

Anna Maria Mickiewicz

Ewa Lipska Three decades – poetic encounters



Dear Frau Schubert, I'm glad there's still a country which is everywhere and is called Poetry.

'Poetry' from Ewa Lipska, *Droga Pani Schubert...* (Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2012).

It happened over thirty years ago. Delicacy and intricacy, a sense of independence and of liberation - for us the poetry of Ewa Lipska threaded them together. Paradoxically, she shattered stereotypes at the same time as she evoked allusions and symbolic suggestions which at that time only initiates felt they understood. That exceptional metaphorical language of hers was enforced by circumstances – the censorship of Poland in the 1980s.

A group of friends, we put on a show based on Lipska's inspirational new volume of poetry, *I Don't Mean Death Here, But a White Piece of Thread* (*Nie o śmierć tutaj chodzi, lecz o biały kordonek*) (Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1982). It captured the mood of the time precisely.

We performed it in the cellar of a disused monastery. In candlelight, with few decorations and draped in black, we could safely laugh at the bad times of Martial Law and exorcise

them with metaphors. There, deep below ground, it was possible to mock, to parody, and as if on a merry-go-round you felt an illusion of freedom before the awakening began.

I never expected I'd have a chance to share my thoughts about that production personally with Ewa Lipska - in London.

'It was hard for us to write directly, given the country we were in,' Ewa Lipska said many years later during a reading in London. This was at the Polish Cultural Institute in 2001. At that time it was an important venue hosting art events, exhibitions and discussions that always drew together an international circle of experts and admirers of Polish art and literature. Ewa Lipska's London reading was devoted to two English-language collections of her poetry: *Poet? Criminal? Madman?* (Forest Books, 1991) and *Pet Shops and Other Poems* (Arc Publications, 2002), both translated by Barbara Bogoczek and Tony Howard.

In *Pet Shops* she poses the question: 'The children from the poems I wrote in the '60s, "with wild strawberry cheeks" – what are they up to today?' And she answers teasingly: 'They're forty, they have weight and faith problems, yet they're still dreaming of love.' The stand-by generation – always ready for work, but sleeping in on Saturdays. They grew up too quickly. Today they make their life decisions on an aeroplane. They increasingly avoid taking risks, overload on medication, alcohol, read *The Alchemist* and *Emotional Intelligence*, go to U2 concerts but listen to Handel too; they're starting to hide their jewellery in a safe in the attic...

This is what her poems were considering. My generation – the London audience – asked Ewa Lipska if she ever writes her poems on commission.

No, not on commission but to point out the paradoxes and absurdities of the world we're in. Lipska stressed she had a difficult task: she wanted to write in a more universal way but she lived in a specific country, that's why her poetic message was usually placed in a more complicated abstract context. 'And in the past,' she emphasised, 'the censor influenced the language and the metaphor.'

Listening to the discussion, I had the impression that we were a bit different from those who'd stayed in Poland. They were still asking questions about poetic imagery, creative anxiety...

'Young people in Poland still read poetry. But for how much longer?' She said that though Polish youth were still interested in poetry it was a matter of habit, 'but maybe it isn't only habit; probably young people reach for poetry just as their forty-year-old parents used to do before reality tired them out?'

Asked if contemporary poetry has space for rhyme, she answered with a joke: 'The times aren't rhymed and rhythmical, so they demand a poetic form that's stripped of rhythm.'

Who is Ewa Lipska? She studied art at the Academy for Fine Arts in Kraków. From 1964 she published in *Życie Literackie* and *Dziennik Polski*. Her first volume, *Poems*, came out in 1967. She was a member of the Association of Polish Authors (*Związek Literatów Polskich*) from 1968 until it was dissolved in 1983. In an interview with Adam Bienias (*Fraza*, Rzeszów, May 2011), she insists:

‘I wasn’t a member of *Nowa Fala*. My colleagues from *The New Wave* shared friendships, birth certificates and the history we lived through together. But like the members of other groups such as *Skamander* or the *Kraków Avantgarde*, the members of the *New Wave* also shared a poetic style. It was a revolt against the dominant literature, against ideological and linguistic manipulation.’

When asked about her inspiration, she says: ‘It came from various sources and changed as I changed. When I was eighteen I was fascinated by American, English and German-language prose, and that got my imagination going. Authors like William Faulkner, Henry James, F.Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Tomasz Mann, Herman Broch, Arnold Zweig, Stefan Zweig and many others, it’s impossible to mention everybody. Then they were joined by European and American poets, essayists, but most of all Albert Camus and *The Rebel* ... Now, years later, I go back to some books and read them anew. Sometimes I’m disappointed... Our life is a play with many acts, we’re in a constant intellectual flux, we and our books, music and paintings mature together. Carlos Fuentes believes literature’s a huge time laboratory. We can experiment in there, carry out research and attempt to understand the immortality of art.’

As the poet Adam Czerniawski pointed out in his preface to *Poet? Criminal? Madman?*, for many decades Polish poetry was absent from the culture of the West. The breakthrough came with the publication of work by Tadeusz Różewicz, Zbigniew Herbert, Czesław Miłosz, Aleksander Wat and Wisława Szymborska. That generation has left a permanent, significant, trace. They were joined by Ewa Lipska. But hers was a different creativity from the start, characterised by different modes of expression based on the experiences of the generation who grew up in postwar Poland.

Lipska’s language differs considerably from her predecessors. This poet doesn’t put on masks, doesn’t try to please. Her work is characterised by intimate personal themes, enhanced by elements that indicate her engagement with public matters. Here is a poem from the volume *Przechowalnia ciemności* (*The Storeroom of Darkness*):

Trying

As we tried to talk to each other
it turned out
we had different tongues.

As we began to speak
a single language
we were robbed of speech.
As we came down from the hills
now we were united
by only the shadows of the dead.
(1985)

In her writing Ewa Lipska refers directly to the concerns and complexities of hectic contemporary life. We come across a poem titled 'A Dishwasher', or such phrases as 'We look like shares plummeting', 'we are the stipendiaries of time'. However this isn't a superficial critique of a lifestyle, the discourse refers to something deeper - the contemporary system of values.

Lipska reaches for a metaphor linked to a sense of transience. These works are metaphysical, surrealist, enriched with musical motifs. This mood is best reflected in a term found in 'The Children from My Poems': the 'anagram'. It's a question of reading your own life on multiple planes, in space and time. The poet is warning us: 'death has already crossed over to our side'. This generational reckoning points towards Time; it's not always sensed directly, but an unsettling clock strikes the passing hours with words. This poet looks critically at life and its quirks. She parodies the merging planes of meaning when she writes: 'forever and ever Enter'. Now even Death is in the hands of our computers.

Back in 1967 a Lipska poem already brought together these themes of love, hope, culture and transience.

A free translation from Shakespeare

Your eyes still gaze in mine as when
- morning, year one, eleventh century -
caught in my billowing gown, your knee
could not find its way out again.

Love never changes through the ages.
Stone was and still is made of stone.
The river was and still remains a river.
Eternal love will still be love forever.

And you still think the same of me
as the prince did, with whom I often
swang from the trees with agile grace
when I became his fair lady.

Love never changes through the ages.
Time wore its hooves out on my life.

You say good-bye to me as you said good-bye.
You say good-day to me as you said good-day.

Here once again through time's perversity.
Consigned to the protection of its hands.
Tick tock. Contemporary. Also middle-aged.
Tick tock. Sad. Happy. Argumentative.

Tick tock. Lights slowly going out.
Tick tock. In everlasting love
sleeps a contemporary prince. He's past.
Contemporary-past. He slips away.
Into the night. No fret no fuss.
As though his hand still clutched his lines,
good enough for Polonius.

In the eighties she published her work in the underground press. At this point it has to be stressed that her poetry was never propagandist, though it contained many allusions and references to the absurdities of the surrounding world. Ewa Lipska does not avoid political subjects: such are the times in which she writes; she tries to face up to them. But her statement is still poetry, and the language she uses is rich in irony and humour.

From 1991-97 she was director of the Polish Cultural Institute in Vienna. 'The city is an ethnic conglomeration, in the background there's always tradition, Austro-Hungary, the monarchy.' She stresses, 'I come from Kraków, where there are similar yearnings. During my stay in Vienna I had a chance to look calmly at Polish issues, from a distance. And there I started to write poetic prose.'

Another decade, a new encounter. Ewa Lipska comes to London at the beginning of May. She will be the guest of Ognisko and of University College, London, and will also appear in Oxford and Edinburgh. She will present her novel *Sefer*, again translated by Barbara Bogoczek and Tony Howard (AU Press, Canada 2012), where all the concerns mentioned here are explored and presented in fascinating new ways through the thoughts of the son of a Holocaust survivor.

She will also read from her latest books: *Droga pani Schubert...* (Dear Frau Schubert) (Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2012) and *Miłość, droga pani Schubert...* (Love, Dear Frau Schubert) (Wydawnictwo a5, Kraków 2013). These volumes introduce us to her poetic prose. Speaking to Radio Aktywne Ewa Lipska has said: 'Poetic prose gives me more possibilities than a poem. A poem is an ascetic short story; to put it metaphorically the phrasing of poetic prose lets me breathe more deeply.' And she adds, 'It's impossible to describe the moment of creation, the second when something sparks. That's a task for philosophers, psychologists, literary historians. The most important thing for the reader is

the work's effect, something catches your interest or it doesn't... If Dear Frau Schubert doesn't, there are curious illustrations by Sebastian Kudas too, and his surrealist imagination. I like that a lot.'

Anna Maria Mickiewicz

(Fragments from a London Notebook)

Translated by Basia Howard

From 1970–1980 Ewa Lipska worked as a poetry editor at the publishing house Wydawnictwo Literackie. In 1975/1976 she spent six months on a fellowship at the International Writing Program in Iowa. In 1978 she joined the Polish PEN Club. In 1983 she had a residential scholarship in West Berlin. In 1989 she became a founding member of the Polish Writers' Association. Between 1990 and 1992 she was on the editorial board of the cultural magazine Dekada Literacka. She is a member of Polska Akademia Umiejętności in Kraków (the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences).

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