, both Dunn’s and Harrison’s poems are read often in the context of Marxist criticism.² Sommer is known as Dunn’s translator in Poland. In a conversation with him Dunn notes:

Plechanov, I do not know everything he wrote, but I know he says what these days is, more or less, accepted: art is a social phenomenon. This is obviously true. Art is created for people by other people, nobody creates it for themselves. That is why, art is a social phenomenon. This is the whole idea of culture, the whole idea of art. These movements in modern art which reduced it to something almost silent, something meaningless—well, I do not think these tendencies are

² In literary criticism in Britain, writing about Douglas Dunn and Tony Harrison together and in the context of class conflicts seems prevalent. Neil Corcoran thus analyzed their poetry in the book already referred to in this paper, in the chapter titled “Barbarians and Rhubarbarians.” See also the books of Sean O’Brian, *The Deregulated Muse* (O’Brian, 1998); Jerzy Jarniewicz, *W brzuchu wieloryba. Szkice o dwudziestowiecznej poezji brytyjskiej i irlandzkiej* [*Inside the Whale: Notes on British and Irish Poetry of the Twentieth Century*], here the chapter “Barbarzyńcy z Północy” [“Barbarians of the North”] (Jarniewicz, 2001: 88-106); Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison*, especially the chapter “Tony Harrison and working class poetry in postwar Britain” (Spencer, 1994: 1-20); David Kennedy, *Douglas Dunn* (2008).

healthy. I think it is a sign of weakness, of the inability to resist pressures (Sommer, 2010 c: 108-109).³

For Dunn, the poem should be “approachable for any adult person,” and an opposing view is “simply an insult” to ordinary people, an insult which only highlights the feeling that “art is a bourgeois business.” Dunn adds that “if art has any significance, it is not limited to any single group of people. And this is one of the reasons why I am really full of anger when I discuss the condition of today’s debate about poetry in Great Britain; the fact that so much discussion is going on about this argument, this battle of books . . .” (Sommer, 2010c: 109). Jerzy Jarniewicz comparing the poetics of the commonplace in Larkin and Dunn writes:

Larkin . . . opened the way to the introduction of humdrum urban life, to images of the trivial and the commonplace. Dunn made use of these newly discovered terrains for his own purposes. If in the case of Larkin the introduction of the common place was a gesture against high art . . . , or the manifest of the poet’s declared empirical, anti-romantic, anti-idealist stance . . . then in Dunn’s work the commonplace becomes an element of his own poetic discourse on culture—in the broad sociological meaning of the term . . . functioned as the opposite of the established culture often associated with the privileged classes and their *Weltanschauung*. (Jarniewicz, 1994: 94)

Dunn’s “commonplace” relates to specific historical times and social groups; this makes his poetry much more topical. His presentations neither rely on metaphors nor do they rely on universalizing poetic generalizations. Potential universalizing cannot reach beyond the moment to which poems are bound. The evil and pain which constitute determinant subjects of Larkin’s poems, become in Dunn social evil and pain, not existential pain. According to Corcoran, in the context of Dunn’s subsequent work, *Terry Street*, Dunn’s first volume of poetry, represents “a displacement of his [Dunn’s] own Scottish working-class background onto the ‘backwaters’ of Hull; and that background itself features prominently in a large number of anecdotal poems anatomizing class resentment” (Corcoran 155).

³ Dunn directs his critical remarks most of all against theoretical experiments of Charles Olson connected with Black Mountain College which in the 1970s, like many American avant-garde movements in poetry, were gaining more and more popularity in Britain.

The characteristic angry style of Dunn's earlier poetry, the "temperature" of his political views finds its parallels in the style of the other Barbarian, Tony Harrison. The poet gained recognition in Great Britain most of all thanks to his "television" poems. Poem *v.* was composed during the miners' strikes in 1984-1985 and produced in 1997.⁴ *Prometeus* was directed in 1998 by Harrison himself. The screenplay was based on a long poem with the same title. The title figure brings to mind Marx's Prometeus from his *Capital*, a figure personifying the enslavement of the working class. In Harrison's film, Prometeus, chained to a rock, embodies the problems of the workers resulting from the closing of mines in Yorkshire. He also drew attention to the ecological and existential consequences of industrialization in Copșa Mică in Romania, and reminded about WWII death factories like Auschwitz.

Harrison, who was also a professor of Classics in Leeds University, wrote poetry appealing to classical formulae and motifs. Harrison often counterpoints their refinement with his class-based experiences and the language of the author as a "Barbarian" from the social, working-class margins. His poem *v.* shocks with its obscenity and vulgarity even the reading public, previously exposed to the Liverpool pop poetry, and familiar with poetry written against high English modernist traditions. It should be stressed that in his poetry Harrison's "barbarism" acts as a kind of a driving mechanism, it operates in the linguistic sphere. His most well-known and most analyzed poem is "Them & [uz]" from the volume *The School of Eloquence* (1978). The poem starts with a recollection of the stuttering Demosthenes who, with his mouth full of pebbles, was trying to learn to pronounce words by outshouting sea waves, ("αἰαί, ay, ay! . . . stutterer Demosthenes / gob full of pebbles outshouting seas—"; Harrison 122). The key point of the poem lies in the manner of pronouncing words by the speaker. Acting in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, because of his Northern English accent, the speaker says he could only take the role of the drunken porter. When reading aloud a poem by John Keats, a poet known

⁴ Poem *v.* describes a trip to see the author's parents' grave in a cemetery in Leeds, "now littered with beer cans and vandalized by obscene graffiti." The title lends itself to several possible interpretations: victory, versus, verse etc. Proposals to screen a filmed version of *v.* by Channel 4 in October 1987, drew howls of outrage from the tabloid press, some broadsheet journalists, and MPs. About *v.* see: Sandie Byrne, *v. opposition, antagonism, blasphemy* (Byrne 66-69).

for his Cockney accent, the speaker says he was scolded for not articulating the “h”s.⁵ In a chapter dedicated to Barbarians in *W brzuchu wieloryba* (*Inside the Whale*) Jerzy Jarniewicz notices that the class conflict which, at its “roots has unsolved social problems,” and which “goes as far as discrimination of regional Englishes which are regarded as non-conforming with the grammatical norm, also as vulgarized language forms,” (Jarniewicz, 2001: 89) in Harrison’s poetic language receives special attention:

[This work] Comes . . . out of a reflection on the archeology of modern English as well as the issue of the complex social, political, and cultural phenomena . . . Perhaps it carries more radical conviction that language does not reflect only the configuration of forces in extra-linguistic reality and the standing hierarchy of values but that language helps to create them. (Jarniewicz, 2001: 94)

The most important conclusion reached so far is that, applied by English critics to “new” poetry of the cultural fringes of Great Britain, the adjective “barbaric”, possessed a politically coloured dimension. It was connected with specific names and carried very distinctive “class” meanings. This adjective is not used as extensively as it seems to feature in Sommer’s introduction to his anthology of British poetry. Although the poems of his favourite Northern Irish poets are not as active politically, maybe not even as dynamic and as provocative as the poems by Dunn and Harrison, they nevertheless are marked by political impulses. Sommer uses “Barbarians” as a category, he uses it in

⁵ It is precisely this motif “4 words only of *mi’art aches* and ... ‘Mine’s broken, / you barbarian, T.W.!’ // All poetry (even Cockney Keats?) you see / ‘s been dubbed by [^s] into RP, // ‘We say [^s] not [^z], T.W.!’ that has become the major theme of drama text called *The Big H* (In: Tony Harrison, *Theatre Works 1973-1985*). As Byrne says, in this text those who scold the student for dropping “h,” so typical of the Northern English accent, are associated with those who drop “H” (hydrogen) bombs, “Word power for Harrison is not just a matter of *how* words are spoken, but also *which* words, and *whether* they are articulated ‘properly,’ or at all. ‘My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says your life depends on your power to master the words.’ In Harrison’s poetry, the illiterate have no defense against the injustice brought about by legalese, bureau-bubble, and other mystification” (Byrne 22).

his own way meaning possible political and journalistic threads but also other things. Sommer thinks about a style peculiar to “new” English poets which, elsewhere, he understands as standing in opposition to that which “in poetry is mannerly”—universally British, academically-canonical. These poets bring instead their own locality, particularity, their own sense of historicity, and most critically, their language. I am most interested in this search for poetic affinity, and the chances to become inspired by some features of language and poetic stance among Polish translators of poetry written in the English language, translators and poets like Piotr Sommer, translator of Northern Irish poets (Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley); Bohdan Zadura (translator of Tony Harrison and Michael Longley), and of the youngest of them, Jerzy Jarniewicz (translator of Craig Raine and Brian Patten). Through the use of a personal and “localized” language, their work on the syntax of the spoken phrase, through their relaxed attitude towards the typically Polish romantic call to testify on behalf of an imagined public community, in the 1980s and the 1990s, the poets-translators, Zadura and Sommer, contributed to a significant enhancement of the idea of poeticity in Poland. They contributed also to the enhancement of the poetic sensitivity and diversification of the language of the lyric. What seems interesting, they were inspired mostly by the diversity of the languages “fighting for legality” in the English poetry of the 1970s, not by the “working class” revolutionary tension of English barbarisms. It is important to acknowledge that these translators looked for poetic inspiration in English poets rather than in Polish New Wave poets, much more conscious of the public duties of art. In the afterword to the second edition of poems by Seamus Heaney, Sommer in his special idiom juxtaposes the political character of the New Wave and its subsequent poetic consequences with the political character of British poetry, much less predictable and linguistically much more attractive. Sommer says:

In Polish poetry, the mid-1970s, were already an overpoliticized time. Ethical obligations and the more and more predictable and unequivocal character of literary languages were vigorously suppressing more nuanced tones. They were producing a more and more predictable set of expectations . . . The Northern Irish . . . , because of their multiple belongings, concerned me much more than the English. And the fact that at times they happened to yield to pressures of immediate obligations to a lesser degree than our close-to-heart native folks

did (those at home and abroad), added to my interest as a “linguistically other” confirmation of a more fruitful, more multi-layered attitude to a poem and less lordly attitude to the reader. This attitude was not necessarily exclusive of politics; it did not allow politics to control the poem. This attitude did not allow reducing the reader to the status of a student. So from this perspective, this wisdom which I was intending to pluck, my three Northern Irish favourites born at the turn of the thirties—Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, and Michael Longley (also the somewhat younger Carson and Muldoon) were, for me, immensely interesting. I am embarrassed to say, maybe my messing about with their poems was not as lovingly disinterested as I had thought? (Sommer, 2010a: 105)

Sommer was not the only one to express such interests. In the mid-seventies, the Katowice group “Kontekst” was trying to create an alternative against the post-new wave, dissenting model of Polish poetry. In the book *Spór o poezję* (*Dispute about Poetry*) the group was calling for, among others, a Polish reading of Liverpool poetry (Sławek 90-95),⁶ as was the Łódź-based *Puls* (*Pulse*), edited, among others, by Jacek Bierezin and Zbigniew Jaskuła. *Puls* was where Jerzy Jarniewicz started his work, where first translations of Allen Ginsberg poetry were appearing, and where a concealed version of a poem by Brian Patten was produced by Antoni Pawlak (Walc, 1998).⁷ Possibly, in the eyes of younger poets, younger than Barańczak, Zagajewski, Krynicki, and Kornhauser, our representatives of the world student revolution of the 1968 revolted too narrowly—revolting mostly on political grounds. As it turned out later, the New Wave carriers of “linguistic” or poetic revolt created a lyrical pattern that in time

⁶ Sławek discussed not only the Liverpool school, Brian Patten and Arien Henri, but also American Beatniks. The book called for other kinds of avant-garde as a response to the simplifications resulting from the New Wave social programme which, according to members of the “Kontekst” group, influenced negatively the quality of the theoretical and programmatic reflection as well as the artistic consciousness of the poets.

⁷ Jan Walc quotes a significant extract from a poem by Pawlak, discussing also contrasts which were produced by the diverse circle of KOR (Workers Defense Committee), made up of the leftist “admirers of Ginsberg” and the Catholic artists, connected with the church, all obliged by the situation to publish in the same paper. The long poem “I śmierć i wiele śmierci” (“And death, and much death”), would appear next to an anti-Marxist essay by Simone Weil. And the fragment “my penis / I entrust it to you with trust / I know you like to hold it in your hands / look at how it awakens in them / how it slowly lifts up / in your fingers it becomes / a flower bursting into blooms” (Walc 38-39) evokes Patten’s poem “Now We Will Either Sleep, Lie Still, or Dress Again” (Brian Patten, “Teraz będziemy spać, leżeć bez ruchu, lub ubierzemy się na powrót”).

became quite repetitive and in some cases too obvious perhaps. The Polish lyrical tradition of literary engagement did not allow the particularity of the poetic language. This tradition veered more towards the solemn, elevated style of the dissident, generational “Solidarność.” One can argue, finally, that the spirit of the “language” revolt of the British “Barbarian” poets from the cultural margins found its expression in the Polish poetic translations of British poets. It should be added that some elements of the translating experience of the poets-critics have constituted a very important component of the translated poems. The “language” revolt was not present, nor was it necessary for the “collectivistic” sense of the world particular for the subject of the Polish postwar poetry. In the seventies, the authors did not remain in the situation of those seeking cultural promotion, rather in a well-familiar situation of the sons of the motherland, they were the ones who, unsuccessfully, were demanding an exchange of the false canon of culture for one that would be right and one which would be rooted in the truly free Poland. Polish dissidents always supported the universal language of a tradition understood in communal terms.

The British poetic consciousness of the student revolt in the 1970s would have aimed at exposing in a poem the tension between the canonical and official in poetry and the particular languages expressing non-imperialistic attitude and individuality. It is feasible to argue that the translation of the social revolt which found its expression in the poetry of British Barbarians—people from the cultural margins—led to the taking away of the subject of the Polish late modern lyric from the burdensome role of the social authority. The speaker in this poetry, builds his language presentation of the world from a distance—a condition which assures him not so much of the “sublime” and the solemnity of poetry, but the opposite, of the low, marginalized place which in reality he occupies in the social space. Paradoxically, this speaker can afford to obtain more in language, which is competitive with the canon because it does not aspire to this appellation, even though it always remains in conflict with the official.

If we take a look at the wave of translations from English published by the publishing house of Fort Legnica in 1998 (volumes of poetry by Longley, Carson, and Heaney), and the translations from 1999 (volumes of poetry by Dunn, Raine, and Harrison), then we can see that this wave constitutes a continuation

of the earlier British interests of our translations. What surprises, towards the end of the first decade of freedom of Polish poetry, a period which was characterized by political indifferentism, led to the translators' anti-establishment. Sommer's translations return not only to the anthology of poetry from the eighties, discussed earlier, but also to the volume *Sześciu poetów północnoirlandzkich* (*Six Northern Irish Poets*) published by Świat Literacki (Literary World) in 1993. In the foreword to the volume of Douglas Dunn from 1969-1993 *A Removal from Terry Street*, Sommer writes:

I wanted . . . to remember the older, "social" poems by Dunn, poems which, starting from the sixties, created such a strong impression in their original versions and in translations into foreign languages . . . I wanted to bring to mind the "earlier" Dunn, curious how those supposedly historical poems from his "heroic" period in Hull will be read now in Poland, in a country where questions about the political and publicist poem have not been asked in a long time in the critical sphere or in the poetic practice. (Sommer, 1999: 81)

Zadura translated Tony Harrison for the anthology in question. In 1990, he also prepared a separate collection titled *A Kumquat for John Keats* (published by PIW). While translating the poems by the author of *The Rhubarbarians*, Zadura was working on a volume of his own poems, mostly sonnets, *Prześwielone zdjęcia* (*Overexposed Photographs*). A few of his poems refer to Harrison's poetics, and one *Życie pozagrobowe* (*Life after Life*) starts with the inscription from Harrison's poem "Newcastle is Peru." As Sommer writes in *Po stykach* (*Face to Face*), in the beginning of the eighties, the eight-verse stanza contributed to the formation of the famous Zadura's "Cisza" ("The Silence")—poem from the period of martial law. The poem, published as late as 1992, can be heard in many translations from the volume *Sztuka i zagłada* (*Art and Extinction*). It seems that we owe the self-unobvious quality of "Cisza," this best Polish political poem, to these translations, to the concentrated attention on the peculiar political character of the new English "class" poem so full of refined irony, humour, and poetic craft, as well as the "low" poetics approximating neo-avant-garde experiments with the everyday. We owe, finally, to those experiments with proper artistic biography, so typical of the times of performance art, artistic happenings of the post-Beatnik social revolt. In the afterword to the "fort" edition, which comprises the repetition of translations from the previous editions, Zadura writes

that he would not call Harrison his fellow from Leeds. He explains that today, poems like “The Curtain Catullus,” “The Bedbug,” and “Curtain Sonnets” “do not have the taste of the fruit partly forbidden.” Zadura says:

My consciousness has changed, ten years later I no longer believe in a straight-forward social transmission of the poem; believing in the gift of the poetic word, I do not believe in its power . . . Calling him a fellow, I would be opening a register in which it would be possible to ask a question if by any chance he was not a slacker. And I would not ask this type of a question. Even if I have doubts if a poem written after the *fatwa* was issued on Rushdie is more than a noble and brave rhyming gesture. (Zadura 59– 60)

It is curious how very different these words sound now, when ten years after the publication of the English series, political poetry yet again enjoys great popularity. In his new books *Makijaż (Make-up)* and *Na dzień dzisiejszy, na chwilę obecną (For To-Day, for the Present Moment)*, Jerzy Jarniewicz mixes the erotic immediacy with elements of recent propaganda of the world politics, with its image from the media and the diverse styles of rejecting what belongs to the establishment. All these gestures appear also in Zadura’s translation of “The Bedbug” or “The Curtain Catullus,” where we hear the famous lines: “Astraea! Stalin’s chocolate-Santa-Claus- / like statue’s made piecemeal. Descend! Descend! / We’re human, young, lustful, sick of wars. / I want this gorgeous red bird for my friend” (Harrison 52).

Working in 1998 on his sketch about the reception and translation of the Northern Irish poets (especially about Heaney) in Poland, Sommer saw the problems of translations of the “barbaric” Northern Irish poetry in a different light. When, with a dose of bitterness, Sommer confirmed a real lack of Polish market for Irish poetry in the past, when “the presence of diverse embodiment of history in poems” was calm because of the small volume of radical political gestures; and also at the end of the 1990s, when the British-Irish series of translations was coming out, and when:

. . . it seemed that Polish poetry stopped caring for history for a while, when poetry apparently got used up in a “new wave” political journalism. In Poland, writing about politics and history has not been forbidden for years, therefore, there is no reason to write. Today, even those who up till yesterday couldn’t have imagined the existence of Polish literature other than in political paradigms . . . , those people

came to accept the change of literary sensitivity and literary expectations. Though, as it is to be expected in the case of changes of official norms, by agreeing, they merely attempt to secure themselves against responsibility, they adhere to passing fashions. . . . In Poland new traditions are looked for today, extra-historical and extra-political. History, politics, locality, regardless if urban or suburban, are embarrassing matters, really shame. (Sommer, 2005: 158-159)

In the following part of his sketch, Sommer states that the characteristics of poetry such as locality and history function prominently in Irish poetry, irrespective of time. "In the setting of a poem and in language," history, if "we are to treat it without falsifications and complexes," "speaks for itself; it does not need to be buttressed and publicized." Finally, Sommer, the major agent of the former boom for the full of social ease "New York School" of poetry, concludes:

Do not the Irish by any chance show that what really concerns the writer, let's say the questions of language, of privacy, of public matters cannot be treated separately? And is it not a paradox that almost everything written by Frank O'Hara, this "frivolous dandy" who became in Poland an embodiment of an apolitical stance and freedom, is very closely connected with "reality," and therefore is political? (Sommer, 2005: 160)

If we recollect the pronouncements of Polish Barbarians at the beginning of the 1990s, it should be stressed that their texts were read most widely with a view of "apolitical" categories.⁸ The term "Barbarians" was used as a result of the *brulion* anthology of poetry published as *przyszli barbarzyńcy (barbarians have arrived)*. It was signed by the poetic group "b.g. wstajmfske." The *brulion* generation, openly indifferent to ideas of good citizenship, strongly opposed the decisively political ethos of the literature of unofficial circulation which

⁸ A significant number of critics included the appearance and work of the *brulion* generation of the 1990s in a much wider and widely-recognized interpretation context based on theses from Adam Zagajewski's *Solidarność i samotność (Solidarity and Loneliness)*. Reflecting on the ostentatious break from the "New Wave" political past, Adam Zagajewski was to procure this kind of aesthetic and "apolitical" turning-point for artists to remain preoccupied with poetry only (Zagajewski 75-86, 90-93). Critics as Julian Kornhauser, Tadeusz Komendant, Jarosław Klejnocki express similar views of the literary process of the early "apolitical" 1990s. It is mentioned as well in the first monograph to come out in the nineties (Czapliński, Śliwiński 193, 169-170).

had inherited most of its characteristics from the new wave literature in its late formulas absorbed by the writers of martial law. This opposition reflected a familiar tradition in Polish criticism of not so much a dialectical class struggle for the central place in culture but rather clashes of romantic *agon* between the elder and younger generations. However, referring to the diverse authors of *brulion* as “Barbarians” was not entirely justified, especially with view of the character of their poems. Robert Tekieli’s intelligent marketing strategy was partly the reason for the choice of the label. Polish reasons for the use of the “Barbarians” label were other than those which we find in English qualifications of “Barbarians.” Although also connected with political life, the English label was based on very different premises.

The Barbarian from the poems by Dunn and Harrison could honourably identify with the famous words by Ovid: “I am a barbarian because nobody understands me.” The ambiguity of these words went hand in hand with that Classical dandy exiled among the barbarian Gets. Barbarity was then regarded in the context of the “foreign,” incomprehensible language, marked as sub-standard, believed to be a departure from the cultural norm (this departure could include the accent of a given dialect, stutter, and silence). If in Polish criticism the word “Barbarian” possessed its own political context, its use was much more simplified and in meaning it was closer to Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses*. Julian Kornhauser initially in favour of the poets of the so-called “turning point,” writing in *Barbarzyńcy i wypełniacze* (*Barbarians and Fillers*) from the mid-1990s asserted:

All this was interesting and rather funny. Interesting because, really, all of a sudden there appeared programmatically anarchic and nihilistic texts destroying common ideas about the responsibilities of the writer and his/her intellectual message. These were linguistically aggressive and unbelievably bold as far as the social manners were concerned. Old boundaries became ruins, old values were denied their say. Young or still young Barbarians welcomed the era of freedom with a deafening scream. . . . This demonstration was also funny because it testified to a lack of adjustment to life, about some nervous tendencies of its authors, usually escaping into the most intimate sphere of privacy which, beyond narcissistic self-glory, did not contain anything else. There was no attention paid to the diversity of emerging options, turning the radical individualism, which was to become a herd phenomenon of dubious literary value, into a superior and unshakable value. (Kornhauser 13)

According to Kornhauser, and many older critics, although the new era demanded a new stance, the young felt satisfied with a total negation of the world of politics, which for them meant a rejection of the dominant model of literature in the last two decades. Kornhauser says that with the fall of censorship and the patronizing of the state, post-Communist postmodernism gave birth to a social revolution which brought about a derisive, joyful game with conventions. The world in this world appeared as an unending cabaret. It was not helping the reputation of the “Polish school of poetry” as an agent “saving values of literature.” The happy emersion in the mass and common market circulation of art was seen as a threat which could potentially lead to flattening of the Polish lyric. It was already in danger from commercialization, prepared by American literature (it seems that the name of Frank O’Hara as well as the immense impact of the American influence on poetry appeared here rather unintentionally).⁹

The most important features which were to characterize the Barbarians were not restricted to poetry. They were understood within publicist categories of the descriptions of a civil stance. Both “the Barbarians who were to be some solution” from Cavafy’s poem, ironically summoned at the back of the *brulion* anthology, and, though more justifiably recalled, Herbert’s “Barbarians” feasting at the walls of the besieged city, Barbarians standing in stark opposition to the famous underground, “power of taste,” remained “Barbarians” without their own linguistic and ideological representation. It could only wait to be complemented with time.

In critical and social perspectives, Polish “Barbarity” was left without a political argument; it lacked a cultural base. The young were denied their own language, not because of the way they were using language but because

⁹ We find a similar treatment of American influences, present particularly in the criticism of Julian Kornhauser and Mariana Stala, as well as younger critics from *brulion* like Krzysztof Koehler who conducted polemics with Marcin Świetlicki. It was published in *brulion* and titled *O’harism* (Koehler 142). Reserved in tone, but also full of disgust, attitudes towards American influences were triggered most likely by pronouncements of Czesław Miłosz. In conversations published at the beginning of the nineties, among others, in the Kraków journal *Na Głos (A-loud)*, Miłosz commented very negatively on the influence of American poetry on Polish poetry (Miłosz, 1990: 15-35). See also Czesław Miłosz, “Z poezją polską przeciw światu” (“With Polish Poetry Against the World,” 1989: 126).

they were charged with being mere imitators of the “New Wave.” It can be said that in Poland, the new poets who willingly accepted the role of Barbarians met with the kind of critical and literary reception from the establishment which was similar to the reception which provided poetic subjects for poets like Dunn and Harrison. This sort of reception created a dialectics of poetic tensions. To an extent, more senior Polish critics reacted towards “new” and foreign poetic languages like English imperials towards children from working class backgrounds, be them Scottish, Northern English or Northern Irish. Kornhauser’s statement, quoted above, can serve as a confirmation of these excluding generalizations. Their poetry stands in ambiguous, tense relationships with the Polish canon, defined by the last two decades of The People’s Republic of Poland and, in its “individual” nuances, it stands transparent for the readers. Depreciated in the past, this poetry has somehow started to play a function of a new canon with a much wider range. And this is where the similarities and differences between Anglo-Saxon and Polish “Barbarity” seem to end.

Trans. Teresa Bruś

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Summary

In the *Anthology of New British Poetry (Antologia nowej poezji brytyjskiej)* prepared by the Polish poet and translator Piotr Sommer in 1983, the term "Barbarians" is used in reference to the poets from "the islands" who started writing poetry in the 1960s or

at the turn of the 1960s, and who came from “the fringes of the official culture,” fringes designating primarily their class background. Sommer writes about “Barbarians” in a much wider context than English literary critics, who reserve the term “Barbarians” to refer to Douglas Dunn and Tony Harrison. Sommer deems the distinctive style of the “new” English poets to be standing in opposition to what “in poetry is mannerly”—universally, academically-canonical. Instead, “barbaric” poets bring their own locality, particularity, their own sense of historicity and, most critically, their language. Exploring Polish translations of poetry written in the English language, I am most interested in the search for poetic affinity and of language and poetic stance. I claim that in the 1980s and the 1990s, through the use of a personal and “localized” language, the work on the syntax of the spoken phrase and—what is even more important—through their relaxed attitude towards the typically Polish romantic call to testify on behalf of an imagined public community, Bohdan Zadura, the translator of Tony Harrison’s poems, and Piotr Sommer, the translator of Douglas Dunn’s poems, contributed to a significant enhancement of the idea of poeticity in Poland.

Key words: comparative literature, “barbarians,” English poetry, Polish poetry, Douglas Dunn, Tony Harrison, Bohdan Zadura, Piotr Sommer

Czego nauczyliśmy się od brytyjskich Barbarzyńców

Streszczenie

W *Antologii nowej poezji brytyjskiej* zredagowanej przez poetę i tłumacza Piotra Sommera w 1983 roku pojęcie „barbarzyńcy” zostało użyte w odniesieniu do poetów z „wysp”, którzy debiutowali w latach 60. lub na przełomie lat 60. i 70., a pochodzili z marginesów oficjalnej kultury, marginesów określanych głównie przez ich pochodzenie klasowe. Sommer pisze przy tym o „barbarzyńcach” w o wiele szerszym kontekście niż brytyjska krytyka literacka, która rezerwuje to pojęcie zazwyczaj dla Douglasa Dunna i Tony’ego Harrisona. Sommer ustawia „nową” angielską poezję w opozycji do tego, „co w poezji układne” – uniwersalne i akademicko-kanoniczne. „Barbarzyńscy” poeci zaś stawiają na swoją lokalność, partykularność, własny zmysł historyczności, oraz, co szczególnie ważne, swój język. Przyglądając się polskim tłumaczeniom poezji angielskiej, najbardziej interesuję się poszukiwaniem poetyckiego pokrewieństwa, inspirowania się pewnymi cechami wiersza i języka. Stawiam tezę, że na przełomie lat 80. i 90., poprzez użycia spersonalizowanego i „lokalnego” języka, i – co najważniejsze – poprzez „luźny” stosunek do typowo polskiego, romantycznego obowiązku świadczenia na rzecz wspólnoty, Bohdan Zadura jako tłumacz Tony’ego Harrisona i Piotr Sommer jako tłumacz Douglasa Dunna, przyczynili się do znacznego skomplikowania pojęcia poetyckości.

Joanna Orska

Słowa kluczowe: komparatystyka literacka, „barbarzyńcy”, poezja angielska, poezja polska,
Douglas Dunn, Tony Harrison, Bohdan Zadura, Piotr Sommer