The Biographer of "Minor Players" Anthony Bukoski and the Polish-American *Weltanschauung**

CORINA ANGHEL CRIȘU

Résumé: *Les sections de cet ouvrage discutent le livre d'Anthony Bukoski,* Polonaise *(1999), offrant de nouvelles perspectives sur l'Europe de l'Est et de l'Ouest – deux sphères qui, malgré les différences entre elles, ne se situent plus sur des positions antagoniques. Insistant sur la signification de la fluidité des frontières, de l'échange interculturel, cet ouvrage se propose de discuter la nature toujours changeante de l'identité transnationale, particulièrement le mode dans lequel celle-ci peut être (dé) construite en relation avec les différents espaces religieux/culturels.*

Keywords: *recent American fiction, transnational identity, lived religion*

> "People make choices, selectively engage scripts and practices, reflect upon themselves as meaning-making creatures. In this process biography and faith traditions interact to produce discursive strategies toward religion [...] Without recognition of these 'lived' – or spiritual – qualities of religion, we risk losing perspective on the diversity and texture of religious life and of its deep personal groundings within an individual's experience."
>
> Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*

The Idea of "Lived Religion"

The above quotation brings together two key terms – both relevant to the theme of this journal and the focus of this paper – 'biography' and 'faith traditions', whose interaction leads to an individualised understanding of religion. In contemporary multicultural America, each person's different background gives shape to the multiple facets of religion, which is no longer defined as a doctrine, but as a "lived" cultural practice situated "in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life" (Orsi 7). This idea is elaborated upon in a collection of essays edited by David Hall and appropriately entitled *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, which points to a new understanding of religion as an unstable and negotiable notion, created via individual responses to inherited codes of meaning. In an increasingly secularised world, these essays argue, emphasis is placed on how "religion is lived by the faithful", in order to "produce the systems of meaning that they need" (Danièle Hervieu-Léger 22-27).

Drawing on the idea of "lived religion" and relating it to the domain of literary studies, Lawrence Buell observes that in the late twentieth century "literary studies by and large has moved decisively away from religiocentric explanations of the dynamics of cultural history" (Buell 32). As Buell affirms, both religious studies and literary studies have been influenced by the secularisation hypothesis, i.e. the view that the dynamics of religious movements are to be explained on nonreligious grounds, having roots in the post-Enlightenment conviction that "religion will tend to disappear with progressive modernization" (Casanova qtd. in Buell 33). Influenced by Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical models of social practice, scholars of both religion and literature have turned their attention towards what they call "lived religion" or religious "practice", laying stress not on the unchanging aspects of fixed doctrines, but on their flexible adaptations to everyday situations.

If there is a changing sense of *habitus*[1], then it is certainly accompanied by the transformation of "faith" in the traditional meaning of the word. In this sense, Robert Wuthnow detects a "profound change in our spiritual practices" that becomes evident in the abandonment of "a traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places" and in the adoption of "a new spirituality of seeking" (3). Just like the collection edited by Hall, Wuthnow's study points to the disappearance of a once fixed system of values, in favour of a more flexible view on religion, in which the sacred and the profane are no longer contrastive terms. Indeed, as Wade Clark Roof cogently notices, "a shift in consciousness" has become visible lately in people's discovery of religion through a "personal quest"; as a result, "the languages of 'journey' and 'walk' and 'growth' are commonplace" (46). Roof's research is specifically directed to the so called "Vietnam Generation", to those born between 1946 and 1955; growing up "in a period of intense cultural turmoil, they quickened the pace of social and religious change" and became "carrier[s] of cultural and religious values that would permeate 'upward' to older generations and 'downward' to those born after them" (50).

The Polish-American Ethnic Landscape

The idea of "lived religion" – broadly defined and disseminated by the collection edited by David Hall and later adopted by an important number of historians and sociologists – provides a theoretical framework for discussing the work of the Polish-American writer Anthony Bukoski. Both a writer and a creative writing professor at the University of Wisconsin-Superior, Bukoski has published several collections of stories, including *Twelve Below Zero* (New Rivers, 1986), *Children of Strangers* (Southern Methodist, 1993), *Polonaise* (Southern Methodist, 1999), *Time Between Trains* (Southern Methodist, 2003), and *North of the Port* (Southern Methodist, 2008). His texts draw on autobiographical material, reflecting the multiple nuances of his Polish-American descent, the diversity of jobs he undertook, and the traumatic experience of serving as a marine in DaNang, South Vietnam.

As a third-generation American of Polish descent, Bukoski consciously depicts in his work the ethnic landscape to which he is so intimately connected. Challenging us to

think beyond the confines of a nation state, his stories spin narratives of the New World, anchoring them in memories of the Old World. These are second/third-hand memories of parents and grandparents, recollected from the perspectives of their children and grandchildren. As powerful ethnic markers, these memories have the role of preserving significant traditions, revealing the subtle ways in which cultural and religious practices can be transplanted from one country into another.

Relevantly, the idea of "lived religion" – in a transatlantic context – informs Bukoski's work. As Thomas Gladsky underlines, Catholicism represents "the mysterious center of [Bukoski's] ethnic world": "for Bukoski, parish, priest, church, and faith are a sanctuary for ethnicity, a haven from cultural interference and social disorder. To be Polish, as most in Poland and many in the United States would say, is to be Catholic, and Bukoski's fiction makes it clear that if ever two were one, then surely they" (225-226). In an interview with Michael Longrie, Bukoski identifies religion as one of the three symbolic coordinates that define his fictional universe: the value of place, the Catholic tradition, and the Polish heritage (29). Paying homage to a passing way of life, Bukoski's work deplores the disappearance of a community, bound by its common belief in Catholicism, at a time when Polish churches are being razed all over the United States[2].

Bukoski grasps the ineffable of what is lost, illuminating the significance of past religious traditions, their transformation, and camouflaged survival. He is serious about his role of a biographer depicting a Polish-American *Weltanschauung* whose spiritual geography is preserved in his stories. He makes visible the destinies of the marginalised Polish-Americans, of those as invisible as Ralph Ellison's African-Americans. Bukoski thus becomes the biographer of "minor players", of those individuals whose destinies are forgotten, whose dreams vanish, whose lives are constrained in a circumscribed world. "Here we are all minor players, minor pieces", confesses one of his characters, alluding to those left behind in Wisconsin, who never had the opportunity of making a future for themselves (178). The writer himself builds on this idea:

> A community that was bound, in large part, by its spiritual belief in Catholicism was in some ways destroyed. And this has happened all over the United States – in Detroit, Buffalo, and elsewhere where the Polish churches are being razed. So I'm trying to recall those sometimes noble, if largely unschooled, inelegant people. I'm trying to recall them in these fictions so that their voices and the memory of them, at least in this area about which I write, are not lost. (qtd. in Longrie 29-30)

One should notice from the very beginning that Bukoski's world seems frozen in time, that the prevalent season of his stories is winter – the severe winters of Wisconsin, when temperatures can drop far below zero – as suggested in his first collection of stories, *Twelve Below Zero*. In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said quotes Wallace Stevens's poetic idea that exile "is a mind of winter", observing that the calendar of exile is different from the others (186). Indeed, in Bukoski's stories, winter suggests the blankness of deserted cityscapes, the bleakness of empty homes, and the inner void of

immigrants with circumscribed lives[3]. These characters have "minds of winter", their sense of isolation and solitary introspection reminding us of Edward Hopper's or Raphael Soyer's paintings, haunted by characters wrapped up in themselves, who do not communicate with each other.

Written with disarming sincerity, Bukoski's stories cannot be simplistically read: one discovers beyond the main theme of religious faith several sub-plots centred on the discreet observation of private lives – biographies whose tragic undertones are presented through introspective moods. As revealed in "A Concert of Minor Pieces", the stories replay the music of the past in a minor scale, which implies a solemn, sad, and meditative disposition[4]. The minor scale sets the time of confession, of self-reflexion in a digressive narrative, where an apparently anodyne present situation always evokes a deeper, more troubled past event. At one level, the minor scale plays the tone of lament for a disappearing world – a Polish America – an ethnic enclave with imaginary characters, yet with roots in reality (as it can be pinned on the map in a specific place: the East End neighbourhood of Superior, Wisconsin). At another level, this hauntingly nostalgic tone is a memento of the Poland left behind by immigrants, a "Poland of the mind", (re)constructed in memory and (re)assembled in Bukoski's literary "pieces".

Bukoski's textual trick is therefore to shape two worlds simultaneously. In order to construct the New World, he uncovers in his fiction the tracks of another signifying system that used to constitute the Old World. To put it metaphorically, he *conjugates the present in the past*, providing a binary temporal and spatial framework for the narrated events.

In several stories, the two parts of this dichotomous world are held together by a recurrent religious event – usually related to the most important Christian traditions of Christmas and Easter –, with the function of creating tension in the narrative by recreating the atmosphere in the Old Country[5]. In this way, Bukoski's stories reveal how the religious forms of a culture can change when transplanted into the realm of another. For instance, the breaking the *opłatek* (wafer) on Christmas Eve – an old custom in Poland, when the family members share the sacred white wafers, remembering those who are no longer alive – takes a different form in one of Bukoski's stories. Here, in contemporary America, where family ties are severed, the breaking of the *opłatek* becomes a casual act hastily done during an occasional visit. Another sacred tradition – tucking palm leaves behind the portraits of dead family members on the Sunday before Easter, known as Palm Sunday – becomes a mere recollection of the past in the new country.

Spatially, the relationship with the Old Country is established by the Parish Church of St. Adalbert's (or the Church of St. Wojciech), a small-scale replica of the Polish churches. It is the *axis mundi* of the Polish-American microcosm, the place where major events animate the spiritual life of the community, where private revelations change the tracks of individual destinies. Both the Church of St. Adalbert's and Szkoła Wojciecha, the parochial school run by nuns, become "cultural repositories, identity markers, and indicators of national character", while "they are also the sure signs of a petrified culture, frozen in time" (Gladsky 265). In this self-contained space in which new

immigrants never arrive – in which the older generation is almost extinguished and the younger generation is quickly assimilated into the amorphous community – both the church and the school have to close their gates. Not only is the church demolished, but the ground where it used to stand is deconsecrated by the bishop. However, churches do not disappear completely. As we are told in "Dry Spell", different saints belonging to demolished churches are collected in an ex-deacon's garden, now refashioned as a surrogate place of worship:

> I got the saints at different places. I bought the confessional when they tore down St. Clem's. […] It's a loss of faith in the world. Churches all gone everywhere. Nobody has faith, Simmy. As a kid I went to confession all-a time. There's nothing for me to confess now if you don't believe in anything. Even in Poland, a Roman Catholic country, people are losing the faith. (31)

As the above character laments, this is a society that is departing if not from religion itself, then certainly from traditional forms of religion. In Mircea Eliade's terms, this is a (post)modern world, where the so-called notions of "sacred time" and "sacred space" are losing their meaning. On the one hand, the perception of time has changed. Living in synchrony, not in diachrony, people have acquired a one-dimensional perspective on time, seen as linear progression, and not as cyclical recurrence of sacred events. On the other hand, the perception of space is different. Space has come to be considered uniformly neutral, homogeneous, and spiritually levelled, without the vertical dimension of a sacred centre. Traditional forms of religion – as Eliade puts it – still survive in camouflaged ways. Traces of religious thought can appear in everyday life situations, the (post)modern world still retaining "a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals" (Eliade 205).

In this light, Bukoski's stories unveil the possibility of unexpected revelations beyond the monotonous flow of daily events. His stories always introduce to the reader a more or less openly avowed quester, who experiences an epiphanic moment, a manifestation of the sacred. While referring to the desacralisation of contemporary America and the loss of traditional forms of faith, these stories simultaneously propose another way of perceiving religion. To quote Robert Wuthnow again, they offer a "new spirituality of seeking" (3). While crying with one eye for the disappearing traditional beliefs, Bukoski smiles with the other, envisaging a more dynamic future for new types of religious identity[6].

To put things in a comparative perspective, the point of view in Bukoski's stories does not belong to the first generation of Polish immigrants, but to the second/third generation, who represents the carrier of meaning, the mirror through which the values of the ancestors are reflected. Traditional forms of religion are (re)experienced, questioned, or twisted in the mind of the young generation, since "primacy is placed not on reason or inherited faith, but on experience, or anticipation of experience, engaging the whole person and activating, or reactivating, individual as well as collective energies" (Roof 46).

Part of the tormented Vietnam Generation, these (anti)heroes return from war with maimed bodies and amputated souls, carrying the burden of a consciousness trapped outside the comforts of what is familiar to them[7]. Prodigal Sons, they come back to their former "homes" only to find them inhabited by strangers; they search for the old churches only to find them torn down, deconsecrated by the bishop. They accordingly experience an ambivalent sense of belonging to and estrangement from a cultural and religious space, striving to find a thread in the past that would give a direction to their future. In "The Wood of Such Trees", the narrator comes back as a visitor to the neighbourhood where he spent his youth, remembering "a different life in a different country when churches were still open" (147). After forty years, he has to remap in his mind a Polish-American neighbourhood, recollecting a whole world of characters and their idiosyncratic stories:

> We lived in a country of woods. I used to draw maps of the woods all the time, putting in the swamp, the Left-Handed River, the birch trees that stood at the edge of a blue forest. I'd also put on the map the coal yard, Federicka Flour, the packing plant, the Isolation Hospital… On this other map – not of places but of the people and events of those times – would have been our priest Father Nowak, Sister Benitia, the school kids, the sick lady Hedda Borski who never left her house, the twins Freda and Greta Zielinski, the Table of Movable Feasts, *Dziadus* in uniform, and many other things. This map wasn't written down anywhere – it was a prayer doubling as a map. (145)

On the narrator's mental map, the reader can trace the flashing destinies of a constellation of Polish-American characters: the priest, the nuns, the furnace cleaner, the housewife, the vet, the immigration officer, and the seaman. In this closed world, some parts of their lives become more visible than others, so one can follow the dreams of a monastic life of a bachelor/furnace cleaner, the quiet desperation of a widower after the death of his wife, the psychological problems of traumatised soldiers returning from Vietnam, and the lamentation of an ex-deacon/junk collector. Narrating their stories, Bukoski chooses to focus on those crucial instances when revelations take place; instances called by the Romanian philosopher Andrei Pleșu "moments of fracture, of syncope, of sufferance", which represent the "real epiphanies of the destiny, defining our hidden structure" (112). The imminence of illness and death, the separation from the loved ones, the loss of sexual appetite, the avatars of (self-)deception, the unbearable burden of loneliness, and the destructive effects of war become pretexts for rethinking the meaning of personal faith.

Significantly, in many stories, the interaction between these characters from different generations leads to various forms of conflict. The younger generation always questions the ideas of the older one, measuring the course of events according to a personal scale, as well as to a model handed down by ancestors. The actions of the older generation thus become templates for the thoughts of the younger generation, i.e. the norm which they follow, but from which they deviate, too.

Dislocated from their natural environment, first-generation immigrants tend to preserve a Catholic frame of mind which is absorbed almost without change in the new American setting. Walking on the *terra firma* of the past, they maintain the traditional thinking to which Eliade refers, never losing sight of the "sacred time" and "sacred space". In the new land, they continue to speak and think with their own accent; they cling to old principles, attending Mass every Sunday, celebrating Christmas/Easter, praying to icons, and being charitable. In David Hollinger's view, they can be defined as "pluralists", individuals who want to remain within the boundaries of their ethnic group by preserving their own set of values. By contrast, second/third-generation immigrants possess inquisitive minds that seem to doubt and test everything. They are the "cosmopolitans", who strive to explore the two sides of their hyphenated identity, as Americans looking back at their Polish descent, and as Poles consciously trying to make sense of their American experience (Hollinger 129).

In a decentred postmodern world, in which one can easily lose direction, the younger generation starts questioning the older generation's traditional understanding of religion. Parents start seeing themselves through the critical lens of their children, while children define themselves against the standards of their parents. As Stephen Fender remarks, "novels based on the immigrant experience express the crisis of uprooting and resettlement in the imagery of adolescence, distributing the opposing values of Old World and New between generations of immigrant parents and children" (300). This is also the case in other fictional works focused on Eastern European immigrants, such as Aleksandar Hemon's *Nowhere Man* or Pauls Toutonghi's *Red Weather*, where the intergenerational conflict is epitomised by the tension between father and son.

The idea of intergenerational conflict is exemplarily developed in "The Korporal's Polonaise", conceived in the *maieutic* fashion of a dialogue between the main protagonist Kazimierz and a priest: "I will tell the priest why I left the Old Country. He will tell me his own fears for the *new* country" (51). The story maps the moral and religious status of a peasant family in the social geography of Poland during World War II, while simultaneously evoking present time America. Unravelling the mechanisms of the traumatic experience triggered by the father's departure, the narrator associates the loss of the father figure with the loss of home and the loss of faith[8]. His question – "is he buying a widow a loaf of Russian bread?" – casts a shadow of doubt over his father's moral integrity. Even after his father's return, the conflict is still there, the questions remain open, and the pattern of denial and acceptance is perpetuated in an ambivalent love/hatred relationship. The son's immigration to the new country does not solve the problematic issue of loss of faith or the intergenerational conflict. Finally, there is no return to Poland, now seen as "the Land of Graves and Crosses" (52).

At the end of the book, however, "the Land of Graves and Crosses" becomes America. It is the place where several generations of Polish-Americans are buried – their names inscribed forever in the foreign land –, the place where the beloved dead ones appear in an epiphanic vision, revealing the deep significance of one's calling:

> Mr. Polaski heard voices echoing prayer, echoes from the Old Country. "Awake", they said to him. Then Mr. Polaski prayed the way he used to and said he was grateful for his life. "Boze! w obliczu którego zadna." Then the ground was cold, and he saw everyone he'd ever known in the neighborhood – but from a distance. And it looked as though they were preparing to welcome him and in the forest where the light had come from he heard the wind and from far away voices saying a simple word, "Bóg", that means "God" in Polish. (179-80)

Bukoski's stories therefore take the form of self-narration and (auto)biographic confession, proposing ways of solving ethical and psychological tensions, which are however left unsolved in open-ended texts with more than one version. Even if the author himself refrains from passing any kind of judgement, his characters allude to attitudes of scepticism, uneasiness, and existential anxiety, at the same time acknowledging the crucial importance of "the sacred" in their lives. They embody the paradigmatic *homo religiosus*, but also the *homo duplex*, the American of Polish descent, who does not belong to a place just as he does not belong to him/herself. Subjects of dis/re-location, they get engaged in a cyclical quest where the point of departure is never the same as the point of return. Drifters, *flaneurs*, blunted destinies deprived of a profession, of faith or of love, they are nonetheless *insiders outsiders* – reshaping Polish geographies in their American minds.

NOTES

1 In Bourdieu's coinage, the *habitus* is the coherent amalgam of practices linking *habit* with *inhabitance*.

2 Jay P. Dolan documents the changes taking place in the Catholic community after the 1960s, noticing "a decline in the number of clergy, women religious, parochial schools, and Catholic colleges," which, however, is accompanied by "a massive increase in the number of Catholics living on the margin of the church". He remarks that "there is no simple explanation for such contrasting developments. Change has taken place to be sure, but decline has not set in. Rather, a restructuring of religion has taken place, ushering in a new era in the history of American Catholicism. It is an era of fewer priests and more lay ministers, fewer Mass and sacraments Catholics as well as more dynamic parish communities, widespread dissent on issues of doctrine along with intense commitment to religion. The reasons behind such restructuring can be located both in society and in the church" (196).

3 Bukoski himself expresses this idea in the interview with Michael Longrie: "I've always thought of Superior as a kind of outpost, a geographical outpost because we are so far north, backed up against Lake Superior, the largest fresh-water lake in the world. We're surrounded by a range of hills in Duluth. […] We are stuck, as it were, here in the lowlands, or were at least in my childhood (I was born in 1945) until, say, the late 1950s. Even now we have only a two-lane highway coming up from Spooner almost to Superior, which isolates us. Add to this the oftentimes severe weather, and I'd like to think of us as kind of an outpost. Isolated this way, I think we're psychologically and emotionally circumscribed. I lived in a largely Polish-American neighborhood. Our church was founded by Polish immigrants – our church being St. Adalbert's. These were the people I had most commerce with" (29).

4 The idea of *replaying* the past is also present in Bukoski's title, *Polonaise*, which does not only define an ethnic space – the American Poland – but also explicitly refers to the slow dance of Polish origin, (in Polish: *polonez*, *chodzony*), and to Chopin's and Ogiński's polonaises.

5 At the same time, the invisible link with the Old Country is strengthened by the religious objects brought to America. Icons, rosaries, scapulars, prayer books, and albums of Polish hymns are visible tokens of a past inheritance passed down through generations.

[6] Gladsky also comments on Bukoski's hopeful perspective: "Even as Bukoski despairs for the past, for lost traditions, for a cultural identity that can never be replaced, for old values and old ways, he points toward a redefined sense of ethnicity, an awareness by the young that something out there must be preserved, and toward a new dialogue, a new expression of ethnicity. [...] A new understanding occurs in the minds of these young, mostly third-generation characters who had come to associate ethnicity only with their parents and grandparents. Consequently, even as these stories document the end of ethnicity, ethnicity is reconstituted, rediscovered as the past takes on new meanings in a world forever changed" (266-267).

[7] Like Private Tomaszewski in the short story with the same name, they define war as a way of annihilating all forms of individual expression.

[8] Bukoski's comments on Shirley Ann Grau's stories become relevant here to his own story: "In Shirley Ann Grau's fiction, houses provide a locus for the psychological and emotional lives of families. Her fictional houses alienate, however, when they become representative of the failure of the family to provide direction to its members. […] For characters not so enthralled by the home place, houses become symbols of isolation and alienation where domestic problems are exacerbated to the degree that characters as 'inhabitors' have no alternative but to 'disinhabit' their houses. Such walls project for the exile his or her loss of the emotional, even spiritual life, of the family" (Bukoski, "The Burden of Home: Shirley Ann Grau's Fiction" 181-82).

WORKS CITED

Buell, Lawrence. "Religion on the American Mind." *American Literary Studies* 19.1 (2007): 32-55.

Bukoski, Anthony. "The Burden of Home: Shirley Ann Grau's Fiction." *Critique* 28 (1987): 181-194.

Bukoski, Anthony. *Polonaise*. Texas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1999.

Dolan, Jay P. *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Harper Torchbooks, 1961.

Fender, Stephen. Introduction to *Sea Changes: British Emigration and American Literature*. *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*. Eds. Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor. Edinburgh University Press, 2007. 298-302.

Gladsky, Thomas S. *Princes, Peasants and Other Polish Selves*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1992.

Hollinger, David A. *Postethnic America, Beyond Multiculturalism*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.

Longrie, Michael. "Replaying the Past: An Interview with Anthony Bukoski." *Wisconsin Academy Review* 42.1 (Winter 1995-1996): 29-32.

Orsi, Robert. "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion." *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*. Ed. David Hall. Princeton University Press, 1997. 3-21.

Pleşu, Andrei. *Minima Moralia*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006.

Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*. London: Granta, 2001.

Wuthnow, Robert. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. University of California Press, 1998.

* A version of this paper was published in *The Glass*, the journal of the Christian Literary Studies Group (www.clsg.org). I would like to thank *The Glass* for permission to republish a revised version of my paper. And a big "thank you" to Anthony Bukoski for reading this article and offering supportive comments.

University of Bucharest