

New Situations of Poetics

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Poetics has often been described in recent times as a field forced into making defensive gestures. There have also been assertions that the charges mounted by post-structuralism of a tendency to search for eidetic literariness, the need to generalize from what is consummately idiomatic, the shuttering of literature inside a closed system, and so on, are still valid.¹ For these reasons, the field should somehow justify its current existence, if only by indicating the propaedeutic virtues of learning literary theory, since aside from those, it remains set in clear contradiction to the widely accepted methodological foundations of literary studies. Seeing the place of poetics in the contemporary landscape of philosophical knowledge in this way is something that recurs each time there is a demand for comment on the situation. I see the current place of poetics somewhat differently than do such diagnoses. Neither the typical poststructuralist objections to poetics presented in the 1990s, nor the conditions for its use stipulated by Anna Burzyńska (as the “most important terms of today’s poetics”) of “pluralism, interdisciplinarity, the pragmatic and rhetorical turn” can today be successfully defended.² Another proposal put forward in that era by the field’s few remaining sympathizers was the slogan of multiple poetics in place of one. Mary Gallagher writes very differently on the subject, observing that poetics can offer intellectually fruitful challenges to such reigning humanities paradigms as cultural studies or post-colonialism. In her opinion, the increasingly vocal reluctance to explore contexts ulterior to literary works themselves will allow a new recognition of poetics’ potential.³

¹ Dorota Korwin-Piotrowska recently recalled this set of widely held objections to poetics – see D. Korwin-Piotrowska, “Życie pośmiertne poetyki,” (The Posthumous Life of Poetics), *Tematy i Konteksty* (Themes and Contexts) 2013, 3, pp. 20-21.

² A. Burzyńska, “Poetyka po strukturalizmie” (Poetics after Structuralism) in: *Poetyka bez granic* (Poetics Without Borders), ed. W. Bolecki and W. Tomasiak, Warszawa 1995, p. 77.

³ M. Gallagher, “Poetics, Ethics and Globalization,” in: *World Writing. Poetics, Ethics, Globalization*, ed. M. Gallagher, Toronto-London 2008, p. 13.

Gallagher's remarks give us occasion to observe that the situation of literary studies and poetics has changed greatly since the '90s. There is good reason to assert that a significant shift has occurred in the position of poetics, from being somewhere marginal, near the discipline's discard pile, to again becoming fairly central. That has indeed happened, though the new position of poetics is perhaps not always plainly evident. Due to numerous transformations in philology, poetics now occupies or will soon occupy a newly important place, is taking on or will soon take on new cognitive tasks, and is determining or will soon determine certain important problems. Here, I am deliberately emphasizing that present and future poetics in philology should be an important subject of theoretical reflection, since only in time will we be able to grasp the dynamics of change involving issues of poetics that have been set in motion by a series of recent and current revaluations in the humanities that have taken and are taking place before our very eyes.

To begin with, we need to note what kinds of reflections are being offered on the framing of philological work. For some time now, philology has less often been inclined to pretend it is something else (as Ryszard Koziołek wrote a few years back, philology is coming home⁴) – for example, an underprivileged segment of cultural studies or sociology, with whose concepts it was eagerly rewriting its lexicons for a time. On the other hand, there are increasingly frequent assertions aimed at newly challenging concepts that have been in use in the field for centuries. A good example of this would be James Turner's book, which reminds us of the importance of philology in the rise of modern humanities and the modern university,⁵ and also of the thesis of one recent collective volume describing histories of philology.⁶ Such publications belong to a growing current in scholarship on the history of philology and reveal an interesting point of view on the field itself. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's *The Powers of Philology*⁷ is another case in point; the book is the product of theoretical reflections on regular philological tasks such as preparing new editions of texts, writing commentaries on unclear fragments, or placing works presented in their historical context. In works such as Gumbrecht's we face the need to consider what constitutes the proper domain of the field, and in particular, to recognize what once enabled it to be set apart from among other domains, bodies, or fields and what makes possible its further, continually renewed differentiation. In general, contemporary metaphilological reflection often helps understand the reasons why philology, often smoothly and easily subordinated to other fields of knowledge (anthropology, cultural studies, and many others), stubbornly resists that process and continuously separates itself, isolates itself, and claims autonomy with a sometimes perturbing persistence. In the broader temporal perspective that these metaphilological studies establish, the well-known structuralist (or formalist, avant-garde, etc.) formulation of literature's independent existence, the famous literariness, would be only one of many historically documented efforts toward philology's creation of its own separate sphere. It is still taking place today, but on different terms and using different arguments than in the age of structuralist *sturm und drang*. As before, there is reference to the causative force behind philological activity, and the "power" that creates further divisions of philosophical knowledge is exposed. The real substance of the reasons, sources, and energies that perpetuate the production of philology

⁴ R. Koziołek, "Teoria literatury jako akt wiary" (Theory of Literature as an Act of Faith), FA-art 2010, 3-4.

⁵ J. Turner, *Philology – The Forgotten Origins of Modern Humanities*, Princeton 2014.

⁶ *Philology and Its Histories*, ed. S. A. Gurda, Columbus 2010.

⁷ H. U. Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology. Dynamics of Textual Scholarship*, Chicago 2003.

today is quite varied. In Gumbrecht's view, what drives it is the desire, typical for philology in previous ages, to make something vanished present again. That, however, is only one of the possible answers, since the scholar of contemporary literature, as Edward Balcerzan wrote,⁸ must have other reasons for developing his area of study, dealing as he does not with the vanished but with the current. Defining the reasons why philology keeps separate from other domains and bodies of knowledge would appear to be a continually ongoing type of discussion, which in the contemporary world has acquired intensity due to the recent far-reaching subjugation of philological domains by neighboring departments. There is now an aspiration to understand more fully why this area defines and separates itself as independent.

The process of philology's separation from other branches of knowledge sometimes finds support from rather unexpected sources. They include a number of politically and socially engaged theoreticians and philosophers who, in the style of Adrienne Rich or Franco Berardi,⁹ perceive certain unchanging literary qualities. Thanks to these qualities, in their opinion, works possess the ability to regenerate the imagination, to bring into being impartial judgment, to open up the temporal horizon to unforeseeable events, and even new social forms. The road to such beliefs often leads through formal analyses of literary works. Thus a recent book by Franco Moretti rather ostentatiously proposes looking at literature via graphic charts, maps, and "trees" showing changes in the English nineteenth-century novel.¹⁰ The scholar tries to grasp the power of form ("form as force"¹¹), its ability to act, create, and raise awareness. At times, the project is far removed from any precisely defined political goals (though Moretti writes about the "materialist conception of form"¹²), but it certainly deals very closely with philological questions, and even questions of poetics.

Sometimes politically and socially engaged critics or others who were once such engaged speak plainly on the subject of philology's potentialities. A few years ago, queer critic Joseph Boone gave a passionate apologia for close reading. He wrote of the need to follow the rhythms of poetry and prose, the ways narrative threads are interwoven and unwoven, and so on, which leads him to expound on the joy he gets from the analysis of literary texts. The critic told of his will to submit to the text's power, to surrender to its literalness, and of being given over to its otherness. Rita Felski cites Boone's apologia in her book-manifesto *Uses of Literature*,¹³ in order to justify the need to reintegrate the phenomenological approach to the literary work. Together with others such as the French scholar Marielle Macé,¹⁴ Felski – once primarily a feminist critic and the author of articles in the area of the study of everyday life – is now developing an innovative version of literary phenomenology. She tries to show four traditional poetic categories: anag-

⁸ E. Balcerzan, „Kim jest [...]?” (Who is the Scholar of Contemporary Literature?) in Balcerzan, *Przez znaki. Granice autonomii sztuki poetyckiej. Na materiale polskiej poezji współczesnej* (Through the Signs. The Borders of Poetic Autonomy. A Study Using Contemporary Polish Poetry), Gdańsk 2000, pp. 9-15, online edition.

⁹ See the discussion of their views in Marta Koronkiewicz's article "Does This Poem Work (For You) – Irony, Possibility And Work in Adrienne Rich's And Franco Bernardi's Critical Thought," in *Praktyka Teoretyczna* (Theoretical Practice) 2014, 1, pp. 71-84.

¹⁰ F. Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for Literary History*, London–New York, 2007.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ R. Felski, *Uses of Literature* Malden–Oxford, 2008.

¹⁴ M. Macé, "Ways of Reading, Modes of Being," in *New Literary History* 2013, 2, pp. 213-229.

norisis, the beautiful, mimesis, and the sublime, in a new light, reformulating them as recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock. These are intended to articulate what fascinates her, i.e., the noumenal power of the text or work, allowing it to cross temporal and cultural barriers, increase readers' knowledge, startle them, etc. Felski's demarcations of certain typically literary forces and domains constitute a representative gesture of contemporary philology in arguing its separate and independent status. Because the subject of her consideration is distressingly and thrillingly unchanging, not to be replaced by filmic works, fifteenth-century legal documents, or an anthropologist's tale, it demands a rebooted descriptive approach that phenomenologizes the subject, testifying to and striving to discover the forms of its unique manifestation.

The book by Felski provided as an example is worth remembering for at least two additional reasons. Firstly, it offers a distinct demonstration of the position, increasingly observed in our day, of approaching or dealing with a text in all of its inimitable and irreplaceable literalness. That position is interesting since it connects with the attention that poetics typically devotes to a concrete subject of consideration and analysis. The position makes it possible for there to develop a poetics seen to borrow a term from Stanisław Balbus as a "language-intermediary",¹⁵ or a lexicon remaining in constant contact with the empirical experience of reading, but also lending itself to further use, to experimental transposition into the contexts of other works.

Secondly, Felski's philological manifesto displays the widespread contemporary interest in a rather enigmatic ontology of the literary work. It has become widespread because the field of contemporary literary studies has re-opened the question of what constitutes the nature of subject they are attempting to define. The belief in the strictly textual nature of works of literature, dominant for several decades, seems no longer to be entirely in force. Some, like Derek Attridge, have said that certain features of the material itself require that we bring back the category of the literary work.¹⁶ An increasingly important persuasion argues that the textual existence of works is accompanied by the uncanny shadow of the text, the work's voice. The vocal dimension of the literary production, long ago repudiated by the deconstructionist critique of the voice as an avatar of metaphysical presence and dislodged by literary analysis, is now returning, bringing with it the possibility of new categories of thought. This current of reflection is visibly linked with those phenomenological descriptions of the noumenal force of what is written and its ability to violate textual principles. The current also corresponds to certain experimental literary forms such as, for example, poetry recorded in vocal performances, where the work itself is a printed amplitude chart depicting the changing frequencies of acoustic waves. We should further take note to of the categories of form and substance, which are making a comeback to literary studies, if nothing else in the formulations of the Copenhagen school. They represent an important concept in the work of scholars such as Gumbrecht or Hayden White, and Moretti, mentioned previously, is also reviving the concept of form and assigns momentous significance to it. Gumbrecht is developing studies of mood for similar reasons; it is his conviction that many works cannot be understood without due consideration of how they often are embodiments of ephemeral, elusive moods. In such cases the literary work draws attention through

¹⁵S. Balbus, „Granice poetyki i kompetencje teorii literatury” (The Borders of Poetics and the Competencies of Literary Theory), in *Poetyka bez granic* (Poetics Without Borders), p. 16.

¹⁶D. Attridge, *Jednostkowość literatury* (The Singularity of Literature), trans. Paweł Mościcki, Kraków 2007, p. 146.

what is material in it or at least through its uncanny residual material aspect. Some scholars have observed in relation to electronic literature, however, that its literary quality exists not on the screen, but somewhere in the sphere of its invisible programmed code, recorded in the word processor, from which it has the potential to be generated infinitely. This gave rise to the proposal by scholars of e-literature to speak not about texts but about techsts, in order to stress the technological redefining of the ontology of what is literary. All of these positions suggest that an interest in the ways works exist or appear is generating and will continue for some time to generate careful analyses of what is literary, where the activities of poetics belong to privileged procedures. It is not entirely reasonable to expect traditional poetics to be able to cope with the tasks connected with this, but we can expect that its lexicon will quickly become more complex, will to some extent be replaced, and will be challenged. An example of how poetics dealt with a similar task would be Felski's book referred to earlier, with its group of four concepts tentatively replacing canonical categories from the past. Something along those lines will continue to take place, and we will, it seems likely, see poetics lexicons tested and re-conceptualized in some interesting ways. That will be a result of the need to take into account some exceptionally complicated intuitions, impossible to synthesize, of what literariness is. Since the text, work, form, voice, and techst are different names for the power of literature, experienced as something noumenal, that must be accompanied by an expansion of the lexicon of poetics, placing it in a new configuration with previously existing resources and traditions.

It is easy to arrive at the conclusion that such an approach to the phenomenon of literariness prepares specialist in the production of knowledge whose field is poetics for a particular type of cognitive work. It is necessarily based on experimentation, testing various concepts, whether new ones or those previously used and worthy of reviving. All different kinds of practical and training activities especially need to be intensified. In various forms of engagement with literary works, the person conducting research undergoes exercises and practices that allow him or her to acquire knowledge in ways similar to what is now called practice theory. The production of new poetics knowledge often takes place as a direct result of text-producing activities, operations performed on the work, playing with it, or exercises inspired by it. We may wish to go so far as to state that the part of poetics knowledge that is worth developing or revealing is discrete knowledge in the sense used by Michel de Certeau, the scholar who developed a theory of the practice of everyday life. We could then conceptually grasp the sphere of literary inventiveness as a little-known poetics present in extremely widespread practices of writing submerged in everyday life, inventive and equal to philology in its autonomy. This means that engaging in training and also planning and participating in the practices of producing literary utterances enables the creation of a poetics viewed in the direct combination of acquired knowledge with the context or situation that made its acquisition possible. This reminds us of the Greek roots of the term 'poetics', about which Teresa Kostkiewiczowa wrote that it originally referred to "the development of something, the process of producing, composing, inventing, and only later to the products of these activities."¹⁷ Seen in this light, poetics is linked with practice, production, and action; in current usage, the connection with creative writing is thus not accidental.

¹⁷T. Kostkiewiczowa, „Poetyka dawniej i dziś” (*Poetics in the Past and Today*), *Tematy i Konteksty (Themes and Contexts)*, 2013, 3, pp. 35-36.

The remarks made above may also stimulate a new framing of the frequently repeated view that poetics can be useful in the literature studies didactic process. We seem habituated to statements that poetics is a body of concepts that students need to recognize in order to be capable of taking part in important discussions of literary theory that reveal the true state of literature studies. That sometimes leads rather to the conclusion that adepts of philosophical knowledge should be kept for a certain time away from pluralism of scholarly thought and led through poetics, treated quite wholeheartedly as pristine, since what remains of the structuralist achievement is pedagogically useful. In addition to the duality of thought that that shows, there also remains a presumably unconscious conviction that poetics is not so much an isolated form of knowledge instrumentally used by various scholarly isms as a philological first estate, its first domain, the place where it is actively created. For this reason the didactic value of poetics is not in becoming acquainted with a philological koinè, a lingua franca, but perhaps chiefly in its shared use by those teaching and learning how to produce the study of poetry, and philological studies generally, with reference to concrete works or fragments, leading to unexpected observations in reading and analysis. In this frame of reference, poetics is accordingly not only something given, but also something created. The teaching situation and discussions in seminars would belong, then, to privileged contexts of creation of poetics knowledge, as a kind of cognitively productive philological laboratory. This function of a laboratory of poetics could – at least potentially – be fulfilled by frequent workshops in class, writing schools, discussion meetings, and other activities.

We can therefore assert that revisions of the status of poetics carried out in the spirit of post-structuralism have paradoxically done a good job of preparing the discipline to play a new role. It has emerged from those revisions more deeply aware of its historicity and the accidental relationships that connect it with the historically changing institutional frameworks of philological knowledge. At the same time, poetics has become more sensitive to the multiplicity of sources and energies that bring about its continuous renewal and creation. In this broader perspective on the conditions that interact with poetics, one can see more clearly how it constitutes a form of situational knowledge, where together with uncertainty as to the durability of its concrete conceptual constructions, there is certainty as to the particular cognitive tasks imposed by the context of studying a particular given work. Without poetics, a certain new value that appears in the reader's situational experience would remain unexpressed and the entire process of reading would be considerably impoverished. Furthermore, without new, situationally developing reading-based conceptualizing possibilities, poetics would remain out of touch with the times and of little use in practical contexts of reception. That is why this situational poetics must be linked to new cognitive developments worthy of thorough study.

Perhaps the potential of these new developments will also prove useful in observing contemporary methodological changes. Poetics constitutes the privileged sphere for encounters between increasingly bold centrifugal reading methods and weakening but still dominant centripetal methods. Today, in the realm of poetics, there can and should be a particularly absorbing and sober debate between the two, one which will no doubt take a somewhat longer time to settle.

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ABSTRACT:

The article discusses new concepts of literary theory that indicate a gradual restoration of poetics to a place of importance in literary studies thought. In the author's opinion, poetics is making a comeback as a form of essential situational knowledge that enables the enrichment of the reading process, and also arises during the act of reading, avoiding the untimeliness and abstraction associated with poetics' former incarnation.

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