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## An Experimental Reading: On the French translation of *Memoir From the Warsaw Uprising*

The discussion with professor Annick Louis held by Agnieszka Karpowicz took place in June 2022 in Warsaw during the 4th Mironological Meetings (June 8-9, 2022) *In an unfamiliar language, meanings soar past, swirl... The Global Białoszewski*, organised by the Institute of Polish Culture of the University of Warsaw (as part of the Perfection Initiative – Research University project) and the University of Wrocław with the help of the Indiana University, the Institute of Literary Research, and the Miron Białoszewski Foundation.

**Agnieszka Karpowicz:** I would like to treat our meeting as an invitation to reflect on Miron Białoszewski's *Memoir From the Warsaw Uprising* in the form of an experimental reading. This experiment involves talking about a work that is very well known in Poland, widely commented on and considered a masterpiece, with a person who has read the *Memoir...* only in French<sup>1</sup>, has no knowledge of the Polish language and has no way of comparing the translation with the original, and moreover, is not a specialist of Białoszewski's writing or Polish literature. If we are to talk about universalizing or globalizing – disseminating in international circulation – Białoszewski's work, what is exceptionally important, in my opinion, is how the work is read in isolation from the nuances of the Polish cultural and linguistic context. Even if such a reading turns out to be controversial from the point of view of the Polish readers, dissimilar to their ways of understanding the *Memoir...*, our experiment has a chance to show how this canonical work can be perceived differently.

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<sup>1</sup> Miron Białoszewski, *Mémoire de l'insurrection de Varsovie*, transl. by Éric Veaux, Calmann-Lévy, Paris 2002.

As a literary scholar, a researcher who has collaborated with a number of global research centers, from the University of Buenos Aires to École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris and Yale University, you have a very broad view of world literature. From this perspective, do you see currents or trends in European, French, or perhaps more broadly, world prose, to which the *Memoir...* could be inscribed? Or would you consider it to be local, Polish, or perhaps local in a broader sense, as it is representative of Central European literature? Would it be easy to find connections between Białoszewski's piece and other narratives about the war?

Annick Louis: It is very difficult to link this work to the French literary tradition. From the point of view of the subject addressed in the *Memoir...*, one can actually think of an extensive corpus of writings on the war, although of course one will not find so many accounts of the experience of bombing.

However, in my opinion, the *Memoir...* is related to some other works of world literature because of its narrative mode. I have two authors in mind here in particular: one is the Swiss writer, Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz (1878-1947), author of *La grande peur dans la montagne* (1926) and *Derborence* (1934) and the other is the Mexican author Juan Rulfo (1918-1986), who wrote such works as *Pedro Páramo* (1955) and *El llano en llamas* (1953). It is not a matter of thematic relationship but of narrative method or overall literary project. These are attempts to narrate an experience from an insider's perspective, as one lived it or as a particular community lived it, without treating the record as a tool to explain the situation and without didactic tendencies. In a certain sense, all these novels lack a narrative that serves to organize experience *a posteriori*.

Rulfo and Ramuz are associated with specific regions of their countries, usually constituting the setting of their stories: in the case of Rulfo, it is the region of Jalisco, and in Ramuz's case, the land of Vaud; these works, however, do not fall into the trend of the so-called regional literature. Their works have special poetics: they tear up literary conventions by borrowing from everyday speech (such as regional dialects), and they violate the moral code of their readers. It can be said that Białoszewski in the *Memoir...* operates in a similar way: he takes a particular form of orality, as well as an ethical code of conduct which governed life under insurgent conditions, which contrasts significantly with the world of readers not affected by the WWII. In addition, the narrative mode here focuses on conveying the experience from an insider's perspective, without attempting to objectify; the story is presented in snapshot images or flashbacks.

In these three works, we observe a point of view that is situated between cruel realism and childlike innocence, resulting in a distancing effect in the case of Białoszewski and the narrator's participation in the world depicted in the works of Rulfo and Ramuz. Indeed, the fundamental difference between the three authors is that Białoszewski narrates an experience that he himself has lived through, while the works

of Rulfo and Ramuz are fictional in nature. It turns out, however, that there are many places in common, when we think, for example, of the book telling the story of the Mexican Revolution, *El llano en llamas*, in which the narrator-hero speaks, like Białoszewski, from an internal perspective about “micro-events”, and is immersed in the chaos of events, it is hard to find the meaning of what happens to him, because he does not try to organize anything or give the whole thing the form of a coherent historical story.

Another major difference is that Rulfo and Ramuz are describing a rural world that they know well and in which they participate, while Białoszewski is talking about urban reality. However, the issue of the relationship between the urban and the rural in the *Memoir...* is very interesting. In order to survive, the narrator and other Warsaw citizens return to typically rural ways of eating (for example, grinding grain in coffee grinders).

In the case of Rulfo and Białoszewski, the narrative focuses on acting, the authors do not introduce an outside gaze, while at the same time they do not expand the layer of their own inner lives, even though their stories are focused on individual experience, told from an individual point of view. In the *Memoir...* there is no holistic view of the uprising, as the narrator himself states. His immersion in the world he narrates is absolute, and as a result, he draws the reader into this reality as well. The style of the *Memoir...* relies on the coexistence of immersion and distance.

**A.K.: What seems to you then to be the most original and unique in the narrative of the *Memoir...*? Would it be the spoken narrative or the perspective: the deheroization of the war and the uprising, as pointed out, for example, by one of the most prominent Polish scholars of this work, Maria Janion?**

A.L.: “Spoken narrative” and the deheroization of the war and the uprising are obviously important here, but what impressed me most about the construction of the story was the tone and style, which are not just the result of oralization.

The tone of the story slides between drama, horror, despair and what can be called childlike naiveté, innocence, while at the same time regularly becoming festive. This gives the tragic story a lightness, and also makes it take on an ironic form, as can be seen, for example, in the statements: “On the first of September in that famous year it was also splendid summer weather. Also, a Friday”<sup>2</sup>. This lightness is also found when the narrator regrets that he was not in Warsaw in 1939 at the time of the bombings. A distanced, objectifying view appears

<sup>2</sup> Translator’s note: I am quoting the English translation here, M. Białoszewski, *Memoir from the Warsaw Uprising*, transl. by M. G. Levine, New York Review of Books, New York 2015, p. 132. From now on quoted as *Memoir*.

frequently: "Sundays didn't differ from each other in any way"<sup>3</sup>. However, underneath the tone one finds despair: "In other words, the same thing for the fourth time. And again, it would be necessary to start coming to terms with death. Or with the tearing off of an arm or leg. That one of us might die, just one, didn't occur to us"<sup>4</sup>. In addition, the light tone is heightened by the use of expressions such as happiness, luxury, which emphasize small everyday joys in a tragic and extreme situation: "On that foolish day of joy everything both amazed us and didn't"<sup>5</sup>. In this way, Białoszewski suggests the coexistence of lightness and horror that makes the book so unique.

The story's originality also lies in the style based on short, unconnected sentences that often lack a part, mainly the subject. Of course, this style refers to orality, but it is literarily constructed and does not rely on imitating spoken language. Thus, the reader receives pieces of information in a fragmented and incomplete way. Events are suggested rather than told. The style also imposes a sustained rhythm on the story, which means that the description is not panoramic, but it is formed instead from single images and fragments of reality, from quick snapshots. The peculiar use of punctuation is also responsible for creating such an effect: the period breaks up sentences, Białoszewski avoids classical "literary language", onomatopoeias build up the effect of orality.

**A.K.:** I know that before you read the *Memoir...*, you already knew a considerable amount about twentieth-century Polish history from other sources, and most importantly, you visited the Warsaw Uprising Museum. Did this book change your knowledge of the uprising? In your academic work, you are also concerned with the relationship between literary text and the network of discourses, representations, and historical events, you combine theoretical reflection with a historical approach, raising questions about the limits of what is literary. How do you read Białoszewski's work from this perspective?

**A.L.:** In the *Memoir...* the uprising is anticipated, and longed for, but the narrator quickly concludes that it was unsuccessful. Almost immediately portraying it as something alien, unreal, almost fictional, the narrator looks at the uprising events with disbelief: "Because it was here that the uprising began to look as if it came out of a book. The kind about a siege. From the Middle Ages. And about an exotic, sweltering city. Where people start eating the bark from the trees and the soles of their shoes. But here, after all, the danger was practically on top of us"<sup>6</sup>. Elements of the real and the unreal, the literal and the metaphorical, coexist in his story:

<sup>3</sup> *Memoir*, p. 65. In the Polish version and in the French translation this sentence has a tad different shape, literally: *The days didn't seem to distinguish that much*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

"A bombshell ... Literally. News:..."<sup>7</sup>. Elements of what, from the perspective of a modern reader, belongs to ordinary everyday life (for example, an open store) seem unreal here, as do the streets and houses at the time of the evacuation of the narrator and his companions.

The description of extreme living conditions is constant and refers to all the senses: sight, smell, hearing; the narrator constantly recalls the sensations of being attacked, the inferno of the noises, the smell of burning, the heat, the fear, the feeling of being chased... In addition to this description of the permanent overload of the senses, the narrator shares with the reader news, rumors and legends, both those from the time of the uprising and the later myths with which the event was charged, some of which are debunked: "Once more I refute the false legends about how Żoliborz survived. And Mokotów. That nothing of the sort happened there. I remember how they both looked in 1945: not just burned-out buildings but a pile of rubble"<sup>8</sup>. However, one cannot say that heroism is present here, rather it is evoked discreetly through the choice of words used for the uprisers, one can see the admiration the narrator shows for them, but they remain a kind of obvious background. The fight of the uprisers is always in the background in relation to the everyday life of the people of Warsaw. In addition, the narrator compares the uprising to the destruction of the ghetto, which he recalls several times, taking into account both events. Even if he disputes that the number of victims means something, the scale of the ghetto massacre is highlighted, and the numbers are noted. It seems that the author thus appeals to the memory of readers contemporary to the time the text was written and published, those of the 1960s and 1970s.

Thus, it can be said that the *Memoir...* allows us to capture the specificity of Polish history and the wartime experience of Warsaw. References to the city and its destruction are created here from scraps of overlapping testimonies and experiences, the attitudes of the residents, especially their solidarity, as well as fragments of memories of childhood and youth, with which the story is interwoven. This narrative gesture makes everything unreal: both the overwhelming present and the pre-war past.

The identity of Warsaw, encompassing the experience of the 1939 bombing, the destruction of the ghetto, and the 1944 uprising, is constructed through street-by-street, place-by-place descriptions of the city, as well as by layering memories of childhood and youth over images of destroyed spaces, and through detailed, meticulous locating of streets and neighborhoods. This construction of the story of the city and its inhabitants is very particular, allowing the narrator to confirm his membership in the group. In the French translation, this effect was achieved through the use of the forms "oneself" and "we", which denote

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 82. The meaning to which Annick Louis refers here is changed in the English translation. Literally, it would be something like: *The bomb. The literal one. As a message.*

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

the residents of Warsaw, but at certain points also the group to which the narrator belongs, although this group is constantly changing, as in the chaos of the war some people disappear for various reasons and others suddenly appear. The residents of Warsaw are a community, so the narrator speaks of the bombing of "our blocks". The community is defined by widespread spontaneous participation in survival activities, human sacrifice and solidarity. It is a world in which everyone is constantly taking action to find water, food, hide, help others and share: "My God! How much kindness there was in Warsaw then! Simple kindness. So much!"<sup>9</sup>. However, this is not an ideal world – note that the narrator's statements are ironic.

In addition, the city is a whole in which history is inscribed. This applies, for example, to the ghetto and the Holocaust, towards which the attitudes of the inhabitants are ambivalent, on the one hand, they, too, experience trauma, and on the other, they are led by the desire to take advantage of the situation, as shown by the episode with the father who brings chairs which belonged to a Jewish family. However, in the French version of the book, the account of the persecution of the Jews and the ghetto is residual (except for pages 87-88 in the French edition<sup>10</sup>, where the narrator makes an attempt at a synthesis), the space of the ghetto appears as a no man's land, and the image of the people of Warsaw is not tainted by denunciations or hatred of Jews<sup>11</sup>.

If the *Memoir...* proposes a narrative different from that promoted by the Polish state, it is partly because the main stake of the book is not the uprising, but the residents' survival. It determines the division of labor, according to which men search for food and women prepare it. Warsaw's residents are a mass trapped by terror, moving within a narrow framework determined by attempts to survive. This portrait of the residents and the city is uniquely striking, detailing survival strategies and reminding us of all that vanishes.

The portrait of the city is also an attempt to topographically map its decomposition from the time of the uprising, when it was an extremely complicated maze: "Never has Warsaw – although it is four times larger now than it was then – seemed so large and complicated, so endless"<sup>12</sup>. Warsaw was not Poland, the uprising remained a Warsaw phenomenon, as evidenced by some of the most pathetic and ironic sentences at the same time: "Let us return to the uprising. Of August. As we thought then. That it would be called the August Uprising forever. Throughout Poland. But even as near as Młociny, or Włochy, Warsaw was not Poland; Poland lived her own life. For Poland, the most important thing about Warsaw

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>10</sup> Compare in the revised English translation pages 84-86, 101.

<sup>11</sup> French translation was based on the censored, "official" version of *Memoir*, where most of the topics in question were cut [A.K.].

<sup>12</sup> *Memoir*, p. 55.

was that it was burning. That made an impression"<sup>13</sup>; "I was about to say that it couldn't get any worse in Starówka. But that's not true. The worsening really had no end. It always turned out that things could be worse. And even worse"<sup>14</sup>; "That it was the end. Stare Miasto was defending itself with its last ounce of strength"<sup>15</sup>; "O, my Piwna Street!"<sup>16</sup>.

The portrait of Warsaw is completed by the story of the narrator's exit through the sewers from the Old Town to the Center. These unknown spaces, traversed with great difficulty, were thus incorporated into the topography of Warsaw. Through the destruction of the city, its secrets emerge to the surface, as if Warsaw was revealing the truth straight from its guts: "In general—Warsaw was betraying all her secrets. She'd already betrayed them—there was nothing to hide. Already revealed the truth. Let it out. She'd revealed a hundred years. Two hundred. Three hundred. And more. Everything was exposed. From top to bottom"<sup>17</sup>.

**A.K.: In your opinion, therefore, does the *Memoir...* tell a very local, Warsaw story, or can it be considered universal?**

A.L.: This is what I find the most remarkable: the *Memoir...* is at the same time very local, firmly rooted in the space of Warsaw, and universal in the sense that you can see in it the history of other bombed cities or assaults. I think of the modern war in Ukraine, the world of catacombs, basements, underground passages, of life hiding beneath the ground in all the bombed cities. Warsaw is an underground labyrinth that seeps into the world on the surface.

The universality of the text is also due to the position of the narrator: the story is told by a resident of Warsaw who did not fight in the uprising, and at the same time did not collaborate with the enemy. Everyday life during the uprising is thus told by a witness, but one committed to the survival of the city and its residents: the narrator always volunteers to help the wounded, to bring food, but never to fight. He is connected to Warsaw and its residents, though he nevertheless identifies with the uprisers since he calls the event "our uprising". Moreover, his story does not echo the narrator's emotions, they are only alluded to, although he readily admits his weaknesses and what he is ashamed of, such as when he wished for a bombing so that he would not have to clean up dead bodies, the narrator never hesitates to report on his unheroic attitudes:

"Well, too bad," I replied (how easy it is to give someone up!).  
But Swen was loyal.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 125-126.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

"No, we won't go without Zbyszek"<sup>18</sup>.

He also considers himself useless except when he finds food. In addition, he sometimes emphasizes the hierarchy that is established between the uprisers and the people of Warsaw, as we see when the residents leave the Old Town and can only do so because they are carrying a wounded uprisoner.

Life in the bombarded city is quickly being organized. Just as the well-known is transformed, disrupted and ruined, people stop being surprised by the destruction, as if they have naturalized the situation. In particular, this is done through constant references to temperature (heat), weather, the appearance of the sky, but also to love, gossip, survivors' stories, as if serving as a point of reference in the absence of such points in a world of constant attacks and bombings. Habituation, like a lack of curiosity, comes into play when the narrator humorously states that the residents have learned never to interrupt a meal during the bombings. Thus, a radical contrast is created between the lives of the readers to whom the story is addressed and the daily life of the time: "Don't be surprised. That was common then"<sup>19</sup>.

**A.K.:** Is Polish literature noticed at all by French literary scholars? Are there any Polish writers who, in your opinion, belong to the canon of European literature? And why is it not Białoszewski (despite the fact that, for example, the *Memoir...* has been translated into many foreign languages)?

**A.L.:** Unfortunately, Polish literature has little presence in France, perhaps more than some foreign literatures (Colombian, for example), but less than other European literatures (German, for example). Of course, the classic authors are well-known: Jan Potocki, Witold Gombrowicz, Czesław Miłosz, Bruno Schulz, Janusz Korczak, Tadeusz Borowski, Stanisław Lem and – enjoying great popularity today – Olga Tokarczuk.

There are several possible explanations for this state of affairs. The first is that France is a country very focused on its own writing, with less foreign literature translated than in most other European countries. The French have traditionally defined themselves as producers and exporters of culture, and as such have always imported less in this area than they have exported. Added to this is the fact that in France, the study of comparative literature consists of reading the work in question in the original language, so one cannot study the literature of a country whose language one has not mastered. This undoubtedly limits access to works and interest in analyzing them, especially at universities, where Slavic languages and literatures are a very limited field. As a result, relatively little is taught in schools about foreign literature. This is due to

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 132.



the policies of academies and academic institutions, but also to national cultural traditions.

**A.K.:** Despite all of this, could you point to something in the *Memoir...* that would be of interest to French researchers? Probably, there are also many factors that make it difficult to understand this work?

**A.L.:** Two features of the *Memoir...* can make it a little difficult to read. First, the lack of knowledge of the detailed topography of the city, as the reader tries to imagine the geography of the place without necessarily understanding it, much like the ignorance of the history of places, buildings, neighborhoods. Probably this is not a difficulty only for the French reader, as perhaps only Varsovians can know the city so thoroughly. Or perhaps the scale of the destruction has meant that even they no longer know the topography that Białoszewski talks about? As for the French translation, the gap that is created between translated and untranslated street names is as charming as it is confusing. These problems make one very eager to understand the *Memoir...*, reading it with a map where one can find every building and be able to retrace all the movements made by the narrator.

Secondly, this is compounded by the fact that the narrator never introduces the full context, but only sketches it according to the rhythm of micro-events that happen here and now and are not placed in the overall story of the uprising. This lack of context sometimes also impedes understanding. Nevertheless, this muddling of the narrative is a conscious decision by Białoszewski that suits his literary project. There may be a gap between French and Polish readers in this regard, as the Polish reader is more familiar with the history of the uprising, so understands more. The narrator sometimes fills in the missing information after time, for example, he writes "AK" or "AL", but only later explains what these initials refer to. The same goes for abbreviations of the names of other armed forces or the bombing in 1939 or the destruction of the ghetto: first we get abbreviated allusions, not always understandable, and only then comes the moment when the narrator explains more.

It remains interesting that through such procedures the reader is as lost as the narrator. Thus, in a sense, the narrative produces a frenetic pace of constant bombardment of events, adventures and difficulties. Although we know that the narrator survived the uprising, at times the events become difficult for the reader to bear, witnessing so much destruction, even though little is said about rape and cruelty, torture (there is one mention of rape on page 208). Białoszewski is deliberately reluctant to recount these horrors in detail: "And then it turned out. What. How. Horrible. Others have described it already. I won't repeat it. Only to say that what happened in Wola happened again"<sup>20</sup>. The narrator perhaps thinks that his story is about something else: the everyday life of

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

Warsaw's residents, the dismemberment of the city, a situation where the extremely real and the unreal meet.

**A.K.:** Based on the French translation, can it be said that the *Memoir...* is an experimental work?

**A.L.:** Yes, definitely. Partly due to the way it is narrated, to the image of the uprising it constructs, but also to the turns to the reader, which are at the same time addressed to Białoszewski's own memory: a dialogue is created that is simultaneously conducted by him with himself, with his own memory and with the reader-conversant, who belongs to the present tense of the writing. Thus, we are assisting the creation of a style that is both written and oral, but is neither a transcription of living speech nor a completely "literary" style. Indeed, this literariness includes the orality of the twenty years during which Białoszewski told the story of the uprising orally, which led him to adopt this style and spoken language in the novel in order to give an account of what he defines as "the greatest experience of my life, a closed experience"<sup>21</sup>.

In the transmission of speech to writing, many of its elements are transformed, but Białoszewski evokes it, thus inscribing versions of stories told orally into his novel. Moreover, this style is accompanied by the undermining of normative language, reflecting the experience of twenty years during which he was unable to write about the uprising, although he felt the need to do so. In this way, the opposition between writing and orality is overcome, the two categories merging into "oral literacy" or "written orality". This establishes a very special relationship between experience, lived experience and History: Białoszewski tells the story of an important historical event in a fragmentary way, from the point of view of an individual who gains a comprehensive view of events only *a posteriori*. Elements such as the unconsciousness in which the experience is lived, the immersion in the course of everyday life, the lack of a broader perspective or awareness of certain events and their significance, appear in the narrative, but can only be placed in the overall historical context thanks to the numerous oral accounts that appeared for twenty years after the uprising.

The text also presents a picture of memory, the relationship between the present and the past corresponds to a chaotic mixture of memories, of which the narrator is certain or not. He constantly questions what he remembers, admits that he doesn't remember something, and being wrong is perfectly natural, accumulating layers of different memories – contradictory, uncertain, which overlap with confirmed information, with what he knows: "I shall be frank recollecting my distant self in small facts, perhaps excessively precise, but there will be only the truth"<sup>22</sup>. The past and the uprising are "epochs" in which unbelievable things were

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

done; the present of the story is 1967, in Warsaw, twenty-three years after the uprising, when Białoszewski is on his bed and Warsaw again has a population of 1.300.000. However, the past is still present: "I have those voices with me today. In my ears, as if alive"<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, memory can be capricious and unpredictable.

Ultimately, it can be said that the *Memoir...* is also – close to the thought of Primo Levi – a reflection on the attitude of a witness, one who knows what happened and therefore has the right to tell about it: "But back to the point: I was not in Mokotów nor in Żoliborz. Others were. They survived or they didn't survive. Those who experienced their own emotions, hells, and reality there know what it was like. And have already described it. And will describe it again"<sup>24</sup>. A young resident of Warsaw, a "layman" rooted in his hometown, thus has a duty to record and remember.

**A.K.:** We literary scholars, researchers and translators, in turn, have a duty to diffuse these records and memory of that event. As you proved with your reading of the *Memoir...*, local literature, so firmly rooted in the Polish context, is at the same time very universal, and the shifts in meaning that resulted from your reading have an invigorating effect on the established Polish reception of Białoszewski's canon.

[The discussion was edited by Agnieszka Karpowicz.  
English translation by Piotr Sobolczyk]

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 220.