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A Generation (Not So) Passed?

c r i t i c s :
The '56 Generation. Authors. Works. Meaning. (Pokolenie "Współczesności". Twórcy. Dzieła. Znaczenie), ed. Z. Kopeć, J. Galant, A. Czyżak, E. Chodakowska, Poznań 2016

A Study at the Crossroads

This 2016 monograph, in which the "56 Generation" receives (yet another) round of scholarly reflections, might arouse the skepticism of some readers, who would be fully entitled to the following concern: do we need yet another publication revisiting an issue that has already, over the course of years, been more or less effectively resolved, yet continues to attract an impressive trail of research and voluminous coverage in newspapers and books? The simplicity of the answer reveals that the question is itself rather trivial. Of course there are aspects of this topic that, for any number of reasons, remain unexplored. Of course there are issues that, with the benefit of hindsight and with new tools developed, say, in literary theory, deserve, or perhaps require, revised consideration.

For all these reasons, the question stated above must be problematized. My intention here is not to negate this quandary, but to reveal the funda-

mental challenge embedded in any attempt made today to renew our understanding of this subject that has occupied Polish scholarly consciousness for years. This is related to the necessity of identifying, and perhaps even ranking, two particularly distinct trends that have emerged as research approaches. These might be described under the headings *multiplication* and *configuration*. The first approach intends to supplement or complete an already-existing body of research, perhaps by devoting attention to marginalized authors to expose concepts not yet observed, or by using hermeneutic methods that are continuously emerging in literary theory. The second approach consists of revisiting material that has already been analyzed: configuration, in this case, is not the superficial rearrangement or assessment of research, but the work of revising and updating material to reflect a new perspective. Already-existing research remains present in this approach (even when that "presence" is construed negatively). To classify one of these approaches as more rigorous and in-

tellectually satisfying than the other is an individual choice (first, for the researcher making the choice, and then for the reader, who evaluates the choice and its results).

At this point, I should point out that the articles that make up the book *The '56 Generation. Authors. Works, Meaning* engage the distinction outlined above. The contributing authors, therefore, have the opportunity to realize the potential seeded in this methodology, making this book intellectually valuable and at times revelatory, although this is the stated approach to the subject rather than its actual execution. To determine whether this book does, in fact, make good on this potential, I will undertake an abbreviated but polemical overview of the texts within this category. My objective here is to capture the current condition of the “generation” as a category and to finally determine how this book relates to this category, and how effectively the book explores it.

Generation – Incompleteness as the Basis of Duration

The concept of the “generational” in its most canonical and monumental meaning is first introduced by Kazimierz Wyka. Wyka authored a number of incisive reflections that had a significant impact on the work of German scholars (such as W. Pinder), whose radicality and prestige¹ would ultimately be the source of increasing methodological doubts. Lidia Burska has pointed out that “the concept introduced in 1963 in the book *Polish Modernism* (...) was in fact, as we know, formulated in the 1930s, when the author was writing his doctoral thesis.”² Burska scrupulously explores this idea, identifying its strong and weak points and revising it to reflect contemporary socio-cultural realities. It would therefore be redundant to restate these claims here. It is, however, worthwhile to under-

score those concepts that symbolically reflect the radicality of the claims referenced above. In other words, Wyka popularized the notion of the “generational experience” understood as a “foretaste of the end of the world”,³ or an absolute experience that becomes the departure point for its participants’ axiological and moral epiphany. Wyka also exposed the fatalist and deterministic role of the historical process.

Jan Błoński later adopted the methods introduced in *Literary Generations (Pokolenia literackie)* to support his classification of authors debating around the year 1956. The clumsiness of the scholar’s criteria soon became evident. As a result, aside from a critical review of the current state of things, his claims took on the pronounced character of postulates and directives:⁴

To be quite clear: I do **not at all wish** [emphasis A.T.] for the heroes of young writers – and young writers themselves – to “**settle down**” (...). To the contrary, even today they often seem quite civil. **I do not want** them to suddenly forget the myths of uniqueness, anarchy, sentiment and so forth. **Instead, I long** for them – when grappling with the total available spiritual reality of the epoch – to transform both their own and their readers’ feelings and understandings; I long for that which has been depicted in the figure of literary myth to be elevated to the realm of ideas.⁵

These personal directives quickly devolved into a retraction and cast doubt on the very basis for using the idea of the “generation” in this context. Even within the scope of one publication (*Zmiana warty*) the author speaks of the ‘56 Generation and “a generation – let’s call it

¹ Wyka understood a “collective generation” to be a defined group of people participating in an event that elevated them.

² See Lidia Burska, “*Pokolenie*” – *co to jest i jak używać?*, in: “Teksty Drugie” 2005, issue 6, p. 17.

³ Jan Garewicz’s phrasing. See J. Garewicz, *Pokolenie jako kategoria socjofilozoficzna*, in: “Studia Socjologiczne” 1983, issue 1. See also the definition of the concept: A. Nasiłowska, *O pokoleniach literackich – glos sceptyczny*, in: “Teksty Drugie” 2016, issue 1.

⁴ See the books: *Zmiana warty* (1961), *Odmarsz* (1978).

⁵ J. Błoński, *Zmiana warty*, Warsaw 1961, p. 141. See also the commentary on Błoński’s argument: J. Brzozowski, “*Odmarsz*”, *Jan Błoński, Kraków 1978: [recenzja]*, in: “Pamiętnik Literacki” 1980, issue 71/4.

– of ‘56”, and admits to the allegations of other critics that his evaluations and judgments are ambiguous. Finally, only a few years later, he writes: “Sometimes it seems to me that I invented the whole problem of the “‘56 Generation,” the problem at the very heart of my book *Zmiany warty* – so little of it remains”⁶.

While Błoński diagnosed a weakness among authors for failing to truly engage with the demanding but indisputably valuable framework of their “generation”, contemporary scholars often point out the disadvantages of that same category, considering the flaws inherent to the very idea of the “generation”. It is quite telling, however, that this reversal bears the mark of an intriguing superficiality (*pozorność*).

For a number of reasons, the notion of a generation invariably absorbs the features of contemporary academic thought.⁷ In her article *Generation - What is This and How can we Use It? (“Pokolenie” – co to jest i jak używać?)*, Lidia Burska sets forth a concept that effectively captured scholars’ attention. Namely, she highlighted the performative⁸ and not moral status of this category, or, more broadly speaking, its axiological status. Counter-intuitively, this claim does not degrade the generation as a phenomenon. To the contrary, it grounds it, finding a place for it within contemporary thought.

⁶ J. Błoński, *Odpowiedź na ankietę “Orientacji”*, in: *Odmarsz*, Kraków 1978. I cite from: A. Stankowska, ““Ogon komety”, czyli czy istniało poetyckie pokolenie “Współczesności”?”, in: *Pokolenie “Współczesności”. Twórcy. Dzieła. Znaczenie*, ed. Z. Kopec, J. Galant, A. Czyżak, E. Chodakowska, Poznań 2016.

⁷ For example, see: A. Legeżyńska, *Jaka zmiana warty? Problem pokolenia w dzisiejszej literaturze*; A. Fiut, *Zmiana warty – po latach*; L. Burska “Pokolenie” – co to jest i jak używać?; A. Bielik-Robson, *Nie ma takiego pokolenia*; in the thematic issue of “Teksty Drugie” – *Powrót pokolenia?* 2016, issue 1.

⁸ The performativity of this category becomes visible in literary critique, which projects certain phenomena and states of things rather than ascertaining and registering the present reality. See also: A. Stankowska, op. cit., p. 60-61.

Of course, Burska has acknowledged critics’ tendency to fetishize the generation as a category but simultaneously calls for a change in perspective, which does not at all amount to a total abandonment of the concept.⁹ Her remarks are also interesting for their emphasis on the role of the audience in classifying authors and phenomena as “generational”.¹⁰ This point can also be interpreted as an attempt to soften the category’s borders.

Paradoxically, it is precisely the above-mentioned fallibility of the term “generation” that turns out to be an epistemically valuable if not fundamental source of the digressions above. To emphasize this point: the term’s very incompatibility with changing social and cultural conditions broadly construed is a significant driver for the term’s persistence in the minds of critics and literary scholars. The term lingers not only in the form of its absolute negation, but often amidst an attempt to restructure or reevaluate (perhaps with the clarity of hindsight) existing claims. All this has the effect of essentially rehabilitating the category as a whole.

The somewhat misleading form of the (never conclusive) “reckoning” with the generation as a category becomes quite visible in the book *“Contemporary” Generation. Authors. Works. Meaning*.

Generation ‘56. Authors. Works. Meaning.

This publication is organized into three thematic fields, as its subtitle suggests. The texts included in the first and most substantial section, *Meaning* interrogate the existence/non-existence of the category itself (as in *“Tail of a Comet,”* or, *Did the Poetic ‘56 Generation Exist? / “Ogon komety”, czyli czy istniało poetyckie pokolenie “Współczesności”?*), the conditions

⁹ See L. Burska, op. cit., p. 31.

¹⁰ See also, p. 29 (ibid).

and ultimate forms of its manifestation, (*'56 and the "Contemporary" as an Aesthetic Category* [*"Współczesność" jako kategoria estetyczna*]) and the status it attains against a backdrop of concrete events and phenomena, such as war, censorship and "Russianness" (*Censorship of the First Activities of the "Contemporary" Generation* [*Cenzura wobec pierwszych wystąpień pokolenia "Współczesności"*]).

The book's second part (*Authors. Works*) consists of articles that take specific authors as their point of departure (*Janusz Krasiński and the '56 Generation* [*Janusz Krasiński i pokolenie "Współczesności"*]), or literary phenomena (*The Narcissis(t/m) of the "Contemporary."* *An Attempt to Read the Prose of Ireneusz Iredyński through a Prism of Narcissistic Motives* [*Narczyz(m) "Współczesności". Próba odczytania prozy Ireneusza Iredyńskiego przez pryzmat motywów narcystycznych*]) or individual works (*"Clangor" with a Portrait of a Generation in Relief – Urszula Koziół's Farewell* [*"Klangor" z portretem pokolenia w tle – pożegnania Urszuli Koziół*]).

At this point, I should emphasize that the monograph's co-authors adopt an ambivalent attitude towards the term "generation", ranging from an exploration of the term, to denials of its usefulness and a turn to "safer" concepts. However, there remains no doubt that the issues mobilized in this book are inscribed with several years of exchanging views, which the reader more or less directly attributes to the category's ambiguity. In this way, the category of the generation becomes a metonymy for the entire academic discourse revolving around it. To understand the consequences of the concept, we can acknowledge the title chosen for the book reviewed here. Moreover, this formal gesture reflects one of the overarching convictions driving this publication: to give the category of the generation what it is due by highlighting its flaws and unquestionable merits alike.

In his contribution, Marian Kisiel offers a postulate we might adopt as the entire monograph's signature motto: "to read once more this idea of the 'contemporary' in this body of work." In this case, how we understand this uncapitalized noun becomes critical. This is not at all a matter of wishing or expecting, as was the case with Błoński's sense of "fitting" and "deserving" to be tied to one's generation. Above all, this is a matter of the real and attributed aspects of that "contemporary present" and how those elements became values in themselves, having a real impact on the formation of a comprehensive and dimensional portrait of the time:

What is "modern," and therefore "contemporary" must reckon with two basic rights [undermined by the "drivers" of the generational – author's note]: the right to creative freedom (...) and 'the right to express the tragedy of experience.' And only when we bring this awareness to the category of the "contemporary" do we see the whole wealth of its entanglements and contingencies.

This attitude of proposing that we revisit and reevaluate this category rather than rejecting it wholesale is a recurring perspective in the monograph, and it supports the quality of its contents to a meaningful degree.

The authors of this publication consistently avail themselves of the benefit of hindsight. On the one hand, this allows them to make radical insights and to finally clarify many issues that had long been up for debate. It also allows them to propose new interpretive methods that had gone unnoticed.

Agata Stankowska's contribution is one of several in the book that makes use of this kind of two-way thinking. What Lidia Burska describes as the performativity typical of "scholars who think cultural initiation is conforming the world to the matrix of grand narratives",¹¹ Stankowska radically revises:

¹¹ L. Burska, op. cit., p. 21.

Let us examine (...) in turn the performative act of the critic [J. Błoński], inscribed in the historical literary narrative thesis, or perhaps it would be better to call it the (never in fact completed) project of calling into existence the “so called” ‘56 Generation.¹²

The author describes the ramifications of Błoński’s work bluntly: “The intellectual’s mirror that Błoński places before the creative output of his generation surely renders its image close to caricature.”¹³ This statement asserts that the resignation from events that might constitute the “generational experience” is in fact conscious, and does not result from perceptive handicaps or a lack of creative aptitude. Finally, she poses a question that incites us to mobilize new critical perspectives: “Could it be that [Błoński’s] assessment [of the generation] is not and never was too critical? After all, so many scholars still subscribe to it.”¹⁴

The reader will find elsewhere in the volume this mandate to distance oneself from the critical voices marshalled towards a given generation and the need to problematize the objections unambiguously condemning one side of the literary critic-author relation. Anna Legeżyńska has written that “the ethical dimension of poetic turpism as with the prose of the “dregs” never received its due appreciation from Przyboś or from any of the critics of lyric poetry after October (...)”¹⁵ She goes on: “(...) to accuse the alleged ‘56 circle of being apolitical and refusing to engage turns out to be a petty allegation”¹⁶. Ewa Wiegandt also notes:

It becomes necessary to verify the earlier judgment that it was literary criticism that created the generation of ‘56 (the “Contemporary” Generation). (...) For critics and writers alike, the category of the generation has become one that expands the autonomy of authors and their work (...).¹⁷

Undoubtedly one of the most engaging organizational methods employed in this volume is configuration, as mentioned above. Here, I understand configuration as a revision that problematizes, rearranging elements of an already existing assemblage (in this case, some form of consolidated image of the phenomenon referred to as the ‘56 Generation). The new configuration can be based on a formative analytical insight afforded by hindsight. Many articles in the monograph exemplify the effective usage of this concept.

In the second part of the book *The ‘56 Generation. Authors. Works. Meaning*, the reader encounters texts that have developed an arsenal of tools useful for describing phenomena. These tools broaden the scope of the subject by “installing” within it new elements from literary theory and history, and by mobilizing a set of tropes/motifs that are not new in themselves, but have not yet been applied to this context. The methods are then verified through the interpretation of literary works.

As an example, take Agnieszka Polachowska and her proposal to use Narcissus’ motives as a reference point. According to Polachowska, this choice directs a tempo of reading that activates new and unarticulated interpretations. What’s more, Polachowska’s reading supplements the myths identified and categorized by Błoński as generational.¹⁸ Moreover, it becomes,

¹²A. Stankowska, op. cit., p. 60.

¹³Ibid, p. 65.

¹⁴Ibid, p. 57.

¹⁵A. Legeżyńska, *Współczesność – niedokończony projekt?*, in: *Pokolenie “Współczesności”. Twórcy...*, op. cit., p. 45.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷E. Wiegandt, *Pokolenie “Współczesności” a pokolenie ‘56*, in: *Pokolenie “Współczesności”. Twórcy...*, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁸See. A. Polachowska, *Narcyz(m) “Współczesności”. Próba odczytania prozy Ireneusza Iredyńskiego przez pryzmat motywów narcystycznych*, in: *Pokolenie “Współczesności”. Twórcy...*, op. cit., p. 216.

in fact, their fullest realization, betraying so many of those myths' characteristic attributes ("a feeling of distinctiveness/peculiarity and estrangement, disturbed erotic relations, and a powerlessness towards reality"). The scholar concludes that: "(...) to use the constant presence of narcissistic motives in literature as an interpretive tool allows us to identify the displacement of accents and meanings."¹⁹

Agnieszka Czyżak proposes another compelling perspective, this time focusing on the later work of Urszula Kozioł, the Wrocław poet who "bid farewell to her dependency on a generational community"²⁰. Czyżak takes advantage of the potential embedded in the phenomenon of "the reckoning movement", which turns out to be a means for artistic positioning towards that which has passed. To emphasize, I describe here a positioning towards that which, in spite of everything, has been undergone in some form. Accordingly, it turns out that after all these years, the concept of the generation still operates and begs attention. The concept is finding a place for itself that is discrete yet irrefutable. And thus, its subsequent portrait emerges, this time in the form of art:

And yet, by creating an *ex post facto* vision of the generational community, Urszula Kozioł does not speak of what historians of literature call the "generational experience" (...). What she has in mind is a community of existential experiences of diverse provenance whose sum total becomes a knowledge of the world and a position thereby determined that can both shared communally.²¹

The articles referenced here certainly do not exhaustively represent the sum of texts that merit attention within this book. To the contrary, we

must treat them as the introduction to a promising whole whose unquestionable value becomes its unrestrained gaze at what has been – a gaze that is by no means regressive.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that the noted division in this publication between configuration and multiplication does not follow a trajectory that unambiguously coincides with its formal organization (Parts I and II of the book). To the contrary, in both of the volume's sections, we find traces of both methods for ordering knowledge outlined here. In the section titled *Meaning*, however, it is the configurative element that particularly grabs the reader's attention. Finally, the classification proposed here is but one of many possible means for organizing contemporary strategies for reflecting on the subject of the '56 Generation.

¹⁹Ibid, p. 224.

²⁰A. Czyżak, "Klangor" z portretem pokolenia w tle – pożegnania Urszuli Kozioł, in: *Pokolenie "Współczesności". Twórcy...*, op. cit., p. 239.

²¹ Ibid, p. 247.

KEYWORDS

the generation today

THE '56 GENERATION

literary criticism

ABSTRACT:

This article's author performs a critical analysis of the ways in which the '56 Generation has been approached as a subject in a book published in 2016. The backdrop of these reflections includes, among other things, a polemical overview of the category's history, and the way in which contemporary intellectual thought relates to already existing and often still persistent views of reception. This scholar proposes two terms for organizing our reflections on the category of the generation: multiplication and configuration.

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performativity

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Angelika Trzcińska (Poppa) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Twentieth-Century Literature, Literary Theory and Translation Arts. She is also a primary school Polish teacher. Her interests include contemporary poetry by women. While her master's thesis addresses Urszula Koziol's late work, she plans to devote her doctoral thesis to the Poznan poet Bogusława Latawiec. Her published work includes: (Interpretatora) kłopot ze starością, in: *Interpretacja jako doświadczenie*, ed. P. Śliwiński (Poznań 2015), Siostra znanej siostry czy poetka nieusłyszana? *Twórczość Barbary Czerwijowskiej*, in: *Twórczość niepozorna. Szkice o literaturze*, ed. J. Grądziel-Wójcik, A. Kwiatkowska and L. Marzec (Kraków 2015), Odpominanie, czyli osiągnięcie równowagi, „Odra” (2016, issue 1).