

The Ill-Birds

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„It’s an ill bird that fouls its own nest”, we read in Shakespeare’s play. Jan Błoński, who coined the clever phrase „the ill-bird” (*złytoptak*) as early as 1974 to describe those who criticize their environment or expose inconvenient truths, and because of that, fall from grace with their own people [123–127], a dozen years later learned about the fate of „public enemy no. 1” in Poland – mainly as the author of the article *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* [Poor Poles look at the ghetto]. The word „ill-bird” easily encapsulates these elements; in this formula, what counts most is the unambiguousness of the evaluation of a social „outcast”. But then it gets tricky: „own”? „nest”? „fouls”? One can have well-founded doubts about the „ownership” of the nest, since the state propaganda tries at all costs to prove that „an ill-bird” has nothing in common with his own kind; so someone else’s nest, preferably – as in the

case of Rosa Thun – a German one.¹ Finally, what does „fouling” mean? Let us ask Norwid, and we shall get an answer in the form of a question:

*„Who fouls the nest? A bird that fouls it / Or the one
that won't allow speaking of it?” [92].*

So why not – leaning on the authority of not only Norwid – risk a claim that the defenders of a national, professional or other community, who at all costs reject any critical judgments of either the community as a whole or its individual representatives, do not have very appealing supporters (morally or intellectually speaking) on their side, and rest the case? I am afraid that it would be too simple because of the extraordinary logical confusion that has accumulated around this notion thanks to politicians using it as a cudgel.

When do we „foul our own nest”? It can be done without deadly serious motives, more by provoking than by stigmatizing. Such attacks on the sanctity of public life were a specialty of avant-garde artists who, like the Futurists, eagerly called out: „it is time to destroy the monuments of the past!”. But of course, few took these carnivalesque-style appeals seriously. It is different when it comes to criticisms

1 Róża Thun is the daughter of Jacek Woźniakowski, a chairman of „Znak”, who distinguished himself fighting for free culture in Poland and was the first mayor of Kraków after the political changes of 1989. She was a long-time anti-communist opposition activist. This does not stop today's party-state press from meticulously spelling out her name after her husband, an Austrian aristocrat: „Gräfin von Thun und Hohenstein”. In this way, by combining national and class grounds for exclusion, the propagandists reached the level of stories about evil Austrians and our (?) highwayman Rumcajs. Bronisław Wildstein, a former colleague of Róża Thun from the opposition, stooped much lower and in an interview dedicated to her used extremely rude invectives from the sexist repertoire.

of one's own society, which are motivated by a deep concern for its moral state. Such was the case with Jan Józef Lipski's famous essay, *Dwie ojczyzny, dwa patriotyzmy* (Two homelands, two patriotisms), which questioned Polish well-being in many respects. The authors of such texts (including the above-mentioned article by Błoński) often arouse the hatred of their fellow countrymen. Hence, they have to show real courage, but in the long run, they can gain respect and admiration. As a result, sometimes a large number of authors decide to participate in such national self-criticism, which lessens the unpleasant social consequences for them. The situation changes drastically when power-seeking politicians decide to turn the issue of historical reckoning into a bidding war.

Of course, life with a feeling of guilt is not pleasant, especially when the memory of the past crimes is suppressed daily in a given community. Politicians, therefore, propose that their countrymen reject the „pedagogy of shame,” believe that the nobility of the „righteous among the nations of the world” enshrouds and absolves the entire Polish nation, and finally, return to a state of „sinlessness” and the self-satisfaction associated with it. From this moment on, if seeking historical truth violates this sense of sinlessness, it becomes risky for researchers, and the risk takes quite a concrete form in the relevant articles of the infamous law on the Institute of National Remembrance. It is not the truth that is at stake here: those who dare to attack the political forces and their espoused values which carry the edifice of the current power, are exposed to serious repercus-

sions. The creators of the political, moral and axiological order in which we live treat it as a kind of consuming rage, self-destruction or an attack on one's own identity. According to them, the one who fouls betrays everything that should be dear to them: their homeland and its culture, religion, and customs. This can only be done by a madman or an individual bribed by the enemies of his country acting from the outside, trying to weaken it, break its cohesion and resistance to attack. Let us note: in such a constructed picture of the situation, there is in fact no common conceptual ground for a meaningful discussion with those who think differently from the leaders of the community. Those who do not agree with them are characterized here not as basically honest people and positively engaged in work for the good of the homeland, even if they assess the situation falsely or erroneously. The lens ought to be different and simpler: the opposition are simply „bad people”, „traitors to the common national cause”, individuals of the „worse sort”, „scum,” that is, citizens whose infernal malice is directed against the organs of the state (identifying themselves with the nation) and manifests itself in “denunciations” written to foreign institutions hostile to Poland. How many traitors are there? It is difficult to say because the numbers of the opposition are a kind of enigma. It is like in the famous joke from March '68: „Who is one student? – A suspicious individual! – And three students? – That's a demonstration!! – And thirty thousand students? – A handful of troublemakers...”. The same applies to the opposition: they are a real problem when a police force of thousands is mobilized against them. Yet, in the discourse

of those in power they remain an isolated handful of defenders of the „system”, members of professional „coteries” or „corporations”, entrenched in their lucrative positions. These individuals are unwilling to surrender their privileges to the „sovereign”, that is, „the people”: a rather abstract entity with blurred boundaries, vividly resembling the „working people of towns and villages,” whose representatives were eager to self-appoint, much like the functionaries of the Soviet-type communist parties.

Naturally, those in charge always claim that they welcome „constructive criticism”, but the criteria for distinguishing constructiveness from non-constructiveness tend to be vague, while the penalties for accusations against their people are quite real. Furthermore, the policy applied to the critics of the community presents their actions not only as an act of bad faith, but also as a grave insult to the concrete, personally affected compatriots. At the same time, the way the national community is treated proves that the ideologists of nationalism – the formation most sensitive to fouling – view the nation like a collective organism that can be harmed or offended and that carries within itself the always painful memory of the harm it has suffered. A nation is thus immortal, but it pays a great price for it; it cannot forget the sufferings it has experienced, nor forgive the perpetrator, who – much like us – also lives indefinitely and remembers the past (unfortunately, in its own way), thus becoming our “eternal enemy.” In this world, crimes do not lapse or get erased from the record. Even if we consider that nations, reflected in the mirror of consciousness,

are communities of autonomous beings capable of individual, critical reflection, the entire system of social education will make sure that these beings – weak by themselves – maintain the rudiments of „collective thinking”, useful in moments of great national elation and psychosis.

In the mechanism of fouling the most important thing is the fusion of two perspectives: personal and collective, which favors the exclusion of intellect as the criterion for evaluating positions in an argument. The one who fouls personally „offends the feelings” – patriotic, religious or any other – of individuals. Moreover, he or she also offends some deeply rooted convictions that the collective has about itself and about the history of its relations with its neighbors. From this duality of address stems the imperviousness of fouling to rational argument. As a result, ideological opponents are not someone to be persuaded, but someone to be excluded.² Thus, they are always and by definition outside the community (even if they are in the majority). Losing an election does not lead to a redefinition of the concept and characteristics of the nation, but at most to an escalation of the feeling of threat that binds the community together, always coming from outside and caused by Others. Paradoxically, however, Others seem to be indispensable for any power with authoritarian inclinations.

2 That is why Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, in an interview given shortly after the presidential election won by Bronisław Komorowski, could say about his supporters that actually he does not need them for anything, that according to his criteria, they do not belong to the Polish nation. Of course, professional politicians would not dare to formulate such a view *expressis verbis*, but thanks to the poet's openness, we get this thought expressed in its full simplicity and radicalism.

A dispute in which respect for rational arguments is suspended must naturally transform into a dispute in which authorities are the decisive factor. The average citizen cannot judge who is right in a discussion about violations of the law. A professor of unquestionable renown must appear on the television screen to explain his or her position in an accessible and convincing manner, or, more often, simply by validating it with his or her name. In such a clash of names, the opposition used to win overwhelmingly, which was the reason why the so-called replacement of the elites has started in Poland on a massive scale. But what does „replacement” mean? Those in charge can put their people in managerial positions and this has happened many times in history, but now it is a very radical change, given the opposition’s enormous advantage in the competition of authorities. The intellectuals driven from their posts can, of course, leave, but they will not disappear at the behest of the authorities. Therefore, they must be effectively discredited, slandered, in a word – annihilated. This operation, if successful, would have to be described as the most costly campaign of cultural self-destruction since the Stalinist era. This self-destruction is closely related to the motif of „fouling,” and the latter reveals its other, less expected face.

I assume that the culture of a given society functions properly when it produces a hierarchy of phenomena and creators. At the same time, in countries where the rulers attempt to extend their power unlimitedly, a conflict of competence inevitably ensues: the rulers try to take control of the processes that form an elite and establish hier-

archies, while culture defends itself against that. Conflict is indeed unavoidable, because the formation of hierarchies in a naturally functioning culture is a spontaneous process, depending on many factors, involving different positions and different types of sensitivity; it is usually controversial, associating both strong affirmation and negation, but not tolerating any *ex cathedra* judgments and decisions imposed by politicians. Thus, the verdicts of bodies operating in the cultural sphere are „soft” at first; they appear biased and arbitrary, and only after a longer period of time are they verified, that is, they either lose their validity or gain durability and become justified. It is similar with authority figures, which often take years to establish, but once they have been established, they maintain their validity and are not easy to challenge, although seemingly no institution approves or upholds them. This produces the negative mythology of the „salon” as a peculiar conspiracy of socialites, imposing their verdicts on others and preventing artists from outside their circle from gaining success and consecration. The salon is hated equally by literary outsiders and politicians; the former detest it sometimes not without reason, because the phenomenon of nepotism does exist there, although a career based solely on connections is not possible in the long run. The latter hate the salon, because it is an institution that establishes its own rules of the game and its own hierarchies, effectively defending itself against the dictates of the state and its institutions. Politicians sometimes try to create mock salons, in which they could decide who would be granted the honor of membership in a presti-

gious body, but such „fakes” do not have a long life: they are too dependent on careers in politics, which are often short and accidental. In the long term, the latter salons perform a secondary function, while the salons of people of culture, even if they are materially inconspicuous (like the famous table in the „Czytelnik” café), can play a major role, and – dare I say it – are indispensable to culture as one of its most important democratic bodies.

But wait: the salon as an instance producing hierarchy, while being a buttress of democracy? Contrary to appearances, there is no contradiction here, because a normally functioning culture does not produce one salon, but a multitude of them, and these salons are often in fundamental dispute. What matters is that they all have the right to exist, even if they express major criticism of the country’s political power. If, therefore, that power announces the „replacement of the elites” as one of its main goals, it proves that it intends to take control over the production and propagation of ideas, as well as the formation of authorities, and thus to destroy the foundations of the democratic system. Because democracy – it is a shame to repeat the obvious – is based on the free exchange of ideas, disturbed neither by police interference nor by the uncontrolled pouring of social money to one side: the pro-government side in all disputes, which quickly causes its demoralization. This changes the ideological dispute into a hopeless struggle of free intellectuals (also free from all governmental subsidies) with the entire machine of party-state propaganda.

But we know it all too well: „revolutionary” changes in culture were initiated by the communists in post-war Poland, and they did it under slogans astonishingly similar to those used today, as the Stockholm-based Polish philologist, Janusz Korek, recently proved in extensive and well-documented work on the language of contemporary Polish politics. I know what I wrote a moment ago: „Stockholm” means, after all, „other”, „not ours”, so it probably serves the anti-Polish propaganda enforced in the West. A propagandist in Ryszard Czarnecki’s style is lurking here to use his favorite word „Targowica”, although it is surprisingly out of place here: the real Targowica defended Polish tradition, religion and customs against Jacobin faddists and destroyers of the national heritage who enacted the Constitution of May 3 inspired by the West. There is a strange reversal of political sympathies. Things are very similar with „denunciations” and „fouling”. It takes complete naivety or bad faith to believe that the politicians from the West do not understand the point of the Sejm’s resolutions changing the legal system of the Republic of Poland and that they needed „traitors to the national cause” to „tell on” the Polish Sejm so that they would decide to take action against the destruction of the rule of law in Poland. If anyone effectively „fouled” their own nest, it was the representatives of political circles stubbornly introducing changes that have wiped out the long-time achievements of the fight for democracy in Poland, introducing to Polish politics the language of gutter hate, and to their arguments pyramids of paralogsms offending common sense.

„Fouling one’s own nest” in the way it is done by the critics of Poland’s national sins is something that usually does not bring the one who fouls any pleasure or satisfaction; on the contrary, it is connected with various distresses. This is evidenced by countless examples, of which I will select the particularly vivid case of Czesław Miłosz. He was undoubtedly an exemplar of the most praiseworthy diligence in efforts to promote national culture and language. „Prywatne obowiązki” (Private duties), the title of one of the collections of his essays, aptly describes the nature of his commitment to activities meant to preserve other outstanding minds of the age, and, above all, the age itself. This commitment was by no means obvious. After the Nobel Prize, he could have sunk in the depths of narcissism and other people’s tributes to him as the „glory of the Nation”. There was a collective consent to this. On the other side, Gombrowicz mocked his work on the history of Polish literature, intended for American students: „Why would you waste your time on silly things? Can you imagine Nietzsche publishing anthologies?” [*Ziemia* 26]. Reviewing Miłosz’s biography, we must conclude that he was not only an archivist of Polish culture, but also its habitual „ill-bird”. Until the end of his long life, he not only devoted himself to his „private duties”, but also immediately got involved in discussions on current political issues, while exposing himself to harsh criticism after publishing a book that revealed the dark sides of the interwar period. And no wonder: throughout his life, he argued with his young poet friends, with Polish politics in the eastern borderlands, with the leaders of the Warsaw Uprising, with Polish nationalism, with Polish and

Soviet communism, with almost the entire émigré diaspora, with the nationalists again, and with Herbert and his circle of acolytes, to name but a few.

These were not the quarrels of a curmudgeon. Miłosz most often argued about issues of great importance, decisive – in his opinion – for the fate of societies, and perhaps also for the fate of humanity. This stemmed from his deep experience of war as a testimony to the crisis of humanity. His „fouling” was not so much calumnies hurled at his own nation, as diagnoses of its diseases, perhaps fatal. How much of this was right, especially regarding the threat of nationalism, can be seen today. Miłosz did not rebuke *ex cathedra*, but expected a serious discussion, especially because he himself was an example of an intellectual who temporarily succumbed to the arguments of proponents of historical determinism. His adversaries responded in kind! One of them, a Polish journalist from Chicago, mailed me a thick envelope with an extensive dossier on „Miłosz’s case”, exposing him as an enemy of Polish literature and Polishness in general, and, of course, as a Lithuanian. Furthermore, the person appointed as the coryphaeus of the national cause was... Konrad Strzelewicz: a writer and activist of the Union of Polish Writers established by the martial law authorities. My consternation would not have been so great had it not been for the editorials that Strzelewicz wrote for Kraków newspapers during martial law. Thus, the fate of the „ill-birds” is usually not disputes with luminaries but a shady struggle with the maniacs and haters released on them. That was the case with Błoński or Lipski, or with a whole

host of noble and irreproachable former and contemporary fighters for ethical values or historical truth.

There are certainly special political situations in which the figure of the „ill-bird” becomes particularly desirable, and without it, the society runs the risk of falling with serious moral maladies. But at the same time, it is in such situations that self-organized collectives find it easier than ever to believe in their own sinlessness and perfection. This is because at that time, it is particularly easy to form accusations of the critics of one’s own nation or state. It is they who are publicly stigmatized as traitors or harlots, and who face the worst charges. Such cases activate the principle of national solidarity always directed against those who break the unity of the community. And there are no such authorities (*vide*: Czesław Miłosz), which the community, or its part defending its image, would not decide to sacrifice at the altar of patriotic rites and in defense of its well-being.

More than 20 years ago, I had the opportunity to listen to a lecture by Richard Rorty at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, who viewed the positive evolution of humanity as a process of continuous expansion of individuals’ identity. According to the philosopher, human beings would continually evolve, first identifying with tribal communities, then with ever larger groups – ethnic, national, racial, religious, continental – to finally gain an identity that would bind them to an all-human perspective, or even to the community of living beings on our planet.

Listening to this beautiful story, I thought with a certain melancholy that at the same time, the opposite process is taking place on Earth: that small groups of people with a tribal identity at most are constantly being born, and their members identify themselves with the residents of the backyard among the blocks of apartments or fans of some team; whose identity is built not on feelings of tolerance and acceptance, but on self-admiration and hatred of the Other. And the Other can be a person of a different religion, culture, language, it can be a refugee, an alleged terrorist, or finally, a critic – always unfair – coming from within the group of his own people, a treacherous „ill-bird” who fouls his or her nest. The sum of such hatreds for Others can drown out, for a time, the negative emotions generated in small tribal conflicts and intensify in the form of national xenophobia, which can give rise to wars and mass deaths.

The mechanisms at work in such situations are well known; nothing new can be invented here. Everything has long been predicted or realized by scientific reflection, novel narratives, and the classic dystopias of the 20th century, such as Orwell's. Thus, it is puzzling that the citizens of the countries in which successive edifices of authoritarian power and monuments to self-glorification are being built are falling for it. So maybe all hope is in the „ill-birds”? However, it is hard to envy them the constant tug-of-war with trolls and other hate-mongers. The paradox of „fouling” was put succinctly and beautifully by Piotr Śliwiński

on the occasion of the presentation of the Poznań Literary Award to Anna Bikont:

„By striving to exclude Polish evil from history, we lose the right to Polish good. To avoid grotesque childishness, to show maturity and credible strength, one should tell oneself and others the most unpleasant truths. Readiness to feel ashamed of some parts of the national past is perhaps a test of patriotism and a sign of decency. Otherwise – as has been the case recently – we tread water, oblivious of the lessons of the Romantics – Wyspiański, Brzozowski, Żeromski, Gombrowicz, Miłosz, Różewicz, Lipski, Błoński – those sensitive consciences without which our conscience, saturated with complexes of grandeur, dreams of a redemptive mission, psychotic and irritable, begins to work like a cudgel with which we threaten the world, every now and then beating ourselves up” [1].

It would be difficult for me to express the idea that also guided me in writing this essay more simply and accurately.

Translated from Polish by Katarzyna Szuster-Tardi
Article first appeared in: “Czas Kultury” 1/2020, pp. 125-130

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