I. Research articles

DOI: 10.17951/et.2016.28.81

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Work in contemporary Polish literature*

The article deals with the literary portrayals of work after the political transformation of 1989 in the prose of selected Polish authors: Andrzej Stasiuk, Dawid Bieńkowski, Piotr Siemion, Daniel Odija, and others. The novels and short stories discussed here deal with personal and social problems, in what can be considered objectivised experience of several individuals. An attempt is made to adapt the methodology of the poetics of experience to those, necessarily selected, portrayals of work. The relevant aspects include: shortage of work as the key element of social change, part-time work, physical work (often considered inferior and unfulfilling), work in the marketplace (as release of subdued energy), work of a small-business entrepreneur (with bankruptcy as an inalienable element of the experience), and work in the novel capitalist corporate context of the time. The literary portrayals of work in the times of transformation involve images of failure, exclusion, and exploitation – a successful career is a mirage, often presented as irony or parody. The Polish reality after 1989 is thus presented in terms of a deep social disintegration: when confronted with the new, capitalist context and the pressure on self-reliance, individuals often fail in what they experience as a hostile reality.

Key words: work in the times of transformation, contemporary Polish literature, poetics of experience

* The article appeared in Polish as "Praca w świetle współczesnych świadectw literackich" in *Etnolingwistyka* 28, pp. 81–99. The present English translation has been financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, project titled "English edition of the journal *Etnolingwistyka. Problemy języka i kultury* in electronic form" (no. 3bH 15 0204 83).

1. Introduction

In his 2009 book *Polska do wymiany. Późna nowoczesność i nasze wielkie narracje* [Poland for Replacement. Late Modernity and Our Great Narratives], Przemysław Czapliński looks at how Poles narrate themselves in late modernity, when the great narratives of modernism have given way to particularistic narratives, dispersed and multiplied, representing "a multitude of social projects".[1] As the critic aptly observes, "the time of transformation is an epoch of a compressed history of ideas: the premodern perceptions of society as an ethnic community coexist with its modern image as a purposeful organisation and its postmodern vision as a community of consumers" (Czapliński 2009: 18[2]).

A uniform society organised around the homogeneous ideas of progress and modernisation is a thing of the past. We live in the times of social division into micro-groups, further divided into monadic entities, which, in very different ways and often in conflict with one another, formulate their strategies for survival.[3] Ulrich Beck (1992: 130–131) talks here about a "risk society": a society that lives in the present, is vulnerable to unexpected change, and takes a gambling risk of parleying with the unpredictable matter of life. The sociologist says:

> The liberated individuals become dependent on the labor market and because of that, dependent on education, consumption, welfare state regulations and support [...], [and] consumer supplies [...]. The place of traditional ties and social forms (social class, nuclear family) is taken by secondary agencies and institutions which stamp the biography of the individual and make that person dependent upon fashions, social policy, economic cycles and markets, contrary to the image of individual control which establishes itself in consciousness. (Beck 1992: 130–131)[4]

Let me then pose the following question: in what ways, in the times of transition from communism to democracy, from a planned, socialist economy to a market economy, from a deficiency of goods to an excess of goods and opportunities that can satisfy a myriad of expectations – in what ways, in the past quarter-century, have we been thinking about work, or, more precisely, in what ways have writers been thinking about it, for us and

[1] It should be pointed out that the Polish experience of political, social, and economic transformation bears many traits of modern formation, which coincide with postmodern experiences described in the seminal works of Zygmunt Bauman (esp. Bauman 2004, but also 1991, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2006a,b) and Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991, 1994). See also Żakowski (2006) or Marody (2014).

[2] All translations from non-English publications by K.W.-D.

[3] Again, see the classics of modern sociology, Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens.

[4] See also Rifkin (2001).

with us (see Dunin 2004: 213–259)? What have they written about work and what diagnoses have they proposed? How has the sensitive medium of literature recorded and interpreted people's experiences of work in this new socio-political and cultural setting?

In the context of the broader interpretations sketched out here, I set myself the task of considering how the latest literature has represented the problem of work,[5] which is, after all, one of the basic experiences in human life and a major issue in contemporary context.[6] Has it merely contented itself with a superficial description or has it ushered in new perceptions of work? Has it followed the experience of the people being affected, or has it rather sided with the ideologies of the fledgling Polish capitalism? And finally: what cognitive tasks has it set itself, what cognitive horizon has it adopted in relation to work? Has it proposed an in-depth diagnosis of both the fascination with and the dangers of new forms of work? The questions can be multiplied, but the main point here is what portrayals of work emerge from the writings of contemporary Polish writers, such as Andrzej Stasiuk, Piotr Siemion, or Dawid Bieńkowski, as well as younger authors, e.g. Daniel Odija and Mariusz Sieniewicz. In a summary fashion, relating to these authors, Przemysław Czapliński says:

> [Th]e anti-globalist tone of these novels is unquestionable, similarly to the bigotry directed against the Polish transformation and against the effects of the liberal coldness of the state towards society; yet none of them challenges the foundations of capitalism: private property, the right to take market risk, equality with regard to the rules of economy. They postulate not so much a world without capital as a world without its unwelcome consequences. (Czapliński 2009: 31)

2. Experiencing work – work as an experience

I will be looking here at how work as an experience is portrayed in literature, as part of a wider experience of the time of transition, which, on the macro-scale, changed the Polish People's Republic into a capitalist Poland, and on the micro-scale, affected the lives of millions of people,[7] often forcing them to assume new professional and social roles.[8] From this perspective, literature is part of a much larger body of cultural corpus, including the

[5] Cf. a review of the definitions of work in various disciplines (education, psychology, sociology, philosophy, economics, the social teaching of the Catholic Church) in Wilsz (2009, chapter 1).

[6] See Obirek (2006) and Marody (2000, 2002); cf. also Bartmiński (2014).

[7] See Czapiński and Panek (2001 and subsequent reports).

[8] See Browarny (2007).

press, radio, television, documentaries, and feature films. These are the socio-cultural records of the relevant two post–1989 decades, describing specific situations, either factual or fictitious, associated with transformations in the Polish way of life. The transformations often involve individuals having to relinquish their professional roles: a person who used to work on a state-owned farm or in a now bankrupt factory, has to face new challenges: they can remain unemployed or try, with various degrees of success, to pursue a career in business. More often than not, however, they become peddlers or emigrate in search of part-time jobs. These situations, literary accounts involving fictitious characters, resonate in a network of relationships with other characters, with their own motivations for action or responses to the challenges of life. In this way, specific individual experiences are networked, so that a person's mode of conduct is set in relation to that of others.

The experience of work portrayed in the literary prose discussed here is suspended between two poles, i.e. between the world of bankrupt state farms and the communist big industry on the one hand, and, on the other, the world of the neo-capitalist market-regulated vigour and entrepreneurship, along with its inalienable predilection for major and minor swindle. These experiences, are, therefore, viewed as symbolic. They are usually depicted from a distanced, grotesque, and ironic vantage point, rather than being seen as matrices to follow. The literature I am dealing with, then, is like a repository of clichés and stereotypes – although exceptions do exist. My comment is not to be taken as evaluative; rather, I am trying to see how specific experiences of specific characters transform in literature into generalised experiences subject to more synthetic reflection.[9] From this perspective, literature is a forum where specific experiences become textualised, that is, without losing their unique specificity, they acquire the dimension of a more general "testimony" to human experience (Nycz 2012: 33, 149–151). And it is not important (as it is in the case of, say, literary reportage) whether these

[9] I am referring here, albeit loosely, to an inspiring argument by Teresa Walas, who has creatively adapted an insight from Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Walas points out that in looking at literature (or culture) "as selection and projection of experience", one can treat it as capable of depicting the transformation of "naive experience" into "direct existential experience". This means that the experience that is being reflected upon is at the same time inscribed into the experience of the world on the plane of artistic objectification of diverse individual, subjective experiences, whose "sense" is being adjusted (Walas 2012: 276). One can, therefore, speak of textual (discursive) displays of reality (cf. Nycz 2012: 208–226). The reality of human experience is embedded, through literature and its specific practices, into a broader cognitive activity, with literature verbalising the kinds of experiences that cannot be so subtly portrayed in other cultural forms of expression. Save for these two theoretical approaches, I am not citing the vast literature on the subject, asking the reader to consult the extensive lists of references provided in both publications.

individual experiences were actually "lived": it is only important what shape they have acquired in the literary account as related to a given situation. I therefore treat the works of literature discussed here as a kind of articulation of the experience of work – an attempt to understand and describe what individuals experienced at a particular time in a particular place (the times of political and economic transformation in Polish towns and villages), in relation to other places of the globalising world.

Attitudes to work can be viewed from a variety of perspectives; examples from other literary sources can certainly be considered, even if the books I will be discussing here are representative in this regard. Here is one possible perspective: the collapse of state-owned farms and factories is shown through the experience of those who in the new reality have been shoved to the margins of life. The prose is populated by jobless alcohol-abusing characters, mooning about, struggling with the excess of time and the emptiness of their days. Some of them take odd jobs but usually, in order to escape from the new and alien reality, drink away whatever little money they have earned (cf. Stasiuk's Tales of Galicia [*Opowieści galicyjskie*]; Odija's *The Sawmill* [*Tartak*] or *The Glass Works* [*Szklana huta*]). Odd, irregular jobs are for many characters, both those in Poland and abroad, the only available option. The work is usually hard and can only pay for one's basic existential needs. It is often portrayed as requiring massive physical effort and posing a threat to the one's health (digging ditches, painting ships, picking fruit and vegetables, felling trees) (Stasiuk, *Tales of Galicia*; Odija, *The Sawmill*, *The Glass Works*). It can also be unfulfilling and degrading, such the work of a peddler or a flyer-distributor.

Work at a market stall, work connected with trade, involving continual motion, is usually portrayed, in accordance with the journalistic scenario known from non-literary accounts, as release of subdued energy. This vitalistic view, however, is associated in the prose with negative traits such as cunning, deception, or lack of moral reservations (Marek Nowakowski, *Homo Polonicus,* Edward Redliński, *Transformejszen*; Stasiuk, *Tales of Galicia*).

A step higher in the hierarchy is the work of a small-business, often a provincial entrepreneur, offering employment to others. The individual has earned his fortune somewhat illegally, as a member of the old, pre-transformation establishment, a *nouveau riche* with all the typical attributes of the latter, someone with the *idée fixe* of accumulating wealth, driven by the "get rich" slogan. His skills, a combination of ability, connections, and cunning, acquired in the grey market, are a poor match for modern management methods; hence, our businessman often goes bankrupt, knee-deep in debt and his personal life in ruin (Nowakowski, *Homo Polonicus*;

Redliński, *Transformejszen*; Odija, *The Sawmill*, Mariusz Sieniewicz, *The Fourth Heaven* [*Czwarte niebo*]).

Then there is work associated with the new capitalist reality (new jobs such as that of a salesman, manager, media and advertising professional): this world of new opportunities is internally diversified, spanning two poles. At one pole there are people in the upper echelons of a corporation, the creative, English-speaking people in advertising, with access to big money. At the other pole are people from the lower rungs of the corporate ladder, the "small fry" who try to remain afloat amid the difficult waters of job competition. They, in turn, enjoy a degree of control and power over their subordinates in still lower positions, cogs in the corporate machine who sweat and toil for long hours to make profit for the corporation, their benefits including a somewhat uncertain stability, adaptation to the new job market, and familiarity with the new work culture (Dawid Bieńkowski, *Nothing* [*Nic*]; Piotr Siemion, *Niskie Łąki*).

3. The workless

But of course, not everyone has a job. Daniel Odija's short story *Zgryz*,[10] in *The Glass Works* (Odija 2005),[11] is a monologue of a jobless character. It begins like this: "First *primo*, I don't have a job. That doesn't mean I do nothing, but I have to admit I don't do much" (p. 106). The life of the unemployed is essentially tantamount to meaningless vegetation ("We are cheerfully vegetating here", p. 107), animated only by moments of alcoholic overindulgence, in which the characters engage to spice up the monotonous flow of time ("Sometimes my brother comes to visit me. He doesn't have a job, either, but there's always something we can do about it. An odd job here and there, and we've got enough for a bottle", p. 107). Not much happens in the life of the unemployed man: babysitting, waiting for someone to buy him a beer. He drinks chicory coffee and eats bread with margarine and luncheon meat. He earns enough for a modest life – a little money for looking after "that brat Sylwek" (the child's parents pay for the babysitting less than they would have to pay for day care). One of the few distractions

[10] The title is purposefully ambiguous: it can mean 'occlusion' or 'concern, worry', both meanings playing a role in the story. [translator's note]

[11] An overview of Odija's writing can be found in Nęcka (2014: 243–257). The author observes: "There are two leitmotifs in *The Glass Works*. The first is physical work [. . .], which – being Sisyphean in nature – not only fails to provide satisfaction, but also deprives one of the opportunity to live a dignified life. The other is alcohol" (Nęcka 2014: 249; cf. also Orski 2010: 57–59).

that make him feel better is to go out and look at the misery of others: "As I said, looking at others suffer poverty gets you in a better mood. I'm going back home, quietly whistling to myself. It is not so bad if others don't have it good, either" (p. 114). But these moments of heightened mood enhance rather than drive away the horror of anticipated disaster: "For now", the hero does not yet smash furniture, does not beat his wife, does not "slit children's throats" (p. 116). Yet, he experiences apathy, a sense of disintegration and degradation of his body – this leads to unpredictable consequences:

> This is because I am getting weaker. Quietly and steadily. I do not even feel like walking around the city any more. I just sit. I zap the channels on the TV. My clothes are falling apart. My shoes are cracking across the soles. My skin is peeling off. My hair is falling out. (Odija 2005, *The Glass Works*, p. 116)

4. Physical, casual (and sometimes degrading) work

If, in this literary world, someone does have a job, it is mechanical, predictable, part-time, low-paid, and totally unattractive. Self-fulfilment through work is an empty slogan with no *raison d'être*. In the title story from Odija's collection *The Glass Works* (2005), a gang of people with complex biographies dig trenches for telephone cables:[12]

> I felt under my spade that the more barren the earth, the more comfortable it was to dig. The more sand there was, the easier. I was lucky not to come across a root. Then I'd have had to cut it. There was no axe, so I'd have had to cut it with my spade. Sometimes my muscles would break and almost rip out through the skin, so hard it was. (Odija 2005, *The Glass Works*, p. 91)

Hard, monotonous work discloses the fatalistic destiny of people relegated to the margins of life, whom the protagonist compares to vermin:

> Tomorrow, I'll also get up early, before the sun rises. I'll scrape away the pus from my festering eyes and splash them with cold water. I'll get dressed and set off to conquer the earth. I'll dig, I'll bury, I'll firm the soil with my feet. Others have done the same before me and will do so after me. Like this poor little insignificant worm, I'll dig my path. No one sees it, and when someone notices it, they soon forget. (*The Glass Works*, p. 98)

In the story entitled *Brokat* [Glitter], Odija portrays a man who works a variety of jobs – lorries, removals, "a job on a Philippine tanker" (this motif, slightly modified, appears also in the novel *The Sawmill*, p. 37):

[12] The publisher's note on the book cover says: "While reading this book, you feel the burden of physical work. Work that either grinds you to dust, or strengthens you so that no other force can crush you any more".

At night, we cleaned the engine room and this was bearable, despite the fact that after not more than an hour of plunging our hands in a bucket of oil, the fingers of the rubber gloves we were wearing fell off. There were also those that had ribbed cuffs, but when the cuffs soaked, they burnt the wrists, leaving biting blisters on them... This is why we scrubbed the place with bare hands. (Odija 2005, *The Glass Works*, p. 117)

In an ironic short story titled *Majorka* [Mallorca] from the same collection, a co-owner of a pub in Pomerania finds himself on the titular faraway Spanish island after his business has been demolished by musclemen mafia. His first job in Mallorca is with a Polish employer and, predictably, the hero gets cheated. The motif of "exploitation of a Pole by a Pole" recurs in numerous works: in Redliński's *Transformejszen* and in the part of Siemion's *Niskie Łąki* set in New York.

Here is a more extensive excerpt from Odija's collection:

We did some interior finishing for a German. Classic stuff, a finish coat and painting. But it took us a week of harsh work. Twelve hours a day. Your muscles want to jump out of the skin, your head drops, there's dust in your eyes, your gullet, and your lungs... I shat with lime for a week. At the finish of the job, I see the German go around the house, inspect our work, and he is clearly satisfied: *Ja gut! Gute Arbeit.* And on payday, the Polack tells us that the German is pissed off, that he doesn't like it, and instead of one hundred Euro each, he pays us thirty. I look and I don't believe my eyes. The gang are happy as pigs in shit to take that measly thirty Euro. I explained to the scammer that it wasn't right to deduct seventy percent from someone's pay. And when he resisted, I did the trick with the ladder and he paid me the hundred. I lost the job, but gained a nickname and a word was spread. (Odija 2005, *The Glass Works*, p. 41)

When out of the country, work is basically a measure of the whole of the characters' existence. They work interminably and put their hard-earned money aside under the mattress (never in a bank account). They live in overcrowded apartments – or rather, they sleep there and drink alcohol at weekends (cf. the short story *Mięśnie* [Muscles] in *The Glass Works*, p. 176). And so it goes week after week, month after month, year after year. They scrimp and save, to return to their home country, to build a house, to open a small business.

In another short story, *Melisa* [The Lemon Balm], Odija describes the embarrassing experiences of a peddler, whose job is to offer to residents of apartment blocks the brave new world of cable television. This low-paid work, performed by a declassed member of the intelligentsia, a graduate in philosophy, rests upon a combination of the protagonist's persuasion skills and the consumer needs of his customers, stimulated by the new capitalist economy. The work is an exhausting experience that can lead to neurosis – hence the titular lemon balm, which the main character drinks for its tranquilising effect. Routinely, the protagonist drinks a cup in the

morning ("This herb has always had a smoothing effect on my awkward disposition", p. 58), kisses his wife and sleeping children goodbye, and goes to work. On the job, he is paralysed with fear, the whole situation having a Kafkaesque aspect to it:

> I paused on the fifth floor. I had to rest, calm down. The walls were unpleasantly yellow. They pulsed like a living organism. It felt like they were about to tumble down and trap me like a dead insect in a piece of amber. Apparently yellow and bright, yet they were dark and dim. I felt tar in my head. I felt sick. My stomach contracted and relaxed, as if it were a flower that opens at night. I tried to breathe deeply. Don't puke, don't puke, don't puke! Finally, the fit passed. (Odija 2005, *The Glass Works*, pp. 63–64)

This anxiety-triggered nervous response is the exact opposite of what the man was told it would be at a training session conducted by a "snot-nosed kid in a suit" (p. 64), who just quoted rashly-translated foreign handbooks. Our hero is aware that he is no vendor of dreams but a pesky huckster everyone wants to get rid of as quickly as possible. His work inspires in his potential customers the extreme emotions of resentment and aggression. But in this story, his anxiety also has hidden causes. The protagonist is a former doctoral student who has had to give up work on his dissertation: the wife, the kids, the prose of life. One day, he coincidentally meets a friend from university, now also a salesman, but decides to conceal the nature of his job from his acquaintance. The irony of the conversation between the two is that his university mate complains of his life as a peddler, while our protagonist fabricates a heap of lies about his academic career – not just at the local university but in the capital itself! His (non-existent) research and publishing activity play an important role in that they spark envy in the acquaintance, who begins to believe publishers "pay good money" for a research article.

Odija depicts here the experiences of contemporary intellectuals who have been "blasted out of the saddle", forced to abandon their scholarly interests and to find the only work that the market could offer. Our hero's neuroses, according to this literary diagnosis, grow from his belief that the work he does has a low value. The feeling is augmented by the accompanying sense of defeat and redundancy, grounded in shame and fear.

5. The small-business entrepreneur or from rags to riches *à la polonaise*

Here is a symptomatic excerpt from Stasiuk's *Tales of Galicia*, preceded by a description of a village kiosk transformed into a colourful temple of

consumerism. A temple indeed, as the kiosk is portrayed in a language with overt biblical connotations:

> The colour white, Similac Isomil,[13] is purity, joy, innocence and eternal glory, the colour of the robes of Christ on Mount Tabor, the fine linen from the Temple of Solomon. Blue in Blue Ocean Deodorant is the colour of the Virgin Mary, and the firmament, which, like white, stands for immaculacy. (Stasiuk 1996, *Tales of Galicia*, p. 14)

The passage continues in a similar style. This world of colours, a harbinger of another reality, a biblical message in the kiosk window, breaks the monotony and hopelessness of the post-communist life. It is one of the few signs that herald the arrival of a new world of capitalist consumption,[14] brought to the small village in the Beskid Mountains by a pioneer of native capitalism called Władek:

> When the priest in the church said it was hard but you had to bear it, because this was the price to pay for freedom and for Poland, and that the farmer always etc., Władek caught some side wind, which had never before blown across these valleys. He sold all he had, bought a Syrena,[15] leased the kiosk and began to bring all those glittering gems from Rymanów[16] or some place like that. (Stasiuk 1996, *Tales of Galicia*, p. 15)

This story is, in fact, archetypal for the birth of Polish provincial capitalism: there is the cunning individual, the purchase of an old car, and the launching of a new trading business combined with the awakening of new consumer needs. The life of the protagonist and his family changes: Władek now lives his life in the rhythm of counting the takings, delivering goods to shops in nearby villages, and the budding of his business: a wooden shed with the sign that says "Second-hand Clothes from Abroad", a fruit stall with a few umbrella-shaded tables, and a video rental store.

Interestingly, Stasiuk compares his character to Ariel among Calibans, floating ethereally over a suddenly transformed reality. The wind of change indeed transforms Władek into a hero levitating over his village, whose inhabitants live more down-to-earth lives, giving themselves to "old, toilsome and hopeless pursuits" (*Tales of Galicia*, p. 16). Władek has within two years become an apostle of a new religion, a religion that will "abolish opposites, invalidate all disputes and make desires tangible" (*Tales of Galicia*, p. 16). Stasiuk's provincial businessman is equipped with the typical qualities of those who in the first post-transformation years were to become the new salt of the earth: enhanced mobility and the circulation of money in ever

[13] A non-milk formula for infants. [translator's note]

[14] See Czapliński (2001: 130–131) and Borkowska (2000).

[15] A Polish automobile model manufactured from 1957 to 1972, one of the symbols of Polish communism. [translator's note]

[16] A town in the Beskids, in south-eastern Poland. [translator's note]

new businesses tailored to the demands of the local market. The hero of the times of transformation constantly moves around, picking up goods from a wholesaler to display them on his folding camping beds, in his vendor booths, and eventually in his shops. In a few years, as the reader learns from other stories, he will have to face the capitalist competition with retail chains and the Western-style corporate culture. Before this happens, however, he will get to live his dream, unaware of how easy it is to go not only from rags to riches but also back to where he started.

This last case is that of Józef Myśliwski, the protagonist of Daniel Odija's novel *The Sawmill* (2003). Myśliwski is a hard-working man: he started his business by buying, for borrowed money, an old Żuk, a Polish van and light truck produced between 1958 and 1998, plus some cages for breeding foxes. He had also earned money that he invested in land: "He earned it with hard work. Not everyone wanted to work. Myśliwski didn't mind working" (*The Sawmill*, p. 7).

This description of work captures the emergence of the myth of a native self-made millionaire who progresses from rags to riches, a myth that is, however, stripped off whatever mythologising justifications there can be. Becoming a millionaire is indeed hard work – at least in the beginning:

> He would get up at dawn. Day in, day out. He had to feed the animals. He mixed minced fish with powdered vitamins for them. He went in his Żuk as far as the nearest town to buy the feed. Plus, he worked the field. [...] He worked like a dog. He paid his debts and had more and more money. This did not win him friends. [...] After all, a bloke with money must be a thief. (*The Sawmill*, p. 7)

The description of the beginnings of Myśliwski's business highlights the drudgery of his daily routine, a "protestant" virtue that does not fit in the surrounding world of passive existence on a former state-owned farm. Myśliwski's success arouses hatred in people from his surroundings – the villagers see him as a hateful bloodsucker, rather than their employer, even though he had taken a loan to buy the sawmill, imported second-hand machines from Germany, and given jobs to people.

The business starts to grow and Myśliwski needs a new employee, a sales representative for his firm. He employs Marcin Panek ("fluent English, a Ph.D. in economics"), who promises to guide Myśliwski's company to success on the national market. Flawlessly elegant, Panek ventures out in a company car to do business outside the local market. However, just like his boss, he is a mere rookie in the capitalist reality, a business amateur doomed to failure even though he knows well that the market is not governed by invisible laws but by the local political connections. These, he hopes, will bring Myśliwski's company big money. But no big money is made.

Odija uses this experience of the initial phase of Polish capitalism, the dream of building a big company and a spectacular collapse of the first business, in order to depict the bankruptcy of his capitalist heroes, who not only rise above those around them, but also – through their first success – acquire a sense of belonging to a different, better world. Mentally, however, they are still stuck in the old world: without an understanding of the mechanisms of the new reality, they merely want to catch the opportunity that has presented itself. The end of the local capitalist, the owner of the sawmill, is sad. Despite his dedication, his business skills are too amateurish to translate into success. Myśliwski is destined to suffer defeat: he seals his failure by setting fire to the sawmill. In an act of desperation, he comes to recognise that his life is an existential, not just a commercial disaster. In the final pages of the novel, Myśliwski is awaiting a trial in court for arson and improprieties in the management of his firm. The protagonist's fall is total: the failure in business finds its match in his equally woeful family life.

Polish writers of the time of transformation take pleasure in depicting the rise and fall of the Polish provincial entrepreneur, sparing no aspect of his existence, as if commercial and family disasters had to be indivisible. The experience of the local businessman is portrayed quite stereotypically according to the pattern: the higher you climb, the harder you fall. A businessman, even if industrious, is intellectually rather primitive, and often makes his "first million" not through hard work but through a combination of trickery, swindle, and connections. This play with stereotypes, however, has its price: the protagonists do not usually spark compassion; on the contrary, the reader is inclined to side with other characters, those who view the businessman's failures as punishment. This ethical evaluation in the Polish narratives of the early years of transition from communism to capitalism is very strong, albeit sometimes only implicit.

6. New capitalist professions: between creativity and exploitation

A novel perspective on the work experience in capitalist Poland can be found in the narratives that describe a new category of occupation emerging in the Polish market at the turn of the 20th century: the corporate job. One book whose plot revolves around corporate lifestyle is *Nothing* [*Nic*], a once-famous novel by Dawid Bieńkowski (2005; cf. Orski 2010: 48). *Nothing* tells parallel stories of different characters trying make the best of the new reality several years into the transformation. They live in alien worlds, "on

planets light years apart" (*Nothing*, p. 112). One of the characters, Krzysztof Lenart, meets another hero of the novel, Euzebiusz Drutt, at work. Lenart is a former history teacher, now a mid-level employee at a chain of dining facilities called *Positive*. Drutt, a former street vendor selling a massaging device, is a regional representative.

Creative work, in the prose of the period, is work in the media. Mana and Hehe, protagonists of another story in *Nothing*, work for magazines in the capital city. Hehe is a freelancer, leading a relatively modest lifestyle but enjoying his independence and cooperating with the magazine *Miastodont* – an arrangement that allows him to achieve a certain level of self-fulfilment but is not terribly lucrative. A financially better option would be *Your Sex Drive*, an erotic magazine, except that with his artistic soul shaped in the previous decade, the hero finds it embarrassing and degrading. While he could be talked into writing commissioned feature articles about the sexual life of Hildegard von Bingen, making an interview with an American porn starlet visiting Poland is too much to ask.

A different setting has been chosen by Piotr Siemion, who has placed the characters of his novel *Niskie Łąki* (1999) in the city of Wrocław (south-western Poland) in the early 1990s.[17] Former opposition activists and members of the Solidarity trade union, they return to Poland after a period of political exile in the United States. They have already experienced life in a different economic reality but were only able to do odd jobs in a constant struggle to stay afloat. In Wrocław, one of the characters sets up Radio Carlos, a commercial radio station broadcasting at former military FM frequencies. The station's editorial room is in a flurry of activity, enthusiasm, improvisation and "gambling excitement" with which the freshly minted broadcasters try to compensate for their professional deficiencies. Careers can be made out of nothing: such is the case of a teenage DJ who has left secondary school seeking self-fulfilment. The new reality provides plenty of opportunities and the characters have to risk their way to a new life themselves. The spectre of failure is always there but so is a chance for success, as they take advantage of the new opportunities and inspire others with their enthusiasm.

In Bieńkowski's *Nothing* (2005) the narrative is set, not in the dynamic beginnings of capitalism, but in its next phase: the introduction of corporate culture, epitomised here by the *Positive* restaurant chain. "The proper perspective is the success of the entire chain and not just of the individual

[17] The title *Niskie Łąki* (lit. "Low Meadows") alludes to the street called *Na Niskich Łąkach* or the *Park na Niskich Łąkach* the city's district Rakowiec. [translator's note]

people working in it" (*Nothing*, p. 126) – this is the essence of the company's policy, put in the mouth of one of its French, Paris-based manager.

The chain is consistently, though ironically, portrayed as a family: the strategy is imposed by the Paris headquarters in all the countries where *Positive* operates. Of course, the goal is to strongly tie the employees to the company, but sooner or later all the characters will suffer defeat in a hard lesson of the shallowness and illusory nature of the ties. It is a family in which invisible and inaccessible "fathers", in a distant Paris, work out development strategies for the rest. No one is safe in the chain, even if they meet the exacting standards established at the headquarters. Employees at higher levels of management control those in lower positions, meticulously verifying their work: at the lowest rung of the corporate ladder, franchise holders check whether the service in the restaurants is fast and whether the cashiers keep smiling (an inalienable characteristic of a *Positive* employee); the franchisees, in turn, are controlled by regional representatives, who on their computers follow graphs with minute details of the performance of their subordinates. The representatives reward the efficient franchisees and punish those that perform poorly. Their own work, in turn, is verified at the national headquarters by a transnational board. The company's unique software allows for everyone in the firm to be precisely controlled.

The division of labour in the network is such that regional representatives are responsible for supervising the quality of the service. They are a rung higher than franchise holders and gloat over what little power they have (*vide* Euzebek, one of Bieńkowski's characters). Everyone else in a lower position either in the corporate structure or on the social ladder is considered a lamer. An important attribute of a representative is a company car, which he uses to impress his family and chat up young girls. A regional representative has to prove at every turn that he is useful to his company: he will arrive at work first lest no-one, perhaps from as higher rung, turn out to be more efficient. His job is to monitor the performance graphs of the franchisees he has been entrusted with supervising and to pay inspection visits to restaurants. He raises the standards so as to show to his superior that he has achieved better results than his counterpart in another region. The work is performed under substantial pressure – and the easiest way to relieve stress is through casual sex. But even sex has to do with corporate hierarchy: the object of sexual desire is typically a subordinate worker, usually a receptionist or a cashier who, having recently arrived in the big city, is trying to find her place in life.

Consider the following monologue from Euzebiusz (Euzebek) Drutt, which reveals not only the nature of his work but also the type of relationships in corporate culture. Bieńkowski mercilessly exposes his hero's character,

showing how authoritarianism and frustration combine with anxiety and produce a peculiar characterological blend:

> Finally, something showed up on the screen...; it works slowly, like everything else here...
>
> So, Euzebek, what are the figures for yesterday? The most important moment... Let's start by looking at key products... ranking list one, a nationwide comparison of regions... Sale of beef... Oh, shit!... oh, fuck, fuckety fuck fuck! Impossible! We are in the third place! [...] It's all the fault of those bastards, the partners... they can't even kick the cashiers' asses to sell chicken and chips properly...
>
> [...] It must sell, they have to sell it hammer and tongs. Those bastards are simply not doing it. (Bieńkowski 2005, *Nothing*, pp. 149–150)

Krzysztof Lenart is an HR manager, one level up on the *Positive* corporate ladder. He thinks of himself as a contemporary Wokulski:[18] his work is a civilising mission targeted "against all romanticisms", "a thing that will remain in this country and in these people" (*Nothing*, p. 179). He has worked a lot over the past four years; he is a guest in his own house but earns big money: he can afford to place his daughter in a private playgroup and to spend family holidays in warm climates. He has taken out a loan for a house in Las Kabacki, a voguish residential area near a nature reserve in Warsaw, and must pay it back. His new life philosophy is: "To have more, you have to work more" (*Nothing*, p. 175).

Lenart is enthusiastic about the new opportunities at *Positive*. He is a perfect match for the new work culture, whose main goal is to maximise profits by computationally optimising the organisation of the restaurants:

> The system was wonderful... I was proud again that I worked for a company with endless possibilities. I was in contact with a higher civilisation. I already saw in my mind's eye how much insight, how much influence on the sales policy we would now have and how we would tailor it locally and across Poland. [...] Sensational... a new quality of work. (*Nothing*, p. 181)

An effective system must, however, spit out inefficient workers, and this is the other side of the frenzied race to outperform one another. It is only upon realising this that Krzysztof Lenart begins to look at the company from a different angle. However, his doubts are dispelled by Pierre, a manager seconded from the Paris headquarters, who pointedly observes that "involvement in the creation of the brand" cannot be removed from what is most important, which is "to sell as much as possible at the highest possible profit" (*Nothing*, p. 182). And the people? Well, they'll get a six-month severance package and should, in Pierre's opinion, be able to easily

[18] The main protagonist of Bolesław Prus's novel *Lalka* [The Doll], first published in book form in 1890. [translator's note]

find a job elsewhere. But all the characters will eventually suffer defeat: they have placed trust in the system, but the system will mercilessly spit them out or destroy them. Here is Bieńkowski's diagnosis, aptly recapitulated by Przemysław Czapliński: "In the final pages of the novel, *Positive* gets gobbled up by *Donald*. Poland has come under the control of corporations, which will henceforth be exchanging people, companies and property" (Czapliński 2009: 23).

Towards the finale, Bieńkowski introduces the motif of the polonaise, a traditional Polish dance that has functioned as a powerful element in the symbolic space of Polish culture since Romanticism. This corporate kind of polonaise, a drunken vision of strangely intermingled characters of the main plot of the novel, shows the world of the corporation as a world bereft of tradition, culture, and dignity:

> Time to start the polonaise! Everyone, please, join in the procession. Who is going to lead the promenade? I'm sure it will be you, Euzebiusz. Can you manage? Pair up with Pierre! [...] A second pair now. Mr. Murawiec with our friend, Director Konewka. [...] Look, Polonia, what is going on! – Look, Krzysztof... they are dancing. What a promenade! How pleased they are! Completely drunk, all of them. – And a change of partners! [...] So Pierre has now grabbed the chief accountant in his arms... Sylwia is dancing with our fattest partner. It is the end of you all, my dear, the end of each and every one of you. Well, enough of breaded chicken, balance sheets and tables. Remind them of yourself, Lady Polonia! (Bieńkowski 2005, *Nothing,* p. 360)

The polonaise from Bieńkowski's novel can be seen as a kind of metaphor for the experience of work in Poland after the political transformation: a confusion of professional relationship, social conventions, and norms of decorum.[19]

7. Conclusion

In the introductory discussion, I asked the question of how contemporary literature has dealt with human work and whether it has ushered in a new outlook on individual people and on communities faced with a new experience of work (or of its shortage) after the 1989 political breakthrough. Hopefully, the argumentation above has suggested quite a clear answer. The conclusions coincide with earlier hypotheses on the relationship between individuals and work in the fledgling and solidifying early Polish capitalism. Literary accounts of the period have dealt with different experiences of work, although

[19] Czapliński (2003: 202–205) describes the society of the first decade after the political transformation of 1989 as being conflicted and looking for new points of reference and hierarchies.

one should bear in mind that perhaps too often they have reached for ready interpretations and relied heavily on the clichés known otherwise from journalistic descriptions (images of the jobless reality of former state-owned farms, the ups and downs of Polish provincial business, the superficial magic of the colourful world of media and advertising). These clichéd images often played the role of satirical or grotesque–cum–ironic interpretations of that time. Much has already been written on the subject. On several occasions, however, literature has offered more subtle and in-depth diagnoses on, for example, the "fashionable" tendency to overwork, often to the point of becoming completely engrossed in work. This pattern of behaviour can be attributed to the new standards of working culture imported from the West, as well as with the desire to close the gap between the standards of living in the West and in Poland (cf. in this regard Bieńkowski's *Nothing*). Another such diagnosis concerns the cunning and bravado of the first years of the transformation, the features that contribute to our understanding of the Polish national character, quite apart from the stereotypical craftiness and inclination to commit greater or lesser fraud. Last but not least, the reader is offered accounts of certain types of professional activity that appealed to the collective imagination of that time, which were believed, for better or for worse, to be not only psychologically rewarding but also profitable.

The general diagnosis, although varied, is quite pessimistic. Polish society is depicted as permanently stratified, with no clear rules and stable points of support. The descriptions more often refer to those who did not succeed than those who came to inhabit the colourful islands of success. Literature, being a sensitive seismograph of collective consciousness, has recorded the new experiences of work in a subtle, often empathetic language, siding with the excluded, and the hard-working, and being critical of the business careers made outside the generally accepted ethical standards. This literary diagnosis complements, and at points significantly broadens, the observations offered in social sciences.

translated by Klaudia Wengorek-Dolecka

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