Tadeusz Konwicki

The Minor Apocalypse

Mała apokalipsa

Presented by: Zofia Paetz

The Minor Apocalypse first appeared in 1979 as a separate issue of the quarterly magazine *Zapis* published in the Polish underground press (pl. drugi obieg). The first official edition, finally released in 1988, was preceded by fifteen prohibited publications that helped combat censorship under the oppressive regime in Poland.

The action takes place over the course of a single day – 22 July, the National Day of the Rebirth of Poland, established to commemorate the proclamation of the communist Manifesto of the Polish Committee of National Liberation in 1944. The whole city is celebrating the 40th anniversary, demonstrators' chants resonate through the streets, banners proclaiming 'We have built socialism!' are everywhere, and during the visit of the First Secretary of the CPSU, Poland is to be announced as the 17th republic of the Soviet Union. The plot opens with an unexpected visit to the main character made by two befriended writers from opposition circles, who make him a surprising proposal: they suggest that he burn himself in front of the Palace of Culture and Science, where the rally is taking place. This meeting marks the beginning of the protagonist's journey, as he wanders through an endless maze of streets, courtyards, and tenements, facing his past and the challenge he has been set.

The main character is a Polish writer who was once a leading penman of the anti-communist opposition. He shares his biography with Konwicki himself, and many scholars consider him to be the author's *porte-parole*, although at the same time, he is a perfect example of an everyman – a portrait of a Polish intellectual of the communist era. We do not know his name; he himself says: 'I am one of you. I am a perfect anonymous *Homo sapiens*.' His social roles define him: citizen, writer, oppositionist – roles which he experiences, however, as if from a distance, like an actor who merely plays out the assigned script, while in fact he is consumed by a sense of alienation from his own actions and the milieu. Furthermore, all the characters in the novel succumb to the theatricalization of existence: both representatives of the regime and dissidents seem to hide in their assigned roles, thus exposing the image of loners entangled in politics with every gesture, incapable of forming lasting, transparent relationships.

The novel is a vision of the collapse not only of community but also of the world in general – a sense of the ending permeates the entire novel: the Polish declines, the protagonist's friends are dying, the city's architecture is slowly collapsing, gas and water cuts are a daily occurrence, and weather anomalies and snow in July does not surprise anyone. The apocalyptic tone resounds even more loudly: the historical and political perspective expands to a planetary scale as the protagonist's internal monologue occasionally touches on not only political, but also historical and even cosmic issues. The existential crisis of the individual is intertwined with the vividly commented moral crisis of Western civilization devastated by the traumatic experiences of two world wars, and finally

encompasses the entire cosmos rushing towards a great catastrophe.

The motif of suicide by self-immolation clearly refers to historical figures such as Ryszard Siwiec, who protested in 1968 at the 10th-Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw, or Jan Palach from Prague, who burned himself against the Warsaw Pact's aggression towards Czechoslovakia. Many researchers have emphasised the Passion motifs appearing in the protagonist's monologue – not only is his act embedded in martyrology tradition, but also his journey is a kind of Stations of the Cross. This analogy opens the perspective of questions about the meaning of the heroic act of an individual as the ultimate expression of freedom and the driving force behind political and social change. Remarkably, in the protagonist's life, artistic malaise intertwines with the inability to decide – irony becomes his only weapon against the feeling of helplessness and mediocrity.

Konwicki creates a satirical picture of Warsaw in the late 1970s, set in an intertextual network (the most frequently cited references include Kafka's *The Trial*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), centred on artistic circles and their relations with the political elite. Currently, the notion of great political act and historical agency can resonate differently in the context of growing interest in social resilience and alternative forms of resistance (nonradical, counter passive, subversive) which can be observed among Polish scholars (e.g. Dauksza, Zalewska, Wandzel). *The Minor Apocalypse*, as a story about a writer torn between the desire for artistic freedom and a sense of social duty, can still resonate with discussions surrounding the issue of critical and engaged art.

LANGUAGE: Polish/Polski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: