

Poetry as a Source of Solace, Hope, and Faith

Indeed, in such a short presentation as I have the honor to offer you, it is impossible to fully represent the poetry of any, even the smallest, country.

However, I will share some reflections inspired by reading these ten works that we will listen to.

In Polish culture over the past few centuries, poetry has played a unique role, primarily tied to politics. For 150 years, Poland was deprived of its statehood and divided among three major powers. Patriotism became an immensely important value in political captivity, and literature was a well-suited medium for expression and communication within Polish society.

Polish poetry served various functions that are not so common today: it influenced social and individual opinions, explained the world, illuminated reality, and often sought to provide wisdom, comfort, and encouragement, supporting perseverance and hope. Often, this was achieved by drawing from the past.

Poetry was central to attention and was widely read, discussed, quoted, and related.

This differs today when other media compete for readership, leaving less room for poetry.

This differs in different societies and sets Polish poetry apart from the poetry of other nations.

Many decades have passed, yet specific characteristics of Polish poetry have remained unchanged despite significant changes in the political situation.

Since Poland regained independence in 1989, history remains an essential theme of Polish poetry, but not just Polish history; it is now integrated into the account of the world.

One recent example:

the history of the tragic September 11 events that profoundly impacted the world, exposing its absolute vulnerability, also became a topic of many pieces by Polish poets.

Polish poets reflect on the past and witness the darkest moments of current history. They describe the genocide, ongoing wars, cruelty, and hatred that sometimes seem to be the most potent force of humanity (Wisława Szymborska). They name a “banal evil” that humans inflict on one another (Hanna Arend, Zofia Nalkowska). They mourn the forgotten, unnamed lives, losses, and harms that have been irreversibly destroyed.

We will listen to poems like that. We wonder where is “**Solace, Hope, and Faith.**”

Can poetry indeed give us solace and a hand in walking through life?
Can it give comfort and help us endure hardships? Can it help us to confront and resist evil?
Do the poet's words have the power to remind us of our human and divine values? These questions may seem naive and rhetorical. However, as Wisława Szymborska once said, there are no more urgent questions than those that appear naive. Polish poetry continually asks these questions and attempts to find answers.

In 1946, immediately after World War II, which devastated Poland and its people. Tadeusz Różewicz, poet - survivor - witness, wrote, "**I am 24 Led to slaughter I survived**" (...)

As if responding to him, a few not-so-peaceful decades later, Adam Zagajewski calls out *Sing of the mutilated world.*"

But "...**these words, what they can do, what they can do?**" - another Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert, asks.

Words can change lives, passionately answers Czeslaw Milosz in his poem Campo de Fiori. "**Rebellion will kindle at a poet's WORD!**" Having no illusions about the tragic fate and suffering of Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, he finds hope and consolation in the power of poetry that will last and be heard through generations.

"**There are two things I can do for them: describe that flight and not add the last sentence.**" — Wisława Szymborska meditates on the photographs of people jumping from the towers on September 11.

"Not adding the last sentence" - is that the task of poetry?
Yes, be the witness. "Describe that flight." Give it a name! Make remember. Keep writing.

Today, perhaps it is necessary to acknowledge that "**the world rips apart,**" as the tailor says in Ewa Lipska's poem. And poetry, as always had been, is obliged to speak the truth.

So where is the solace?

In "A Little Song on the End of the World," a poem written by Milosz during World War II amid the atrocities of the Nazi occupation in Warsaw, we are struck by the presence of a beautiful, peaceful, and almost idyllic depiction of the world.

"**On the day the world ends, A bee circles a clover; (...).** Consolation glows in the verses, and comfort lies in hearing that the world will endure beyond us.

My two final (long) thoughts:

When we read this poem today, it is hard not to question the possibility of seeing those idyllic images of the earth. Should we even permit ourselves to remain in a state of admiration when there is so much evil in the world: wars repeatedly emerge, nature degrades drastically, so fewer “happy dolphins are leaping in the sea.” We do fear that ***the other end of the world*** will come.

The poet's answer is yes. Let's listen to what they offer.

Różewicz, whom we will hear momentarily, is looking for a MASTER to “***let him separate the light from the dark.***”

This thought seems to be in tune with what Adam Zagajewski is saying about the role of a poet: *Poet gives us “**moments of lucidity,**”* which I translate to “snapshots of understanding,” “glimmers of transparency,” or flashes of light along our path. Hence, we know where we are heading.

That is so much.

So yes, *Praise the mutilated world;*

Praise the world even if it is mutilated.

Praise this (still) wonderful world.

And do good.

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