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Between a Phantasm and the Daily Life. Herstoric In(ter)ventions in Latest Polish Women’s Literature*

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ABSTRACT: The article explores herstoric in(ter)ventions in Polish women’s literature of the last decades. The author analyzes selected texts by Izabela Filipiak, Joanna Bator, Anna Dziewit-Meller, Martyna Bunda, Liliana Hermetz and Inga Iwasiów, drawing particular attention to the strategies of revisionist re-writing women’s phantasms and their influence on the identity of the protagonists and family stories. The author points out that after 1989, there emerges a need to reconsider women’s phantasms present in Polish national imaginari-um and the inspiring influence of precursory works by Maria Janion, who was one of the first in Polish literary studies to reflect upon women’s experience of history in gender perspective. The article also refers to influential philosophical concepts by Jolanta Brach-Czaina, seeking in daily, repetitive activities transgressive potential and gestures of resistance against the excluding mechanisms of History, as well as strategies of resilience against trauma.

KEYWORDS: phantasm, daily life, herstory, woman, Polish Mother, revolution

Herstory and Literature

Women are more likely to be “represented” than to be described or to have their stories told – much less be allowed to tell their own stories. It may be that the more women are absent from the public arena, the

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more abundant the representations. Olympus is filled with goddesses, but Greek city-states had no female citizens. The Virgin reigns above altars at which (male) priests officiate. Marianne is the incarnation of the French Republic, that most virile of regimes. Woman – imagined, imaginary, even fantasized – epitomizes everything else (Duby, Perrot 1992: X).

The quoted conclusion of French historians, Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot points towards a tension between a phantasmic imaginary version of a woman and her actual experience, between the need for an allegoric woman, referring to something different than her own self, and erasing women from public space and historical discourse and expropriating them from their own bodies. These issues became some of research problems for women's history and gender history (Canning 2010). The creation and development of women's history as an independent research discipline took place in the 1960s in the United Kingdom and the United States, and the 1970s in France. Crystallization of this research practice was connected with such factors as anthropologization of contemporary historiography and broadening heretofore research perspective with issues connected with women's experience, feminization of academic structures, and, finally, the necessity of reclaiming one's own past and memory as constitutive factors of emancipatory project (Nora 1989; Perrot 2006). The American feminists of the second wave created the "herstory" neologism, which was, in principle, an element of criticizing traditional historic writing, dominated by an androcentric perspective: "the wordplay of her-story (her story) became a counterbalance for his-tory (his story)" (Kuźma-Markowska 2014: 179). The initial goal, which was to return women to history, soon turned out to be insufficient – scholars such as Natalie Zemon Davies, Gerda Lerner or Joan Wallach Scott undertook reflection on the reasons behind systemic exclusion of women from official historiography (Davies 1976; Lerner 1979; Scott 1986), using post-structuralist thought or Michel Foucault's concept of power-knowledge as inspiration.

A breakthrough moment for the history of women turned out to be the publication of Scott's article *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis* (Scott 1986: 1053–1075), in which the scholar pointed out that in traditional historiography, marginalization of research into women's past is connected with not noticing the research potential of the category of gender. Acknowledging the usefulness of this notion in relation to not just the issues traditionally associated with womanhood, but also a broad spectrum of historical issues made it possible to undertake critical reflection on patriarchal mechanisms of power and the institutions stabilizing those, as well as current models of femininity and masculinity. This necessarily simplified delineation of changes happening in the field of women's history serves me to emphasize that in Poland, the development of this historical practice took place in a different manner than in the West. In Poland, history of women as a research field constituted after

1989, in the post-transformation period (after the fall of the Communist rule), and, thus, at a time when its Western equivalent was in the process of transforming itself into gender history. The relationship between Polish historical and gender studies was also shaped in a different way. According to Dobrochna Kałwa, a women's history scholar and theoretician:

In Poland, as elsewhere in the world, women's past is the subject of interest both to historians and to gender studies scholars. However, if in Western (Anglo-Saxon or German) historiography we can notice an approach and interaction between various communities of broadly understood humanities, in Polish circumstances, instead of interdisciplinary dialogue and cooperation, we are dealing with a situation where two research trends, historical and "gender", remain in opposition toward one another, offering different and separate conceptions and interpretations of women's past (Kałwa 2014a: 118).

Kałwa repeatedly emphasized the local specificity of historical research in Central and Eastern Europe as characterized by considerable distrust towards gender theories; she sought the reasons behind this state of affairs, among others, in the fear of being accused of ideologization and instrumentalization (Kałwa 2014b: 17; Szewczyk 2023: 99)¹. Despite the reluctance of professional historians, the aforementioned neologism "herstory" found its place in contemporary Polish humanities where – among other reasons, due to popular historiography – there functions a notion of a herstoric turn, clearly emerging in the last years (Grzebalska 2015: 147–148; Szewczyk 2023: 94–114), and connected with the increased interest in women's past in the publishing field, popular historiography and literary studies. Due to the growing interest in women's history within literary studies, the subject of my sketch consists in narratives that I describe as herstoric. I take this concept to denote literary texts that problematize women's experience of history and that create a field of in(ter)ventive negotiations of meanings of female phantasms and allegories rooted in national memory. Herstoric narratives establish a relationship between literature and history that does not only play a background role, but becomes subjected to critical reflection, considerably influencing the identity of women protagonists. Such an understanding of herstoric narratives makes it possible to avoid the danger of abusing the widespread notion of herstory, frequently used in reference to all stories about women (Nowacki 2019: 149). For the purposes of my reflections I have selected texts created over the course of the last few decades, not infrequently inspired by autobiographic experience, inscribed into the genres of a *Bildungsroman*, a neo-post-settler novel (see Siewior 2013), or

¹ However, it needs to be emphasized that in recent years, monographs concerning the history of women in the period of Communism wherein the category of gender becomes a key research tool were published in Poland (Fidelis 2010; Stańczak-Wiślicz, Perkowski, Fidelis, Klich-Kluczevska 2020; Artwińska, Mroziak, Jarska et al. 2021).

family novel, but ones that always pertain to its women protagonists negotiating their own identities. These are stories that formulate sharp questions concerning the participation of women in the Solidarity revolution, that attempt to deal with growing up at the time of Polish People's Republic (1945–1989), that touch upon the issue of inheriting war trauma, or finding one's place in a new reality of the post-war or transformation period.

I would like to locate my remarks on herstoric narratives in the context of two research proposals seemingly connected only by being created at a similar time. I am referring here to the concepts by the prominent Polish literary studies scholar and historian of ideas, Maria Janion, contained in her book *Kobiety i duch inności* [*Women and the Spirit of Otherness*] and to the reflection by the philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czaina, found in the essay collections *Szczeliny istnienia* [*Fissures of Being*] (1992) and *Błony umysłu* [*Membranes of the Mind*] (2003). It should be emphasized that despite the passage of time, both publications continue to resonate in Polish humanities, inspiring reflections concerning women's experiences and identities. Maria Janion's *Kobiety i duch inności* is one of the first Polish publications in which the scholar drew a framework for revisionist thinking about the presence of women in history. The author made both historic and fictional figures into protagonists of her book: ones that performed gender and cultural transgressions, were gifted with a distinguishing trait of otherness, difference and madness, which defined their presence in public spaces as well as in literature (Mrozik 2012: 44–45). There is no doubt as to the foundational nature of Janion's work, but it needs to be stated that her conclusions also met with some doubts on the part of scholars interested in women's history. As Aleksandra Ubertowska remarked:

Janion's study is, therefore, a "foundational", basic work – but it does not mean that it is free from methodological limitations. It seems that the book's weakness lies in the fact that cases of anonymous women thrown into history that challenges their heretofore stabilized gender roles do not fit the horizon of Janion's feminist writing. And it appears that it is precisely a confrontation – struggling with "surcharge of history" that comes suddenly and irreversibly changes the life of common women – that seems to be the essence of Polish fate in a feminist perspective (Ubertowska 2015: 19).

In her works Maria Janion repeatedly undertook the subject of female political figures, following the transformations of the French Marianne – the allegory of the Revolution into an image of strict and dignified Republic, or studying the history of the personification of Polonia as a symbolic embodiment of the body of the nation² (Janion 2006, 2007). The scholar drew attention to how

2 Janion's analyses, located in the framework of studies into women's experience of history, saw their continuation by inspiring – both conceptually and methodologically – the monographic

the 19th century saw a growing need within political imagination for women's figures, gradually undergoing allegorization that resulted in them being made melodramatic and kitschy. Janion's analyses of the "long endurance" of women – phantasmic images showed their influence over collective imagination and the national identity discourse, which is particularly significant in the perspective of research into women's history and showcasing the contrast between phantasmic femininity and actual women's experience. For this reason, the quotation cited at the beginning of my sketch could be a motto to Maria Janion's reflections; in her research, she used the notion of a phantasm, understood as "various kinds of imaginings, images, emotional subjects, delusions, mirages, mystifications, hallucinations, dreams and illusions" (Janion 2006: 6), which, however, result in enduring consequences within consciousness, and thus, can also have impact on women's biographies and histories.

If the subject of interest of the author of the project of phantasmic criticism was what is subversive and focused around otherness, then Jolanta Brach-Czaina's reflection in *Szczeliny istnienia*, one of the most important Polish philosophical books of the 1990s, concentrated on the experience of what is corporeal and sensual, connected with private space and repetitive household chores. Brach-Czaina's project was based on the philosophy of existential concrete, and one of its foundations consists in daily, invisible household work (*krzątactwo* – busyness), traditionally taken to be women's domain. In this perspective, busyness, inseparable from human existence, allows for a particular access to reality. At the same time, the pages of *Szczeliny istnienia* revealed a concept of embodied subject, rooted in being due to the repetitive actions and physiological processes omitted in philosophical reflection. As Tomasz Stawiszyński wrote in his introduction to a subsequent edition of Brach-Czaina's essays,

In the pages of this book there is revealed a fundamental ecstasy of the most banal daily practices and props. [...] And above all – as is, after all, an essential condition of the possibility of any kind of existence – the fact of having a body. With all of its usually undescribed, shamefully hidden "meaty" physiology. With excreting, body fluids, being born and dying, eating other bodies [...] (Stawiszyński 2018: 7).

I treat Janion's and Brach-Czaina's projects, briefly summarized above, in the perspective of women's history not as opposing, but, rather, complementing

volume *...czterdzieści i cztery. Figury literackie. Nowy kanon [...Forty and Four. Literary Figures. A New Canon]*, which is a project of gender-based re-reading of Polish literary and cultural canon, as well as its interpretation through the lens of women figures gifted with subversive potential (Mrozik i in. 2016). As the authors of the introduction to this extensive monograph remarked: "a central figure for our thinking of new canon was Polonia reconstructed by Maria Janion in, among others, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna [The Uncanny Slavic Tradition]* (2006). The interpretative fields she delineated showed the directions for exploration, intellectual investigation and were clues in analyzing the figures that create our historical and literary memory" (Rudaś-Grodzka, Smoleń 2016: 12).

one another. Taking into account their ceaseless influence within Polish gender studies, in the present sketch I focus on reading selected herstoric narratives created after 1989 through the lens of both concepts. My aim here is not to create a total synthesis of the issue I am interested in, but to show the way in which women's literature, as emerging over the last decades, captures women's phantasms, revising women's allegories and identity figures rooted in national imagination. I also aim to show how herstoric narratives undertake reflection over History through the lens of daily life, repetitive activities that turn out to be practices of resilience against the experienced trauma and, at the same time, gestures of resistance against discriminating historical mechanisms.

Women Rebels and Polish Mothers

A reconstruction of herstoric in(ter)ventions in Polish literature of the last decades is not possible without taking into account Izabela Filipiak's (born in 1961) short stories published in the 1990s, namely, *SKA* (from the volume *Śmierć i spirala* [*Death and the Spiral*], 1992) and *Weronika, portret z kotem* [*Weronika, a Portrait with a Cat*], from the volume *Niebieska menażeria* [*Blue Menagerie*], 1997), as well as her novel *Absolutna amnezja* [*Absolute Amnesia*] (1995), one of the most important texts of the period after the system transformation. The lively discussion she instigated became – as Przemysław Czapliński noted – the first debate concerning gender in Polish literary criticism, while its participants saw the category of gender as useful for analyzing literary texts (Czapliński 2024: 213).

From the perspective of my reflections, what is significant is the autobiographical signature of Filipiak's oeuvre: the author had participated in Maria Janion's seminar at the University of Gdańsk. The scholar herself dedicated an affirmative essay published in the collection *Kobiety i duch inności* to *Absolutna amnezja*, and recognized herself in the figure of the Teacher-Mistress presented in the novel. While analyzing the transgressive potential of Filipiak's teenage heroine in Polish literary canon, Monika Świerkosz drew attention to the fact that it is not a coincidence that her name is Marianna, which refers to the imaginary representations of the French Republic and one of the most recognizable feminine political figures, whose transformations were analyzed by Maria Janion (Świerkosz 2016: 405). According to the scholar, the transformation of the Goddess of Liberty – Revolution into the stately personification of the Republic associated with motherhood and strict morality denoted the end of the anti-structural phase of the revolutionary impulse and sending women to traditional social roles and private spaces. Filipiak made the protagonist of her novel into a girl gifted with sensitivity and a keen sense of observation, whose adolescence happens at the time of the violent strikes at the Polish Coast in the 1970s. Torn between her father – a secretary of the local party cell – and her mother, engaged into opposition activities, Marianna discovers that both at school and at home she is being socialized to take a subordinate place in social

hierarchy and fulfill a reproductive role. In this literary way, Filipiak processed the mechanism of the need for a feminine allegory with the simultaneous marginalization of women's experiences, as diagnosed by Janion.

Izabela Filipiak was one of the first to diagnose the male-centric nature of the heroic foundational myth of Solidarity and the traditional gender contract reproduced by the Solidarity opposition, which Maria Janion (2003: 7) also wrote about in the introduction to the Polish edition of Shana Penns's *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland*. The short stories *Weronika, portret z kotem* and *SKA* are connected by a similar narrative perspective, established by the protagonists' emigration; years later, they reminisce about their engagement into opposition activities, an experience that is deeply hurting, unprocessed for both. In both short stories there also recurs the particularly significant moment of young women being excluded from the space of the student strike – a space where History is symbolically taking place. It turns out that the source of this exclusion lies in their sexuality: by not having an exclusive disposer, it is perceived as a threat to the seriousness of the “masculine matter” which consists in participation in Solidarity structures (see Mrozik 2012: 163)³.

Reminiscing about her youth spent in Gdańsk at the time of the late People's Polish Republic, the narrator of *Weronika...* wants to reconstruct the story of the eponymous character, realizing, years later, how the latter influenced her own identity, artistic and life choices⁴. Regaining the story of *Weronika* – an emancipated painter with an open house – full of “areas of silence” has its meaning not just for the narrator's individual biography; it also serves to capture mechanisms whereby women's oppositional activities are erased. At the time, the relationship between the two women is mediated and conditioned by Seweryn, *Weronika*'s son and the narrator's fiance, who is the leader of an informal student group. Filipiak recounts its microstructure, dominated by young active men focused around their leader, and, simultaneously, unmasks the relations within, which save a narrow strip of approved roles for women: those of muses, wives, or fiancées ready for sacrifice. As Agnieszka Mrozik

3 A similar motif appears in Agnieszka Graff's essay *Patriarchat po Seksmisji (Patriarchy after Sex Mission)*, in which the author analyzes the Polish political discourse and the Solidarity gender contract by referring to her own experiences: “In 1987, as a 17-year-old ‘oppositionist's girlfriend’ I was carried out, against my will, from a demonstration when it seemed batoning was imminent. On the one hand I was livid, on the other, I knew that the bruises the boys will leave the battle with will be worth more in their own and in my eyes if I allow myself to be first carried out of the battlefield. [...] Today I am convinced that clashes with the police and the later stories about them were in the NSZ community a rite whereby masculine identity was created” (Graff 2021: 37–38).

4 The narrator emphasizes the radical difference between *Weronika* and other women, manifested in her appearance, behavior, and undertaken activities: “she was completely different from those I knew in passing, herded into work, tired of getting up too early, exhausted in buses, teetering at the edge of irritation, beyond which dementia begins, while in queues – mothers of my young friends” (Filipiak 2006: 428). Thus, women's experiences of the Polish People's Republic construct a generation gap.

aply notes, “In Filipiak’s texts there is an essential difference between women and men engaged in oppositional activities: men function as individuals who have their personalities, ambitions, passions, while women appear as a not very interesting, gray mass, a set that only gains meaning when it is located in the orbit of masculine interest” (Mrozik 2012: 162).

A group uniting young people, seeking an escape from the dreariness and hopelessness of late Polish People’s Republic, becomes similar to Romantic conspiracy and independence-minded associations from the post-Partition period⁵, that valued, above all, brotherly relations and had – in addition to the patriotic dimension – also a clear compensatory function with regard to patriarchal structures shaken due to the loss of independence. As aptly noted by Elżbieta Ostrowska, “manhood, strained due to the circumstances of external political oppression, could become reborn and strengthened via the force of masculine relations uniting secret associations of conspirators, for whom the feminine element, if appearing in a formula different from safe motherhood, could only be a threat” (Ostrowska 2004: 220)⁶. The scholar points to the homosocial nature of Polish culture, referring to the notion of homosocial relationships, as proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), and secured by the figure of a mother (see Janion 2007: 272). Indeed, as Ostrowska aptly noted:

Despite it usually taking the shape of national myth and stereotype, the phantasm of the Polish Mother reveals in its deep structure, above all, how rooted the ideal of womanhood realizing itself through motherhood is in collective imagination. [...] In Polish culture, where [...] one can notice a domination of masculine relationships based on the principles of idealized brotherhood, femininity takes on the shape of the phantasm of a mother, who not only does not threaten brotherly relations, but, in a sense, even legitimizes them – after all, brothers must have a mother. That mother is a phantasmic Polish Mother – an ideal moth-

5 The Partitions of Poland took place between 1772 and 1795. As a result, the then Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth lost its territories for the sake of the neighboring countries: Russia, Prussia and Austria.

6 In the short story *Weronika, portret z kotem* Filipiak demonstrates the “long endurance” of this mechanism. The narrator recalls the justification behind the refusal to let her into the university during student strikes: “Eventually they would have let me in had I been married. In these important times, my friends, like Renaissance scholars, discovered that the unpredictable feminine element could only disturb the gravity of their focus” (Filipiak 2006: 448). In the novel *Absolutna Amnezja*, Marianna becomes a member of a school band led by a teenage boy that meets in post-German bunkers. The school rebellion organized by the band happens at the same time at the Coast strikes of the 1970s. When the girl sees the leader of the student group sitting in the headmaster’s armchair, she begins to understand that “revolutionaries” take over the attributes of the overthrown authorities, and she becomes excluded from their community and deprived of any alternative, as both in the current system and in the structures of opposition she will always be located in a subordinate position as a representative of the “worse” sex. Therefore, her place in the rebel group can only be secured by taking on the role of “the leader’s girlfriend” (see Świerkosz 2016: 407).

er who, in the phantasmic imagination, also becomes the motherland (Ostrowska 2004: 223).

In her short stories, Filipiak attempts to perform a revisionist re-writing of the phantasm of the Polish Mother, depicting an ideal relationship between a woman and her homeland, and, at the same time, delineating the framework of women's activities (Dąbrowska 2012: 162). Indeed, the figure of the Polish Mother remains inextricably connected with two kinds of reproduction – biological and cultural. By giving birth to sons, the Polish Mother serves to strengthen the national community, and by raising them in a patriotic spirit, she becomes a guardian of the national cause. Although the figure of the Polish Mother evolved over centuries (see Titkow 2012), her influence would increase during key historical moments. The eponymous character in the short story *Weronika, portret z kotem*, seeking the possibility of self-expression and confirmation of her uniqueness outside the realm of the art and making her surroundings aesthetic, in the conspiratorial activities, succumbs to the seductive power of the phantasm. The figure of the Polish Mother, initially tempting Weronika with the promise of recognition and broadening her area of activity, turns out to be a trap of contradictory demands, deprives her of autonomy and leads to the disintegration of the “self”:

She did what she could to reconcile the demands of history, family, art, and her own. [...] She outgrew that mother who, with unsurpassed coquettishness, wanted to be worshiped, and revealed herself to us as the Polish Mother. Earlier, she wanted to be everything for her son, now she became for him the law, the guardian of national values, family laws and those holy, inalienable mother rights (Filipiak 2006: 445–446).

The phantasm of the Polish Mother remains inextricably connected with the institutionalization of motherhood (Rich 2001), with its subordination to the interest of national collective. Kaśka, the protagonist of the short story *SKA*, is removed from student strike when she becomes pregnant with one of the oppositionists. It seems that entering the role of a mother is the only solution for the protagonist, as it will allow her to avoid being accused of sexual promiscuity. Kaśka's body becomes politicized, located between the figure of a public woman, an allegory of the “shameless” Revolution and the figure of a majestic Polish Mother, disembodied and asexual. However, Kaśka does not agree to be subordinated to the mechanisms of biological and cultural reproduction, and decides to perform a double transgression: abortion and emigration. During one of the meetings of American Polonia, the drunk protagonist undermines and bursts open Romantic mythology, describing Poland as “the Frankenstein of the nations” (Filipiak 2006: 149). Not only is this concept a subversive reference to the Romantic messianic idea, assuming that Poland sacrifice itself in the name of returning liberty to other nations (Poland as the Christ of na-

tions), but it also refers to the figure from Mary Shelley's novel, grown over with various interpretations. In reference to the Latin etymology of the word monster (*monstrare* – to show), one can thus ask, what does the monstrous figure in Filipiak's text point to? Frankenstein's monster – a construct made out of dead bodies, brought to life without a woman's participation, read in gender perspective reveals a conglomerate of Thanatic and motherly imaginings, which includes fantasies about sacrificing a woman and depriving her of creative abilities (see Szczuka 2001: 160–175). In Filipiak's short story, motherhood subordinated to the interests of the nation becomes a variant of a story about reproduction taking place with the exclusion of female body.

In *Absolutna amnezja*, the institutionalization of motherhood becomes integrated with the phantasm of menstruation. The growing Marianna dreams about being surveilled by the Menstrual Police, a panoptical institution that gathers information about girls menstruating for the first time so as to “seal” their destiny as representatives of the “worse” sex and include them into reproductive mechanisms. The protagonist unsuccessfully tries to get her mother, engaged in aiding persecuted oppositionists, interested in the form of violence she experiences; however, her “first blood” is seen as a private issue, devoid of meaning in the hierarchy of experiences as compared with the blood shed by men in the battlefield⁷. As Agnieszka Mrozik aptly noted:

Filipiak unmasks the process whereby female body is controlled, disciplined by state, national, social institutions: in patriarchy, female body only has a utilitarian, ancillary role, while its suffering and pain become unimportant, pushed to the margin of History. Women's menstrual blood is worth less than the blood of men shed in the fight for the Homeland [...] (Mrozik 2012: 166–167)⁸.

7 It is worth reminding the reader that undertaking the topic of menstruation in *Absolutna Amnezja* met with unfavorable reactions of some male critics, who accused the novel of ideologization. The term “menstrual literature”, used with regard to the novel, began to function as a sort of stigma in literary criticism, ascribed to women's literature that would take up the topics of corporeality, physiology or sexuality.

8 I believe that the influence of “masculine” phantasm of menstruation can also be seen in the story described by Marta Dzido in the reportage *Kobiety Solidarności (Women of Solidarity)*, first published at the 35th anniversary of the August Agreements. The author references an article concerning one of the male oppositionists, a legend of underground Solidarity, published in press. After its publication, the editorial board received a letter in which the author pointed out the omission of her sister, Krystyna – the oppositionist's partner of many years, bringing up their daughter on her own, who paid for her engagement and work in the structures of the opposition by miscarrying twice. However, a suggestion of publishing the story from the woman's point of view met with a firm refusal: “Zuzanna A. called the editor's office and asked the editor whether her text would be published. ‘Never ever will I forget these words’, Zuzanna A. recalls today. ‘They were like a slap in the face. Brutal, very impolite, and, of course, arrogant also in the symbolic, cultural sphere. He said: We will not publish something like that in the context of Teoś Klincewicz, just look what you wrote – it's something about miscarriages... This isn't about Solidarity's struggle, about Solidarity's ethos, this is about some menstrual blood’...” (Dzido 2016: 91).

Filipiak made female phantasms the subject of her stories and the novel *Absolutna amnezja*, referring to visions of womanhood rooted in imagination. Her protagonists are gifted with transgressive potential, unmasking patriarchal mechanisms of power and History, which nullify women's experiences. However, open endings of the texts under analysis lead one to questioning the efficiency of women's gestures of resistance – the narrator of the short story *Weronika, portret z kotem* and the protagonist of *SKA* choose emigration, but they cannot liberate themselves from their own and national past, while for Weronika herself, the only form of rebellion against being reduced to the role of national monument turns out to lie in madness, manifested in fear of men. Confronted with the Menstrual Police, Marianna decides to run away, although, at the same time, she gains knowledge about menstruation as feminine initiation – the source of power and creative energy – drawn from folk beliefs. This leads to an association with Brach-Czaina's micro essay devoted to menstruating, in which the philosopher proposes the idea of shedding membranes of the mind as a difficult, but renewing practice leading to the sharpening of critical sense, noticing and transgressing imposed limitations: "By rejecting old membranes, we reach the living force of the mind, which consists in the power of disbelief, the ability to be wonder, the critical sense. The freed ability to doubt makes it possible to question oneself curiously and to reject the uncritically assumed notions, traditions, customs, values" (Brach-Czaina 2022: 173). Therefore, perhaps, revisionist and critical herstorical narratives, rooted in women's experiences, are a form of shedding membranes of the spirit, whose source lies in the physiological act of menstruating?

Peasant Women and Heroines of Socialist Labor

Years later, the narrator of *Weronika...* admits: "We stood at opposite sides of closed doors. Unfortunately, there was no one to open them for us" (Filipiak 2006: 446). In this way, she points out the impossibility of establishing an authentic relationship with the eponymous heroine, a relationship free of social demands and cultural mediation. In herstorical narrations created in the first decades of the 21st century relationships between women gain particular meaning. What becomes particularly significant are women's genealogies, marked with absence, rupture or trans-generational trauma, whose reconstruction within the novels' narratives is undertaken by representatives of the youngest generation, seeking sources of their own identity and otherness (see Szewczyk 2022: 33). These narratives frequently take on the form of family sagas that question linearity, are written out for women's voices and perspectives, in which official history is marked with clear gender edits, while, simultaneously, entering into relationships with family history, as well as the local, grass-roots history of daily life (see Zatora 2022). Their heroines are frequently women marked with war trauma, repatriates or newcomers seeking a possibility of social advancement and their places in post-war reality (see Szewczyk 2022: 35). Reflection over women's historical experiences, inscribed into these stories, is connected with a clear emphasis on the heroines' origins and so-

cial belonging. Reconstructing matrilineal heritage draws with it transgressing forms of noble culture, which traditionally shaped Polish national identity.

This is showcased wonderfully in Joanna Bator's (born in 1968) *Piaskowa Góra* [*Sand Mountain*] (2009), inscribed into the trend of novels about the shaping of locality in the so-called Recovered Territories⁹ and about growing up at the time of the Polish People's Republic (see Mrozik 2021). Its characters are repatriates and newcomers brought to the eponymous neighborhood in Wałbrzych by wartime turmoil and the promise of social advancement. Building a community and, at the same time, seeking one's own place in the world requires creating consolidating, new foundational myths and referring to well-known identity figures – however, neither the former nor the latter survive confrontation with reality and undergo ironic inversion in Bator's novel. A kind of a founding myth for the emerging community of newcomers consists, first, in searching for German gold, and, in later years, searching for “a good German from the FRG” as a perfect candidate for a husband for the inhabitants of Wałbrzych. In this way, Bator deconstructs the legend about the Polish princess Wanda, who refused to marry a German prince and chose to die in Vistula waters, preventing the outbreak of war by the means of willing self-sacrifice. In *Piaskowa Góra*, Bator re-writes the phantasm of a woman sacrifice, and thus, two symbolic sacrificial stakes burn in the novel. Zofia, a representative of the oldest generation of heroines, dies in a fire, thus becoming punished by a once-rejected suitor for her wartime affair with a Jew, Ignacy Goldbaum; her granddaughter Dominika is also supposed to die in a burning car, stigmatized for her multi-faceted otherness and breaking the rules of her own community by the forbidden affair with a priest. Therefore, Bator unambiguously indicates the endurance of the mechanism of punishing a woman as the one who, by opening her body to the Other, infringes upon the boundaries of her own national community and the one who becomes a carrier of otherness.

In *Piaskowa Góra*, the motif of inherited, trans-generational traumas and complicated, damaged family relationships between women recurs multiple times. Zofia and Ignacy's daughter, Jadzia, unloved by her mother, who sees in her the result of a rape – punishment for the wartime affair with the hidden Jew – subsequently creates and hands down to her daughter a phantasmic, romantic and heroic scenario built around the figure of her supposed father, a Polish soldier, who dies a tragic and noble death: “They found him at the bank of Pełcznica, in military uniform, he looked beautiful, as if he slept, covered with apple blossoms, star-like snowflakes, autumn leaves in all shades of gold” (Bator 2009: 342). The imagined figure of the absent father – a war hero – is indispensable for Jadzia to confirm her own uncertain and blurry identity through self-identification with the Polish Mother. This has destructive influence on her relationship with her daughter, Dominika. Indeed, the phantasm

9 The Regained Territories was a propaganda term for the territories that became part of Poland after World War Two following the decisions of the Potsdam Conference.

that protects brotherly relationships does not leave space for relations other than those between mothers and sons – the daughter only gains meaning when she becomes a mother herself and reproduces maternal scenario. Dominika, radically different from other inhabitants of Piaskowa Góra, does not fulfill the expectations set before her, and Jadzia, deprived of motherly love, cannot accept her daughter's otherness and is only able to sacrifice herself for her. At the same time, Dominika's mother appears in her own identity project as "her father's daughter", thus avenging herself on Zofia for the latter's emotional frigidity: "When she told her daughter about her childhood, Zofia was almost absent there, as this was the only way she could have her revenge. Jadzia never admitted, not even to herself, that she was jealous of the belated love that Zofia preserved far from her and that she gave wholly to her granddaughter" (Bator 2009: 343).

Drawing upon voraciously read romance books, Jadzia imagines for herself a Romantic and noble genealogy, according to which, "the grandmother whose namesake she was was a beautiful noblewoman married to an ordinary Strąk from Brzezina as a result of unspecified, but tragic circumstances of romance nature" (Bator 2009: 343). By the means of this strategy, the heroine attempts to recompense herself for the lack of motherly love and unsatisfactory marriage, but one can also see an attempt to negate shameful peasant heritage in this strategy. Dominika's persistent efforts to seek truth about family past, leading to the discovery of a Jewish ancestor, result in Jadzia's reluctance and fear of the need to confront herself with otherness suddenly discovered within herself, and the loss of a point of reference in the shape of imagined genealogy, built against the backdrop of national and Romantic phantasms.

The passion of uncovering family histories is instilled in Dominika by the falsified stories of her paternal grandmother, Halina, whose basis is an album found during repatriation: it becomes a kind of a "memory prosthetic" and a source of fantasies about the noble manor in the Borderlands¹⁰ as a place of rootedness. However, this imagined genealogy is not compensatory in nature, as in Jadzia's case, but is a particular form of grass-roots emancipation. Halina uses resettlement to Wałbrzych in order to erase the stigma of her son Stefan's illegitimate origin; she also deconstructs the idyllic imaginary version of a small Borderland homeland that she had never had, as she had been oppressed and subjected to patriarchal violence as a mother of an illegitimate child (see Zatora 2022: 228). In turn, someone else's photographs, found in the gained album, awake in Halina the force of storytelling, which makes it possible to establish a relationship with her granddaughter that is filled with tenderness. Similarly, Zofia, who discovers the similarity to her beloved Ignacy only in Dominika, loves her unconditionally, in a way she has never done for her daughter. Thus, Bator shows the impact of

10 Eastern Borderlands is an old term for the borderland Polish territories that became part of the USSR after World War Two and that currently belong to Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine. At the time of the Polish People's Republic, Communist authorities strove to eliminate this term.

History and national myths on the life of women through the lens of mother-daughter relationships, always marked with a lacuna, painful rupture and hurt.

For Katarzyna, the protagonist of Anna Dziewit-Meller's (born 1981) *Od jednego Lucypera* [From One Luciper] (2020), discovering empty spaces in family history has – as for Dominika in *Piaskowa Góra* – emancipating and, at the same time, therapeutic dimension. Here the family structure is also built only of women, burdened with the phantom of Marijka Solik, who had been accused of industrial espionage and sentenced to death in the Stalinist period. The heroine, robust and muscular, different from her mother, sister and other women, becomes a kind of an embodiment of the Socialist caryatid – a heroine of Socialist labor, feminine icon of social realism. As such, she is the victim of twofold violence – actual and symbolic. Indeed, as Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz aptly concludes: “In the museum of curiosities of the People's Polish Republic imaginary versions of women take up a prominent position. The so-called Socialist woman, a heroine of labor, a woman-brick layer, woman-tractor driver tends to be referenced as an oddity, a symbol of reversed reality” (Stańczak-Wiślicz 2013: 152; see Mroziak 2016). In the narrative of *Od jednego Lucypera*, there strongly resonates the conviction – firmly grounded after 1989 – concerning the illusory nature of the emancipating project decreed from the top up by the Polish People's Republic authorities and disastrous for women deceived by the promise of equal rights and possibility of working in masculine professions; in this perspective, the social realist heroine of labor functions as a sign of disturbance of the traditional gender order, a caricature of “normative femininity”. Polish feminist communities referred to the tradition of pre-war women's movement, as well as to the Solidarity protest, seeking their genesis in these events (Mroziak 2011: 155–156). According to Stańczak-Wiślicz: “Women's active participation in the underground, their role in creating association structures were eagerly equated with partnership, with ‘noticing’ women, with permitting them to exit the home sphere” (Stańczak-Wiślicz 2013: 154). In this discourse, labor heroines became a symbol of oppression and entering “unnatural” roles (Stańczak-Wiślicz 2013: 154). The studies concerning the Communist period in Poland, developing dynamically over the last years and drawing on the gender studies toolkit, aim to return the period of the Polish People's Republic to the history of feminism, recognize the activity of Polish women of the time (not limited to participation in the Solidarity opposition), finally, draw attention to the place of Communist women in family archives (see Mroziak 2022). These studies also lead to providing visibility to grassroots emancipating projects of women at the period of Social Realism, when the participation in vocational courses and working in “masculine” professions was a way of liberating oneself from the patriarchal structures present at the family home and achieving financial independence (Fidelis 2010).

In the novel *Od jednego Lucypera* Marijka, a socialist labor heroine and victim of Communist terror buried in an unmarked grave, becomes erased from family history and symbolically excused from the history of Polish emancipa-

tion movement, wherein the Polish People's Republic period functioned for a long time as "the lost chain link" (Iwasiów, Galant 2011: 5). It could seem that Dziewit-Meller's Silesian saga copies the discourse that unambiguously criticizes the Social Realist project of women's equal rights. Experiencing deep trauma after her sister's death, Halina negates the point of Marijka's grass-roots emancipation, as the latter "had once given in to the temptation of the devil of modernity, had believed in all that Communist propaganda" (Dziewit-Meller 2020: 255). Halina chooses a survival strategy consisting in "being dissolved" in family space and in traditional mothering role: "Eight years after her death, when she stood in front of the altar to marry grandpa, she almost dreamed about getting pregnant soon, many times, and give herself over to the one task that God designed for women: raising a family" (Dziewit-Meller 2020: 255). However, reproducing a traditional mothering role does not turn out to be a positive alternative to the Social Realist emancipating project undertaken by Marijka and ending in her failure. The family structure in Anna Dziewit-Meller's Silesian saga is burdened by historical, multiplied trans-generational trauma and silence regarding Marijka's tragic fate, which mark the fates of representatives of several generations of women.

Conducting the narrative through a woman's body is one of the distinguishing features of the herstoric narratives within my field of interest; here, it should be noted that the gender experience of History leaves its marks precisely on the body. When she is being arrested and brutally interrogated by the Security Bureau's functionary, Marijka experiences a particularly painful and violent menstruation, humiliated not only with being accused of sabotage, but also with her own physiology, manifested by the bloodied work uniform. Analyzing iconography and novels of the Social Realist period, Ewa Toniak draws attention to the fact that "a woman's body and woman's physiology [...] are located in this system of representation that represses corporeality as such at the side of the abject" (Toniak 2008: 88). This is why the contempt-inducing body is ascribed to negative characters, feminine equivalent of "enemies of the people". Once Marijka is pushed off her Socialist labor heroine pedestal, it is the actual, rather than the phantasmic, feminine body that is humiliated, beaten, tormented and embarrassed: this is how Dziewit-Meller intervenes within the Social Realist imaginarium, locating stifled corporeality and sexuality of the "monumental" Marijka. A deconstruction of "Socialist caryatid" is performed here through referencing the experience of menstruation, which multiplies violence against the woman's body.

Reading Joanna Bator's and Anna Dziewit-Meller's novels leads to a conclusion that a chance for breaking through a cursed circle of historical traumas handed down from generation to generation may lie in a difficult reconstruction of women's histories: silenced and invalidated, confronted with national myths and phantasms of womanhood. This task is undertaken by the representatives of the youngest generation of the novels' protagonists, who reclaim invalidated relationships between women. Polish literature after 2010 puts clear

emphasis on marginalized matrilineal relations, as advocated by Brach-Czaina, who signed her book *Błony umysłu* as “Jolanta, daughter of Irena, granddaughter of Bronisława, great-granddaughter of Ludwika”. Here, reclaiming women’s genealogy gains a liberating dimension while, simultaneously, being connected with the women protagonists abandoning the limiting home space. In the continuation of *Piaskowa Góra*, the book *Chmurdalia* published in 2010, a relationship between Jadzia and Dominika becomes renewal in the space of the Greek island of Karpathos, ruled by matriarchy and matrilineal principles of inheritance. Therefore, the myth of a Polish Mother, as subordinated to masculine community, comes to be supplanted by an affirmative myth of feminine community.

Herstories of the Everyday

Reading last decades’ narratives that problematize women’s experiencing of history leads to a conclusion that within them there can be distinguished (frequently interpenetrating) strategies of unmasking and critical re-writing women’s allegories grounded in Polish national imagination, or demonstrating their destructive influence on matrilineal, cross-generational family relationships. However, it is impossible not to notice that a significant medium of herstoric narratives consists in the experience of the everyday, inextricably connected with the category of “busyness” as proposed by Brach-Czaina (2018: 67–96), referring to repetitive, apparently meaningless actions that make it possible for one to become rooted in being:

Busyness calls out of nothingness a delicate, tiring issue of daily existence, out of necessity with a frail basis, sentenced to temporary being. Stubbornly maintained, it is the driving force of everyday life. [...] The aim of efforts of busyness is precisely struggle for daily existence created and renewed with every small action. [...] Busyness maintains everyday life in an uncertain point of tension between being and the void. Although we do not hear the sounds of struggle going back and forth, we take part in it (Brach-Czaina 2018: 88–89).

I am not going to reconstruct extensive reception of Jolanta Brach-Czaina’s philosophy here; despite the passage of time, it continues to inspire scholarly reflection (see Przymuszała 2021: 45–56; Marzec 2022: 34–47). My goal, in turn, is indicating that busyness referring, above all, to women’s activities, traditionally set in opposition to men’s actions undertaken in the public space (Latos 2014: 253), aids in constructing women’s counter-history and makes it possible to undertake critical reflection over official History. In this context, it is worth referencing the novels *Nieczułość* [*Lack of Tenderness*] (2017) by Martyna Bunda (born in 1975) and *Rozrzucone* [*The Scattered*] (2021) by Liliana Hermetz (born in 1964), wherein the protagonists’ daily life plays a very significant role. One of the protagonists of Bunda’s Kashubian saga, Rozela, a victim of wartime rape by the Red Army soldiers, represses the trauma that burdens her rela-

tionships with her daughters. Simultaneously, her actions are directed towards preserving and maintaining the house she had built even before the war in Dziewcza Góra, a kind of a matriarchal seat, which – similarly to Rozela’s body – becomes marked with signs of wartime trauma.

After five years of war, time came to return life to its proper place. To apply lime to the apple tree so the worms would come out, to repair the fence, to order and cut down the currants, to clean up the well – these were the most important. [...]

Still there was not enough time to take care of everything. The floor, for example. The war did strange things to it. Oh, here they went and scraped it with black soles. They brought in soil, slime, which dried on the soles and then, mixed with God knows what, ate into the wood. Those that burned the trace of clothes iron on her stomach had metal-shod boots. On the wooden planks, polished for years with a rice brush, seventeen scratches remained, deep and wide. It all made up a map.

And there was blood left on the floor. Her blood. It is the most difficult to wash off. Oh, here, next to the stove, it poured when the Russkis were gone. Rozela was cutting carrots with her small knife, worn out with the years of faithful service, when all that dirt, helplessness, all that corruption – poured into the floor and it was not possible to wash it out (Bunda 2021: 37–40).

When writing about struggles with the matter of the everyday, Brach-Czaina repeatedly reaches for the metaphor of a fight, which, while referring to the external chaos, makes it possible to forget about internal chaos for a moment (Brach-Czaina 2018: 86). The protagonist of *Nieczułość* seeks shelter from the experienced trauma in repetitive activities, although it is impossible to remove traces of the experienced violence both from her own body and from her surroundings. The trace burnt with the clothes iron on Rozela’s stomach is mirrored by the patch burnt at the very center of the yard, where the rapists started a fire. In Bunda’s novel, it is that being rooted in daily life that makes it possible for Rozela to survive; although – similarly to Jolanta Brach-Czaina’s philosophical reflection – busyness is not affirmed, from beneath it there peeks out the body’s memory, and the drama of dealing with the matter of the everyday is a sign of the “hidden presence of the forces of chaos” (Brach-Czaina 2018: 86). This is why the unprocessed and unspoken about wartime trauma, whose visible sign is Rozela’s wound, manifests itself in the form of mental disturbance that the family matriarch suffers with time (see Ładoń 2020: 210–212). Thus, feminine madness is here not an attribute of heroines gifted with revolutionary potential, but, rather, becomes woven between daily, repetitive activities, from under which dealing with History peeks out.

When, prior to leaving for school, one of Rozela’s daughters decides to use the forbidden clothes iron, her mother uses the iron’s slug to hit her in the face.

The sign of the trauma being transferred to the daughter is that “on the first day in new school Truda showed up in an un-ironed dress, with hair she had no strength to style for the first time in her life [...]” (Bunda 2017: 78). However, despite her declarations, Truda cannot tear herself away either from Rozela or from the family home in Dziewcza Góra. The new iron she brings from Gdynia after electrification becomes a sign of quiet understanding, of difficult relationship between the women – marked with lack of tenderness, yet still maintained; it also makes it possible to take up anew busyness, which is a form of resistance and survival:

She put this new trinket on the table with a gesture so fierce as if she plunged a sword into the battlefield. And she kept looking into her mother’s eyes, haughtily. The new iron was put on the wardrobe, the old one disappeared for good [...] When the electricity finally flowed, Truda spread open the table, covered it with a blanket and one of the sheets, and put around things to be ironed: more sheets, both dresses, the green and the blue one, Gerta’s dresses, and the man’s waisted shirt she’d gotten somewhere for Ilda. And then, with a gesture so wide and pious, as if she was sitting to the piano, she grabbed the plug and put it in the socket. Electricity flowed. The iron became hot (Bunda 2017: 84–85).

Daily life can also be seen to generate narrative in Hermetz’s *Rozrzucone*, wherein 20th century history is told through the lens of daily busyness of several generations of women. The novel’s protagonist, Marysia-Irène, realizes the figure of a woman stranger, alienated on every level of her existence – national, familial and linguistic (see Nadana-Sokołowska 2016: 121–133). Exiled to do forced labor in Germany, as a result of her illegitimate origin, settled in Alsace after the war, for decades the protagonist maintains an uneasy, full of hidden animosities and dependencies relation with her mother’s sisters and with her Polish-Ukrainian cousins. Family relations between the women, presented against the background of the post-war period and the system transformation, in Hermetz’s novel become a lens that makes it possible to grasp long-lasting tensions connected with the sense of alienation and rejection, as well as inferiority complex with regard to the phantasmic West (see Zdanowska 2021).

What connects the scattered protagonists in a particular way is the routine of daily activities, gluing together the representatives of three generations. In her novel, Hermetz depicts one day in the life of each of the women, reflecting its particular pace by the means of linguistic and narrative devices. One day in Ksenia’s life is written out as almost a single, unbroken sentence, imitating daily, mechanical busywork, rhythm of working in the field and tending animals, while a day in Eulalia’s life, represented by the means of short, rhythmic sentences, portrays how this representative of the youngest generation – a business translator of French – feels at home in post-transformation reality.

In turn, Marysia-Irène's daily life is stretched between household busyness and long hours of working at her husband's French restaurant. However, from beneath the daily work of protagonists peeks out their traumatic experience: Ksenia was the victim of paramedical experiments in the Nazi Reich, while Marysia was taken to do forced labor due to her aunt's decision – by sacrificing her sister's illegitimate daughter, she saved her husband from a similar fate. In the eyes of Polish relatives, Marysia-Irène's post-war marriage with a foreigner seems to be a model realization of a perfect life scenario, but it is actually connected with alienation, lack of financial independence and growing antipathy for the husband, which the protagonist hides under the mask of an elegant, respected "Madame".

The representative of the youngest generation, Lala, a beneficiary of the Polish system transformation, also hides the stigma of a "poor relation from the East", once humiliated by her aunt's French family. The restaurant incident, during which her provincial peasant background is scorned, sets into motion a tangle of affects of embarrassment and humiliation, while, at the same time, referring back to national and ethnic stereotypes and complexes which the protagonist tries to mask with a total commitment to her work, legitimizing her belonging to the Western cultural circle, pride in the success achieved and capitalist changes taking place in Poland. As Ewa Zdanowska aptly notes, the author of *Rozrzucone*, "aware of Polish myth-making, ironically drags out into daylight the entire repository of Romanticism – from Mickiewicz to Maria Janion" (Zdanowska 2021). Here, the masculine, Romantic myth of an emigre – an exile experiencing ceaseless symbiosis with his place of origin – becomes demythologized. It is confronted with the emigrant experience of several generations of women and, as connected with it, hard work to earn a living, sense of alienation and not belonging.

Thus, literary adaptation of daily life may become a tool for herstoric in(ter)vention. An incredibly interesting example of this literary strategy lies in Inga Iwasiów's (born in 1963) short story *Kobieta z kotлетem. Brednia paraakademicka* [*A Woman with the Meat Patty: A Para-Academic Drivel*] (2014), which brings together two fields of the author's activities as a writer and as a literary studies scholar. The protagonist of the micro-narrative based in memories and set in the reality of the Polish People's Republic is Anna, who:

kind of prettily and romantically bought minced meat on the first day of the strike. The composition of this meat, other than beef-pork, was a state secret. Anna made it into meat patties. To put a secret note in? No, of course not, this was just about meat patties. High protein food for men. And Anna, in a flowing dress, took the patties to the gate (Iwasiów 2014: 251–252).

Anna's "feminine" gesture becomes a pretext for a reflection on herstory and its research limitations. At the same time, however, the narrative, permeated with distance towards fashionable subjects of contemporary humanities and un-

doubted liking for the protagonist, is a literary extension of Iwasiów's considerations contained in the auto-ethnographic sketch *Przed sklepem rzeźnika* [*In Front of the Butcher's*], whose ironic title is a reference to Karol Wojtyła's text *Przed sklepem jubilera* [*In Front of the Jeweler's*] (1960). In analyzing the political nature of women's prose and discourse after 1989, the scholar focuses on the notion of the gender politics of meat (see Adams 2015), taking up, among others, the issue of the construction of the gendered subject of narratives concerning meat in the literature of personal document and memoirs about Polish People's Republic. At the same time, Iwasiów reaches for Brach-Czaina's essay *Metafizyka mięsa* [*Metaphysics of Meat*] – the philosopher's reflections about “meatiness”, referring to what is material and metaphysical, and, simultaneously, communal, lead her to consider the degree to which this category can be useful for grasping the generational and daily experience of the time of Polish People's Republic, woven around illegal distribution of meat and its processing, around which there was created a particular “meaty” ritual and folklore, preserved in various texts of culture. Here, Iwasiów emphasizes the community-creating role of meat, which “could be a gift of love – housewives made rump steaks for their husbands. Women wielded the cleaver and the knife excellently. Men would drive cut meat around in suitcases, preferring this dangerous mission from the monotony of obligatory queuing” (Iwasiów 2013: 195). In this way, she showcases the particular politics of meat and the gender contract connected with it.

In the short story *Kobieta z kotлетem...* Anna's gesture, rooted in the daily life of Polish People's Republic, becomes a pretext to consider excluding mechanisms of memory and history, and an opportunity to reflect over herstory, frequently treated as a supplement of the official, male-centric History. “Non-heroic input in the shape of a meat patty” belongs to the order of busyness and may reveal the subversive nature of daily activities, establish the subjective presence of anonymous women in literature and culture, but also become one of constitutive elements of a positive myth of transformation, a need for which was indicated by the creators of the famous musical *1989*, which premiered at the Juliusz Słowacki Theater in Krakow in 2022¹¹:

This myth is built not only on reclaiming memory about women revolutionaries, but also on drawing attention to daily women's busyness: “Next to ‘revolutionaries’ the fate of Solidarity was also decided by another group of women – ‘housewives’. [...] They were the ones to ensure that children would eat daily breakfast and start for school, they kept the house and clothes in order, and kept a pot of hot soup always ready on the stove” (Napiórkowski, Szyngiera, Wleklej 2024: 30–31).

11 As the musical creators wrote: “While Solidarity was being canonized or demonized, we tore out its teeth. We deprived it of the internal fissures, which actually denoted its strength. This is why today we need a new, positive myth of Solidarity, which will allow us to meet the challenges that future brings” (Napiórkowski, Szyngiera, Wleklej 2024: 130).

* * *

Over three decades ago, in *Projekt krytyki fantazmatycznej* [*The Project of Phantasm Criticism*] Maria Janion made a call to take up the challenge consisting in reconsidering national myths and phantasms and developing a new language that would make it possible to articulate reality – also that of women’s experiences. A reply to that call may consist in seeking a positive myth of 1989, rooted in official history and history of the everyday both, but also in a gesture by Karolina Micuła – an artist, performer and activist of the National Strike of Women, which took place on the General Charles de Gaulle’s Roundabout in Warsaw on 26th October 2020, during a protest against exacerbation of abortion law in Poland. Standing on a car’s roof with her breasts bared, a flare in her hand and a mask on her face, Micuła reclaimed the feminine allegory of revolution familiar from Eugène Delacroix’s painting *Liberty Leading People*. It is appropriate to once again refer to Janion’s conclusion, according to which, although “the basic phantasm of a revolution-liberty is an imaginary version of a woman” (Janion 2006: 6), it leads to women being deprived of political rights. Micuła’s gesture can be an evidence of long endurance of women’s phantasms, but it can also prove that the statement formulated by women literary critics back in the 1990s remains current: that revolution is not a woman as much as it starts with women (see Mroziak 2012: 57) – in public and private space, in literature producing a field for herstorical in(ter)ventions.

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