

Michał Witkowski, *Autobiografia: Tom pierwszy, Wiara: 1975-1990*. Kraków: Znak Literanova, 2023. 496 pp.

Not too long ago, Michał Witkowski's extraordinary literary career was on a downward slide. His 2005 novelistic debut, *Lovetown*—a self-proclaimed “faggot Decameron” about cruising adventures of the communist-era queens—took the Polish literary world by storm, introducing queer sensibilities to the cultural mainstream and making its author an overnight celebrity. Witkowski's subsequent works could not quite top the raw energy of the first novel. Yet, each was a literary event that showcased the author's gift for storytelling and his knack for self-promotion. Together, they comprise what can best be described as a “queer epic of Polish transformation,” arguably the most sustained inquiry into the country's turbulent transition to capitalism in all contemporary fiction. Witkowski's daring publicity stunts were eventually crowned in 2017 with an acting stint in a popular soap opera (peculiarly enough, produced by the public television network run at the time by a virulently homophobic right-wing government), yet by this time his literary stardom was clearly on the wane, as he appeared unable to move past the creative horizon drawn by his most successful works. It did not help that the author increasingly neglected mainstream publishing for the sake of digital patronage and content-provider models that enabled him to capitalize on his dedicated fanbase.

Then came *Autobiography, vol. 1: Faith (hereafter Faith)*, the first book in a planned multi-volume autobiographical project that returned him to the cultural spotlight, though for how long is yet to be seen. The volume owes its existence to a literary streaming experiment, which it is both a product of and an advertisement for. Indeed, the more impatient readers can purchase advance drafts of the forthcoming volumes directly from the author via his Facebook page immediately after putting down the present volume (the “package” includes all hitherto written material and an annual “subscription” to regularly released new content). The volume was met with an enthusiastic critical and readerly reception. In 2024, it was nominated for the Nike Award, Poland's most prestigious literary distinction, and won the Readers' Choice Award in the same competition. Some critics went so far as to compare *Faith* to Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle*, and even to Marcel Proust's opus. It is neither, of course, but that is not necessarily a criticism. On the contrary, it easily counts among Witkowski's most accomplished and accessible works, though with some notable caveats.

The author, a self-proclaimed and self-conscious narcissist, was always at his best when using his literary alter ego as a conduit for his colorful narratives. Here, he clearly relishes the freedom of self-expression afforded by the genre of autobiography. “I can finally speak in my own language, in my own name, about things that interest me,” he boasts in the book's epilogue. However, readers are best advised not to take the author at his word when he declares that his latest book represents “the most existential and direct way of commenting this strangest adventure that happened to us, which we

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conventionally call life.” The book is still very much a part of the author’s self-fashioning project, intricately tied to his oeuvre and public persona. It is perhaps the starkest difference between Witkowski and authors like Knausgård, whose auto-fictional writings intentionally bracket out their present-day consciousness (i.e., knowledge of “where it all leads to”). Unlike his Norwegian counterpart, the author of *Faith* constantly highlights the teleological nature of his story – the emergence of Witkowski the writer and Witkowski the celebrity – and makes repeated references to his works, which is why the book will be best appreciated by readers familiar with his output and self-perpetuated mytho-biography.

This is not to say that others will not find much to enjoy here. *Faith* is filled to the brim with brilliant anecdotes, vignettes, and impressionistic essays, served with the author’s distinct sense of humor and eye for the grotesque. The volume focuses on Witkowski’s childhood and adolescent years, a period framed by his birth and first sexual initiation, respectively. The latter serves as the book’s denouement, to which a large portion of the narrative slowly builds. Of course, the skilled storyteller that he is, Witkowski ends his tale at just the right moment to pique readers’ interest in subsequent volumes. Capitalizing on post-communist nostalgia has always been Witkowski’s hallmark. In *Faith*, the author fleshes out the twilight years of Polish socialism with almost ethnographic attention to detail, recreating the period’s distinct atmosphere through colors, textures, tastes, smells, objects, affects, rituals, and all manner of half-forgotten relics. To the author’s credit, the world emerging from his book is hardly a blissful idyll. Time and again, we confront the darker sides of Poland’s communist utopia—conformity, insincerity, transactionalism, resentment, and violence—that permeated the everyday fabric and easily impressed themselves on a sensitive child like the young Witkowski. Indeed, this is arguably the volume’s central paradox and driving tension: while the author delights in reconstructing the social and sensual aura of the late PRL (People’s Republic of Poland), his narrative follows an emancipatory trajectory that sets its protagonist against the world he so richly invokes in his tale. *Faith* is therefore not so much a nostalgic celebration of the simple joys of life under communism as a coming-of-age story about the formation of a distinct sense of “I”—which includes coming to terms with one’s homosexuality—in a time and place often viewed from the viewpoint of collective experiences.

In that sense, *Faith* shares some interesting parallels with Tomasz Jedrowski’s recent, well-received romance, *Swimming in the Dark* (2020). However, what distinguishes Witkowski’s autobiographical tale from his younger colleague’s Romeo-and-Juliet-style narrative is his specific approach to queer identity, which made *Lovetown* such a controversial proposition back in 2005. Namely, Witkowski ostensibly rejects labels such as “gay” and the emancipatory discourse associated with middle-class values. Instead, he is repeatedly drawn to the abject and dangerous sides of the underground homosexual life in PRL’s twilight years, his depiction of which some progressive critics found borderline homophobic. We get a hint of it in this book and when we follow the author’s sexual initiation leading him to a seedy bar that, his friend points out, is a queer hookup

place. In a rather interesting passage, the present-day author warns his younger, inexperienced self: “My beloved, innocent child, what are you doing? Don’t go there, stop yourself! Don’t you know it’s a dangerous playground, Klondike, gutter? You want to seek love and heath in the gutter? This path leads not to the heath, but to the swamp. It’s easy to get lost” (459). Of course, the book’s protagonist does not heed the warning, partly because of blooming, insatiable desire and partly because without taking such risks, there would be no story worthy of telling and no author to tell it. And that is the point, since for the author of *Faith*, queerness is quintessentially a call to adventure.

One can only hope that *Faith* and most of Witkowski’s output will one day appear in English translation. For those to whom Polish language does not present a barrier, the recommendation is an easy one.

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