

The Prose of Mark Power

Marek Bieńczyk

Mark Power's book on Poland concludes with what I feel to be one very special photograph. It is not much of a stylistic departure from the others, but its composition and painterliness give me the strongest sense of *déjà vu*. Where have we seen that before? In a picture by Caspar David Friedrich? A landscape drawn from early Romanticism, deeply melancholic, haunted by ruins, by the disintegration of form, situating spiritual symbols (crosses, altars) against a backdrop of a strange, and seemingly hostile nature, into which they melt, both struggling with it heroically and succumbing to it? Or in some other engraving or historical canvas, perhaps from the time of the January Uprising – through the mood of soft, melancholy despair, a mournful (though not plaintive) image is assembled of disaster and strength?

Disembowelled, stony earth, snow and a cross; regardless of our associations, this romantic *Golgotha*-like setting unerringly sets a tautology before us: how Polish this is, how Polish is this Poland. If this photograph (along with many others) was taken from the book and presented on its own, then pinning down its location – ‘Now that's Poland!’ – wouldn't cause the slightest difficulty. After going through the pages of Mark Power's book, I even had the feeling that he had artistically distilled, crystallised the landscape, though every picture takes a different route to finding this essential land. And so I repeated: ‘Oh, how Polish!’ and promptly was amazed at my own exclamation, at my own elation, for like it or not, this book has forced me to reconsider an ongoing internal polemic or quarrel – our essence, our Polishness. Not just Gombrowicz-style, not just its spirit and its mentality, but the Polish landscape itself, marked by the stigma – particularly where nature crosses paths with civilisation; where man sets up house – of sloppiness, or as we're accustomed to saying, of simple rusticity.

But in the book's last *Golgotha*, Power has managed to create a magical and many-levelled landscape from a pile of dirty snow. I will therefore treat this peculiar magic as a symbolic summary of the book. Of course, Mark Power is an outstanding artist, who could doubtless summon fascinating and hypnotic compositions from a space that initially seems unremarkable, wherever it might be. But when the subject of the

photography is exclusively our own land, as it is in this book, a place we know like the back of our hand (as the old song goes, *'it's our fate to live on the Vistula River'*), it is even more astonishing. For as natives, we know all too well that we live in a place and time that is generally unsuitable for brochures, and none-too-attractive in terms of landscape. And, to top it all off, it is a country ravaged by a half century of communism and, following 1989, subjected to unrestrained – sometimes savage – modernisation.

Reality comes in different colours, but in general realism is bleak, and tends to speak of that which is rather odious, the disgusting, the filthy, even the evil; to dazzle with the negative it describes. Nuance is not among its specialities. Such statements at least spring to mind upon reading the Polish 'realist' literature – whether it be good or middling – of the past twenty years; it provides us with few opportunities to appreciate the charms of the mundane. Meanwhile, through the lens of a foreigner, Mark Power, the ordinary, everyday places – the very sites where 'realist' literature often takes place – take on a positive energy and are momentarily framed as complete and more respectable. This does not mean, of course, that Power tries to re-touch anything, that he slaps an aesthetic mask on reality. One does not get the impression that he is simply trawling for effects, but rather that he submits to a place, delves into it. He seems to sense the potential of places; better and more deeply than the everyday eye. He grasps their power of expression, even – or perhaps, particularly – where the reigning mood is what we call 'grey reality'. Tin garages, rubbish bins, abandoned train platforms, houses plastered with boards, half-built pieces of concrete – everything here has its *raison d'être*, its own quiet, visual qualities.

And so in Power's work we often find ourselves in places the French call *terrain vague*: a territory or region that is undefined, formless, mediocre. The term refers to places on the margins, on the outskirts of cities or towns; zones that are vacant, peripheral, often neighbouring industrial areas, and poorly maintained. These are spaces that might also be found under bridges, in interiors that are crumbling or stubbornly hanging on in some half-finished state, in squares with darkened stalls, fire-safety drills, lonesome, half-empty parking lots, dreary and often desolate courtyards, empty playgrounds and holiday camps, patches of indefinite scrub crushed underfoot, between walls, or between houses, which sometimes are better described as ruins. This whole zone

is what we generally call ‘Poland B’: essentially provincial, at a first glance neglected, or at least of vague status, existing in some (to repeat the term) halfway form, in eternal incompleteness.

Mark Power is interested in the colour schemes and geometries of this particular nowhere; in its reinforcement – in the sense that one refers to a construction as ‘reinforced’. The reinforcement was once literally steel or metal, those wires, rods, arms and stumps of cranes; those construction pipes or slide pipes shooting upwards or running crosswise, creating somewhat unreal sculptures or, one might imagine, choreographies right in the middle of an utterly real, somewhat rusted reality. Or – as is the case in one photograph – it becomes a cement street theatre with cranes standing in for puppets, a kind of fairy-tale engineering. This whole peculiar verticality, these semi-static, one might say *abandoned* constructions, surviving beyond the purpose for which they were constructed, are intriguing in their autonomy. Even if they look here and there like parts of a slow degeneration, like something verging on disintegration, more discarded than in use, in their own imperfect way they represent a compositional whole, endowed with its own nearly illegible, or almost incommunicable, yet compelling significance, its own perspective, its own harmony. Sometimes it is more hidden, a geometrical structure that has to be noticed; sometimes it is more evident, when – as in the residential buildings, glass houses, workshops, pipes, jutting wires, and field gates – the colours (generally awkward, though warm) improve appearances, whether by human intention or by accident.

Redemptive charms, a gentle coherence, an aesthetic balance can lurk in imperfection, in incompleteness, in mediocrity or in downright ugliness. Ugly housing estates and old houses are set up like Lego blocks, sometimes creating a cinematic frame, sketching in a fascinating perspective. I could not at times resist the general impression that Power’s pictures have a cheerfulness, a gentle aura, they soften contours. The images find light in this crude reality – at times coarse and ugly, at other times utterly ordinary – and perhaps tranquillity too. The colour schemes, with all their naivete (pink paintings on buildings to serve as ‘adornment’, graffiti as unintentional ornament); their sounds (we are generally in silent places, where echoes disappear and time stands still: Power is also a photographer of silence, or of faraway sounds, diligently captured); and their potential

to laugh at and mock themselves. It is hard not to feel the *vis comica* of some pictures. Those four tyres under a car, which isn't there; that little white dog in the snow, among lines of benches and lamps.

But in Power's book as a whole, in his presentation of the Polish landscape of the last five or six years, there is perhaps a more vital and unsolved – or rather, unsolveable – question being asked: is this often fragmented, crippled space only an image of contemporary reality, or is it also the image of a memory? I have stared many times at the photograph of pieces of ventilation pipes thrown in the corner of a disused warehouse: they are somehow terrifying, like prosthetic limbs piled in a concentration camp storeroom, like those other piles (of corpses, clothing, hair) we know from documentary photographs or from filmed recreations of Auschwitz. In the light of this photograph, some of the other places presented in Power's book take on a sublime – if I may use the word – ambiguity; they often combine two dimensions, the present and the past. So, our way of looking at Power's photography has to expand to take in this unstated, or not fully stated *memento*; we must sense in his work a reflection of the invisible world, a world that has died, in the configurations of visible reality. If this is so, we can understand why Power introduces this duality, this flipside, instead of presenting history literally, instead of packing his camera and travelling to Auschwitz or the Stutthof camp, for instance. This artistic intention seeks to destabilize and open up the place being represented, to introduce multiple dimensions, so that each should radiate a significance that spreads in time, and which we must latch onto. Yet all this takes place within a realistic structure: without staging, without stating anything up front, and through suggesting the various potential meanings – sometimes dramatic, or even tragic (as in the photograph recalled a moment ago) – slumbering or contained in a given space, which then we ourselves must learn to decode.

Other extraordinary photographs show the empty interiors of shipyards, wet earth after a rainfall with the phantoms of cranes in the background, the contour of a half-built ship. While in the foreground a shredded rag, tossed by the wind, is spinning its own after-image, like something from Kantor's theatre. Are we still in a workplace, in a great industrial square, or on a stage after all the workers have left, with the curtain still flapping? Or take the assortment of small portraits in the glass case, paired with the

man's face seen through the window of an old building. It is as if in the very middle of the present, the current moment was annulled and left an empty space; those people in the portraits and this man in the window survive here in some other time.

But let's return to the present. Saying the word 'reality', we cannot avoid literary analogies. Photography and reality, literature and reality. 'Reality' is a favourite word of Polish critics, it swarms about the Polish newspapers like birds in springtime, tirelessly opening the critical debate that begins with the question: 'Has the Polish literature of the past two decades done justice to the "new" reality; has it expressed this reality sufficiently'? Or, 'Has the 'new' reality found just expression in our literature'? The critics eternally grumble and moan that there is too little reality in literature; they are forever struck by the impression that our world, and in particular the 'brave new world' since 1989, is insufficiently represented. This grumbling is their *raison d'être* and no writer is really much concerned by it. It has occurred to me, however, that if we were seriously to consider what this tale of reality or representation of the real world would look like on an artistic level – let's say in a novel or a novella – then Mark Power's book could serve as an inspiration. In my view it could be an interesting model for the tone in which the novelist or poet could speak of everyday life, to create a realist literature, to feel the weight of real detail in it and simultaneously maintain an individual voice. I have in mind the photograph's subtle, elegant combination of carefully observed concrete details of life with a touch of magic or humour (a few photographs are overtly comical), and with a touch, albeit a light and understated one, of the surreal or the fantastic. I try to imagine Power's unwritten prose, the translation of his photographic language into a literary one. I try to transcribe his pictures into words, and I feel as though this imaginary language would have an absolutely distinctive style: balanced and slightly provocative, on the surface journalistic and fact-inspired, but essentially free in its narrative. It would take that margin of liberty which allows the writer and the storyteller to maintain a slight distance from the object being represented, in spite of the desire for a mimetic appearance, in spite of all its sense of shared feeling. These photographs, I would say, maintain a healthy balance between a mimetic gesture and a creative one, between a 'real' landscape and one that is artistically inscribed.

What, above all, does Mark Power see in 21st century Poland; in the Poland of the last few years that was politically transformed two decades ago over the course of just a few months, but whose physical space is weighed down by millions of tonnes (those colossal blocks of flats, those crooked roads, those squalid holiday getaway cabins) of communism? Does Power want to photograph a world that is slowly vanishing, to document what will slowly disappear under the pressure of liberal modernity, with a covert nostalgia? Much like Andrzej Stasiuk does, for example, in prose? Does he want to immortalise images of a country subjected to violent transformations in its way of life? This I do not know, but at any rate we are, on the one hand, outside the Poland of new post-modern – and generally awful – architecture (disregarding the comical photograph with the covered flowerpots inside the brand new shopping mall), and, on the other, outside the Poland of great symbols, great events, great monuments; outside the realm of the shipyards and heritage. Even a great national event, the funeral of John II, beamed live from the Vatican is captured inside-out, from the wrong end of the tele-beam, on which the cables sketch a fantastical pattern. And the little cross sparkling on the ground is surrounded by cigarette butts. The reversal of things, looking at them from the bottom up, seems to be one of Power's artistic gestures.

The book begins with a bird's-eye view, with a photograph of the monumental centre of a city, of Stalinist constructions (today gaining some charm), in the beautiful, slightly misty colours of dawn. The second photograph then jumps to the similarly misted atmosphere of a gigantic shopping mall parking lot, where red neon lights beguile with their warm glow, and the whole thing resembles a secret landing strip for UFOs. But this diptych of two realities created in post-'89 Poland, the 'old' and the 'new', has no sharp contrasts in Power's rendition; the two wings do not clash violently. Here and there we observe how the new encroaches into some established place, but there is no sign of an invasion; it is more of an amusing supplement to what has long existed.

Even now, so many years after the departure of communism, investment activities (or so-called 'modernisation') tend to warp forms of reality rather than transform them violently. In picture after picture we observe what seems, for those of us who remember life and space under communism – a sort of 'cohabitation', the co-existence of different realities. A sign proclaiming 'We take new passport photographs' on an old pavilion

booth is exchanged for that of a photography studio; a small Coca-Cola advertisement at what would seem some snowy end of the world; the enormous 'M' of a McDonald's swallowed up among Gierek-era skyscrapers; supermarket parking lots with aimless trails marked out by tyre tracks; advertisements with beautiful girls or designer interiors glued to village huts... the new history is sending out these testing signs which confront the terrain without occupying it, seep in without invading. While fairly quickly even they grow mundane, grey, and soak into the landscape itself, or just colour it with great subtlety. The signs succumb more to the local eternity, the local status quo, rather than have the power to shape; the suburban/forest landscape seems to correct the movement of history, to absorb it.

The eye of the foreigner sees the measure of time; perhaps better than we do ourselves, immersed as we are in the sequence of events that bring the immediate but false distortion of the old by the new. These recently taken photographs show that twenty years is very little in terms of the visible world. The country photographed by Power has a great deal of solidity up its sleeve; the forces of nature, and its speciality – trees, creating a background that is by turns elegiac, mournful and whimsical; with the snow (and a general proclivity for whiteness, like fog) that ushers us into a gentle long duration, that precludes suddenness, abrupt transformation. We see time and again vignettes or stock images we know well from the past few years, advertisements for prostitutes stuck onto a frozen windshield, specialities for sale on an arterial highway. In any event the country is shown, above all, through its most petty facts, its most petty business, its small change.

Petty facts, petty changes: an insane 'Gothic' shirt on a kind of man that never used to exist here. And, of course, there are ladies in luxurious furs coats, but against a backdrop of a swimming pool with containers floating like bubbles, or stripped of glamour, worn over pants and long boots. The people depicted in these extraordinary portraits combine the awkward and the pretty, and appear to embody this double-sided land, that is both ordinary and somehow endearing. Having looked through Mark Power's photographs, I had the childish sensation that it was good to live here after all.

Translated by Søren Gauger