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## MIRON BIAŁOSZEWSKI'S *PAMIĘTNIK Z POWSTANIA WARSZAWSKIEGO* IN ITALY: SOME POLEMICAL (AND POLITICAL) REMARKS ON TRANSLATION AND CRITICAL RECEPTION

### ABSTRACT

In its first part, the essay deals with some issues related to the Italian translation of Miron Białoszewski's *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* (1970) from a comparative perspective with the American (1977, 2015), French (2002), Spanish (2011), and German (2019) translations. In its second part, the paper reviews the critical reception of the Italian edition (2021) of this classic of twentieth-century Polish literature.

KEYWORDS: translation, Miron Białoszewski, memoir, reception, Warsaw Uprising

### ABSTRACT

Nella prima parte il saggio affronta alcuni aspetti della traduzione italiana delle *Memorie dell'insurrezione di Varsavia* di Miron Białoszewski (1970) in una prospettiva di comparazione con la traduzione americana (1977, 2025), quella francese (2002), quella spagnola (2011) e quella tedesca del 2019. Nella seconda parte viene sottoposta a disamina la ricezione critica ricevuta dall'edizione italiana di questo classico della letteratura polacca del XX secolo.

PAROLE CHIAVE: traduzione, Miron Białoszewski, memorie, ricezione, Insurrezione di Varsavia

Miron Białoszewski's *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* was first published in 1970 by PIW. The first translation into a vehicular language was the American one by Madeline Levine (Białoszewski 1977) which was subsequently republished unaltered in 1991<sup>1</sup>. In 2002, Eric Veaux translated the *Pamiętnik* (Białoszewski 2002) for the renowned French publishing house Calmann-Lévy. Therefore between the first and the second translation of the *Pamiętnik* into a vehicular language passed precisely a quarter of a century, and one could wonder about the causes of such a long delay for a renewed interest of the Western public in Białoszewski's



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<sup>1</sup> Slovak and Hungarian, which have preceded the English translation, of course, could not exert such an influence on a broader reception of this text.

masterpiece<sup>2</sup>. There could be several reasons for it. The first one could be that the fame of Miron Białoszewski as a significant literary author was mainly circumscribed, during his lifetime, to Poland and the “Soviet block”, Central European countries<sup>3</sup>. In Italy, for example, translations of his verses could be found only in anthologies and “niche” literary reviews (for the Italian translations up to 2001, see Bernardini 2005)<sup>4</sup>. In France, an anthology of verses (Białoszewski 2008) was published only several years after the *Mémoire de l'insurrection de Varsovie* was brought to a broader audience<sup>5</sup>. The same happened in Germany, since Miron Białoszewski's verses were awarded a volume of translations (Białoszewski 2012) 18 years after the *Pamiętnik* was published in German<sup>6</sup>; in English, Miron Białoszewski as a poet seems to be present up to date only in anthologies (Miłosz 1970: 88–91; Białoszewski 2010: 14–20, 50–56, 72–82). A second reason could be political, as the American translations' dates attest. Madeline Levine's was the only translation into a vehicular language published during the Poland People's Republic years. In contrast, the second edition took place not long after the change of the political system. The Warsaw Uprising, as such, has been widely ignored as a relevant WWII event by a politically left-oriented Western European audience, mainly (probably) because of the involvement of the Soviet Union in its failure. Still, Italian or French public opinion nowadays tends to mix the uprising in Warsaw's Ghetto (1943) with the Warsaw Uprising (1944)<sup>7</sup>. If one of these two events is widely known, this is the one which took place for Easter in 1943<sup>8</sup>. Such is not the case for Germany, where the awareness of the different nature of the two uprisings

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, in a paper published by the literary review “Comparatistica” in 2005, I mentioned that the lack of a translation of the *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* had contributed to a relatively poor reception of Mironczewski's work in Italy (Bernardini 2005: 9).

<sup>3</sup> The dates of the translations into Slovak (Białoszewski 1972), Hungarian (Białoszewski 1973), and Czech (Białoszewski 1987), all of them carried out in Socialist times, attest to such a circumstance. It is somehow meaningful the absence of a Russian translation.

<sup>4</sup> Further data about the Italian translations of Białoszewski's verses in 2001–2021 will be available in a paper due to appear on “Pl.It” in the current year.

<sup>5</sup> Other translations of Białoszewski's verses can be found in the anthology edited by Constantin Jelenski (1965: 373–77), and in Hanna Konicka's (2005: 143–230) monograph, *La sainteté du détail infime*.

<sup>6</sup> Other translations by Dagmara Kraus are to be found in Białoszewski (2015), Białoszewski (2013: 33–43), Białoszewski (2018: 976–985); Białoszewski (2015c: 71–85). Dagmara Kraus has also translated Białoszewski's *Tajny dziennik* (Białoszewski 2014b). Esther Kinsky, who has translated the *Pamiętnik* twice, has also translated four of Białoszewski's verses for the literary magazine *die horen. Zeitschrift für Kunst und Kritik* 216, 49. Jahrgang Band 4, Verlag für neue Wissenschaft GmbH, Bremerhaven, 2004, pp. 7–8.

<sup>7</sup> Sometimes it looks like the mixing up of these two happenings is intentional: the publishing house Il Sole 24 Ore, in the blurb of a book devoted to the 1944 Warsaw Uprising (Colombo 2022), proclaims: “[the text] offers a summary of an event that gains even greater value on the occasion of the ‘Holocaust Remembrance Day’”. One wonders why the booklet should have a more excellent value if it appears on the anniversary of another historical event.

<sup>8</sup> A discussion between the French and the Italian translators of the *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* took place in Paris in 2021 on the 50th Anniversary of the publishing of Białoszewski's *Memoir*, and is due to be published in the next issue of the revue “Mirofor”.

should have satisfactorily developed. In 2014 a new, “uncensored” and “restored” version of the *Pamiętnik* was published by PIW, and this prompted a wave of “revised” translations: not only Madeline Levine amended her largely insufficient translation dating from 1977, but also Esther Kinsky, that had first translated Białoszewski’s *Memoir* as *Nur das was war. Erinnerungen aus dem Warschauer Aufstand* (1994), went through a new translation, much more adhering to the style of the original text, published in 2019 simply as *Erinnerungen aus dem Warschauer Aufstand*. The previous “western translations”, the Swedish and the Spanish ones (Białoszewski 2003, 2011)<sup>9</sup>, were still based on the text published in 1970.

The version of the *Pamiętnik* published in 2014 has reinstated – as said – several passages removed either by the censorship or by the editors of the Warsaw publishing house PIW for their political contents. Alas, the editors have also restored several other passages previously written off, possibly, because they did not appear to have real meaning or would add very little to the narration. As a translator, having started my translation in late 2014, I had only the 1977 English translation I could eventually consult to solve doubts, apart from 2002 Eric Veaux’s French edition and 1994 German one. As stated, one could not rely on the original translation by Madeline Levine. There are several occurrences of significant misunderstanding of the text. Such a relatively straightforward sentence as “Niemiec strzelał spod Garnizonowego przy Miodowej, z armaty, w getto, w Bonifraterską” (A German was firing an artillery piece by the Garrison Church in Miodowa Street into the ghetto, into Bonifraterska Street) has become “a German was shooting from the garrison on Miodowa, from a tank, into the ghetto, into Bonifraterska street” (Białoszewski 2015a: 75). Levine has correctly understood Białoszewski’s linguistic trick to employ non-existing augmentative forms, but why should have been the “pucha” on the “wybrzeże”, i.e., the no-man-land between the Germans and the insurgents, be “a big tin can” (a big “puszka”: Białoszewski 2015a: 75), instead of “big empty space” (a big “pustka”)? “Nie wiem, czy miała podwórze. Czy jak to się zwało” (“I don’t know if it had a courtyard. Or what one would have called it”: Białoszewski 2014a) has surprisingly become “Or how it was demolished” (Białoszewski 2015a: 93)<sup>10</sup>. A “szafka zasuwana na harmonię” (Białoszewski 2014a: 124) is very likely a “roller shutter cabinet”, somewhat less so a cabinet “shoved against a wooden harmonium” (Białoszewski 2015a: 130). Some misunderstandings are not that important, as long as the book’s overall meaning is concerned, but still, they can produce far-reaching outcomes. Levine has translated the relatively obscure military technicism “cekaemy” (an acronym for “ciężki karabin maszynowy”) as “grenades”, and this has passed into the German translation<sup>11</sup>. In fact, had the

<sup>9</sup> Piotr Sobolczyk has thoroughly discussed the Spanish edition in an essay due to be published in the forthcoming issue of “Pl.It” (2023).

<sup>10</sup> The translator could have easily read “rwało” for “zwało”, but the misunderstanding has passed unaltered into the 2015 “revised” translation.

<sup>11</sup> “Sie werfen ihre Granaten und hauen ab” (2019: 259). Katarzyna Olszewska Sonnenberg (2011: 244) has decided to translate “cekaemy” with “metralletas”. “Metralleta” is not an accurate rendering of

“cekaemy” thrown by the two German soldiers at the depot in Muranów been two grenades (Białoszewski 2014a: 188), Teik would not have lived to tell the story: they were two heavy machine guns instead, and quite understandably Teik thought not to collect them, even as such weapons would be of great use to the insurgents, because they would have encumbered him in his flight: “He took off. He chose well. Because he’s still alive’ (Białoszewski 2015a: 199). Such a sequence of nominal phrases like “My. Trudno. Swoje” is at the same time very białoszewskian and very varsovian, but “swoje” means “we have done what was to be done, we did ours”, so can not be translated as “Our own kind” (Białoszewski 1977: 116), nor “Our own people” (Białoszewski 2015a: 115). “Rozwalania” in Białoszewski’s (2014a: 179) specific parlance are street executions, not “cave-ins” (Białoszewski 2015a: 189): why should have the “cave-ins” ceased by September 10, since there were still shells and bombs coming down all over the city? Of course, it was only the summary executions that were suspended because of relatively well-known political reasons<sup>12</sup>. Białoszewski – we all know – was obsessed with topographical details: one could very quickly draw a map of 1944 Warsaw just according to the text of the *Memoir*. So one could be tempted to think that the sentences “Było trochę ciasnych uliczek. Ale z zabudową pod Kubusia Puchatka” (Białoszewski 2014a: 187) refer to ulica Kubusia Puchatka<sup>13</sup>, but should also take into account that this very street is located in the Śródmieście district, not in Żoliborz, and here the poet is explicitly referring to the military situation north of Inwalidów and Wilson square: “Żoliborz kilka razy mniejszy. [...] Bloki nie zbyt wysokie. Wyższe stały tylko przy placu Inwalidów i Wilsona (dziś Komuny Paryskiej)”. Therefore “Ale z zabudową pod Kubusia Puchatką” should be translated as “with houses à la Winny the Pooh”. Not as “Near Winny the Pooh street” (Białoszewski 2015a: 198) since that street was all but near<sup>14</sup>. So, the seldom error always happens in any translation, but one has to grasp what is relevant for the author. An extremely personal, even “intimate” precision of the chronological and topographical setting of the events of the Warsaw uprising is a crucial factor in Białoszewski’s will to recreate in his memory the city

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the acronym “cekaem”, which should translate into “ametralladora”, but Miron Białoszewski likely had in mind not really a heavy machine gun, but a light one (“elkaem”) or a submachine gun.

<sup>12</sup> The same is to be found in the German translation (“Einstürze von Häusern”, Białoszewski 2019: 246), whereas Eric Veaux and Katarzyna Olszewska Sonnenberg have correctly translated, respectively, “les liquidations” (Białoszewski 2002: 212) and “los fusillamentos” (Białoszewski 2011: 232). Himmler’s order stopped the summary executions of the civilians on September 9 (Richie 2013: 348–49).

<sup>13</sup> This has happened not only to Madeline Levine, but also to Esther Kinsky, alas also in her second, revised translation (“Kubuś-Puchatka-Strasse”, Białoszewski 2019: 258).

<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Igor Piotrowski, Adam Poprawa, and Tadeusz Sobolewski for their help in clarifying this not-so-secondary topographical detail: I could not figure out how something in Żoliborz could be near Winny the Pooh street and wondered whether in pre-war Warsaw that name could have possibly been given to a street in that suburb. It is worth noticing that Eric Veaux has correctly, even if paraphrastically, translated “comme dans un conte pur enfants” (Białoszewski 2002: 222). On the other hand, the Spanish translator seems to have a rather confused knowledge of Warsaw’s topography since she has not only translated “calle del Kubuś Puchatek” but also “la calle de Wilson” (Białoszewski 2011: 243).

he was born in during the process of her destruction and the extermination of his fellow inhabitants. No translator should oversee this<sup>15</sup>.

Another critical factor of the book is the linguistic register employed by Miron Białoszewski. In a paper that is bound to appear on "Pl.It", I went through the difficulties met in a translation that tried to comply with Z. Barańczak's signaling three different and intertwined linguistic "layers": that of child language as incompatible with adult language, that of spoken language as opposed to written language, that of colloquial language as a negation of "high" language (Barańczak 1976: 292–293). Here I will give further odd examples of the difficulties a translator could encounter, mainly related to the "lessico familiare" (the family parlance, or lexicon, Natalia Ginzburg devoted a famous memoir) used by Miron and his family. I have never been able to establish what botanical family the "trawka warkoczowa" belongs to (Białoszewski 2014a: 39), therefore had to recur to a neologistic equivalent ("erba trecciolina"), nor how to translate appropriately "szwurgoły" but, to my partial excuse, neither did the most acclaimed Polish translators of Italian literature, such as Halina Kralowa, Kasia Skórska or Joanna Ugniewska (strictly in alphabetical order): "calzoni mezzi sbrindellati" will have to do (Białoszewski 2021: 48). Everybody knows or should know that there is no way to translate the archaic Polish verb "łazić" that nevertheless is crucial in Białoszewski's lexical infantilization of his narrative. In her foreword to the 1977 edition of her translation, Madeline Levine (Białoszewski 1977: 17) had counted "approximately" 250 occurrences of the verb "latać" in its non-literal meaning, i.e., "to run", "to flee". An attempt to preserve as many of these occurrences as possible, employing not only the verb "volare" but also the referring locution "di volata", has been severely curbed by the editor of the publishing house Adelphi, precisely as my rendering of "chyba", another astonishingly recurring word, with "mi sa", that has quite often (if not always) changed with "forse" ("perhaps"), "mi sembra" ("it seems"), "credo" ("I think") "probabilmente" ("probably"), and so on, even though "mi sa" is a bisyllabic locution exactly as "chyba", and for a Polish poet the amount of syllables is not indifferent.

As I have already mentioned, Białoszewski makes use of "augmented" hypocorism, such as "pucha" instead of "pustka", "micha" instead of "miska", "klucha" instead of "klusek": it has been quite challenging to convince the editor at Adelphi to accept Italian equivalents, "scoda" and "macchero", but there was still no way to translate not periphrastically "pucha" ("grande vuoto"). On the other hand, one of the tools Białoszewski employs to achieve a high level of infantilization of the language is the use of diminutives. In this field, I have encountered unexpected

<sup>15</sup> Eric Veaux's French translation provides ample evidence of an excellent knowledge of the political, historical and topographical background of Białoszewski's *Mémoire*. He could have somehow adhered much more to the original's broken syntax. I do not share the choice to translate the toponyms into French. The names of the streets in Warsaw have indeed very poetical "speaking names", and for this reason I have decided to introduce into the Italian edition an appendix, i.e., a translated index of the streets mentioned in the book, with further information about their eventual disappearance in nowadays city.

resistance from the editor mentioned above, which would regard many as derogatory rather than childish. Such was the case of “mundurki” worn by the “harczerzyki” running into battle: my proposal for a translation as “divisine” was rejected because such a term was considered derisive, and I accepted to change it into “piccole uniformi”. I did not manage to maintain “edificiuccio cassetto” for “wychodkowy budynek” (Białoszewski 2014a: 185) but I think “costruzioncina cessori” is still a good compromise (Białoszewski 2021: 222). Instead, “ripostigliuccio nicchietoso” would not pass, mainly because the English and French translations had respectively given “hidden recess” and “recoin” as solutions, so that I had to put up with “nicchietta di scorta” (Białoszewski 2021: 110). As I have stated elsewhere<sup>16</sup>, the outcome of the translation process is the result of much negotiating: not only between different languages or cultural systems but also, mainly, translator and editor.

The Italian translation of the *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* meant to offer the Italian reader Białoszewski's text by placing it at the intersection of two concepts: that of “foreignizing translation” developed by Lawrence Venuti (1995: 20) and that of “text of bliss” (“texte de jouissance”) conceived by Roland Barthes (1973: 25)<sup>17</sup>. After the publication, I have wondered whether my translation has satisfied these methodological requirements or if this would facilitate the Italian reception of Białoszewski's works. On the other hand, critics and the readers' audience could have rejected such an attempt that could have been detrimental to Białoszewski's good critical fortune south of the Alps. I am therefore glad to say that, in general, from the moment of the publication of the Italian translation of Miron Białoszewski's *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*, the critical reception in the press of the Apennine Peninsula was favorable. Sales figures, which see – as of August 13, 2022, on a print run of 5073 copies – 2361 copies already sold, attest this<sup>18</sup>. The figure may have already reached 3,500 copies by the end of spring 2023.

Critical reception also presents relevant figures. By the end of May 2022, eight reviews had been published in national or local newspapers, one on an influential blog on the Internet, one on the website of Italy's most important news agency, and one read on the radio. Other reviews have appeared on more or less widespread blogs<sup>19</sup>. On November 14, 2021, the ANSA press agency announced the *Memoir* as

<sup>16</sup> In the already mentioned article due to be published on “Pl.It” 2023, where I have given many other examples of these negotiations.

<sup>17</sup> For Roland Barthes (1990: 14), a “text of bliss” is one “that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomfords (perhaps to the point of a certain state of boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.” Such a definition seems to fit Białoszewski's prose perfectly.

<sup>18</sup> Figures provided, for 2022, by Henk Proeme and, for 2023, by Adelphi publishing house.

<sup>19</sup> To Marilia Piccone, author of the blog “Reading by Candlelight,” Miron Białoszewski puts his memoirs in writing “to find the voice of the boy he had been, to recount those days as he had lived them, with the recklessness and ardor of youth. For it is a young voice that comes out of these pages, and the written word reproduces the spoken one.” Piccone expresses her conviction “that there is nothing invented in this utterly necessary book that strikes us by the facts it recounts and by the

the “book of the day”. Paolo Pietroni (2021), a literary and theater critic, wrote a review essentially paraphrasing the afterword for the Adelphi edition, highlighting the anti-heroic and anti-rhetorical nature of the “truly unique” pages of the *Memoir*, showing the daily collective life disturbed by the violence of history. Two genres of reviews should be distinguished here: those of a more journalistic nature and those more focused on the fictional features of the work. Włodek Goldkorn – a journalist of Polish origin – in his review, published in the “Robinson” supplement attached to the “la Repubblica” newspaper of August 28, 2021, pointed to problems more related to today's popular political topics (for example, homosexuality). Goldkorn (2021) probably wanted to convey to the Italian readers a range of historiographic information about the sixty-three days of the Warsaw uprising rather than reconstructing the book's genesis or subjecting it to a critical analysis. The reading made by Goldkorn seems to be marked by the principles of “political correctness”. Apart from Białoszewski's homosexuality – the journalist has underlined his empathy for the Jewish characters of the *Pamiętnik* or the “feminist” nature of literary criticism practiced by the first critic in Poland, who announced the *Memoir* as an “absolute masterpiece”, Maria Janion. Another expert of things Polish, Francesco Cataluccio (2021), author of *Vado a vedere se di là è meglio*, in a review that appeared on the blog “il Post” on September 17, 2021, included the *Memoir* in the context of historical and intellectual debate about the Warsaw Uprising. He has also connected the *Pamiętnik* to the tragic and naive testimony of Wanda Przybylska, *Cząstka mojego serca*, which was translated into Italian in the 1960s. I do not know how exactly the following statement reflects the narrative approach of the *Pamiętnik*: “The account seems to be the story of someone who unknowingly found himself in the whirlwind of events without understanding why, and tells about it in a stream of consciousness, with forgetfulness and mistakes, inventing funny neologisms, commenting and almost mumbling, as some freaks use to do in front of a beer booth.” Maybe Miron Białoszewski would have appreciated it. On the other end, it is not sure that he would have shared the belief that in his narrative “[t]ruth and untruth inevitably mix and mingle.” After all, in the first pages of the *Pamiętnik* Białoszewski (2015a: 3) had programmatically stated that “I shall be frank recollecting my distant self in small facts, perhaps excessively precise, but there will be only the truth.” Although – as Philippe Lejeune (1975) teaches us – the “autobiographical pact” has a value of literary convention, not a documentary one.

On the pages of “l'Avvenire”, the newspaper of the Italian Episcopal Conference, the comments reserved for the *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* reflect a reasonably common phenomenon that can be noticed in the non-specialist press: a certain tendency to confuse the Warsaw ghetto uprising (April 19–May 16, 1943)

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language that seems to have been hit by a bombardment.” In all likelihood, it may not be entirely appropriate to paint as a teenager someone who, in 1944, was twenty-two years old and attending university studies.

with the later uprising in Warsaw from August 1944<sup>20</sup>. Righetto has produced such a reference because both uprisings appear in the film *The Pianist* by Roman Polański (2002). The problem is that for more than half of the review, the author avoids going into the literary specificity of the work. When he finally does it, he reveals some difficulties in identifying the genre to which the text belongs, defining it – despite the book’s title – as “a journal from those years.” No wonder religious or para-religious aspects of the books draw the reviewer’s attention. They can either be the ruins of churches or the “prayers raised on the morning of August 15 in memory of the miracle on the Vistula, when in 1920 the Polish Army defeated the Bolshevik Red Army, preventing it from attacking the Western Front.” It seems, however, that religious enthusiasm did not allow Righetto to notice the irony displayed by Białoszewski when he turned the “miracle on the Vistula” upside down. The author of the *Memoir* pointed out how, this time, in 1944, the inhabitants of Warsaw prayed not for the defeat of the Red Army but for the Soviets to enter the city as quickly as possible. Righetto does not fail to point out how the author of the *Memoir* was able to “combine ‘ethical reliability’ and ‘awe’”.

In the daily “l’Adige”, in an extensive review titled *L’eterna gioventù, il grande romanzo* (*The eternal youth, the great novel*) published on September 13, 2022, Carlo Martinetti (2022) wrote about the style of the book as of a narrative based on “an excited, shattered and erratic speech”, in a free flow of memories that can convey “a truth far from that of the opposing propagandas.” In the writer’s opinion, the review that appeared in the online magazine “Blow up” (but also available in print form, to be found at newsstands) in a collective review entitled *The wild bunch. Grandi libri usciti quasi insieme* (*The Wild Bunch. Great books released almost simultaneously*) is definitively noteworthy. Here Białoszewski parades with Somerset Maugham, Lawrence Osborne, and Colson Whitehead as an author nurturing “literature as a testimony” and featuring as a “perplexed witness”. Maurizio Bianchini (2021: 134) compares, not altogether wrongly, the *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* and Kusturica’s movie *Underground*. Somehow naive sounds Bianchini’s definition of Białoszewski as a poet “appreciated, even not as much a Herbert or a Szymborska, possibly because he was not helped by his homosexuality, in a sexophobic country such as Poland” (*ibidem*). Bianchini recognized that the few lines from Arthur Sandauer’s evaluation of Białoszewski’s

<sup>20</sup> It is in some ways understandable that this happens, especially in the period of the “International Holocaust Remembrance Day” (January 27), as in the case of the “Bulletin of the Jewish Community of Milan,” which published a telegraphic review in the January 2022 issue. Quite a different space the text was accorded by the blog “Pulp books. Quotidiano dei libri,” where Paola Quadrella (2021) reviewed it together with Joe. J. Heydecker, *Il ghetto di Varsavia. Cento foto scattate da un soldato tedesco nel 1941* (*The Warsaw Ghetto. One Hundred Photos Taken by a German Soldier in 1941*), translated by R. Muratore, Meltemi 2021). Quadrella has framed the *Pamiętnik* critically well, taking advantage of the references to the “famous, late and beautiful Passover of 1943,” that of the ghetto uprising, to relate Białoszewski’s *Memoir* to the shots taken by Heydecker inside Warsaw’s Judische Wohnbezirk in the winter-spring of 1941. The last photo in the collection, depicting the sea of rubble in the ghetto in November 1944, could illustrate a photographic edition of the *Pamiętnik*.



works quoted in the afterword of the Italian edition of the *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* “restore confidence in the mission of literary criticism” (hurray!). Moreover, he is ready to admit that “even the style of the *Memoir* is equidistant from emphasis and victimhood. These feelings characterize uprisings.” One immediately agrees with Bianchini that the hero of the memoir “listens to, helps, consoles, transports, moves among a ‘junk of objects’ left behind by the insurrection, in a constant breathlessness that his prose enhances” (*ibidem*). Furthermore, one could even share his definition of the *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* as a reportage, not a memoir. One could also consider a connotation of the language used by Białoszewski as “écriture blanche”, the “white writing” theorized by Roland Barthes (Bianchini 2021: 135). Why not? Bianchini’s review reveals itself as one of the most original pieces of criticism written in Italy on the *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*.

In an unsigned review published in the daily “l’Adige” on November 22, 2021, the *Memoir* is described as a narrative of a “meticulous and attentive civil witness that does not get excited or takes part but assists [to events] almost from an external position, completely anti-heroic and, of course, without any trace of rhetorics.” The anonymous reviewer goes on: “There is, so natural, implicit, more than hidden in what the narrator describes, a look full of humanity right where this seems not to exist any longer.” One could not agree more. Unfortunately, not so, as the review in the “La lettura” supplement of Italy’s leading daily newspaper, “Corriere della Sera,” is concerned. Here, the Italian translation of the *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* has become only a pretext to recall the introduction of martial law in Poland by General Wojciech Jaruzelski on December 13, 1981. The review appeared in a four-page insert titled *Orizzonti geopolitici (Geopolitical Horizons [sic!])* devoted to thirty years since the collapse of the USSR [sic!], in a box entitled *From Poland a sign that the empire was shaking [sic!]*. The author, Federigo Argentieri, historian of Eastern Europe and professor of political science at the John Cabot University in Rome, suggests (“maybe it is not a coincidence”) that the publishing house Adelphi wanted to publish Miron Białoszewski’s *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* because of the “approaching fortieth anniversary of the coup d’état carried out in Poland on December 13, 1981” [sic!]. This connection has probably occurred because, in the same article, Argentieri (2021: 12) refers to Antonio Macchia’s publication on *Solidarność and the end of the Soviet bloc*. The article ends with the surprising observation that “Jaruzelski’s military coup of forty years ago accomplished little: it simply delayed the collapse of the communist regime, which used both [sic!] Białoszewski (he died in 1983) and the uprising [sic!] for its propaganda ends. Which one regime melted like snow in the sun in 1990 with the entire Soviet bloc.” It is hard to understand – nor does the author of the “review” care to clarify this – when and how the communist government would have employed Białoszewski’s *Pamiętnik* for propaganda purposes. On the other hand, in support of such statements, which we could euphemistically describe as “bold” – if not historiographically – then at least from a chronological point of view, the article

is provided with a photograph of General Wojciech Jaruzelski and Lech Wałęsa at the same table. It is a pity that the author could not make Miron Białoszewski sit at it. After so many insightful reviews highlighting the literary, stylistic, cultural, and, of course, historical and documentary features of Białoszewski's masterpiece, the fact that the literary supplement to the most relevant Italian journal reveals this level of provincialism, making Polish literature (recently awarded the Nobel Prize) an insignificant addition to the country's political history, which at its turn is perceived as an (insignificant?) addition to the actual occurrence of this part of Europe, provides ample evidence that Russia, and only Russia – whether in the form of the USSR or in the not less disturbing form of Putin's presidency – still in 2021 seemed to be the only subject of interest for some Italian journalists. Readers of the "Corriere della Sera" might feel a sense of dissatisfaction because of the absence – in this Polish "szopka" – of a mention of the futile heroism of the Polish lancers who immolated themselves against the German panzers in September 1939<sup>21</sup>, but if anyone had feared the absence of the Polish pope, they can rest assured: Karol Wojtyła is there. After all, a saint is at his place in a "szopka", a Nativity crib.

Of course, the texts written by those who – even without being specialists in Polish affairs – can understand and appreciate the artistic nature of the *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* have a completely different depth and value<sup>22</sup>. An authentic Polish philologist reviewed the Italian translation in "Alias", a cultural supplement attached to the communist daily "il Manifesto", which brings together the best Italian critical minds. Andrea Ceccherelli (2021) reconstructed the text's genesis and carefully analyzed its stylistic features, observing how in the *Memoir*, the flow of memory consciously carries the characteristics of the spoken word, responding to a specific mimetic intention of the author. It recreates the memory process that takes place in the act of narration. The reviewer rightly mentions what Marek Edelman said to Hanna Krall about the story in *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* (*Shielding the flame: an intimate conversation with Dr. Marek Edelman, the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising*) "We are not writing history, we write about memory." A common feature of Białoszewski and Edelman is the anti-heroic and anti-patriotic way of telling about their respective Uprisings, just as the poet Anna Świrszczyńska did it performing other stylistic and literary choices. For the author of the review, the core of the narrative is the destruction of the Polish capital, "a symbolic event that equates to the collapse of our entire civilization." Art, philosophy, and religion have made all this possible by anesthetizing the human race with ideas as noble as they are illusory: only the "small facts", "fakciki", about

<sup>21</sup> It may be worth mentioning here that the inventor of this untruthful and defamatory legend was the "Corriere" correspondent in the Nazi rear of the conflict, Indro Montanelli.

<sup>22</sup> These need not necessarily be specialists in Polish culture, as the author of a review that appeared on the "Mangialibri" blog attests. Beyond some naiveté (and even some insistent and blatant "crypto citations" from the text published by Martinelli [2021] in the "Adige"), Gian Paolo Grattarola (2023) is the only reviewer who has correctly pointed out the Proustian quality of the process of reconstructing the workings of memory undertaken by Białoszewski in his *Memoir*.

which the survivor writes, are genuinely worth immortalizing, small things, fragile like the human being itself. According to Ceccherelli, the *Memoir* should be read “aloud, and a good director could transfer it to the theater”. Another critic, Eraldo Affinati, also captured the theatrical potential of the text. In the newspaper “Il Riformista” on October 21, 2021, the writer noted: “At first glance, the *Memoir* does not seem to be a literary work, although it is in the highest degree.” Indeed Affinati (2021) – even if he does not know Polish – seems to have fully grasped the literary quality of the *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego*. Affinati writes: “Anyone who approaches its dense and compact pages [...] arranged in a very suggestive notebook style, between every day and hallucinatory chronicle, [...] has the impression that he is clutching a hot lava stone in his hand: there is no time to breathe between one page and another, everything seems to collapse in front of our eyes.” The point that “toponymic explanations give the narrative vitality and color: they are part of the account,” is very accurate. Affinati has perfectly captured the “almost theatrical” nature of the “broken and repeated” sentences, composed “as if they were to be recited in a monologue on stage.”

If one can express a value judgment, the first review, which appeared in the “Tuttolibri” supplement to the newspaper “La Stampa” on August 28, 2021, appears to be the most beautiful. Author Federica Manzon emphasized various female characters’ roles in the *Memoir*. It is no accident that the review title is: *Varsavia 1944: gli uomini insorgono e nei rifugi comandano le donne* (*Warsaw 1944: Men Rise, and Women Rule in Shelters*). Manzon, who also does not speak Polish, attaches great importance to the “syncopated style” of the text, “animated by the conviction that writing must avoid all sublime to go straight to sensations.” For the author of *La nostalgia per gli altri*, what Białoszewski performs is “an ethical effort that aims to convey through the style the authenticity of a historical fact that only memory can reconstruct.” The language of the *Memoir* for Manzon is “rhythm, impression, charm, gulf.” Language makes it a fascinating reading “which plunges the reader to the ears in the streets, sewers, the rubble of Warsaw.” The comment that the *Pamiętnik* “is perhaps above all a city’s novel” seems accurate. “A map in which the accuracy of dates and places becomes a way to hold together those places that lose their regular continuity under bombardment and begin to disintegrate, covered with holes, gaps while everything is on fire”. One has to admit that the ending of the review has a lyrical force rarely found in critical texts: “Suddenly everything becomes quiet. [...] Capitulation. Insurgents lay down their weapons. [...] And it is precisely in this moment of suspension, when young Miron asks himself the question: ‘but is this the real end?’, that the final meaning of all wars resounds: when the city is no more, the survivors wander among monstrous ruins, then high, then low, then empty, when the destroyed Warsaw becomes Dresden, Hiroshima, Sarajevo, Aleppo, and we only hear someone’s cry that explodes, loud and liberating.” A minimal reference to the *Pamiętnik* occurs in a booklet enclosed in the financial daily “Il Sole 24 ore” in January 2022. The former Consul of the Republic of Poland in Milan has written a foreword to *Varsavia 1944* by Paolo Colombo

(2022), a full professor of Political Sciences at Milan Catholic University. Dr. Adrianna Siennicka has quoted an excerpt from the afterword of the Italian translation of the *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* related to the “inexistence of a language capable of communicating the meaning of an experience, the destruction of an entire city seen from the inside, unprecedented in the recent history of mankind.” The booklet itself is supposedly a history lesson on the Warsaw Uprising. It refers to Białoszewski’s *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* only in the bibliography, attesting (once again) how little historians seem to grasp the new perspectives a literary work of art can open on such an intricate and sensitive subject<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> An approach to the *Pamiętnik*'s text dictated by extra-literary circumstances such as – for example – the anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising on August 1st is not always a harbinger of an underestimation of its artistic depth. Evidence of this is the article *Insurrezione di Varsavia. Un monito per l'attualità (Warsaw Uprising. A warning for current events)*, published on the website “Abbanews. Notizie senza confine”, where Paola Copello (2022) juxtaposes Białoszewski's *Memoir* with Andrzej Wajda's film *Kanal* and emphasizes the classical origins of a narrative where “on the hero in arms is superimposed an anti-hero, a novel Ulysses, destined to land on an Ithaca of which few original traces will survive.” On the other hand, I have here deliberately omitted to go through the review by Alfredo Ronci (2022?) that appeared on the blog [www.paradisodegliorchi.com](http://www.paradisodegliorchi.com), since is centered on the astonishingly mistaken belief that 1944 Warsaw uprising was the first act of resistance waged by the Poles against the German occupant. Nobody is obliged to write about topics he knows very little about.

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