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Andrzej Bursa

KILLING AUNTIE
& other work

translated by
Wiesiek Powaga

CB *editions*

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Fairy Tale

Once upon a time he got on the wrong side of the Emperor. The Emperor wanted to order his head chopped off but had no time. So he said:

'Please be so good to report to my office and remind me that you should have your head chopped off.'

So he reported. At first he took it badly. He thought a lot about the transience of existence and limits of individual freedom and dependence on the whims of some stupid despot. But then he got on with it. For the clerks he was a real pain in the neck. Mountains of work, petitioners fainting in the queues and he:

'Hello. The Emperor asked me to remind you that I should have my head chopped off. Goodbye.'

And so on, every hour.

Punctually two minutes before twelve he would run out of the Ministerial Café (he wouldn't be seen anywhere else) to quickly rattle off his formula. Every Saturday at eleven in the night, slightly swaying on his feet after a bottle downed at the Ambassador's (he wouldn't drink anywhere else), he would turn up at the office and mumble out:

'M'peror ordered . . . you know . . . mmm . . . I should have my head chopped off.'

At four in the morning he would drag himself off his camp bed stretched out in the corridor (he wouldn't sleep anywhere else) and in sleepy voice would wake the desk clerk:

'The Emperor ordered . . .' and so on.

Twenty years passed. One day in the office he bumped into the Emperor, who was an old man now.

'What's this man doing here?' asked the Emperor.

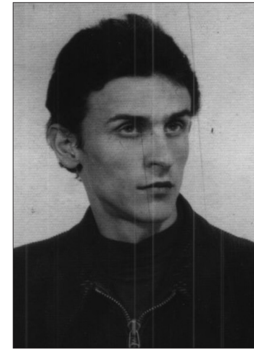
'He reports here because His Imperial Highness is to chop his head off,' answered the secretary.

'Chop it off then,' bridled the Emperor.

So they did.

End of fairy tale.

Preface



Andrzej Bursa (1932–1957), poet, writer, playwright, journalist, despite his short life and relatively small literary output created a diverse and original body of work which secured him a unique place in Poland's post-war literature. He made his poetic debut in 1954 in a Kraków newspaper, but the bulk of his work was written between 1955 and 1957 and was never published in his lifetime. The first volume of his poetry, published in 1958, consisted mostly of material the publisher had previously rejected. A fuller collection of his work, including prose and drama, edited by Stanisław Stanuch and published in 1969, was followed by further two editions and by a collection of poetry in 1977.

Andrzej Bursa was born into a family of Polish pre-war intelligentsia with long artistic traditions, especially in music. His wartime childhood and the tragic deaths of his aunts in Auschwitz affected him deeply and left him with an indelible if carefully masked scar. His education began with the outbreak of the war and continued at the secret educational courses run by the Polish underground. After the war, following his parents' divorce, he stayed with his mother and sister in Kraków, while his father, a school inspector committed to the cause of the new regime, moved to Wrocław and then to Warsaw. Young Bursa continued his education in a Kraków gymnasium, where he first tried his hand writing for a school paper. He failed his matriculation exam in 1950, but he passed it a year later as an external student. He enrolled at an art college (where he met his future wife, Ludwika), then moved to the Yagiellonean University to study first journalism

and then Bulgarian. The birth of his son in 1952 forced him to abandon education and in 1954 Bursa began full time work at a Kraków paper, starting at the news desk and graduating to reportage and cultural events. By 1957 he had published over thirty poems in various papers and literary magazines, and placed a proposal for his first volume of poetry with a major Polish publisher. At the point of death he left in his drawer about a hundred poems, several plays and a good dozen prose pieces, including a novel.

He died suddenly and unexpectedly of natural causes (congenital malformation of the aorta) weeks after receiving a rejection letter from a publisher. This circumstance, as well as the tone of his writing, which by then had begun to be better known in the artistic circles of young Kraków, gave rise to a legend of a young poet rebel who, unable to deal with rejection or bear life under a totalitarian regime, committed suicide. Despite disclaimers published by the family the legend persisted for years; it turned him into a cult figure. This persistent mythologisation was in part a natural reaction to the cruelty and injustice of early death, but it was also a testimony to the power of his voice – the voice of a generation whose childhood was destroyed by the war and whose youth was poisoned by false hopes, and the voice too of later generations of young people: angry, uncompromising in their idealism, stuck between their past and future, creatively destructive, all mixed up and courageous. It is the voice of 'all who once stood terrified before the dead perspective of their youth'.

From the moment I first dipped into the Andrzej *Bursa's Works in Verse and Prose* I felt the warmth of the Holy Anger of Youth radiating from the sparse lines throbbing with indignation and scorn and crying out loud what most people around me only muttered under their breaths. He had the courage to wrestle with form, even if he had to kick it in the crotch. All

those lines running off the page, the disdain for capital letters and punctuation, the near-rhymes and the prosaic rhythms of everyday speech, the (to my mind wholly justified) vulgarisms – all those seemingly awkward and indecorous formal flaws somehow jelled into lines which rang out in my head for days.

By then I had already discovered Zbigniew Herbert and his potent, distilled poetry packed into pared-down syntax and laid out in clean, elegant lines. Some of Bursa's poems reminded me of Herbert. They had a similar compressed form, laced with irony and lyricism, and a strong moral flavour. But they were something different. Where Herbert was reaching out for the truth through the classics, Bursa was throwing it out of his pocket by the fistful. He was angry, impatient, ill-mannered, sometimes downright vulgar, yet artful. It all fitted like a glove, and it wasn't a boxing glove. He said what he felt and how he wanted it said. The immediacy of feeling, sometimes violent yet delivered in measured verse and metre, was a revelation.

Despite the pervasive double standards of the school curriculum (Herbert was on both the censor's list and the list of required books), Bursa's work was not read in schools. His absence was perhaps related to the general shortage of everything that plagued mature socialism, forever getting its supply-and-demand knickers in a twist. Be that as it may, I felt I had missed out on something important – I felt cheated. Just like Bursa did.

Bursa made his debut in 1954, a year after Stalin's death, at the beginning of a political thaw which began to relax the communist orthodoxy of social realism. By 1956 the thaw had changed into a tide, and the debut of five poets, among them Białoszewski, Harasymowicz, Herbert and Czycz (who later published an experimental novel *And*, featuring a Bursa-

like character) marked a defining moment for Polish post-war poetry. Freed from the straitjacket of the sentimental political propaganda, poetry took on new forms and new themes, and Bursa's writing developed with astonishing speed. As one of his friends recalled (quoted in an article by Krzysztof Cwiklinski, www.dziennik.com): 'Die young? Suits me fine. Imagine, they'll say – so young, so talented, such a promise, such a nice, charming man – that's what they'll say in the obituary – and died so young. When I grow old I'll be an old fart, no one'll give a toss about me, no one'll be sorry. And to die young – so much work off your back . . .' This was of course the foolhardy irreverence of youth talking, but no wonder the legend of a *poet maudit* stuck.

But he was not a *poet maudit*. Compared with the real self-destructive maniacs of Polish poetry such as Wojaczek, he was simply a young ambitious poet, eager to show his work to the world, and he couldn't wait his turn. Impatience is a natural instinct of any young poet; even Herbert, the monument of moral incorruptibility, tried to have his poems published (and succeeded) years before the famous debut of 1956, if under a pseudonym. But while the older poets – Herbert, Różewicz or Białoszewski – generally held back until they were allowed to come out in public with their new, fully matured poetics, Bursa was pushing to the front, wanting to be where the action was.

In 1947, influenced by his father and carried away by youthful enthusiasm, Bursa joined the Polish communist youth organisation (ZWM). His early poem 'Under the Red Flag' was set to music and given a public performance at a conference; apparently this was done without his permission but it shows that the legend of a rebellious James Dean who 'didn't crawl or grovel', like all legends, hides as much as it preserves. In fact he seems to have been just like a lot of his compatriots, swept along by high hopes rising from the ruins; he wasn't alone in taking the promises of the red flag at face value. But it didn't take long before he saw that the face was peeling off the flag. When his ZWM card got washed clean with his trousers he took it for a sign and didn't renew his membership. His motivation for joining the Polish Workers' Party in 1955 may have had much to do with the difficulties facing his young family and his need to secure a better position in the newspaper he worked for.

His published journalistic pieces from this period show a young reporter visiting small towns and attempting to present the country in the process of rebuilding. The most interesting fruit of his travels was the story 'Dragon', which blends the dry style of reportage with a fairy tale in which a young virginal couple, following an ageless local custom, is sacrificed to a dragon. As the feeble old beast is well past its retirement age and the devouring takes place side by side with progress of the new order, on the surface the story can be read as a satire on the deeply rooted conservatism and 'backwardness" of the Polish countryside, well within the directives of the official propaganda. Yet the sparseness of the style and its unblinking naturalism give the story an unexpected universal, even existential depth. Doubtless the young reporter touring small-town Poland witnessed many such horrors; another work deriving from his travels ends: 'You can shove your small towns up your arse!' But once the anger subsided he realised that the aspirations of the new ideology – and the way the new powers went about achieving them – might require more than a couple of four-year plans. This is illustrated in the sur-real (rather than soc-real) sketch 'Rustic Dialogue; or, Socialistic Faraway', which was performed regularly in a popular Kraków cabaret well after the Polish 'real socialism' bit the dust.

The distinguishing mark of Bursa's work is his continuous experiment and struggle with form. But to begin with, to become a poet was a natural ambition for a boy with a keen musical

ear and a great facility for rhyming and poetic improvisation. Being 'made a Pole', as he complained in his 'Thanksgiving Prayer (with a grudge)', meant that he had first to square up to the grand tradition of the Polish Romantics. Shaped at the time of Poland's partition and revived with great force during the German occupation, the Romantic tradition conferred on the poet the role of Prophet, Conscience of the Nation and Beacon of Freedom. The surprising number of poems dealing with the role of poet and poetry in Bursa's work, and its sometimes battered form, attests to what a struggle dealing with the Great Tradition must have been. He could look to Mickiewicz, in whose 'Great Improvisation' the Poet vies with God, indifferent to the nation's suffering, for the rule of hearts and comes blasphemously close to comparing Him to the Tsar; this poetic act of rebellion and scornful contempt for the Supreme Authority must have felt close to Bursa's young heart. He could look also to Lautréamont, whose *Songs of Maldoror*, apparently inspired by Mickiewicz's 'Great Improvisation', echoes in Bursa's work not just in 'A Song of the Sewing Machine'. But the condition of 1950s Poland – post-war, post-Auschwitz, and with a rigid, state-enforced censorial – imposed particular challenges. As Stanisław Stanuch, Bursa's champion and the editor of his collected works, remembers: 'For the majority of young people born in 1930s the horror of our time was as commonplace as our daily bread. The more penetrating for being soaked up by souls of six- or seven-year-olds, for whom notions like "execution", "selection", "hostages", "bumping off", "revenge" "soap made of people", "burning corpses in crematoria or in the open air", were part of their everyday conversation. These were not just abstract notions but a way to describe the fate of their closest: fathers, brothers, mothers, sisters, friends.'

Suffering, mutilated bodies, corpses, horror – it all had to be packed in somehow and no wonder an occasional limb plopped out of the suitcase. In his all-out search for the most

adequate form it was only a question of time before Bursa turned to theatre, and the extracts from 'The Carbuncle; or, Theatre of Horrors' printed here are another example of his unerring instinct to be where the action was. These were written with his schoolfriend, the actor Jan Guntner, and commissioned and produced by Tadeusz Kantor. Bursa's work includes one complete play (*Count Cagliostro's Animals*), but fragments of two others were produced in his lifetime and many more are marked as work in progress in his archive. His fascination with theatre which focuses on the body as a medium for the intangible points in the direction later fully developed by Kantor and his then assistant Jerzy Grotowski. It could have been his mature form.

The fact that Bursa grew up surrounded by war and Stalinist terror focused his mind in a way that may be difficult to appreciate fifty years later. There are few better examples of how lofty poetic ambitions had to be cruelly readjusted to the new post-Auschwitz world. He was not the only one, and not the first, but while the older, more mature poets had time to adjust, his is a vivid example how the operation was carried out on living tissue. No wonder he sometimes felt like a dead body.

The motif of death and the corpse in Bursa's work certainly contributed to the legend of his suicide, but read from the inside it appears as the chief symbolic device which allowed him to handle the fundamental questions. His most ambitious use of this motif is in the short novel *Killing Auntie*, the manuscript of which lay in Bursa's archive for years before it was patiently pieced together by Stanuch.

The sparseness of the clues as to time and place inside *Killing Auntie* give it the feel of a morality tale. The plot, evolving around the central act of a pointless murder, invites comparisons with Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, but while

Raskolnikov's murder of an old usurer had a firm moral – if misguided – justification, Jurek's killing of his good auntie has none: it is practically pointless and potentially self-destructive. It seems that the lack of moral deliberation, indeed of any premeditation, and the gratuity of the extreme act that makes it an act of pure evil. But in what sense can evil be pure? And can the gratuity of an act make it evil? The subsequent preoccupation with getting rid of the body in order to avoid being caught and punished becomes almost a game, but something more than a simple catch-me-if-you-can game: it's a game played as much with the corpse itself as against the catchers, reminiscent of Daniil Kharms's 'Old Woman'. The surprising end suggests it was a carefully set up test of the validity of a moral code, and a scrupulous – one might say a surgical – examination of the tangibility of guilt.

The vague timelessness of *Killing Auntie*, combined with a realistic setting and naturalistic descriptions, also suggest parallels with Kafka. Both Dostoyevsky and Kafka were admitted into the official canon in Poland through the back door of new translations only after Stalin's death. Kafka especially must have posed problems for a new totalitarian regime, and was no doubt high on Bursa's personal list of required reading. Much of his prose ('Summons' and 'Women's War' are examples) has a strong Kafkaesque flavour; what makes this different from a simple youthful influence is the direct connection to his childhood experience, as in the case of 'Horse' – a brutally beaten horse (which appears as a symbol of pointless human cruelty also in Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche and Mayakovski) is presented as an 'accumulator of suffering' in the manner of Kafka, but its description derives from an image imprinted on the boy's mind on visits to the coal depot with his father during the war.

Killing Auntie also testifies to the softer, sensitive side of Bursa that is often obscured by the legend of the rebellious, uncompromising, sharp-tongued poet. His aggression and

contempt were at least in part a cultivated, protective veneer. His angry poetic gestures were rooted in a deep emotional trauma resulting from the explosive collision of innocent childhood and brave youth with real world, in his case the world of horror and guilt. He was young, still searching for the right form, resonating with different influences and inspiration; but his anger, linked with an unresolved sense of guilt, childish perhaps but whose sense is universally human, became the mainspring of his creative mechanics, and the interplay between childlike sensitivity and a callous skin of disdain and derision is the key to understanding Bursa's writing.

Final word about aunties: I first read Bursa when I was seventeen, a long-haired rebel in a school run according to the drab rules of 'mature socialism' in 1970s Poland, and immediately felt I had found a kindred spirit. His book was passed to me by an old lady, the school librarian, who must have felt a soft spot for a skinny youth enquiring naively about books outside the required reading list. Hats off to old wise school librarians, those kindly aunties ready to sacrifice themselves on the pyre of youth.

W.P.

I'd Like to Be a Poet

I'd like to be a poet
'Cause poet's life is great
Always in a lovely sweater
Desert boots walking a setter
And he doesn't have a care

I'd like to be a poet
For a poet's life is heaven
For a poet has four wives
Naturally long divorced
And I do like women

I'd like to be a poet
I may even get a grant
If I get to know the right people
I won't have to get up early
Mornings can be nippy

For a poet's life's a dream
Not for him the office hours
And to hell with discipline
Only music and a girlfriend
And counting lucky stars

And erring and counting
And starting from the beginning
On earth in trees and sky
Looking for a shade of meaning

And getting mad and worried
Because it's still not right
And always searching and always stuck
I hate being a poet

Poet

A poet suffers for the millions
From 10 to 1.30
At 11 his bladder is full
He goes out
Unzips his flies
Zips up his flies
Returns to his desk
Clears his throat
And again
Suffers for the millions

Amoeba

Children are nicer than grown-ups
Animals are nicer than children
You are telling me that thinking
This way I have to come to the conclusion
That the nicest thing is an amoeba

So what?

Amoeba is nicer to me
Than you
Bastard!

Horse

Have you seen, ladies and gentlemen, a horse standing stock still in the clay yard, surrounded by empty stables and farm buildings? Such a horse, dug into the ground, has no hauling value, it's useless. Exposed to rain, freezing cold and heat, flogged, tormented by horseflies – it suffers. That's its function.

The horse's hide, full of blisters and puss, is a veritable map of pain, full of geographic paradoxes and surprises. For instance, that apparently horrible, massive blister is nothing but a dead scrap of skin, while the little wound in the crotch, invisible to a cursory glance, is a practically inexhaustible seam of pain.

Because, as we pointed out earlier, the horse's legs are dug into the ground, he cannot move, and so every effort he makes to do so under the whip only multiplies his suffering. So, the horse is an accumulator of suffering. It automatically, through its own effort, self-charges with pain. Its reserves are so great it can be shared out among several families.

But show me, ladies and gentlemen, who is today looking for suffering?

Nevertheless, the horse is indispensable and it's hard to imagine how the world can function without it.