

Political input in making poets cultural icons*

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In July 2007, the Polish Parliament declared 2008 the Year of Zbigniew Herbert,¹ commemorating the tenth anniversary of his death in 1998. Four years later, the same political body declared 2011 the Year of Czesław Miłosz,² commemorating the centennial of the poet's birth. In contrast, in 1984 the Slovak Ministry of Culture and the Communist Party of Slovakia did not formally devote a year to Laco Novomeský,³ yet a series of conferences, monographs, the production of a fictionalized biopic, and the inauguration of a museum in the town where the poet had spent his youth certainly created a similar aura. These three literary personalities, each well known in their homelands and abroad, achieved an iconic cultural status that is, paradoxically, not only the result of mere artistic achievement but was also, in part, the result of political motivation.

This article examines the cases of poets who, in the course of time, became cultural icons in East-Central Europe in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While this paper's primary examples are drawn from a handful of Polish and Slovak writers, these cases are supplemented with those of other poets to provide more examples of how complex the creation of cultural icons is, especially when considered from three frameworks: cultural semiotics, national literatures, and transculturality. The choice of two neighboring literatures is made to compare the situation in a larger language area (Polish) with the smaller language community of Slovak literature to broaden the research area and reveal, on the one hand, the common history of Eastern Bloc countries and, on the other, the distinctive differences that every nation and individual author possess. There is also a visible trace of the influence of Polish poetry on Slovak literature coming from geographical and linguistic, as well as spiritual, religious, and cultural, proximity. The case study focuses namely on Zbigniew Herbert and Laco Novomeský; however, other Polish (Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska) and Slovak (Ján Ondruš, Ivan Štrpka) poets are mentioned because they provide valuable insights the genesis and transcultural transformation of cultural icons in East-Central Europe at present and in the recent past.

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Research into cultural icons leaves investigators in a rather awkward situation as analyses and interpretations cannot always rely on verified facts. Research must take into consideration myths, mystifications, and hearsay, which are not often available in written form. Even if there is a written document – since 2000, something most frequently found on the Internet and blogs – its credibility is often questionable. Secondly, the field of culture is to be seen as a semiosphere in which study material consists of professional research accompanied by an equally large range of opinions of rather variable competence. Over time, even the order of signs ranges from a first order iconic form to second and third orders (indices and symbols), and it is not uncommon for cultural icons to simultaneously appear in different iconic orders. In the particular case of poets as cultural icons, there is still a non-iconic reception when poets and their works are read in a narrow, aesthetic way. However, the importance of their work and general appeal transcends literature and becomes instead a representation of features, values, or notions of the work or the person who created it.

WHY DO POETS MAKE GOOD CULTURAL ICONS?

Not many contemporary poets become cultural icons; yet when we briefly survey the Polish and Slovak poetry of the twentieth century, we can find a number of suitable examples. The process of “iconization” takes time and is a result of an “exponential accretion of meaning” (Tomaselli – Scott 2009, 20), which means that research of cultural icons always sets a point of time, the vantage point, and takes into consideration the dynamic character of such icons. It also means that contemporary living poets may later become cultural icons, although the iconization process will differ from what contemporary icons might have experienced. To simplify, based on common cultural practice, we could label each poet to indicate, conveniently, the result of their representative or even symbolic function, which is an outcome of accretion in the process of iconization. Herbert is seen as both “Antaeus” and “the figure of Atlas”: “with all the strengths of an Antaeus, yet he finally merges more like the figure of Atlas. Refreshed time and again by being thrown back upon his native earth, standing his ground determinedly in the local plight, he nevertheless shoulders the whole sky and scope of human dignity and responsibility” (Heaney 1988, 70). For Joseph Brodsky (1978, 364), Miłosz is “a severe and relentless mind of such intensity that the only parallel one is able to think of is that of the biblical characters, most likely Job.” Szymborska has often been called the first lady of Polish or world poetry, and symbolic labeling has sometimes taken a rather peculiar form, with her being designated the “Greta Garbo of poetry” according to Swedish writer Gabi Gleichmann (1996) or, more seriously, “a Mozart of poetry” with “the fury of Beethoven”:

She has been described as the Mozart of poetry, not without justice in view of the wealth of her inspiration and the veritable ease with which her words seem to fall into place. But, as can be seen from the quotation, there is also something of the fury of Beethoven in her creative work (Nobel Prize Press release, 1996).

Novomeský was seen as “a humanist” (Kučera 2004) and Ondruš “an absolute poet” (Hamada 1996).

Despite all the efforts of schools and cultural organizations, the reading of poetry never spreads beyond a limited number of enthusiasts, yet poets often gain general and wide recognition. The asymmetry between the declared importance of poets and their lack of presence in society is the source of numerous investigations without clear conclusions. This situation is also a part of the examination of poets as cultural icons carried out in this study. In the beginning, every process of iconization in culture has a point of initiation leading to an increase of a person's – here, a poet's – popularity (Macura 2008, Williams 1983). Literary history at the beginning of the twentieth century consisted of quite a diversity of poets, though this diversity was mostly expressed aesthetically, in a range of decadent, modern, visionary, avant-garde, and other styles. Especially in East-Central European (namely Polish, Czech, and Slovak) literature, there was the very important image of a poet being “the conscience of the nation,” a notion which had survived from the times of national revival movements in the previous century. Later, this supposedly prestigious position of national poets was often ridiculed or challenged as archaic;⁴ however, some poets were able to hold such a position, maintaining it mostly by means of their personal heroism in the difficult times of the Second World War, Cold War or reformatory years of the 1960s.

Literature in East-Central Europe in the twentieth century always had a political subtext: Journals kept their profiles cultural-social or cultural-political (understood as one homogenous sphere), and thoughts that could not be uttered in public through the press were often successfully encrypted in messages within literature. The political involvement of literature throughout the eastern regions of Europe has shifted over the years due to changing circumstances (fights for national independence, establishment of democracy, pro- versus anti-fascist actions), but never seems to cease. During the Communist period in East-Central Europe (1948–1989/1991), the importance of literature's political involvement would even rise, declining again only in the 1990s, in a decade defined as “years of transition” or “transformation.” The true character of the phenomenon of politics and art has been illustrated by Western observers who have made a number of comments on the aforementioned relationship during the political division into Eastern and Western “blocs.” Such artistic involvement in politics was seen as odd and unlike anything in the Western countries. Tom Paulin, editor of *The Faber Book of Political Verse*, highlights that “in Eastern Europe, the poet has a responsibility both to art and society, and that this responsibility is single and indivisible” (1986, 17). The critic Alfred Alvarez adds another useful comment: “In Western Europe we take for granted that there is a fundamental split between poetry and politics. The problem is not that the twain can never meet, but that they can do so only at a great cost” (1968, 9). Alvarez also lists the possible flaws of political verse, citing its “vague rhetoric,” “dependence on clichés,” and tendency to be “debilitatingly simple-minded,” only to point out that although Herbert's poetry is “unremittingly political,” he is “an exception” to all of these faults (9).

Political activity in the East took many forms, the worst of them being open support for nationalist (before and during the Second World War), fascist (during the war), and Communist (since the 1920s and vigorously after 1948) agendas by authors who thought it no shame “to serve” political ideology. Authors such as Her-

bert, Miłosz, Ondruš, and Novomeský cared for aesthetic values, and their political content always remained rather indirect: It was just a part of something larger, often called “humanism” (Herbert and Novomeský) or the “existential situation” (Miłosz and Ondruš) *ex post*. In private letters and occasionally in literary journals, all of them criticized political verse, especially when it placed politics above aesthetics. The so-called “public order” (an offer made by political officials to artists to meet desired needs) attracted many semi-talented authors to include political content in their works in order to improve their positions in literature or in lucrative institutions.

Of the aforementioned poets, Novomeský found himself in the most peculiar position. He was involved in politics as a high-ranking member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia, yet he had to defend the independence of art: “We would look ridiculous (and we would certainly deserve that scorn), if we in the name of anything – Marxism, modernism, or art progress – admired works unsanctioned by talent, creative passion, or the ability of an artist,” he claimed in 1937. He would repeat this sentiment in different words on many later occasions (1970, 319). A political journalist and a poet, Novomeský solved his dilemma by a clear distinction: Direct political matters are a subject for journalism, whereas poetry functions independently of such matters. The pragmatic idea of changing the world that he identified with the idealistic doctrine of Communism was acted upon through his news articles and his acts as a politician, but his deep and universal beliefs and poetic vocation were preserved in poetry. Novomeský marked this impenetrable difference by using two different forms of his first name: When he spoke as a journalist or a politician, he signed with his formal citizen’s name, Ladislav Novomeský. All his poetic works were, by contrast, signed with the informal version, Laco Novomeský. In the 1920s and 1930s, he was known for following the leftist literary model of “aesthetics from Paris, ideas from Moscow” which later, in the worst era of Communist persecution in the beginning of the 1950s, was interpreted as reluctance and negligence and was added to other accusations (of bourgeois nationalism and treason) at the show trial ending with Novomeský’s ten-year sentence. Novomeský’s solitary effort to make a clear distinction between politics and art did not bring any recognizable improvement; however, his journalistic articles were available as a kind of proof of the political and cultural competition between the democratic and conservative wings of the Communist Party. The pro-democratic content of Novomeský’s articles also led to the repeated cancellation of planned publication of the poet’s collected articles and essays written in the 1960s in the subsequent decade, both when the author was seriously ill (1971–1976) and after his death.

Even notable authors such as Herbert, Miłosz, Szymborska, Novomeský, and Ondruš are not immune to the general hesitation towards poetry; they have been recognized as “the best that the culture brings” but never read on a mass scale. Their poetry triggered their recognition beyond the literary context, but examples of other equally notable poets reveal that to become a cultural icon, other factors come into play as well. Poetry in the process of iconization is an initial factor, and an extraordinary poetic quality constantly remains a hallmark for the authors. Furthermore, other literary activities expand the worldview of and impact on the audience, and

finally, it is the poets' personal lives that show accordance with their actions in a time of crisis. All three aspects were built more or less simultaneously, though poetry was at the beginning of it all. Among these poets, three of them (Herbert, Miłosz, and Novomeský) also have extensive work in the form of essays, journalism, and academic articles, but Szymborska and Ondruš also created prose writings that help to reveal their worldview in detail. Szymborska provided this in her book of reviews *Lektury nadobowiązkowe* (translated as Non-required reading) and Ondruš in a rather private form of notes and letters about the founding of the literary group Trnavská skupina (Trnava Group) from 1957 to 1959; these texts were published in the 1990s when Ondruš was rediscovered by critics and readers.⁵

The impact of essays and articles in newspapers and journals was similar to the impact of poetry, yet even extensive literary activity would not have been enough to move a figure beyond mere popularity and on to becoming a cultural icon. The third important factor, viewing these poets as personal examples, demonstrated that their poetry, essays, articles, and letters were more than just words. The high moral standard expressed in their work was equally shown in their lives, as they took part in the resistance during the Second World War (Miłosz, Herbert, Novomeský) or against Communism (Miłosz, Ondruš, Rúfus) and acted in the name of humanism, to which they often gave voice. Each of these three conditions had great significance and just two without the third, it seems, would not have been enough. Only after “exceptional poets” change into “exceptional personalities who happen to be poets” does a person achieve transcendence and demonstrate a representational ability which eventually result in his or her transformation into a cultural icon separate and distinct from other popular personalities.

CULTURAL ICONS AND POLARIZED SOCIETY (POLISH REALITY IN THE 2010s)

It has been asserted that the process of “iconization eliminates contradiction, celebrates the unity of surface appearance, and denies history” (Tomaselli – Scott 2009, 20) and, with the cultural icons of East-Central Europe as our study, these functions can be seen in actions such as the commemorations of poets that occurred in 2008 (Herbert) and 2011 (Miłosz). On the other hand, counter to such elimination and unification, there have been great regime changes, such as those before and after 1989, as well as a number smaller changes (political, social, and literary) that, when taken all together, have significantly shifted the depiction of these icons. In light of the previous observation, the cultural icons were examined and questioned by both experts and common readers who wanted to correct a constructed “surface” (20) appearance.

The initiative behind these commemorations came from a political body, the Polish Parliament, which – as will be shown later – had its own reason to support such gestures. As an important aside, it is worth noting that in the case of Miłosz, the Lithuanian Parliament made the same commemorative declaration for him as he was a Vilnius-born poet. In all three resolutions on Herbert and Miłosz, the attending committees placed emphasis on transcendent features, underlining the mostly

pro-European character of the poets, their patriotism, and their humanistic values. The resolution on Herbert reads:

On the 10th anniversary of the death of the poet Zbigniew Herbert, one of the most outstanding writers of our times, the Sejm (Parliament) of the Republic of Poland has decided to pay tribute to the artist, who – creatively referring to the great tradition of European culture – enriched and strengthened it. In times of a crisis of values and painful despondency, he stood firmly on the side of values: in arts – the canon of beauty, hierarchy and craft, in life – ethical codes, clearly separating the notions of good and evil (Zagajewski 2008, 47).

The political bodies and their cultural partners – for Herbert, the National Library (Biblioteka Narodowa) in Warsaw; for Miłosz, the Book Institute (Instytut Książki) in Kraków – made cultural commodities out of both icons. Special web pages (on the domain name www.culture.pl) were launched for the commemorative years and included their complete program of events, texts of the declarations, and leaflets and “catalogues” presenting the lives and works of the poets in a nutshell. The polished surface of perfectly organized events, however, could not conceal contradictory attitudes and feelings towards particular details and even the whole idea. As soon as the idea of declaring a commemorative year to Miłosz was posed, numerous voices were raised in opposition. In October 2010, a dispute began in parliament and the leader of the anti-Miłosz faction, Anna Sobecka, claimed:

Czesław Miłosz insulted the Poles. His books are full of various kinds of contempt directed at Poles. He sneers at all social strata. His insinuation that in Poland illiteracy prevailed and that peasants were awful, smelly fools who should be taught to think, is a great insult. This is in *Captive Mind*, the Cracow edition of 1990 (quoted in Secler 2014, 113–114).

Despite the dispute, which was just a prologue of what was to come in the press and Internet, the declaration of the year in honor of Miłosz went through. It was explicitly connected with political reality, and the press release announcing it explained that it was an accompaniment to the Polish presidency of the European Union planned for 2011; the motto for the Miłosz commemorative year, “Rodzinna Europa,”⁶ was “excerpted from the work of the Nobel winner” and could be translated as “native Europe.”⁷ Both sides of the dispute continued in their arguments so eventually the word “controversial” became one of the unintended attributes of the Year of Miłosz.

It is not difficult to find political bodies inspired to profit from the generally positive image of poets such as Herbert and Miłosz (or Szymborska, Różewicz, and others) and present them as such to majority of the public that is usually oblivious to such cultural values. Reintroducing the legacy of the poets is an act of education and cultural revival, and the poets were chosen by the parliament in order for citizens to identify themselves with icons of international significance. This is commensurate with the Saussurean notion of differences that at the same time preserve specific reference, which in this case references ethics, artistic talent, and the notion of Polishness.

The unity of the icons, as engineered by the Parliament, was not convincing in a polarized society in which even a slight comparison of the two poets, Herbert and Miłosz, whether seen as representations in and of themselves or just as an “idea” of something they stood for, triggered arguments. An answer to the question which of

these two good poets was the better resulted in seriously emotional reactions, accusations, sources of mystification, misread situations, or exaggerations. In this dispute, the arguing sides questioned whether Miłosz deserved to win the Nobel Prize, why Herbert did not, and what Miłosz's involvement in the matter was. Other issues that are repeatedly brought up in the ongoing argument about the two poets' (respective) worthiness are Herbert's and Miłosz's actions in wartime Poland, underground activities in the postwar period, and stances towards Russia, as well as more general arguments regarding the life of an emigré, literary prizes, *Solidarność*, Communism, and anti-Communism. The long list of aspects reveals that this is an argument that has been going for a long time (since the late 1960s) and has influenced the character of these cultural icons.

Views on Herbert's and Miłosz's deeds, whether those deeds were true or not, are inseparable; sometimes they are simply overinterpretations made by keen followers eager to prove either the positive or the negative side of their beloved or hated icon. An example of such exaggeration is an image from the early *Solidarność* years in which Herbert is photographed with Lech Wałęsa⁸ and Adam Michnik⁹ during their declamatory gesture. In Herbert's biography, the snapshot is explained with explicit pathos: "in the Gdańsk Church of St Brigit [he] stretched up his two fingers with Lech Wałęsa and Adam Michnik, but not – like the other two – with his fingers apart as a sign of victory but together as if for an oath" (Łukasiewicz 2002, 192). An apparent glorification of the poet (in a tone that ran through the entire biography) highlighted an ethical approach that Herbert allegedly never abandoned.

Another "mysterious" event that has gained multiple meanings over time was a dinner party in the summer of 1968 at the Berkeley, California house of John and Bogdana Carpenter, the co-translators of both Polish poets' writings. During the dinner, "Poland's biggest post-war literary fight" (Haven 2011) broke out and abruptly ended the long-term friendship of Miłosz and Herbert, with many sad consequences. In distorted versions of the dinner, the question has always turned on who attacked whom and why. Accounts have varied, and each time, the other poet was to blame for starting the painful falling-out. Cynthia L. Haven, a literary and cultural journalist, took a statement from Bogdana Carpenter, the host of this "worst dinner party ever" (2011). Carpenter broke her silence and corrected what was believed to have happened. According to her, the quarrel started after both poets had drunk too much wine. The fight was provoked and inflamed by the aggressive behavior of the drunken Herbert. First, he accused Miłosz for being idle during the Polish resistance in the Second World War, and the quarrel then culminated when the two poets argued over the duties one has to his homeland and the acceptance of an absolute sacrifice. All in all, the harsh words broke the bond between them and Miłosz's wife, Janina, forbade Herbert to ever come close to them again (2011). Since that moment, even their readers have followed the life paths of both poets separately or in opposition. The rumors around this dinner party have caused continuous accusations from one side or the other of malicious behavior. For example, Miłosz was suspected of having, out of jealousy, caused Szymborska to be preferred over Herbert when both Polish poets were in the running to win the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature.

A basic division into a left- or right-wing political orientation is connected with the two icons, with Herbert seen as a representative of the right whilst Miłosz and Szymborska are considered leftists. It is not uncommon that in the most heated exchanges of opinions the latter are labeled as “collaborators” or, in an anonymous blogosphere, as “red pigs,” which clearly contradicts their iconic positive image in an official narrative that, as quoted earlier, “eliminates contradiction, celebrates the unity of surface appearance, and denies history” (Tomaselli – Scott 2009, 20).

When in 2011 the renowned American neo-conceptual artist Jenny Holzer prepared a performance in Poznań in cooperation with Szymborska, members of “the anonymous group of artists The Krasnals”¹⁰ decided to disrupt the event. Holzer’s art is based on large-scale projections of texts onto the sides of buildings, city halls, and town landmarks, and Holzer and Szymborska selected excerpts from twelve of Szymborska’s poems to use as text for this collaboration. Holzer’s performance had a political subtext, and for the Poznań projection, the authors prepared verses with topical motifs such as torture, terrorism, and guilt in the contemporary world. The event was disrupted by thousands of white paper leaflets with an excerpt from a poem by Szymborska from the 1950s which adored Stalin in a cult-of-personality style (Moskalewicz 2011, Niziołek, 2015). On their blog, the activists commented on and explained their action:

Another problem – Holzer’s action had a political meaning which was right and empty. In distinction from artist we didn’t choose most popular and known poems of Szymborska. We chose a poem that had been written before she received a Nobel prize award and which was showing communistic inclinations of Szymborska. We added to the poem a provocative question, which was forcing to giving thought to what were the reasons of giving to Wisława Szymborska Noble prize award: Nobel prize winner? Red communistic pig? (The Krasnals 2011)¹¹

Later, as an outcome of this action, the Krasnals and Holzer met and the Polish activists explained that long before Szymborska achieved her elevated status as a Nobel Laureate she had had a past of sympathizing with the Communist Party. Eventually, the members of The Krasnals and Holzer agreed on cooperation during the next performance and prepared a banner with the provocative sign “Szymborska is COOL!!!” showing a hammer and a sickle to the left and right sides of the text. The explanation from The Krasnals tried to describe the feeling¹² that resulted from the unpleasant treatment of the “commune,” which was also one of their reasons to take action against the “very expensive, snobbish projections, based on special effects” (2011) that were Holzer’s political statement turned into art.

This was not the first finger-pointing at Szymborska by The Krasnals, the anonymous collective who, in their own words, describe themselves as “culture provocateurs” and who “track hypocrisy and mechanisms of rules in the field of art” and who “track also crucial dependences of art, culture, economy, politics and are fragile to all of their unfair tricks” (2011). In 2010, Szymborska’s image was painted as part of a transcultural representation on a large-scale canvas entitled *The Battle of Grunwald/Ship of Fools* and signed under the name Whielki Krasnal. In a mocking symbolic position, her figure is positioned amid a group of foreign political figures,

holding a megaphone in one hand and a long pole with the Polish flag in the other. The depiction unites two opposite views of Szymborska: one as “an icon in a country that takes great pride in its poets” (Hopkin 2000) and one as critical of the poet’s political involvements in the past.

The political background of the cultural icons of the late twentieth century remains intriguing to older generations who share the life experience that the icons represent. Younger Polish generations tend to overlook or ignore the political layers of this iconic order and discover the poets instead for their poetic qualities. Their generations tend to appreciate different values and features, an observation which is also explained theoretically by Tomaselli and Scott (2009, 22–23), who distinguish postmodern from modern cultural icons: The former are hailed as “sensual” and “sexual” whilst the latter (for instance, the poets in this study) are seen as “moral” and “social.” Long before postmodern ideas had been taken up in East-Central Europe, poets such as Herbert and Novomeský were critiqued by a younger generation of poets including Adam Zagajewski, Julian Kornhauser, and their “Pokolenie 1968,” a “new wave” of the 1960s and rebuke of acclaimed authors (Barańczak 2001, 16–17). The situation in Polish culture of the 2010s shows that the distance between Herbert, Miłosz, and Szymborska and the younger generations is growing and that young poets and readers have started to look for new icons¹³ – very much in the sense suggested by Tomaselli and Scott.

CULTURAL ICONS AND TOTALITY (SLOVAK PAST)

The peak of incentives for a symbolic third order in the 1980s came after Miłosz’s Nobel Prize and Herbert’s political involvement in *Solidarność*. Paradoxically, the culmination is also seen in the iconic status of Novomeský who – unlike the Polish poets – was already dead (since 1976). Whereas the living writers could still shape their new impact, the legacy of Novomeský was at the disposal of official Communist political advisors who took advantage of the opportunity to make him into an exemplary Communist icon. Novomeský’s journalistic works were censored, selected for circulation only when they supported Communist cultural politics; the author’s articles in which he supported the reformist wing in the political confrontation before and during the Prague Spring (1964–1968) were concealed. Between 1969 and 1971, Novomeský’s collected articles were chronologically published in five volumes. Publication of what would be the sixth and final volume, with articles from 1963 to 1970, was cancelled in 1972 and then repeatedly banned on several later occasions. It would only be printed after the political change of 1989, under the title *Splátka velkého dluhu* (Payment of a great debt, 1993, edited by Karol Rosenbaum).

The dramatic events of 1967 to 1972, the liberalization of socialism up until 1969 and, subsequently, “the restoration of order” (also the title of Milan Šimečka’s in-depth analytical collection of essays of the era, first published as samizdat in 1978 and in English in 1984), led Czechoslovak Communist Party leaders to look for new cultural icons and Novomeský fit their desired profile. His poetic works were superb and his personal life and articles offered repeated proof of his loyalty to Communism. Novomeský became the subject of a cynical manipulation that even took advantage

of the fact that after a stroke (in July 1971) the author never recovered, withdrew from public life, and was unable to object to any public events. It was not very difficult to interpret Novomeský's words and actions in a way that could suit Communist propaganda purposes in the 1970s and 1980s. He was one of the most loyal followers of the Communist doctrine, which he accepted as a young idealist in the 1920s when the Communist Party offered the most direct social program for classes on the social periphery. As a journalist for the Communist press, he willingly underwent more than twenty-seven incarcerations between 1926–1938 (usually of four to eight days at a time, for press infractions). Novomeský followed doctrine on its idealist level, overlooking individual or systematic failures, even those of the 1950s and after Communism became the hegemonic power of the Eastern Bloc countries. His loyalty to the ideas of Communism was not open to question; he was even a “prisoner of his own comrades” (as declared in the title of a book by Štefan Drug about Novomeský's incarceration between 1951 and 1955 and probation until 1960, *Väzeň vlastných súdruhov*), and yet, after his rehabilitation in 1963, Novomeský was a keen supporter of a reform wing within the Communist Party, hoping to reach a new form – “socialism with a human face” (Novomeský 1993).

The symbolic representation of Novomeský as a loyal supporter of Communism, constructed in the 1970s and 1980s, has endured and even nowadays it is one of two main perspectives on Novomeský (the other brings about a more nuanced view and is based on unbiased historical research). The poet's years of being alive but not active (1971–1976) helped to create an image of a loyal artist and cultural journalist for the “restoration” years in the 1970s. The manipulations were multiple: exaggerating Novomeský's role in the Slovak National Uprising (1944), the most important historical event for Slovaks during the Second World War, yet concealing Novomeský's incarceration (1951–1955) by the Communist prosecution on false accusations of treason and bourgeois nationalism (originally the sentence was ten years, and capital punishment was also a real possibility), as well as covering up other facts such as the visit of the American poet Allen Ginsberg¹⁴ to Novomeský in his flat in Bratislava in 1965.

Both the 1944 Uprising and Ginsberg's visit to Bratislava were important for Slovak culture, and both were subject to transcultural and intermedial transformations, with Novomeský playing a direct part in the former event. The character of Novomeský appeared in a historical film about the Uprising called *Poéma o svedomí* (An Epic about Conscience) produced in 1977–1978, shortly after Novomeský's death in 1976, and premiered on 24 August 1979 (the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Uprising). The film was produced in a docudrama style, focusing mostly on Karol Šmidke,¹⁵ Gustáv Husák,¹⁶ and Ladislav Novomeský as the alleged leading protagonists of the Uprising. It was a reconstruction and popularization of a biased interpretation of historical wartime events in which the Uprising was a military action depicted mostly as the sole exploit of the Communists (the subtitle of the film was “Communists in a decisive fight for saving the Slovak nation”¹⁷). The film was a prequel to a new wave of films about the war, followed by a considerably bigger project, an eight-part series, *Povstalecká história* (The Uprising History), released

in 1984, the fortieth anniversary of the Uprising and the eightieth anniversary of Novomeský's birth. To secure acclaim for the films, their producers, working under the supervision of the Politburo casted star actors (Novomeský was played by Leopold Haverl, Gustáv Husák by the popular actor Michal Dočolomanský) and hired notable Slovak directors (Zoroslav Záhon and Vladimír Bahna). One of the reasons for the media reconstruction of cultural icons such as the Uprising protagonists was that younger generations were no longer aware of the connection between the government of the 1970s and the key historical event of 1944. Novomeský's reconstruction in the film *Poéma o svedomí* (An Epic about Conscience) resulted in an image of a witty, selfless, and politically loyal activist, and his poem *Analýza* (Analysis, 1964) was used in the film's opening and closing scenes, also highlighting the poetic side of Novomeský's personality.

While official political advisors constructed a cult tone around the Uprising and its alleged leaders, to the generation of liberal artists, a different event was of great importance. Allen Ginsberg's three-month visit to Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1965 was considered "a miracle," as "the young people could suddenly touch their icon," "somebody who they would never believe they could ever see and hear alive" (Klimáček 2014, 218). During his stay in Czechoslovakia, Ginsberg also visited Bratislava for about three days; the main purpose of his journey to the Slovak capital was to support a performance of the young poetic group, *Osamelí bežci* (the Lonely Runners), composed of Ivan Štrpka, Peter Repka, and Ivan Laučík, who shared some of the beliefs of the beat generation (such as an ethical approach to literature). Ginsberg also wished to see Novomeský, "a poet who was in prison and returned with an unshakeable belief in socialism" (Novomeská-Bútorová 2012, 2).

Ginsberg's visit to Slovakia had great symbolic meaning and later became the catalyst for a number of transcultural transformations. The most important of these are the characters of Ginsberg and a symbolic figure of "the Poet" (based on the poet Ivan Štrpka) from the play *Ginsberg v Bratislave* (Ginsberg in Bratislava, 2008) by the Slovak playwright Viliam Klimáček.¹⁸ The play uses a fictional plot based on real facts that Klimáček obtained from evidence from Ivan Štrpka (the Poet) and from microfiche copies of records taken by the state security following Ginsberg during his entire stay in Czechoslovakia (Klimáček 2014, 218). The play's central point is to depict the difference of everyday life without inspiration, as lived in "grey socialism" (grey being both the color of concrete blocks of flats and a descriptor for the dull mood of people) against the uplifting feeling after being inspired by freedom. Klimáček builds the contrast in a dialogue between a girl who wishes to drown and the Poet trying to talk her out of it, the girl being disillusioned with her life in socialism and the Poet filled with elation after spending time with Ginsberg.

Ginsberg's participation in the Lonely Runners' reading is depicted in the memoirs of the literary group and in Klimáček's play. Ginsberg's visit to Novomeský remained quite a mystery. Ginsberg was under the impression that Novomeský was something of a Slovak Pablo Neruda (Blažek 2012, 37) and wanted to understand the aging poet and his reasons for loyalty to Communism. For the official Party advisors, the event was an "unpleasant" episode that was to be wiped out from cultural memory – a scan-

dalous meeting of an American writer with their recently-decorated “national artist” (the highest artistic honor in socialist Czechoslovakia, which Novomeský was given in December 1964). Only in 2012 during research on Novomeský was a statement taken from Novomeský’s daughter, Elena, who was present at the meeting with Ginsberg. Her entire testimony is quoted here, made public for the first time. In response to my request, she wrote:

You ask about meeting Allen Ginsberg.

I was there.

My Dad wanted me by his side, quite probably in case something unexpected might occur, of whatever kind, which he, at his age, with illness and previous jail isolation, might have not understood or seen because he used to often ask about what was “normal,” regarding, for example, technical developments.

And this was a situation where I was to be present, because of my English or to serve coffee or just in case he did not get what was meant. And I was glad because I was very curious about the beatnik.

I think Ginsberg got himself into trouble in Prague. I don’t know if he had stripped his clothes off or something like that in his limitless independence, and in May in Prague he became King Majáles, an annual ritual of students on the first of May and afterwards he was deported by the police state.

But this all had happened before.

At the door stood a man, in a long denim coat to the floor, a red scarf around his neck long enough to also reach the floor, in white tennis sneakers and something knitted under his coat, hirsute, hair to his shoulders, beard halfway down his chest so only his expressively black, smart, Picasso-like eyes were to be seen.

Even that was enough.

Luckily, a translator had come along too, a lady who accompanied Ginsberg his whole time in Czechoslovakia. She not only translated exquisitely but also added more to his every question of what the poet meant and wanted to say.

Because all thinking was different and everything was different.

The two worlds met, two opposite peaks.

The beatnik didn’t understand how somebody could be locked up when he thought about something differently, the beatnik didn’t understand why our poet wouldn’t take a chair and go to Hyde Park to explain his ideas, the beatnik, simply, didn’t get our system.

My Dad didn’t understand how come he [Ginsberg] didn’t get it; he had been there for a week already and had met some writers in Prague, why hadn’t they explained to him that not everything is allowed.

The beatnik behaved freely because he was free, smoked some drugs, told my father that he had a beautiful wife, that was somehow me, and asked when there was going to be a poetry festival. It was simply an utterly different world, freedom, he knew no prohibitions, didn’t get, didn’t understand the system.

His smartness was hard to deny but he was here in an era when our young people had never been to the West, never mind to America’s west coast. He was a product of his era of hippies, just as we were, especially my Dad, a product of absolutely different closed, bound, disciplined values that were represented by our police system.

Everything was cheerful, and they said their farewells cheerfully, but the latitude and freedom left and at home remained the pain of an old man and a life weary and hard-tested.

This is why he always felt closer to the Russians, to Pasternak, and all this just confirmed

that our lives intertwined with pain are more valuable, but also that everything Ginsberg felt so strange, because he did not know it. Ginsberg wanted to see a poet who was in prison and went back with an unshakeable belief in socialism, knowing what to think over his whole visit (Novomeská-Bútorová 2012, 2).

Slovak newspapers (*Smena, Pravda, Lud, Večerník Bratislava*) and journals (*Kultúrny život*) briefly reported Ginsberg's participation in a literary event (Theatre of Poetry, Bratislava, 6 March 1965) with the Lonely Runners. However, no press mentioned his private visit to the Novomeský's. Then, after years of concealment, it was almost as if it had never happened. Given the character of the meeting between the American and Slovak poets, the carefully constructed iconic status of Novomeský as a keen Communist would have not suffered. Yet it was always safer not to give any incentive for later speculation. When Klimáček collected material for the play *Ginsberg in Bratislava* in 2008, he had difficulty in obtaining information except from old newspaper cuttings. The information on Novomeský's and Ginsberg's encounter remained only with a couple of people who were present during the visit and with the secret police. A systematic and persevering control over information was eventually successful and Novomeský remained an intact symbol of loyalty to Communism, someone who was able to maintain the idea of "revolution of poetry and poetry of revolution," appealing still to both readers and politicians.

The dynamic character of cultural icons, as Tomaselli and Scott (2009) observe, eventually leads to re-semanticization, which also could be understood as a process in which some of the layers of symbolic representation vanish over time or rearrange their importance in the hierarchy of meanings. Another factor that has an impact on the status of cultural icons such as the poets Herbert, Miłosz, and Novomeský is a change of expectations: Cultural icons, once "moral" and "social," have been replaced by the postmodern "sensual" and "sexual" icons (Tomaselli – Scott 2009, 22–23). What we may witness is not a complete replacement but, rather, a plurality of icons and a plurality of views of the same icon, plurality coming mostly from generational differences in society. The icons of Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz have preserved a number of their potential symbolic representations (patriotism, humanistic values, pro-European orientation), whereas other layers have lost their validity (activities during the war, participation in resistance, leftist or rightist political orientation, stance on Russia, etc.).

Novomeský's status as a cultural icon in the 1970s and 1980s was not the result of a loose and gradual accretion but was purposefully constructed in order to serve as a role model for the purposes of propaganda. The icon of Novomeský was a media construction based on half-truths; the massive campaign, taking almost twenty years (1970–1989), made sure the symbolic representations of Novomeský stayed intact, even after the fall of Communism in East-Central Europe (1989/1991). Even without any formal changes in semantic content, all of a sudden the positive icon became quite the opposite: a representation of a regime that was considered criminal, condemned the same way as other totalitarian regimes. For a couple of years after 1989 the aversion to Communism in Czechoslovakia was so strong that bookshops refused to sell books by Communist writers, and other forms of cultural retribution, such as

the removal and replacement of compromised individuals at schools and at cultural and writers' organizations, were also present.

Comparison of the differing cases of Herbert and Miłosz, and even Novomeský, show that despite the obvious political input in making the poets cultural icons there is a core in their iconic status that has never been questioned (Juhásová 2015, 84). All three of them have always been considered notable poets with an appeal to both older and younger generations. Even though generations born after 1989 lost the sense of importance of an author's political representation, aesthetic values, alongside humanist ones, do not change abruptly or do not change at all. Poets as cultural icons in East-Central Europe have never been the icons that made the most important historical differences. Yet they seem to show a long-term appeal, and their seductive power is often the beginning of an accretion of layers that lead to the construction of cultural icons.

NOTES

- ¹ Zbigniew Herbert (1924–1998) was a prominent Polish poet, essayist, and playwright. He came from the intelligentsia and his adolescent years were affected by the war and the fact that his native town, Lwów, later became a part of the Soviet Union. During WWII, Herbert joined the underground resistance movement and in the years directly after the war he kept a low profile, taking low-paying jobs until the political change of 1956. With his first collection, *Struna światła* (1956, Chord of Light), he immediately became a well-known writer and his fame grew in subsequent years with significant collections of poetry and essays. In the 1980s he also became active in the political movement *Solidarność*. Herbert was a poet of international acclaim honoured with a number of prestigious prizes (the Herder Prize in 1973, Petrarca-Preis in 1979, and others).
- ² Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) was a prominent Polish writer, translator, and university lecturer. He began writing his poetry in the 1930s in the avant-garde literary group *Żagary*. During WWII, Miłosz worked for the underground press and after the war he had a short career as a diplomat for Communist Poland but defected and received political asylum in France. His nonfiction book *Zniewolony umysł* (1953, The Captive Mind) became a classic of anti-Stalinism. From 1961 to 1998 he was a professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of California, Berkeley. His poetry and essays earned much acclaim, though his works were banned in Poland until 1980 when Miłosz received the Nobel Prize in Literature.
- ³ Laco Novomeský (1904–1976) was a leading Slovak poet and cultural journalist of the twentieth century, also a prominent member of the Communist Party of Slovakia. He began as a journalist for Communist presses, also alongside Klement Gottwald who would later be the country's first Communist president (1948–1953). Novomeský's poetic work is rather slim but considered vital for Slovak poetry. He was involved in organizing the Slovak National Uprising (1944), the most important Slovak war action during WWII and was a member of the negotiating party with the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in England (1944). Between 1951–1955 he was incarcerated after a show trial and upon release he spent five years on probation. Later, in the 1960s he became one of the leading journalists and poets who tried to democratize socialism, but his efforts – as well as those of others – were crushed by the military intervention of the Warsaw Pact armies (August 1968). In 1971 he suffered a stroke and never fully recovered. In 1964 he was awarded the title “national artist.”
- ⁴ The notion of “a poet on pedestal” was systematically challenged in the Czech avant-garde movement of Poetism in the works of Jaroslav Seifert and Vítězslav Nezval; in Slovak literature, this is particularly notable in the Dadaistic poetry of Rudolf Fabry in his collection *Uťaté ruky* (Severed hands, 1935), where in the poem, *A Poet*, he demystifies the character of a poet from a position of a prophet to the level of a perverted “coachman.” A similar critical approach, based on other motivations, is

- found in the works of the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, for example in his work *Against Poets*, in which he sums up almost all the negative associations that the wide privileging of poets brought about: “And thus in poets not only their piety irritates us, that complete surrender to Poetry, but also their ostrich politics in relation to reality: for they defend themselves against reality, they don’t want to see or acknowledge it, they intentionally work themselves into a stupor which is not strength but weakness” (1988, 218).
- ⁵ The essays and documents are published in collections of studies by literary critics *Křížu je člověk lahký* (1996), *S dlaňou v ohni* (2002) and in his collected poems *Ján Ondruš Básnické dielo* (2012) edited by Milan Hamada.
- ⁶ The resolution in Polish reads: “W roku 2011 mija 100. rocznica urodzin Czesława Miłosza. Uchwalony przez Sejm Rok Miłosza będzie okazją do przypomnienia poety i jego dzieła, a także szansą głębszej refleksji na temat związków jego życia i literatury w zagmatwanym XX wieku. W tym samym roku przypada też moment objęcia przez Polskę przywództwa w Unii Europejskiej. Mottem polskiej prezydencji w Unii będzie hasło zaczerpnięte z twórczości Noblisty: ‘Rodzinna Europa’” (Schetyna 2010).
- ⁷ The official translation of the book title *Rodzinna Europa* into English as *Native Realm* (1968) is much more abstract and totally misses the European connection.
- ⁸ Lech Wałęsa (1943) is a Polish politician, co-founder and a head of *Solidarność*, and later, President of Poland (1990–1995). He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983.
- ⁹ Adam Michnik (1946) is a Polish journalist, essayist, dissident, and the editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the largest newspaper in Poland.
- ¹⁰ More on The Krasnals can be read in Katarzyna Niziołek *Sztuka społeczna: koncepcje, dyskursy, praktyki* (2015).
- ¹¹ The quote is given in its original uncorrected English.
- ¹² “Cool – as all the symbols of commune, for youth generation are COOL, trendy, they awake pleasant, warm and almost sexy – overly emotional feelings. But only when there will come to sexual intercourse with commune, even with a great commitment, there will be no orgasm. The only thing that will be is hangover and disgust” (2011; The quote is given in its original uncorrected English).
- ¹³ The loudest generational dispute was initiated by Andrzej Franaszek’s article, *Why nobody likes new poetry?* (in Polish original *Dlaczego nikt nie lubi nowej poezji?* 2014) that dwelled on an observation that the last decades of Polish poetry went through a process of contraction and barrenness, a point that the author demonstrated in a contrast between poetry by notable great world and Polish poets and new poetic production after 2000. The fiery discussions reveal the distance between the new generations born without experience of Communism and wars (neither the World Wars nor the Cold War). In the simple comparison, Franaszek tried to prove that the new skimmed poetry aiming just to play with language will never reach the level of poetry by moral authorities such as Miłosz. The most complex response (also regarding responses published in Franaszek’s article) has been given by a representative of the upcoming generation of artists, Krzysztof Sztafa (born 1991), in his manifesto article *Poetry, you fool! Report of a dilettante* (in Polish original *Poezja, głupcze! Raport dyletanta*): “A model of reading, suggested by Miłosz’s biographer [Franaszek], is wrong when he favours the profound anachronism of the strong belief that poetry is lucid, timeless, and universal and that poets are moral authorities – all this from a contemporary postmodern perspective simply does not work” (Translated by J. Gavura). Sztafa contradicts Franaszek and explains in detail that “incomprehensible” poetry still has validity for readers as “signs” are not longer based on “faith” but rather on “constant verification” (2015). All in all, the concept of new poetry also affects the acceptance of cultural icons, and giving precedence to “great masters” (Franaszek 2014) provokes a sharp response from a critical young generation.
- ¹⁴ Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997), an American poet, was a leading figure of the Beat Generation and the antiestablishment phenomenon known as the counterculture of the 1960s.
- ¹⁵ Karol Šmidke (1897–1952) was a Slovak politician and Co-President of the Presidium of the Slovak National Council.
- ¹⁶ Gustáv Husák (1913–1991), President of Czechoslovakia (1975–1989), was a person who shared much of Novomeský’s fate, including illegal Communist work in the 1940s, imprisonment in the

1950s, and political rise a decade later. Husák is also the author of a 600-page memoir, *Svedectvo o Slovenskom národnom povstaní* (Testimony of the Slovak national uprising, 1964), which was the subject of a fiery dispute among Communist and non-Communist historians.

- ¹⁷ In the Slovak original, “Komunisti v rozhodujúcom boji o záchranu slovenského národa” (distribution letter, available at <http://www.skcinema.sk/ar1-sfu/sk/csg/?repo=sfurepo&key=50912250038>).
- ¹⁸ Viliam Klimáček (1958) is a Slovak playwright and writer and co-founder of the theatre GUnaGu, one of the most important theatres dating from the late Communist era (1985) which later turned into a professional theatre company. Klimáček is known for using historical and political motifs and messages in his works (e.g., in his *Občiansky cyklus, /Civil cycle/*, about Gustáv Husák and other politicians in Slovak history).

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Political input in making poets cultural icons

Cultural icons. Polish literature. Slovak literature. 20th century poetry. Politics and poetry. Transcultural transformations.

This study analyzes the role and degree of political involvement in the process of constructing poets as cultural icons in Polish and Slovak literature in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The main focus is on the Polish poets Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz and the Slovak poet Laco Novomeský, but research also takes other Polish and Slovak poets into consideration (Wisława Szymborska, Ján Ondruš, and Ivan Štrpka). This examination reveals an important political input behind constructing these poets as cultural icons using the symbolic potential that the poets accrued over the years and were able to represent. The dynamic character of icons (accelerated by great geopolitical and social changes in East-Central Europe), however, causes a constant re-semanticization and partially diminishes their iconic status, especially for upcoming generations. Despite a rearrangement of the hierarchy of layers in their iconic status, the poets are always associated with their poetic work, and the notable quality of this work keeps their potential for remaining or becoming cultural icons regardless of political circumstances.

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