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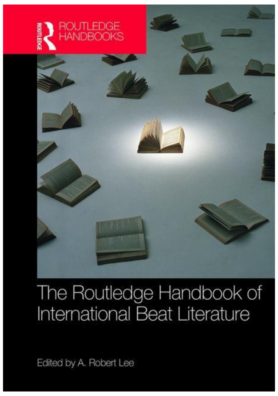

# The Routledge Handbook of International Beat Literature

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# Activists and Stuntmen

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# 13

# ACTIVISTS AND STUNTMEN

## Envisioning Polish Beat

*Andrzej Pietrasz and Tomasz Sawczuk*

The links between Poland and the Beat generation are usually determined by and spoken of in terms of Allen Ginsberg's East European excursions as well as translations of his poetry. The poet's three visits to Poland (1965, 1986, 1993) together with a number of his texts available in Polish indeed helped to shape some of the literary voices and to widen the crack in the Communist monopoly over power and truth. Yet, the idea of Polish Beat literature reaches far beyond acknowledging the established poet. While not necessarily wholly indebted to the Beats' literary and artistic output, the bulk of Polish post-war writings shares much of the spirit, themes and literary diction of what has come to be thought representative of Beat. This further poses the question of whether it is plausible to speak of the latter as a global mindset, emerging both within Poland and circulating transnationally.

What might be called Polish Beat sensibility can actually be traced back to two currents in the Polish post-war literary history. The first of these, represented mainly by the heterogeneous Nowa Fala (New Wave) literary movement and comprising poets such as Ryszard Krynicki, Julian Kornhauser, Krzysztof Karasek, and Stanisław Barańczak, was predominantly focused on bringing the poetry back to the realm of life, much in the aftermath of March 1968 and December 1970 student and worker uprisings—both of which marked a whole generation. The other current finds its best epitome in a group of writers which has often been labeled by Polish literary historians as "kaskaderzy literatury" (*Literary Stuntmen*). Its core part, active in the 1950s–1960s and consisting of Andrzej Bursa, Marek Hłasko, Edward Stachura, and Rafał Wojaczek, was fueled by contestation; yet, unlike Nowa Fala, the resistance took a more introverted and escapist turn.

### The Rise of the New Wave

Problems arise as soon as one attempts to specify and classify Nowa Fala since the poets considered a part of the movement represent various poetics and cannot be assigned a unified set of goals. Framing the poetic group within particular dates brings further difficulties. Discussing the poets of Nowa Fala, Tadeusz Nyczek suggests 1968–1976 as the core period of their activity, yet looking at their further careers he is even willing to extend the proposed time-span up to 1993 despite the artistic inactivity of some of the writers involved. (Nyczek 1994).

What is also troubling is the case of poetic geography. The group which is said to have launched Nowa Fala is the Kraków-based Teraz (*Now*), associated with the magazine *Student*, whose poets include Wit Jaworski, Julian Kornhauser, Stanisław Stabro, and Adam Zagajewski. Nowa Fala would later be joined by writers from Poznań (Stanisław Barańczak, Lech Dymarski, and Ryszard Krynicki), Warsaw (Krzysztof Karasek, Leszek Szaruga, and Jarosław Markiewicz), Łódź (Jacek Bierezin, Zdzisław

Jaskuła, and Witold Sułkowski) and Wrocław (Lothar Herbst and Marianna Bocian). These different regions inevitably affected styles of idiom and outlook. Even so, in a phrase used by Nyczek, "poets of contestation" might well work as a unifying tag for the entire group (1994: 3). What also has to be remembered, he suggests, is that Nowa Fala is but one filament in the wider image of the so-called Pokolenie 68 (Generation 68*)* and "appears internally inconsistent when set against the backdrop of its poetic contemporaries, be it groups or individuals. It blends diverse aesthetic standpoints as well as often conflicting literary and philosophical inspirations" (Nyczek 1994: 5).[1]

Additionally, Nowa Fala did not make any effort to operate under any one poetic manifesto. Its most essential artistic assumption was, with a proper dose of ambiguity, to situate oneself "at the borderlands of life and art" (Nyczek 1994: 7). In other words, poetry was meant to enter, or rather to be brought back into, the sphere of actual life. This entailed becoming politically engaged, which became troublesome after the events of March 1968 but which positions Nowa Fala closer to Western European as well as American protest movements. As regards being thought a generation the span was wide: from the politically committed to those who opted for self-enclosure. As Leszek Moczulski writes in "Pieśń I" ("Canto I"):

> Which generation shall I belong to for you?
> The one without wings or the one without applause?
> one of contempt or the one of shrugged shoulders?
> What are you labelling me with?
> Rebellion or decency?
>
> Moczulski 1994: 23

Moczulski takes it upon himself to address directly the challenge of finding one's place in the world at the time of writing. Posing questions becomes a poet's duty, which slowly turns into tormenting obsession since no ready answers are available. The ordeal of defining oneself is shared by other poets of Nowa Fala, a useful benchmark for reading the poetic movement in generational terms. In Stanisław Stabro's poem "Bez biografii?" ("With no biography*?*") the tragedy of the generation that cannot identify itself with the Polish status quo is signaled through his suggestive question mark as well as through the use of the collective speaker. The criterion of generation as an entity struggling with totalitarianism is also marked in other poets' works. Krzysztof Karasek mentions "empty barrels full of shriek" (Karasek 1994: 66). Ryszard Krynicki speaks of being forced "to believe lies" (Krynicki 1994: 69). Stanisław Barańczak gives witness to the all-pervading gibberish which threatened to take the entire epoch down into historical insignificance (Barańczak 1994: 78–79). What attitude, then, is one to take against so distorted a reality and against those who have created it? For Dymarski the only alternative is "a retreat to the museum" (Dymarski 1994: 102–103), where history has become knowable and altogether more possessed of meaning.

At the same time, however, other poets of Nowa Fala consider the past, too, a distorted superfluity. As expressed by Stabro and Karasek, history becomes "the mother of garbage dumps," (Stabro 1994: 104) and makes people "wise-guy, liquored-up revolutionists" (Karasek 1994: 121–124). Given such circumstances, the fate of a poet does not seem bright, and neither does that of poetry, which, putting Czesław Miłosz's words into question, does not save anybody. Yet, poetry for many remained a universal and utopian counterforce against the distortions of reality brought on by Communism. Can one thus speak of the generational nature of Nowa Fala—shared experiences as may be but also quite differing aesthetic stances? In *Co dalej? Rzecz o nie istniejącym pokoleniu* ("*What's next? On a Nonexistent Generation*") Grzegorz Musiał gives an affirmative answer to the question though is terms far from optimism:

> It is not here that Genet was born, it is not we who were shaken by Ginsberg. Instead, we had a pitiable offshoot of the profane already anticipated by Witkacy—croaking ordinariness, flatness, and exhaustion. For an ordinary man, a fearful conformist, who was yet clever

> enough to justify the fall of their spirits with an alleged need of "democratization," "dissemination," and "intelligibility" that was the only lesson to be learned from pulling down the temple of art. Nowa Fala, a poetic movement transmitting a significant ethical message and bearing unquestionable weight for both the present and the future generations, unfortunately and involuntarily ended up being the aesthetic peak of that weak doctrine.
>
> Musiał 1981: 9

Nowa Fala was not a formal literary movement but rather a poetic and indeed extra-poetic movement which contributed to a new understanding of the poet's role in society. The poets' reflections on the state of a man in modern society set fresh challenges to readers. Some writers clearly pressured their readership to dissent from the "new" socialism whereas others seemed to advocate unconcern for the vision of Poland shaped by authorities. It was among the latter that claims for a collective poetic voice arose for the first time. Orientacja Poetycka Hybrydy, a submovement of Nowa Fala with Leszin-Koperski being its leading figure, were early to call themselves "the first Polish generation" (quoted in Głębicka 2000: 219) which artistically responded to the Polish post-war reality, much in parallel with the Beats in America. Other poets briefly involved with Hybrydy were Jarosław Markiewicz, Krzysztof Karasek, and Ryszard Krynicki, who later constituted the main core of Nowa Fala. For a certain period of time Hybrydy exerted some influence on the Polish literary scene, chiefly owing to its own periodicals such as *Widzenia* or *Orientacja*.

The key theoretical assumptions of the group revolved around artistry, rich explorations of metaphor, and the affirmation of life. Supporters of Hybrydy did not enter disputes with the older poets, yet they eagerly collaborated with their younger literary brothers and sisters. Considering themselves the core of a unique generation, they tried not to fall into exercising historical self-determination, nor did they wish to write on the topics related to nationality. The claim of the group to be the voice of the generation was often heavily questioned and criticized, among many, by Janusz Żernicki, Maciej Chrzanowski, and Julian Rogoziński. For them, as observed by Głębicka, Hybrydy was more of a group of friends who just exchanged opinions about poetry (Głębicka 2000: 229), a line of criticism somehow paradoxically reminiscent of Beats' own reluctance to generational inclusions ("just a bunch of guys trying to get published," claimed Ginsberg).

Another poetic group that is significant in the context of Polish Beat is the Kraków-based Teraz, set up in 1968. Its poetic awareness was mainly stimulated by poems like Ginsberg's "Howl" and "America," along with Charles Reich's *The Greening of America* and the first two books in Polish linking American and Western European counterculture, Kazimierz Jankowski's *Hippies in Search of the Promised Land* and Aldona Jawłowska's *The Paths of Counterculture*. Books of poetry such as Jerzy Kronhold's *Samospalenie* (*Self-immolation*, 1972), Adam Zagajewski's *Komunikat* (*A Message*, 1972) and *Sklepy mięsne* (*Butcher Shops*, 1975), or Julian Kornhauser's *W fabrykach udajemy smutnych rewolucjonistów* (*In Factories We Pretend to be Sad Revolutionaries*, 1973) follow many countercultural threads, including "rebelling against the establishment, falsified culture, and the Polish version of the 'rat race'" (Stabro 1995: 395). Given the political and social conditions of the time, it was natural to link the feeling of emptiness experienced by the mid-1940s generation with the events of March 1968 in Paris and the American hippie movement. It further comes as no surprise that US Beat poetry found ardent enthusiasts among the representatives of Teraz. The latter, however, clearly diverged from the Beats as regards the ways of protest; their scrupulous questioning was predominantly focused on the political and social realities and was not as spontaneous or spectacular as that of the Beat generation. Jerzy Kronhold writes in "Forest Flower": "I believe in contestation / Which is the only possible / Poetry" (quoted in Stabro 1995: 396).

Another strand in Nowa Fala with Beat-like affinities, and which sought to make its impact on Polish contemporary poetry, was the Katowice-based group Kontekst. In their poetry manifesto they criticized the artistic standpoint and anti-avant-garde practices both of Hybrydy and language poetry. Paźniewski and Piskor claimed that

> The poetic jugglery of Orientacja, which was soon to become the ministry of perfecting metaphors, had its heyday in the beginning of the sixties, the time of particular importance to the arts. Let us not forget that it was then that we witnessed the emergence of the poetic avant-garde termed by critics as the Beat Generation, with Allen Ginsberg as its spearhead, as well as new trends in art and music which did not remain indifferent to the general situation of modern humanity and which was finding new means of expression. The phenomenon of the Beat Generation could have been a point of reference to Polish poetry. Unluckily, among the self-righteous there was no new Peiper who might have taken creative thought up to the European level after years of deterioration.
>
> Paźniewski and Piskor 1973: 8–9

The program for poetry of Kontekst found its anchor in McLuhan's ideas about TV and media imaging and their "message"—with the implication of changing the relationship between poet and reader. Key was the role of context in poetry since:

> manipulating the contexts by incorporating elements directly from surrounding reality, … and using them in completely new constellations is a form of directing (such as in a happening) which changes the typical styles and ways of thinking. By eradicating usual patterns and reversing the dominating hierarchies, contexts allow one to intervene into the spheres of human thinking and sensitivity. Instead of being a spectator and a recorder, the poet becomes a participant and a director of a play, he enters the stage from the peripheries.
>
> This new poetry breaks from the common manipulation since it discloses the hidden falseness of the latter by itself manipulating the formulae it uses.
>
> Paźniewski and Piskor 1973: 12

Such postulates dissatisfied many critics, who accused Kontekst of incorporating directly and mindlessly Western avant-garde ideas while rejecting domestic traditions. Additionally, the alleged obsession with mass culture was deemed a contribution to the fall of the traditional understanding of poetry and the fondness of concrete poetry was condemned for "fetishizing emptiness" (Głębicka 2000: 399).

The criticism did not stop the representatives of Kontekst from promoting the new functions of poetry, which found their way into a collaborative manifesto-volume, *Spór o poezję* (*A Dispute Over Poetry*). Opening up to extroversion and elevating reality as the key factor which determines and makes art possible put Katowice-based poets to the front of the new Polish avant-garde. The principal ideas revolved around writing concrete poetry and reducing the metaphoric to its minimum. They found a notable supporter in Andrzej Bursa, who posited that poetry and life cannot move separate ways. The frankness and openness of the poetic act can be seen as a nod to the Beats and their call for bringing life and writing together. Confirmation was to be found in Ginsberg's undressing on being asked about the role of nakedness in his poetry or Snyder's claim that the rhythm of his poetry is the rhythm of physical work.

The literary 1980s in Poland are often said to be "a black hole" (after Tadeusz Nyczek), although Marian Stala found the metaphor incorrect, observing that "apparently, having lived through some dramatic times, one is basically unable to find a language to express their intensity as well as the immense political and spiritual content, so different from the previous decades" ("Czarna dziura" 1990: 4). Critics mused over the reasons for such a condition in Polish literature. Some pointed to the unquestionable achievements of the time, especially the poetry of Jan Polkowski, Bronisław Maj, and Piotr Sommer and the prose work of Paweł Huelle. But in general there was disappointment, not least the socialist realism of writers like Tadeusz Konwicki and despite the work of established poets like Miłosz, Szymborska, and Zagajewski.

In Stala's view, what counters Nyczek's argument about the "black hole" state of Polish 1980s poetry is the work of poets gathered around the magazine entitled *bruLion* ("*Note-paper*"). Founded in 1987, it published underground writers, such as Wiktor Woroszylski and Antoni Pawlak, as well as debutants, as for instance Marcin Baran, Krzysztof Koehler, and Marcin Sendecki. After 1989 the periodical featured authors who did not shy away from openly discussing sex, in the manner of like Genet or de Sade, as well as other texts touching upon the themes of drugs and alternative culture. The critical point came with the publication of an anti-Semitic article by Céline, which brought the editorial board into a major conflict with a number of reputable authors and turned *bruLion* into a subculture-related underground periodical. In Anna Nasiłowska's view

> The younger generation started to see their chance in provocation, a deliberate break-down of all taboos, and promoting a generational breakthrough. Feminism, postmodernism, the problems of consumption culture, New Age, and the new techniques of communication came along with the provocative texts by new writers and their incendiary comments.
>
> Nasiłowska 2006: 168

In 1990 Krzysztof Koehler published a text entitled *Nowi Skamandryci* (*The New Skamander*), which followed up on Jan Błoński's discussion on the similarities between post-1918 and 1980s poetry. Koehler observes that

> after 1918 Polish poetry witnessed the wave of poets who started to ridicule the duties and responsibilities of literature; they were captivated by vitality and freedom of unrestrained expression, the truth that came with living the world. The good spirit that hovered over this strand of poetry was that of an American poet, Walt Whitman, who was basically first read thoroughly and passionately by those poets. Sixty years later another spirit emerges as their Anglophone inspiration: Frank O'Hara (and his like-minded contemporaries).
>
> quoted by Nasiłowska 2006: 171

With the 1987 Polish release of Frank O'Hara's selected poems (translated by Piotr Sommer) under the title *Twoja pojedynczość* (*Your Singularity*), there emerged a new poetic current, so-called "O'Harism." What also contributed to its appearance were the prior translations of other New York poets (mainly Ashbery and Schuyler) appearing in leading Polish literary magazines. The term is predominantly used when speaking about the poets who launched their careers in *bruLion*, namely Marcin Świetlicki, Marcin Baran, and Jacek Podsiadło. It is the poetry of the latter which displays the clearest signs of inspiration drawn from the youth counterculture of the sixties (Stabro 2002: 141); it also shares many artistic assumptions dear to both the Beats and the New York School and defined by Nasiłowska as "an ostentatious autobiographism, the exposure of the private, and the rejection of abstract declarations" (Nasiłowska 2006: 173).

One of the memorable arguments against generational un-centeredness in Polish post-war poetry was made by Grzegorz Musiał in his 1995 essay, "Wielki impresariat, czyli o pokoleniu trzydziestolatków, czterdziestolatków i jeszcze trochę" ("The Great Impresario, or on the 30-, the 40-year-olds and beyond"), in which he reproached the younger generation of poets for their shallowness and attention-seeking. Musiał's oeuvre, essentially his novels, can be read as a manifestation of individualism, albeit sharply divergent from that of *bruLion* and any generational claims. A precursor of gay writing in Poland, Musiał was a brother-in-arms against bourgeois morality, yet he believed his literary tactics less chaotic and more well-considered than those of the younger poets.

The comparability of mindset between Nowa Fala and the Beats is irresistible—the critique of existing social and cultural norms and disdain for the cult of the merely "aesthetic." Inspiration, moreover, was to be found in both spontaneity and Zen Buddhism. Nowa Fala, moreover, like the Beats, was heterogeneous and not confined to a defined set of artistic and ideological assumptions.

Both can also be linked as countercultural generations, however different the historical circumstances that gave rise to each and even allowing that an insurrectionary year like 1968 offered a shared point of reference. While the Beat generation is not an indispensable point of reference for Nowa Fala, as claimed by Andrzej Waśkiewicz, one would be hard put not to recognize their similarities of word and imagination (Waśkiewicz 1982: 131).

## Stunting Stanzas

The further Polish literary phenomenon which can lay claim to a Beat sensibility lies in the so-called "kaskaderzy literatury" ("literary stuntmen"), writers and poets who fit well into Colin Wilson's category of "outsider." Their uncompromising rebellion was directed chiefly at society, whose norm-making was perceived by them as a form of repression. Among the most prominent has to be Andrzej Bursa (1932–1957), poet and novelist who died prematurely in his mid-twenties and of whom Leszek Bugajski has written:

> The entirety of Bursa's artistic expression contested the kind of world in which there was no space for sincerity between people and in which the truth was hidden deep below a number of masks. Bursa meant to rip them all off… He rebelled against the world, but did not lose its realities for a moment; he did not avoid them. He was a poet, but it is poetry his numerous poems are targeted against; Bursa relentlessly mocked its usual scope of interest, its search for beauty, etc… His poetic idiom challenges traditional poetic forms and makes wide use of everyday expression, vulgarities, colloquialisms, borrowings from urban slang, all of which are skillfully employed by the poet.
>
> Bugajski 1978: 28

Bursa's rebelliousness towards both the realities of the day as well as towards any docile use of language of poetry was as explicit as was allowed by Poland in the 1950s. According to Bursa, exposing the condition of the post-war "modern" world with the use of foul and colloquial language was the only way to maintain honesty with others and, even more importantly, with oneself. What mattered the most was freedom—to think critically, to believe in what you want, and to render reality in language best thought to suit. Bursa does not accept any form of social conformism nor any of its attempts to absorb rebellious or exceptional individuals. He defies religion, which he deems shallow and un-stimulating. In "Wiara" ("Faith") he writes:

> I believe that God is like a dove
> …
> I do not exclude
>         abiogenesis
>         parthenogenesis
> conception by the union of a female butt and an armchair
> which has not been sat on for a while
> …
> I believe in the pre-spirit
> and the pre-matter
> and other pre-pra-docs
> and all those pro anti cor and contra
>
> Bursa 1990: 37–38

What is more striking is the poet's self-criticism at being a part of his own society. The speaker of Bursa's poems realizes his own powerlessness and submission, yet he cannot abandon the imposed sense of belonging, as witnessed in "Katownie" ("Torture Chambers"):

> Every day I visit torture chambers
> torture chambers twisted into a secessionist grimace
> …
> I sit on the instruments
> already prepared to torture me
> …
> I know torture chambers designed like the vestibules of paradise
> like quiet sanctuaries
> nay, even like
>         the temple of pleasures
>
> Bursa 1990: 51

It is not possible to read Bursa without awareness of the poet's discomfort in the world and his consequent struggles to change it. Bursa is clearly suffering and his pain is an inexorable element of his poetic vision of the world. Not the least important is the poet's young age, which legitimizes his defiant standpoint and would lead to canonizing him as a tragic rebel. Bursa passed away at a mere twenty-five as a result of congenital aortic failure, which nevertheless contributed to the myth of the poet lost to suicide.

Defying the idealistic vision of the world is also typical for another "literary stuntman," Marek Hłasko. Dariusz Kulesza claims that

> [Hłasko's] works can be affiliated with the climate of contestation as represented by the Anglo-American literature of the 1950s, with the output of the American Beat Generation (Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and the author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Jerome David Salinger, referenced by Hłasko) and the British "angry young men" (John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe)… Hłasko's texts embrace the archetype of a perennial rebel, who does not belong to the world, because it does not fit to his idealized image of it.
>
> Kulesza 2008: 462

Hłasko strove to make a legend out of himself and his literary self-staging is far more evident than in the case of Bursa. In artistic terms, his archetype of dissident is not nearly as manifest as that of Bursa's, yet, it is Hłasko and not Bursa who will be regarded as the voice of post-Stalin Poland. As with the Beats, his rebelliousness is of Romantic provenance since he "fights for the individual's right to manifest his or her sensitivity" (Stabro 1990: 65). Much as this could be dubbed as over-sentimental, one has to bear in mind the Poland of the late 1950s and the atmosphere of moral torpor. Hłasko thus presents himself as the child of an epoch in which he struggles to live and write. Grzegorz, the protagonist of his *Ósmy dzień tygodnia* (*Eighth Day of the Week*), gives the following diagnosis of reality as it so appears:

> It's the twentieth century …: Isolde lives in a brothel and Tristan drinks with some pimps round the corner. People have little time for big love these days; they drag themselves out of bed in the morning, sip on their soup in cafeterias, pack themselves up into trams, buy some cheap furniture by installments in department stores, have a row with a conductor over a penny, and so on… Life does not guarantee any future. Anyone saying "Leave it, there'll be another big thing soon" should be spat in the face. What big thing? How soon? Fortune never comes along right.
>
> Hłasko 1990: 101

It thus can be no surprise that the characters of Hłasko's prose are downtrodden and unsure of the future; they abuse alcohol and do not expect the world to surprise them with a change. Moreover, they do not idealize themselves since "to stay away from illusions and myths is to live an ideal life" (Hłasko 1990: 140). They have no option but to give in to inertia.

Hłasko evidently writes as a harsh critic of the world and does not seem to belong to it. Does his characters' "outsiderism" reflect the author himself? According to Stanisław Stabro, Hłasko fashioned a persona little in common with reality. His self-image of *poète maudit* was essentially a myth applauded by favoring commentators and readers. Stabro himself observes: "[W]e witness an ongoing fable-making on the behalf of the critics as well as the exhibition of the readers' sensation-driven expectations, which are unavoidable when dealing with an artistic legend." (Stabro 1990: 67). Apt as this may be does in tell the whole story? If Hłasko manipulates his own legend to an extent does that obviate the rebelliousness of *Ósmy dzień tygodnia* or unlink it from the countercultural writing of the 1950s and the 1960s? Interestingly, Hłasko's reputation is also that of the emigrant: it gets augmented through his extended stays in France and Israel.

Despite their fierce critique of the realities of the day, Hłasko's books offer a hint of hope for piercing though the negativity of the period. The phoniness and insubstantiality of socialist realism together with the degenerate power-politics which underwrote it finds condemnation in the writer's eyes; the authorities, the communist bigwigs and agitators, pay the highest price in Hłasko's prose—they are denied humanity, which becomes the biggest victory of the writer.

When linking Edward Stachura (1937–1979), another of the "stuntmen," with a Beat sensibility, the main focus has to be given to the final years of his poetic activity, the so-called "mystic" period, which blends his existentialist and Buddhist interests—the latter being the dominant force. Out of these emerges the poet's key interest, that of his concern with absolute and mystical freedom. An outsider who needed to defy the world, Stachura chose solitude, yet not necessarily one that connotes seclusion. In kind with the Beats, he sought to merge word with act; his actions lead to writing which was consequently turned back into an action. A vagabond-like poet, the author of *Wszystko jest poezja* (*All Is Poetry*) abandons society and "emigrates inwards" nurturing the escapist within himself. In Beat fashion again he insist that life is poetry and that poetry is life, the two always quite inseparable:

> You either are a poet or not, you don't jump in and out. You jump into being a non-poet at times, perhaps. Perhaps you jump into being a non-poet thinking you are a poet, remembering that you are a poet, and consequently, forgetting that you are a poet. You don't jump into being a non-poet but simply are always a poet when you don't have to either remember it or recall it when you forget about it.
>
> Stachura 1984: 5

For Stachura, it is natural and unquestionable that every person is a poet. This brings him close to the Beats and, later in his career when he adopts the voice of a sage, close to being Zen follower. The mysticism gets further developed in *Fabula Rasa* (1985), his considerable meditative treatise. Interestingly, Stachura does not call himself a mystic and in fact considers the term undefinable:

> What does mysticism mean? We could look it up in a dictionary …, possibly only to learn that we don't learn anything from it. It is because all the dictionaries explain things in the same things. You look up "mysticism" to find that it is "transcendence" and "the supernatural," you look up "supernatural" and find that it's "mysticism."
>
> 1985: 83

Stachura's mysticism must first repudiate reality to find possible ways for its reformulation. Nevertheless, no simple solutions are offered by the writer; he simply has his say leaving the reader to himself or herself or not. His understanding of mysticism is well reflected in the following conversation with himself:

> I apologize for asking you the following question…
> There is no one to apologize to for anything. So ask or don't.
>
> 1985: 91

> Who will possibly claim the authorship of this book while not being its author?
> You will. You, Edward Stachura, will possibly claim the authorship of this book while not being its author. You bear the name, don't you? Thou art the name bearing the burden of thine name.
>
> 1985: 106

Zen mysticism aims at separation from the body and denial of existence with a view to dissolution into void, entrance into nirvana, and thereby an end to human suffering. This goes well in line with Stachura's overall literary project, the more so since it is an outcome of the writer's experience and his attempts to perceive reality in such a way that aims at one's total separation from the outside in order to engage into a dialogue merely with oneself. Such a form of artistic self-creation may seem odd for an author who is very much anchored in the realities of the 1960s. The author of *Fabula Rasa*, however, decides to give a chronicle of all his inward thoughts (which might remind one of Mallarmé, Ginsberg, or Kerouac) in order to inscribe the world in the widest spectrum he can manage.

What is also in line with Zen are Stachura's longings for solitude and self-restraint. The writer embodies a wandering monk, who silently learns the world and attempts to show his understanding of the processes that are shaping it. He does not avoid people completely, but tries to communicate with them on another level of perception. Accordingly he refuses drugs offered to him by hippies, claiming that air is his drug of choice, yet he does not avoid jamming with flower children. In line with the Whitmanesque traces in the Beat sensitivity, he displays a sense of quietist acceptance of the way things are and by doing so he affirms his own (poetic) "self."

The poet's self is also augmented by the very act of solitary traveling. An avid wanderer, Stachura absorbs in solitude the plentitude and flow of life around him, which gives shape and substance to his sense of independence, bringing him close to the Beat ethos of individualism and (spiritual) self-reliance. What, in the poet's eyes, becomes the ultimate epitome of a solitary journey and an ever-lasting lesson is life, which makes one bedazzled as well as overwhelmed by its variety and complexity. The immense absorbing powers that paradoxically come along with a sense of a perennial loneliness make Stachura a silent partner to Kerouac, a glorifier of life and vitality who yet was able to relish Beat solititude. Additionally, much of Stachura's and Kerouac's journeying leads through urban landscapes. Both writers seem to share a perspective on a modern city as something both alarming and alluring. Reminiscent of Kerouac's musings over the pretentiousness, yet also the charm of New York City in *The Town and the City* and *The Subterraneans*, Stachura's take on the modern Polish city is frequently a blend of criticism and astonishment. The writer speaks as follows of urban life:

> Whenever I'm in town and I look at all that heavy traffic and all those Poles who are always in a hurry, I think of all that big movement as of something illusionary; everybody is heading somewhere, everybody is rushing, dashing, faster and faster, and there they are. There they are in the evening back in their cages which they left in the morning.
>
> Stachura 1966: 11–12

Looking at Stachura's entire oeuvre, Beat sensibilities are but one among many facets of a writer who resists easy categorization. It is thus more than challenging to reach a conclusive assessment image of his literary endeavors.

Much like Bursa, Hłasko and Stachura align relatively well to the Beat mindset; but the fourth of these "literary stuntmen" appears to be yet more troublesome due to the predominance of the use of the physical in his works as well as his belonging to a later generation of Polish writers (the poet was born after World War II). What definitely brings Rafał Wojaczek close to the Beats is his pioneering role as a countercultural dissident. For just like his American counterparts, Wojaczek identified life with writing and tested "how far biography can match bibliography" (Grześkowiak 2008: 569). He sought, again like Stachura and the US Beats, to integrate life and writing, the one wholly tied into the other. The label "stuntman" well fits his career, the years 1965–71 especially, the debut, the frankness, the darkness of vision, the eventual suicide.

Some common ground between Wojaczek and literary tactics of the Beats is to be met in his acts of self-fashioning. In a 1969 poem, entitled "W śmiertelnej potrzebie" ("In a Deadly Need"), the speaker states: "And so, in a deadly need and with no help to find / I made up Wojaczek, an accomplice of mine" (Wojaczek 2005: 280). Who, then, exactly is Wojaczek? The question is left without an answer. There are in effect many "Wojaczeks." Radosław Grześkowiak helpfully observes that "there are gaps between Wojaczek—the person, Wojaczek—the poet, Wojaczek—the poet depicted in a poem, and Wojaczek—the poet depicted in a poem as somebody else, as a non-Wojaczek" (Grześkowiak 2008: 572).[2] We thus encounter a broken personality, whose parts remain separate and unreconciled. Wojaczek hints at the problem in a poem entitled "W podwójnej osobie" ("A Double Person"):

> I'm not sleeping
> but neither is He
> I'm listening
> but so is He
> I'm waiting
> but so is He
> …
> I'm putting the shirt on
> He's doing up the cufflinks
> I'm putting the slacks on
> He's doing up the belt
> I'm putting the shoes on
> He's lacing them up.
> 2005: 112–113

The world of Wojaczek's poetry is physical, not to say aggressively physiological. The human body is the site of saliva, sperm, and, above all, blood, which becomes the poet's fetish. This is the body as of paramount importance but to be reduced to its most basic biology—as in "Kobiecość III" ("Femininity III"):

> I'm not sure if you noticed how much "belles"
> Find to be akin to "lettres"
> …
> those who give them shape, experts in dirty underwear
> All the filth, gutter, and the other side
> Of the coin that the world is, who can it be if not wives,
> Mothers, part-time or regular lovers
> …
> Who else would smell rancid suet in the beauty of the world;
> Who else would notice muck specks around every single pearl;
> That is why I'm smiling, you lil' big child of mine,
> When you sometimes tell me you'd like to be a dame.
> 2005: 286

Just like the vision in Ginsberg's poem "Mescaline" with its freneticism and naturalism, Wojaczek's vision of corporeality is one of rot, infection. This is the body full of blackheads and excrement, yet at the same time it remains fascinating, refined and attractive. Its perverse lyricism, as given in the poem, seems to feed on the ugliness, which is not far away from Rimbaud or Mickiewicz and their poetic appreciation of hideousness.

Much in line with the Beat mindset, Wojaczek's poetry broadly comments on history happening here and now and by doing so blurs the line between reality and script. Its defiance of reality plays into allusions to the December 1970 protests against increases in the price of food and the bloody suppressions by the Army. Wojaczek's sense of loss and resistance has understandably been likened to that of Ginsberg's. Bogusław Kierc goes so far as to argue a connection with the second part of "Howl," yet he adds that "the Moloch of Wojaczek's homeland pursued different prey and killed in other ways" (Kierc 2007: 187). The Polish realities of the day were indeed far removed from those of America. While Ginsberg's activism, at most, could lead to censorship, defiance of the authorities in Poland could end up with imprisonment and, in extreme cases, execution.

Wojaczek appears not to have been able to handle such realities, just as he was incapable of coping with love and the fissures within his own creative personality. Critics have long divided on his legacy. Jan Marx calls Wojaczek a sentimental and infantile poet, whose uncompromising works "come out of mere spitefulness are a game of appearances" (Marx 1993: 239–240). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the author of "In the Deadly Need" fits well into the Polish resistance culture of the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Much comparison understandably is made with earlier outsider writers like Bursa, Hłasko, and Stachura who paved the way for both the Nowa Fala and the "stuntmen."

Turning to more recent times and *bruLion*, the poetic diction which comes closest to the Beat spirit, mainly owing to its Whitmanesque free verse and its focus on the social and ecologic responsibilities of modern man, is to be found in Jacek Podsiadło. Stanisław Stabro aptly suggests that

> [w]ithout taking away from the author's independence and originality, Podsiadło's broad poetic phrase has the stamp of Ginsberg's poetry. In this respect, the lyrical works of the Polish poet are "road poetry," all the more so since the motif of journey is an essential one.
>
> Stabro 2002: 141

Podsiadło's poems, such as "Dwadzieścia jeden kroków" ("Twenty-one Steps"), "Plasticclay," "Akt żalu" ("The Act of Repentance"), "Jadąc przed siebie" ("Moving Forward"), "Języki ognia" ("Tongues of Fire"), Sprzyjająca aura ("A Favorable Aura") or Zdania, fale ("Sentences, Waves"), echo Ginsberg's rhapsodic cadence and imagery and in which the world is tangible, experienced at first-hand:

> Abandoned maps still cross the of swords of paths, the varieties of tea cross over in my cup, a bird spreads its wings wide and trails through the sky as if crucified – – –
> And I see a weird cat dancing and balancing on the beam of a fence, uncurling the sickle of its back in a leap and dropping on the ground like a heavy blob of ink – – –
> The hushed child of air suddenly reflects on itself, begins to praise the nameless playing the drums of houses – – –
> I feel serenity as if I read from the Book of Proverbs, I know my name and I don't rise against it – – –
>
> Podsiadło 2003: 265

Linking Podsiadło with the Beats and their sensibility is easy enough: the sharpness of observation, the insistence on the rhythm of life and the world. Ginsberg himself appears in a poem entitled "Ośrodek wypoczynkowy C" ("Holiday Resort C"):

> a1
> I've been through some failed readiness
> for death or whatever

refused to come.
And in front of me just
a long list of poets
invited to Warsaw Autumn of Poetry
thrown on a table covered with white despair.
And some faith, as much as in God,
that I will be saved
by a poem by an Argentinian, Liliana Lukin,
by Elia Peonidu from Cyprus,
by Ginsberg or Patten.
Podsiadło 2003: 89–90

Podsiadło appears to believe in the poem's power to save oneself providing one has the will to yield to its saving powers. Such an assumption inscribes the Polish poet into the Beat paradigm, since it also echoes the Blake, Shelley, and other Romantic poets so cherished by Ginsberg and Corso.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Polish post-war literature finds literary voices critical of Beat attitudes. It is especially worth mentioning Darek Foks of *bruLion*, who lookd with suspicion at signs of pomposity and posing, and found particular displeasure in Ginsberg's vision of himself as a poet-prophet. In "Bitnik w niebiesiech" ("A Beatnik in Heaven") he paints a rather mocking image of the author of "Café in Warsaw" after his death in 1997:

I
He buried himself somewhere in April. We all know what April is like:
Folks await the Spring, people getting down on Saturday.
…
II
You were a Beat, just like every second of us, every
Third, maybe. No way every fourth
Will get through your *Collected Poems*. The sky
Of America over a grad from Costa Rica. "Glos Wybrzeza"
Surely had a difficult time after your passing away. A thousand-year-old Gdansk
And seventy-one-year-old author of "Café in Warsaw."
A thousand faked orgasms for a thousand years of the city.
A thousand moves in a mother's womb for a thousand years of the country.
Two queer expressions heard at dawn.
Foks 2000: 17

Resorting to colloquial language, even when describing Ginsberg's death and hinting at how easy it was for popular countercultural attitudes to take hold, Foks ridicules off-the-shelf rebelliousness. Similar reservations are voiced by Cezary K. Kęder, whose poem "Skomlenie" ("Whine") gives an ironic vision of the Polish countercultural milieu of the 1990s. Unlike their American counterparts, modern-day Polish Beats do not suffer nor are they ostracized by society. As a matter of fact, they live life to the full consumerist potential:

who were getting their hands on the secretary an hour after a holy intercourse with
  the wife
who were constantly on the road to get to their work or home
who were renting videos either of the image culture or murders
who were telling each other those videos before, during and after the lunch, but first
  and foremost,

> in the evening
> who were getting self-indulged buying sweets, cigarettes, alcohol and
>   sometimes pot since it brought them closer
> to the perfection
> who were writing their pompous novels about ejaculations and
>   menstruations of hermaphrodite heroes
> …
> who were more beat than the Beats
>
> Kęder 1994: 3–9

In his portrait of late-capitalism and countercultural Polish attitudes, Kęder enumerates the worst vices of the country's transformation-era society. He lists apathy, giving oneself completely to consumerism, and the envisioning of ultimate happiness as material success. That greatly brings to mind the critique of 1950s American society mounted by the Beats. What is left of Ginsberg's "Howl," Kęder seems to suggest, is but the whimper of an animal struggling to settle snuggly into the new realities of modern-day Poland.

Notwithstanding the obviously vast and complex differences between social, political, and economic context of the post-war Poland and America, it might be well claimed that the abovementioned writers bridge the cultural gap between the two countries. Much as the question of Polish Beat cannot be given straightforward answers and remains partially unanswerable, some affinities shared by the Beats and the presented crop of Polish post-war artists are not to be overlooked. As observed, Polish Beat literature realizes itself predominantly in two modes, that is in the act of blending living and writing as well as in contesting conformism and political realities of the day. Sadly, unlike its American counterpart, it lacks a female perspective which would offer a proper balance to male standpoints. The only name to be occasionally brought up by critics is that of Halina Poświatowska, a poet who is sometimes put side by side with Polish *poètes maudits* mainly due to her premature death from a congenital heart defect and her various erotic poems. One hopes to hear more female voices, either awaiting discovery or still to emerge, a long overdue vein in Polish Beat writing.

## Notes

1 All translations from Polish here and henceforth are by the authors.

2 Interestingly, Gerald Nicosia speaks of four "Kerouacs": "the writer Kerouac, the mythological Kerouac, the popular Kerouac, and the real Kerouac" (unpublished lecture at the University of Cambridge, the Faculty of English, October 22, 2010).

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