

STUDIEN ZUR KULTURELLEN UND LITERARISCHEN  
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Michał Glowński

# Totalitarian Speech



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# Introduction: The Critic's Revenge

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Michał Głowiński (born in 1934) is among the most eminent living Polish literary scholars. In a career spanning almost six decades at the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IBL PAN), Głowiński has published over thirty books, largely specializing in twentieth-century Polish literature and literary theory. During the communist period in Poland, he gained particular recognition in opposition circles for his extensive work on the language of socialist totalitarianism as a form of Orwellian “newspeak.” Some of this analysis forms the core of the present volume. In 2005, Northwestern University Press published Marci Shore’s translation of *The Black Seasons* (*Czarne sezony*), an account of Głowiński’s traumatic childhood experiences as a Polish Jew in the Warsaw Ghetto during the German Occupation. In a more recent autobiographical work, he made an important step for gay rights in Poland by becoming one of very few Polish scholars to declare his own homosexuality.

Głowiński is a pivotal figure within Polish literary studies because he stands at the interface of two opposing paradigms. On the one hand, he is a leading exponent and promoter of Polish structuralism. This approach is clearly evident in the method of his analyses, which concentrate on closely defining and tracing the relations between multiple recurring elements within individual texts and broader literary trends. On the other hand, he anticipates and supports the “social turn” in literary studies, opening the field to influences from the broader domain of cultural studies. Here, Głowiński appears almost in the role of mediator. He does not wish to reduce literary studies to a mere sub-discipline of cultural studies, yet he refuses to ignore the deep and productive interpenetration of the two fields. According to Głowiński, the study of literature must maintain its specificity, while opening itself to contact with various other disciplines concerned with diverse aspects of human culture and society.

The present volume exhibits this powerful thread of continuity running through Głowiński’s diverse and extensive scholarly oeuvre, as structuralist literary analysis meets the “social turn.” The first section of the book – “Literature and Totalitarian Experience” – largely sees Głowiński in his primary role, engaged in exhaustive analysis of literary texts and tendencies. His essay on “Narration as Dramatic Monologue” is a classic of Polish literary studies, mapping the rise of the dramatic monologue in Polish prose of the late 1950s. The context here is explicitly political, since this short-lived literary trend arose immediately after the

so-called “thaw” of 1956, when Polish communist totalitarianism briefly moved in a more liberal direction. In other essays in this section, Głowiński assesses “Polish Literature on the Holocaust,” the contradictory movement of “Socialist Parnassianism,” and “newspeak” as the language of socialist realist narrative (“Narrative, NewSpeak, Totalitarian Form”). In the two remaining pieces, Głowiński engages in close analysis of individual texts: the medieval *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf* and Jonathan Littell’s controversial novel, *The Kindly Ones*. The essay on Marcolf may at first appear somewhat tangential to the main subject of *Totalitarian Speech*. In fact, it contributes a crucial commentary on the logic and rhetoric of proletarian revolution, while its conclusion reveals a cryptic, though unmistakable allusion to a communist ruler who often liked to play the Marcolfian “bumpkin” – namely, Nikita Khrushchev.

The second section of the book – “Political Forms of Language” – collects various essays on the manipulations of totalitarian discourse both before and after 1989. Głowiński wrote the majority of these pieces during the communist period, when he produced his classic analyses of the diverse forms of socialist propaganda. Among them, he examines the daily distortions of the socialist press (“Ulysses’ Day”), the official media coverage of John Paul II’s visit to Poland in 1979 (“An Account of the Papal Visit”), the meaning of national identity (“Russian, German, Jew”), the cult of the leader as a fairy tale narrative (“Stalin the Magician”), the ideological rewriting of history (“Don’t Let the Past Run Wild”), and the instrumentalization of anti-Semitic discourse during the political crisis of March 1968 (“Instigators”).

Of course, “totalitarian discourse” is by no means restricted to ostensibly communist political systems. Indeed, Głowiński finds similar rhetorical and discursive strategies at work in Nazi Germany (“Talking Like Them”) and even in post-1989 democratic Poland (“Three Days with *Nasz Dziennik*” and “The Crisis in Patriotic Discourse”). In the key essay, “On Totalitarian Discourse,” he delineates the general characteristics of totalitarianism not merely as “a way of exercising power,” but rather as a “mode of speech.” Above all, totalitarian speech imposes an all-embracing worldview and an associated set of dichotomous divisions from the omniscient perspective of an authoritative and radically “de-subjectivized” speaker.

The final section of the book – “Anti-Semitic Discourse” – includes essays on a particular variant of totalitarian speech whose function has been to vilify and incite violence against Jewish people both in Poland and elsewhere. Głowiński analyzes the “Characteristics of Anti-Semitic Discourse” and its various manifestations in Poland (“Always the Same”), while also offering close textual analysis of the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (“The Poetics of a Political Forgery”). The volume concludes with a peculiar character portrait of Jan Dobraczyński, an anti-

Semitic ideologue and writer who received the title of “Righteous of the Nations” for his role in saving Jewish children – including Michał Głowiński himself – from the Nazi Holocaust. Here, we witness the unpredictable relations between discourse and action in an individual life. Głowiński movingly acknowledges that he partly owes his life to a man whose courageous actions came into sharp conflict with his hateful words. As the power of totalitarian discourse unleashed death and destruction in Warsaw under the German Occupation, Jan Dobraczyński resisted the concrete consequences of his own anti-Semitic ideology.

In his analysis of diverse totalitarian texts and rhetorical strategies, Głowiński methodically applies the tools and techniques of structuralist literary criticism. He is convinced that analyzing the literary characteristics of non-literary texts and discourse may help us to understand certain persuasive mechanisms and deeper meanings at work within them. This conviction also reveals an indefatigable faith in the power of human reason. By reasoning, analyzing, explaining and exposing, Głowiński hopes to gain a certain measure of power over even the most terrifying political and social phenomena, subjecting them to the processes of reflection and critique. Detailed analysis and rational inquiry are the frontline weapons in his intellectual struggle with the irrational excesses of naked political force and racial hatred.

Totalitarian power has two primary means of social control at its disposal: violence and the discourse of propaganda. Violence is indispensable – and a literary scholar can do little to resist it. However mighty the pen, the sword may always cut off the hand that clutches it. Yet the linguistic manipulations of “newspeak” form an even more insidious and far-reaching means of control, as George Orwell revealed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. If a totalitarian regime can brainwash an entire society to believe that two plus two equals five, then violence becomes increasingly superfluous. According to Głowiński, literary scholars and other intellectuals have an important role to play in resisting this process. By revealing how totalitarian speech functions, they can expose the mechanisms of manipulation, rendering them less persuasive or even ineffectual.

Indeed, it was partly thanks to the tireless efforts of opposition intellectuals that the mendacious rhetoric of Polish socialism broke down in the period leading up to the Solidarity revolution. The regime was left with no alternative but to fall back on violence, as General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law in 1981. This strategy would prove unsustainable in the long term, especially once Mikhail Gorbachev removed the underlying threat of Soviet intervention. The project of Polish totalitarian speech collapsed, as Poles eagerly embraced democracy and the discursive hubbub of a free press. Nevertheless, its influence has survived in unexpected forms. In the final section of this volume, Głowiński traces the peculiar

afterlife of totalitarian discourse in the nationalistic and anti-Semitic divagations of certain fiercely “anti-communist” groupings in post-1989 Poland.

Diverse totalitarian systems have always attempted to subjugate literature and literary studies to the limitations of a totalizing ideology and discourse. Socialist realism was the official literary style of communist Poland. Accordingly, literary studies and criticism also had to follow strict guidelines. Literature was always subject to ideological interrogation. Michał Głowiński effectively reverses this power relation, submitting the language of totalitarian systems to the discourse and analytical techniques of literary studies. In his essays, ideology is always subject to literary interrogation. This is Głowiński's way of fighting back against linguistic oppression. As we read the works collected in this volume, we bear witness to a sustained campaign of scholarly resistance to manipulation and violence – the spirited revenge of a literary critic.