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**Other than Aesthetic Functions of Literature**  
**an Example of 10 Year Activity of the Polish Writers Association**  
**in the Jesuit Millennium Center in Chicago**

**Introduction:**

The Jesuit Millennium Center in Chicago. A lot of aid groups work here and they focus on the problems of Polish immigrants. There are, among others: The Integrated Group Jasmin, The Community of Difficult Marriages Sychar, the groups for the addicted and for those in bereavement. Ten years ago John Paul II Polish Writers' Association was set up here and has worked since. The Association gathers people who write - mainly poetry.

The Association was found in 2004 at the initiative of Alina Szymczyk. On the website you will find the biographies of the 29 members – the immigrants of the first generation. PWA is a situational group. It organizes readings, testimonials and promotes books of poetry accompanied with music and art, it initiates springs and autumns with poetry, special programs, anniversaries, workshops of literary competence, evenings of self – education, it publishes almanacs -joint publications.

They write in Polish – mainly religious and patriotic poems, in which nostalgia is accompanied by a reflection about the costs of emigration. Their work doesn't exist in the official circulation of literature in Poland. In the local circulation – Polish media in US – it is treated as graphomania or marginalized, though PWA has its own immigrant public and readers.

I would like to concentrate not on an analysis and evaluating of PWA's output, but on its situational and biographical context. My presentation will be focused on the social aspect of writing and functioning of literature in the conditions of emigration and on pointing

out of the non- aesthetic, but vital roles played by this literature. I'm convinced that the value of this poetry is not autotelic, but stems from the biographical and situational context. All these literary works are an effect and an outcome of this context.

### **The situational context:**

PWA works under the care, support and approval of Jesuits in Chicago (slajd religion-culture, ethnicity). For the ethnic groups in exile religion is some sort of “ fundamental values”, most important for preserving the cultural identity (Geertz's thesis). Religion in exile becomes in fact a substitute for the left fatherland – which is essential in the conditions of aculturalistic stress. Gathering around the ethnical Church – helps to reduce disorientation, simplifies stabilization, creates the basis for a new type of integration – through its message, moral teaching, social engagement, organizational, charity and educational work. **Religious life helps to transform chaos into space.** This is also the significance of religious creativity of PWA. Religious engagement is best expressed through poetry - *ars sanctissima poesis*. Jesuits don't expect the poems presented here to be religious, there is no censorship. But the members of PWA themselves think that the place and the patronage of John Paul II are a kind of commitment. Therefore there appears a phenomenon of inner censorship, of self – censorship. *“If in poetry there's no God or man, there is nothing in it, that could interest a serious person (13.05.2012 W. Panasiuk).* Not only is the situation of creating under the umbrella of the Church important here, but also the fact, that poets are members of a specific, legally registered, organized group. The structure of the society, publishing of almanacs, as well as common public presentations imply cooperation, support and a safe approval of the community

### **The biographical context:**

The poetry written in PWA stems from the status of an immigrant. Emigration breeds poets. Anna Frajlich calls it “**the creative wound**”. Dilemmas, longing, cultural alienation turn out to be a stimulus, which liberates the creative potential. The egalitarian concepts of creativity, so called everyday creativity (the effect of psychological research of the 1980s, mainly D.N. Perkins *The mind's best work* 1981, R. W. Weisberg *Problem solving and creativity* 1988) assume, that creativity is not an attribute of outstanding

individuals (the domain of genius), but a common, universal feature, susceptible to educational influence. The creative potential is a basic adaptation resource of an individual, simplifying their development (according to K. Obuchowski 1985), and creativity is a process of solving problems (according to Strzalecki, 1989). Writing therefore helps to deal with the challenges of the cultural adaptation, to determine one's identity, to work out the strategies of adaptation. The creative act of writing allows the writer to look at their biography of an immigrant not through the aspect of a loss, but through building, working on oneself, through rediscovered creative potential. „*Moving to a new country is, in fact, the start of a learning project*”, claims Agnieszka Bron, the author of the concept of FLOATING- defeating the difficulties connected with living in a new culture. Floating consists of four stages: 1. Feeling uneasy about the decision, searching for an emigration niche; 2. Losing security, symptoms of aculturalist stress; 3. Facing a crisis, entering the culture of habitation; 4. Trying to cope with the situation, recognizing the new reality as one's own. If the immigrant stops, they usually permanently stay on the second stage of the aculturational strategy and in such a case writing compensates them the failure to reach the remaining two stages. The members of PWA are usually over fifty. Their biographies are broken, they have a distorted sense of the continuity of their biographical experience. Writing helps them to build an important, symbolic relationship between the past, the present and the future. Writing becomes a kind of biographical closure.

**The roles this literature plays for the recipient / the reader :** the work of groups such as PWA plays several important roles for the recipient;

1. **To teach about the traditional Polish culture:** it preserves, keeps and hands down the Polish culture – its customs and values. It's the culture in its traditional form, mostly anachronic, stiff and pathetic. But for the second and the third generation of Polish – American children and grandchildren, knowing their ancestors' cultural legacy is a necessary starting point to their individual

exploration.

**2. To be a witness:** strong will to maintain the cultural identity

**3. To abolish taboos:** the poetry of PWA exposes the love of God, the love of fatherland the subjects which nowadays are treated as private, as some sort of a taboo. These poems are authentic, naïve and very refreshing. I myself experienced such feelings in contact with this poetry and its authors, and later I observed similar reactions in my students.

**4. To be a model:** The activity of PWA may be considered a model of a strategy for constructive dealing with the aculturational stress through development of creative potential, coming together, support in the ethnic group.

**5. to be the culture capital:** this type of ethnic creativity is an alternative for the popular culture, widens considerably the cultural capital of the second and third generation of immigrants.

Though the poetry of PWA plays important rules for the reader, it's not the reader that is its target or reference point. This poetry implements the strategy of CONFESSION, where the author's "I" is most important, the inner world of "I" addresses "I". That's why special attention should be paid to:

#### **Functions for the sender /writer:**

**1. To educate** - particular care about language correctness, verification of the historical knowledge, encouragement to read other writers, self - educating

**2. To compensate** – writing releases the tension connected with the process of adjustment, recompensates the inferiority complex or lack of satisfaction with life, low social status, J. Paradowski *we write to take away some power from Fate*, to retain the sense of belonging.

**3. To remember, to keep the past** - saving from oblivion, leaving a trace of oneself and the world one lives in

**4. To escape (escapist)** – escape from difficult present to a better past, fascination with the fullness of the past life

**5. As a therapy** – a kind of katharsis, serving to relieve and compress the fear of depression, the life crises, the moments of confusion, apathy, the feeling of losing sense of life. The tension typical of emigration causes disorganization of psyche, whereas writing helps in its integration. It also helps to justify, apologize, confess, expresses the testament state of the soul.

**6. To integrate** – it helps to create a community of writers. Publishing together and joint public shows, organizing events is a cure for loneliness and a feeling of alienation, gives a sense of support, solidarity, security in a group. Participation in the common, shared culture prevents the cultural isolation.

**7. To meditate** – poetry helps in religious meditations, it often simply becomes a written prayer

### **Conclusions:**

Absent or marginalized emigration poetry, written in organized groups is USEFUL as:

1. an example of a strategy for dealing with adapting to the aculturalistic stress
2. as an evidence, how complicated and painful the process of assimilation can be
3. as an example and encouragement to free the creative potential (writing turns out to be available for those willing to take it up )
4. as a kind of activity and social engagement, protection against loneliness, feeling of uselessness and depression
5. a way of self – education, developing of imagination, self - improvement
6. making the ethnic group stronger through integration and participation in cultural events

Maybe in the modern world, where multiculturalism is obvious in America, a requirement in Europe, the act of creative writing is worth promoting as a way to help oneself in ethnic groups? This question has been positively answered by the Jesuits – as for 10 years now PWA has found support in the Jesuit Millennium Center.