The Epistolary Poem in Modernist Lithuanian and Polish Poetry

Epistolinis eilėraštis modernistinėje lietuvių ir lenkų poezijoje

Beata KALEBA
Jagiellonian University in Cracow
Faculty of Polish Studies
Gołąbka 16 st., 31-007
Kraków, Poland
beata.kaleba@uj.edu.pl

Summary

The object of investigation is a historical-literary one, being a reconstructive interpretation. My aim is to analyse and interpret some epistolary poems by Lithuanian and Polish authors and to describe their poetics. The poems were created in different languages and under the impact of different literary traditions, but they speak about a similar historical and existential experience. Another question I address in this article is the formula of Modernism in the poetry of the authors whose origins are not in Western, but rather in Eastern Europe. The texts to be analysed are: Do Jonathana Swifta (To Jonathan Swift) by Czesław Miłosz, Užgavėnių kaukės (Shrovetide Masks) by Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, Widokówka z tego świata (A Postcard from this World) by Stanisław Barańczak, Disciplinuoti ir bausti. Apsilankymas tardymo izolatoriuje IZ – 45/1 (Discipline and Punish. A Visit to the Detention Centre IZ – 45/1) by Tomas Venclova, and also an excerpt from Žodžiai ir raidės (Words and Letters) by Jonas Mekas.

Key words: epistolary poem, Lithuanian poetry, Polish poetry, Modernism, comparative literature.

Santrauka

Šio straipsnio objektas yra istorinis-literatūrinis tybris, pasitelkus rekonstruojančią interpretaciją. Tikslas – ištirti ir interpretuoti keletą lietuviškų ir lenkiškų eilėraščių bei apibūdinti jų poetines priemones. Eilėraščiai, veikiami skirtinės literatūrinių tradicijų, yra sukurti skirtinėmis kalbomis, nepaisant to, jie kalba apie panašią istorinę ir egzistencinę patirtį. Kitas klausimas, kurį straipsnis tiria, yra modernizmo formulė autorių kūriniuose, kurių šaknys glūdi ne Vakaruose, o Rytų Europoje. Straipsnyje analizuojami Czesław Miłosz Do Jonathana Swifta, Alfonso Nykos-Niliūno Užgavėnių kaukės, Stanisław Barańczako Widokówka z tego świata, Tomo Venclovos Disciplinuoti ir bausti. Apsilankymas tardymo izolatoriuje IZ – 45/1 ir ištrauka iš Jono Meko Žodžiai ir raidės.

Esminiai žodžiai: epistolarianinis eilėraštis, lietuvių poezija, lenkų poezija, modernizmas, komparatyvistinė literatūra.

http://dx.doi.org/10.15823/alc.2014.12
The main goals of this paper are: 1) to describe the realisations of an epistolary poem in a few Lithuanian and Polish Modernist literary works, and 2) to determine what kind of 20th-century human experiences can be seen in the texts. In addition, there is a third goal, mainly to see if we can find similarities in Lithuanian and Polish post-war poetry, which immediately would differentiate them from West European literature.

The main methodological frameworks of the paper are: post-structuralist comparative literature, especially the currents inspired by the cultural and translation transition in literary studies (comparative literature studies as an art of reading and understanding through the translation of discourses by George Steiner); the most important categories of the comparative description include “adjacency” by Peter de Bolla and “placing” by Siegbert S. Prawer (Bilczewski, 2010), which explain that no prejudgment of hypertextuality is allowed, nor are interpretative prejudgments. I also owe much to the concept of “poetics of experience” by Ryszard Nycz (Nycz, 2012). Following such categories as placing and adjacency means that I do not tend to look for possible influences that one text may have had upon another (thus avoiding a discussion of hypertext and subtext), I rather try to place texts one beside the other (this is what is meant by “placing”), and try to understand and describe how they “collaborate” in an act of reading, to see what is going on when we align two (or more) texts in an adjacency position. Last, but not least, we cannot forget about the reader (or better, the act of reading) and the experiences (including knowledge, culture, intellect and intuition) that a reader during the act of reading may give to the texts (and that of course is the heritage of hermeneutic interpretation). I have mentioned “experience”—another important category, concerning both the problem of the ontology of literature and the question of interpretation. Over the past few years, it is becoming more and more popular to use that category as understood by Ryszard Nycz: in brief, it means to formulate or shape a poetics and theory of interpretation which would be able to describe modern literature. Nycz understood modern literature to be an autonomic-elite model of literature (concerning such literary works as those in which the poetic function of the language predominates over other functions, and which are addressed to a refined, well-educated reader. It is close to the old idea of poiesis docta; when speaking about masterpieces of Modernism it is also called “ironic poetry.” Why a “poetics of experience”? As Nycz said: 1) Writing and reading literature is a specific way of experiencing reality, 2) The
position of the author and the text in their relation to the world is equivalent, which means that literary works are also “experiences” – it should be noted that the literary work is not submitted by its author –, 3) The literary creation of discourse does not necessarily mean that what is irrational (a-rational) or sensual must be lost; instead it stresses and strengthens the role of the reader, 4) literature is not an autonomic construction (of phonemes, words, metaphors, etc.) isolated from space and time, meaning from cognitive and historical processes, 4) in Europe and the United States, literature was a common language of 20th-century experience, and 5) for modern literature, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, the cult of memory, both individual and collective, is very typical. These last two contestations are of particular importance to the subject of this article.

All the poems analysed in this article are various realisations (or reinterpretations) of epistolary poems (epistles), which are seen as a genre whose roots go back to ancient Greek, Roman and Hebrew (first of all, the Epistles of the Apostles) cultures. Its long tradition shaped the epistle as a didactic text which followed the rules of rhetoric; as concerns the composition in an epistle, the “recipient” (audience), “sender” (author) and the topic had to be enumerated in precise order. Both formulas of greetings (opening and farewell) had to be included. The rhetorical purpose of an epistle was usually to teach, and it referred to specific problems of a specified community.

Therefore, the epistle was very popular in eighteenth-century Europe during the Age of the Enlightenment. At that time, satirical epistles gained particular popularity; among them, probably the most well-known were those written by Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift. This became the tradition which, during the first post-war years, turned out to be relevant to the first poet under discussion – Czesław Milosz, clearly to be seen in his epistolary poem, *Do Jonathana Swifta* (*To Jonathan Swifi*).

**Letter From the Journey to the New Land**

Milosz wrote his poem *Do Jonathana Swifta* in Washington D.C. in 1947. Among the texts chosen for this paper, this is the one closest to the traditional epistolary poem. It is possible to analyse it using the categories of classical rhetoric, as it contains an opening formula, an introduction to the topic, narration, argumentation, probation/conclusion, and a farewell formula. Furthermore, it is stylized like a satirical 18th-century epistle:
Do ciebie zwracam się, dziekanie,
Proszę o dobre rady twoje. [the opening formula – B.K.]

[…]

Ty możesz wskazać mi, dziekanie,
Jak się ten płyn przedziwny stwarza,
Że prócz inkaustu pozostaje
Coś więcej na dnie kałamarza.

[…]

Będę się starać, mój dziekanie. [the farewell formula – B.K.]
(Miłosz, 2011, 231-233)

[Literal transl.: I address myself to you, my dean, / asking your advice. /
[… ] You could show me, my dean, / How so marvellous a fluid can do it,
/ so that there is something more left / on the bottom of the inkwell /. […]
I’ll do my best, my dean.]

The persona of the poem writes a letter to ask for advice and receives it. Communication exists (more precisely, a dialog possible thanks to the uninterrupted tradition). Furthermore, there is a bond between a persona and an imaginary companion, whose symbols are the maps showing the way through the world:

… gęsie pióro mapę kryśli,
dla pouczenia i dla sztuki.
[…]
Według tej mapy, znak po znaku,
Mój okręt odnajdywał skróty.
Zwiedziłem ziemie Brobdingnagu
I nie minąłem wysp Laputy.
[…]. (Ibid., 231)

[Literal transl.: …a goose quill draws a map, / just for teaching and for artistry. / […] Following this map, mark after mark, / My ship was finding the shortcuts. / I visited the land of Brobdingnag / and have not missed the Laputa islands. […] ]

The fact that the “letter” written during the journey is not being left unanswered, even if it is actually the persona itself, who formulates the answer of “my dean” (thanks to its memory of literary tradition) is very
important. It also indicates the existence of a connection to the long-term European tradition, and that the persona has confidence in it:

Dotychczas mówią twoje usta:  
Rzecz ludzka nie jest zakończona.  
[...]  
Odwagi synu! Bierz okręty,  
[...]  
Dopóki niebo jest i ziemia  
Dla nowych Miast gotuj przystanie.  
Pozas tym nie ma przebaczenia.  

Będę się starać, mój dziekanie.  
(Ibid., 233)

[Literal transl.: You are still saying: / Human work is not completed yet./ [...] Be courageous, my son! Go aboard your ships, / [...] ‘Til the sky and earth exist / Set up harbours for new Towns. / Unless you do this, there is no mercy. // I will do my best, my dean.]

The request for advice concerns ways of establishing the dignified role of a writer (‘you, my dean, could show me how to create a miraculous inquest of truth’) in the world, as literature was more and more subordinated by politics. It also stresses the moral necessity of setting off on the journey to new lands, leaving behind one’s homeland (in this case: Lithuania, Poland and Europe – the “Native Realm”). Trusty repetition of an old genre, the creation of a poem related to the European culture of the eighteenth century in which a rational dialog between people raised in the same tradition was possible was one of the ways of looking for the new order of minds and souls in the post-war world.\(^1\)

**Letters From the Land Left Behind and From the New Land**

Miłosz’s poetry of the first post-war decade was seen as one of the best revelations of self-consciousness of that period. That was also the main reason for its importance to Lithuanian exile writers of the so-called žeminininkai-lankininkai generation. In 1972 one of them, Alfonzas Nyka-Niliūnas, the author of the Afterword in Miłosz’s Lithuanian book, *Epochos sąmoningumo poezija* (Poetry of the Consciousness of the Epoch), wrote a very interesting poem entitled *Užgavėnių kaukės* (Shrovetide Masks), which is a reinterpretation and transposition of the traditional epistolary poem.
It starts with an opening formula, but mentions no concrete recipient:

Galbūt tau bus sunku suprasti ir tikėti
Tuo, ką rašau; bet iš tiesų tai viskas,
Kas liko nesugriaunama ir tikra.
Po to, kai palikai gyvenvietę ir apsisprendei
Ne gintis, bet gyventi […] (Nyka-Niliūnas, 1996, 382)

[Literal transl.: Perhaps it will be hard for you to understand and to believe, / In what I am writing but in fact it is the only thing / That has remained indestructible and true. / After you left your domicile and decided / not to defend yourself, but to live, […]]

What we read here is not a rhetorical epistle anymore, but a private letter. Thus, even if the text is stylised like a personal letter, it demands a contextual reading. In this case the context would be the Lithuanians’ journeys through exile and anti-Soviet guerrillas, both of which were occurring in the 1940s and 1950s. The importance of the historical experience is revealed, while a virtual, anticipated dialog between the sender of a letter and its recipient is established (besides, the dialog’s rudiments are of course a mark of the epistolary poems’ tradition). Only by knowing the historical context can we determine what the nature of the relation and relationship between the sender and the recipient is. It turns out that the letter is addressed to somebody who decided to live somewhere else, in another place far, far away from the homeland. This means the sender is also one who has left, a fact which is probably not what we would expect or what we are used to – thus, it is mainly the person who has started the journey, who has left his or her home, who sends the letters. However, the suspension of specifying “who’s who” in the text until the reader becomes conscious of the context makes it possible to place the sender of the epistolary poem on the shores of both locations, i.e., in this case both in Lithuania and in America.

Of course, it is not by accident that the last word of the poem is “silence.” The poem thus discusses the short future of literary communication between people in reality dominated by “masks” (the context directs the reader to the formation of and triumph over the Soviet environment and a new human Soviet *modus vivendi* known as *homo sovieticus*):

Dabar […]
Jų balsas
Skamba mūsų žodžiuose ir sunkiai
Išsikovotame rašte. Mes galim saugiai
Kalbėtis tik su mirusiais, ne su gyvaisiais:
Mūsų vienintelis atsakymas į viską –
Kurčia ir niekad mūsų neišdavusi tyla.

[Literal transl.: Now their [masks – B.K.] voice / rings in our words and in our script, / that we fought so strongly for. Safely we can / talk only to the dead, not to the living: / Our only answer to all of this is / a deaf silence, which has not yet betrayed us.”]

Consequently, a prediction of destruction and finally losing contact is hidden here. What indicates a rescue (silence) at the same time makes the communication between people impossible. We could say that while Miłosz’s persona is on his way (and is keeping in touch), Nyka-Niliūnas’ persona has settled down (here or there) and is slowly losing the ability to effectively communicate.

We can describe the style of the poem Užgavėnių kaukės as an informal, private letter, with long, chaotic phrases and a description of both a real (possible) and an imaginary (impossible) environment – thus the mask’s ontological status is dual.

A rather similar situation has been described in short poems, in laconic words, by Jonas Mekas. An example is a verse from his book, Žodziai ir raidės: it starts as a description of a group of people rambling across Lithuania to the seaside. As the context indicates, there is a departure and a settling down in a new place. At the end of the poem, a persona invites somebody to come for a visit or maybe to stay permanently:

dabar
vėlųs ruduo
ir lietus

Atvažiuok.
Pas mus vis
tas pats.

Pamatysi
viską - -
nors ir čia
nieko néra. (Mekas, 2007, 35)
[Literal transl.: Now / it’s / late / autumn / and / rain. // Come. / Here every-thing / is the same. // You’ll see everything - - / Although, there is noth-ing / here, either.]

In this verse, only the farewell formula is left and, especially relevant to Modernist poetry, Mekas intentionally uses irony. The concept of irony as a main device in poetry is characteristic of the Polish school of poetry in the 1960s and 1970s. One of the most important poets of that period was Stanisław Barańczak (1946–2014), to whom the next chapter is dedicated.

**Letter From the Deeply Human World**

The statements which have been made so far are: 1) an epistolary poem (or just a post-war thematic variation) begins to evoke the impossibility of communication through language (because of a deprivation of the language, occurring mostly because of politics) – e.g., Nyka-Niliūnas, and 2) irony starts to be one of main literary devices in an epistolary poem. Both statements are present in Stanislaw Barańczak’s works. This poet belongs to the generation called “Nowa Fala” (the “New Wave,” arose in the 1960s). In general, it represents so-called linguistic poetry in the sense of looking for new formulas of language, which are mainly meant to make the reader vigilant and ready to reveal the lie within the language one uses both in official and in private life. The reason for this trend was first of all the statement that the language has been “stolen” and is being misused by politicians.²

Barańczak wrote some poems that imitated the official letters sent to citizens of Peoples’ Poland by the authorities and the mass media, or ones written by a citizen to a popular magazine, for example. Such epistolary poems mostly revealed the absurdity and falseness of language as a means of communication between an individual and “the state,” as it was represented by mass media and officials.

But for this paper I chose a poem published in 1988, which is a rather late example of “Nowa Fala” poetics. It is an epistolary poem entitled *Widokówka z tego świata (A Postcard from this World)*. Is the following verse just another realisation of the epistolary poem genre? Attachment to both the literary tradition and the etiquette of epistolary correspondence is marked by using the (reformulated) opening formula:
Szkoda, że Cię tu nie ma. (Barańczak, 2006, 363)

[Literal transl.: It’s a pity You’re not here.]

The opening formula is repeated three times, at the beginning of each strophe. The farewell formula is also repeated three times, yet it changes at the end of every strophe:

[…]
Ale dosyć już o mnie. Powiedz, co u Ciebie
słychać, co można widzieć,
gdy się jest Tobą.
[…]
Ale dosyć już o mnie. Mów, jak Tobie mija
czas - i czy czas coś znaczy,
gdy się jest Tobą.
[…]
Ale dosyć już o mnie. Mów, jak Ty się czujesz
z moim bólem - jak boli
Ciebie Twój człowiek. (Ibid., 363-364)

[Literal transl.: But enough about me. Now, tell me how are You, and what one can see being You?,
But enough about me. Now, tell me how You spend your time, and if time has any meaning at all for You,
But enough about me. Now, tell me how You feel the main pain, and how it hurts You your human being.]

In Widokówka z tego świata, the balance between formality and intimacy is characteristic: the formulas used by Barańczak could work in both a formal and a private letter. Moreover, repetition is very important, as it stresses the non–presence, or absence, of the recipient. Those two standardised uses of the language (the formal and informal one) and the absence of the recipient of the letter are of course a feature of the literary conceptualisation of post-secular anthropology, which is a rather important part of Polish Modernist and Postmodernist literature.

It is probably not possible to know for sure, but from the perspective of the persona in Barańczak’s poem, the repeated appeal to “You” (i.e., God) remains without any answer. But there is also another possibility: to interpret the role of sender and receiver in that poem. Finally, it is just a soliloquy, a monologue (meaning that it is a return to a long, ancient
A third important observation would be that the hope, or lack of hope, and suspension of any strong assertion has its roots in the presupposition of a common experience (“jak boli ciebie twój człowiek” can be understood in two ways: 1) a human being hurts God, 2) God is in pain because a human being hurts.)

The last poem chosen is *Disciplinuoti ir bausti. Apsilankymas tardymo Izolatoriuje IZ – 45/1* (Discipline and punish. A Visit to the Detention Centre IZ – 45/1; written in 2002) by Tomas Venclova, is an example of a poem where the question of the possibility of communication among humans arises once more.

**Letter From the Deeply Human World Which Turns Out to be a Prison**

*Disciplinuoti ir bausti*... can be also seen as an example of the intentional disintegration of a traditional epistolary poem. In a sense, its beginning reminds us of *Užgavėnių kaukės* by Nyka-Niliūnas; there are no rhetorical frames, just a conversational situation is designated.

[It is easier to survive in here than before. / Problems are the same outside: AIDS, TB. (Venclova, 2008, 48-49, transl. E. Hinsey)]

Furthermore, a world is described as it would be in a letter written (or spoken, or maybe just thought) by a prisoner. But, what is very interesting (and occurs often in Tomas Venclova’s verses), is that those letters have no concrete recipient, as if they were addressed to the world itself. Furthermore, while these letters are sent, it is barely possible that they will ever be read by anyone.

[When the wind lifts they say a paper, / scrap sometimes reaches the other sore, / though more often falls on passing barges – / or, simply, onto the flickering ultramarine. (Ibid.)]
In Disciplinuoti ir bausti, as in many other poems by Venclova, the persona of the text transforms into a representation of the common experience. Here, the persona is being multiplied, as it is a prisoner in Kresty, and then somebody who, before his visit to Kresty prison museum, tries to imagine or even repeat the path of Anna Achmatova, as she walked across Leningrad to the prison (an autobiographical perspective cannot be denied, as the poem was written after Venclova visited the prison). Thus in the poem, the sender of a communication (which is at least three times defined as letter or just a written message) is a prisoner, the persona of the poem (maybe we can identify it as the author), the mother of the prisoner (i.e., Anna Achmatova), whose perspective tries to take on the persona, and, even further, poets terrorised by Soviet powers, and finally just human beings, including those who belong to the world of freedom:

Daug kitų, taip pat ir žinojusių, kad būna
gurkšnis oro ir kitoniškas pasaulis.
Štai ir jis: už vartų zuja kregždės,
ūkia garlaivis ir mes paveldim žemę,
nors greičiausiai tai menka paguoda. (Venclova, 2010, 317)

[And others who were sure there existed / unfettered air and another life. Here ir is: / beyond the gates sparrows scurry about. / A steam boat belows. We inherit the earth. / Though this is probably small consolation. (Ibid.)]

It turns out that the poem which begins as a letter written by a Kresty prisoner, transforms and develops into a multi-perspective, reflective poem on the nature of communication between people of different times and (at least partially) different experiences. The unique possible way of communicating (understood both as to stay in touch and to understand each other, also between generations) seems to be literature; for example, there is an image of a man who dies, but his son becomes a writer, and a writer is someone who serves as a witness to his epoch. In this sense, Disciplinuoti ir bausti seems to be essentially similar to Do Jonathana Swifta by Miłosz. The situation of the persona – and at once the sender of the poetic letter – seems to be similar too, they are both free people, but there is a relevant difference: the persona of Miłosz’s poem is travelling to new lands across the oceans (which is obviously a repetition of the topos of freedom), while the persona of Venclova’s poem, although facing open space, mentions the buildings of Kresty prison most of all, and the conti-
ment, which is behind him (the continent, which is present in Venclova’s work as well as in Brodsky’s work, for example, is a symbol of enslavement). Venclova’s persona is also much more affected by his memory.

So, once more, in this case, in a poem written in 2002 by Venclova, such literary devices as stylisation of an epistolary poem or a letter theme in a literary work serve to evoke the experience of the twentieth century, common to people to whom Eastern Europe is a homeland.

**Conclusions**

The experience of Eastern Europeans during the post-war epoch is described more or less as a deprivation of homeland, freedom, language, sacrum, and also as a general threat of corrosion which can affect various forms of contact between people. It is about losing direct, intrapersonal contact (e.g., because of destroyed family or community bonds, as presented by Nika-Niliūnas and Mekas); written contact, a servant to communication at a distance, like a letter (because of the rotting the language, as presented by Barańczak, or the enslavement of people by their rulers and the “eastern” version of the idea of prison, as presented by Venclova); metaphysical contact with the sacrum (as a sign of a secular era, while the painful lack of the sacrum is being shown through the creation of an intimate letter to God, as presented by Barańczak), and finally the loss of coherence of a human being, which can be understood, for example, as a barely noticed hesitation about the possibilities of a compass – which is a form of communication – with those who we thus assume to be close to us, close because of a form of common experience.

In Miłosz’s epistolary poem, a new project of intrapersonal communication is being created: its foundation is literary tradition and openness to new experiences and to new literary creation. The personas of Nyka-Niliūnas’, Mekas’s and Barańczak’s poems try to keep in touch with others, writing imaginary letters. In Venclova’s poem, communication in the form of a letter is already impossible, but now it can be possible thanks to the work of human memory – as the persona in the verse says, a writer “will save a scrap of memory” [underlined by B.K.]. However, Venclova’s *Disciplinuoti ir bausti* can also be interpreted as a sign that we, the people of Central and Eastern Europe, are just leaving behind the tremendous and terrifying “continent” of the twentieth century, and probably also the Modernist paradigm of poetry.
References

1 In addition, it is also important that Miłosz, a political emigrant from Eastern Europe, considers an Irishman as his master – we should remember that Miłosz used to repeatedly compare Lithuania to Ireland; it opens a door for investigations into understanding the “provincial cultures” as the guardian of high values in the works of Modernist writers from Central and Eastern Europe.

2 It is worth noticing that it would probably be possible and meaningful to compare or to place “Nowa Fala” works within Algimantas Mackus’ idea of “unadorned language.”

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