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# P o e t i c s

## as a Praxis of Attentive Reading

C r i t i c s :  
Dorota Korwin-Piotrowska, *Poetyka. Przewodnik po świecie tekstów* (Poetics. A Guide to the World of Texts), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2011

A discussion on the status and future of poetics as a basic area of literary studies has been going on without interruption now for many years. The richness of textual phenomena and problems concerning textuality, growing and multiplying incessantly, means that any attempts to organize and classify reading experiences elicits manifold doubts, heightened by differences in scholarly perspectives. They start out by demanding that we accept diverging premises, and as a result lead to mutually exclusive conclusions.

The longer this state of dissatisfaction persists, and the greater the impetus for new disciplines and methodologies to play a role in shaping humanists in the university, subjecting each new class of Polish Studies students to fascination and frustration, the more frequently and effectively we hear the view stated that without the formation of a professional skills set, these new, mind-boggling scholarly projects are of no use. The foundation and fulcrum of intellectual work in the humanities remains knowledge of the principles of writing and reading texts, of how they are made and function. All cognitive excursions in the university still begin with attempts to answer these questions. At the same time, these questions have for years been accompanied by methodological uncertainties: how do we confront the complexity and specificity of issues relating to the world of texts in such a way as to avoid oversimplification, idealizing, and rigid classifications, these days rightfully viewed with distrust? How can

we convey to our students specialized knowledge about language material and how to use it in scholarly practice? Answers to these questions have been offered by myriad anthologies, special issues of periodicals and articles on the current state of poetics, which nonetheless function more like prisms refracting light than lenses that bring a spectrum of visual phenomena into focus.

It appears, then, that the days of great syntheses and textbooks presenting clear and comprehensible instructions on how to approach literary texts have vanished for good. So it was a great joy for me to read Dorota Korwin-Piotrowska's 2011 textbook *Poetyka. Przewodnik po świecie tekstów* (Poetics. A Guide to the World of Texts). This is the first effort since the era of those great compendiums by the gray eminences of Polish literary studies<sup>1</sup> to make a synthesis of current knowledge in the area of poetics, encompassing both the state of the discipline and the current shape and scope of its subject matter.

<sup>1</sup> I have in mind here the following classic academic tomes: *Zarys teorii literatury* (Outline of Literary Theory, Warszawa 1972) by Michał Głowiński, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, and Janusz Sławiński; *Zarys poetyki* (Outline of Literary Theory), Warszawa 1972 by Ewa Miodońska-Brookes, Adam Kulawik, and Marian Tatar; *Poetyka stosowana* (Applied Poetics, Warszawa 1978) by Bożena Chrzęstowska and Seweryna Wystouch; *Poetyka. Wstęp do teorii dzieła literackiego* (Poetics. Introduction to the Theory of the Literary Work, Warszawa 1990) by Adam Kulawik; and Henryk Markiewicz's *Główne problemy wiedzy o literaturze* (Principal Problems in Literature Knowledge, Kraków 1965) and *Wymiary dzieła literackiego* (Dimensions of the Literary Work, Kraków 1984).

Korwin-Piotrowska has set herself the imposing task of coming to grips with the tradition of poetological scholarship and applying its classical tools, categories, and methods to a description of the problems of the contemporary scene. What is particularly noteworthy is her acute sense of the importance of poetics as a subject which, regardless of changing cultural contexts, or perhaps due to those changes, fulfills an essential propaedeutic function in Polish Studies education. This belief of hers is the result of Korwin-Piotrowska's many years of teaching experience. From her perspective as a university teacher, she shows that the aim of poetics is to teach independent and creative thinking connected with passionate reading and the ability to interpret diverse types of texts. At the same time, poetics should teach a set of skills and emphasize the functionality of the tools it employs, which do not impose received ideas and assumptions but rather render the reader sensitive to the complexity and subtlety of the objects under analysis. Texts as a rule resist descriptive categories, demanding a critical approach to any terminology that seeks to categorize and systematize things apodictically. Instead of allowing methodological problems to plague students' reading from the outset (knowing that they are bound to appear sooner or later), it is crucial that we teach attentive reading and restraint in issuing judgments. Such judgments, in view of the dynamic and multivariiegated changes in both the subject of study and its environment, as well as in the theory of literature, are of necessity historically conditioned.

This very sensible premise leads to the following results. Dorota Korwin-Piotrowska strongly emphasizes the connection between poetics and contemporary stylistics and semantics, as well as rhetoric, which is more than just a subcategory of stylistics; it also provides essential training in how to use language creatively and how to be a discriminating reader, taking into consideration the persuasive, even manipulative role of grammatical figures and constructions.

Finally, and crucially, all instructions and counsels offered by Korwin-Piotrowska in her guide to the world of texts are accompanied by the qualification that this work involves creating a mental map, bearing witness

as much to the specific nature of the texts under discussion as to our own situational or historical cognitive condition, which defines our capacities for understanding and defining the meaning of these particular texts, as well as the limitations to those capacities.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle is presented by defining what "the world of texts" means today. This formula (presumably intended to be in dialogue with the Post-Structuralist vision of a "textual world") appears to suggest the possibility of opposing the world of semiotics to the world of reality. Nonetheless, I understand Korwin-Piotrowska here to be deliberately embracing methodological and philosophical self-definition, being careful to demarcate the clearest possible boundaries to her object of study.

Korwin-Piotrowska treats the world of texts as the sphere of humanity's semasiological activity. More specifically: as the sphere of language communication, not limited to literary utterances, whose study is governed by poetics. Still, she repeatedly expresses her conviction that literature exists, despite the difficulty of defining it, and that it is the subject that concerns her.

The trouble is that in today's world the word often has a range of relationships with audio and visual communication, with which Korwin-Piotrowska does not concern herself (the intertextuality she discusses is not the same thing as intermediality). As a result, the journey into the world of texts proposed by her guidebook at times resembles an attempt to return to the Gutenberg galaxy in which the central position is occupied by printed texts, and the main object of interest are those among them that are designated as literary texts. The author, in paying lip service to the emergence of new textual issues relating to the internet that are imparting dynamism to and radically reshaping textual phenomena (e.g. three-dimensionality, multimediality, functionalization, the unique and active nature of the cybertext), seems to underestimate the stature of this change in the culture, defending values and ways of reading that belong to the culture of the printed word. At the same time, Korwin-Piotrowska treats all genres of discourse as material to be absorbed into contemporary literature.

Despite her tremendous sensitivity and competence, despite her receptivity to the current state of literary studies' self-consciousness, Korwin-Piotrowska takes a consciously conservative position, aiming to preserve the identity of the discipline. Because she repeatedly asserts her belief that the effort to guard the stature of poetics cannot be based on the conservation and invariability of its tools, but must emerge from its capability of adapting research methods to the actually existing situation and state of the subject, her proposal presents an ideal point of departure for further reflection on these problems, which transcend her designated scholarly framework of the paradigm of printed literature.

Korwin-Piotrowska explains in the preface that her intention is to give "a certain glimpse into what literary studies means" (p. 11). And we should clarify here that she makes a fantastic job of it, though she—naturally does not achieve any kind of universal definition of literature. It is difficult not to agree with the diagnosis she makes at the beginning: "The world of texts, that surround us and that we use, forces us to continually re-define what we mean by literature, fiction, genre, style, narrative, composition, or poem." (p. 15)

The structure of the book demonstrates her point, as these same currents, problems and questions, concerning the specificity of literary texts and of contemporary poetics tasked with their analysis, reappear throughout it. The chapters are divided according to specific problems rather than such categories as versification, genre theory, or stylistics; they frequently defy accepted, settled definitions (such as those decreed by typology or genre). This seems to be an excellent idea, justified on the merits and in terms of its pedagogic value. The author initiates the reader into nuances of literary studies scholarship, leading him first with a general description of the place and role of poetics. She then poses a question which is still intriguing, though by no means new: "Do we know what literature is?" and indicates some ways we can define it, finally concentrating on the central problem: "What does it mean 'to be a text'?"

I will give the titles of successive chapters in the order in which they appear, because neither their formulation nor

their succession follow established patterns, and they therefore testify to Korwin-Piotrowska's intuitive grasp of the newest methodological trends and questions. They proceed thus: "Types and genres—spheres of influence," "Narrative as knowledge," "Secrets of composition," "Worlds and characters," "Tonal value—prosody," "Lyric, poetry, or poem?," "The art of the line," "Drama: the word as action," "Space in the text, space of the text," "Textualized time," "Tools of knowledge, conveyors of expression: stylistic means," "From style to stylization (against a background of intertextuality)."

The idea of *Guide to the World of Texts* is to be of equal service to those who have no knowledge of the problematic it presents and those who wish to deepen and systematize their knowledge. To that end, the book's construction is clear and functional, with the text divided into short, manageable chunks, using a variety of fonts, and, especially, a well-developed system of references among mutually relevant passages dealing with related subtopics. That is a very useful way of dealing with the interconnectedness of different areas within the overall subject, where the same problems recur in a number of different contexts (e.g. time, characters, figurative language, narrative, etc.). The use of different fonts (italics, bold, different sizes) allows the reader to quickly get a sense of which information is most important, and which is skip-able (the latter is often in brackets). Also, each chapter ends with a short bibliography of recommended readings that develop the threads discussed and expand their context. The chapter endings also include *Exercises in Thinking (And Not Only)*, aimed at encouraging readers to work independently and creatively with other literary texts in terms of issues discussed in the chapter and to engage with other theoretical concepts. Significantly, there is no "answer key" in the back of the book. The exercises should thus be treated as a task for expanding the reader's sensitivity and imagination, rather than building the ideal adept art of the study of literature.. As one would expect of a solid academic textbook, there is an index that allows readers to flip through and quickly reference whatever information they may need at a given moment.

All of Korwin-Piotrowska's strategies certainly ensure the clarity of her argument. They are not, however,

what is most important in the book. From an editing standpoint, the way she carries out her survey is much more decisive. Korwin-Piotrowska embraces the role of guide, and at the same time that of an obstetrician who, using the Socratic method, elicits self-knowledge from her students. This process depends on the revelation that even the most accomplished knowledge of the instruments of literary studies cannot replace sympathetic, sensitive, attentive engagement in the act of reading, always a singular and unrepeatable event. Even when a text is interpreted using a set of preconceived formulae, it invariably takes scholars by surprise with elements that evade categorization.

Korwin-Piotrowska effectively demonstrates how poetics introduces a new perspective, an awareness of frameworks, enabling us to confront mechanisms hidden beneath the surface of things. Among these frameworks, she mentions 1) awareness of the incompleteness, subjectivity, and ambiguity of every statement in language; 2) awareness of the mediating role of language, which itself introduces additional subconscious and cultural meanings inside a work, and is therefore an unruly instrument; 3) awareness of the interaction between the reader and the world represented in a work; 4) awareness of the fact that “representation” is not merely a description of the appearance of visual stimuli, but also a form of intellectual organization and search for justifications that strengthen the structure of the representation; 5) awareness of the fact that an apparently realistic (or fantastic) world is in fact nothing more than an outline, a “momentary expression” or “mental construct” influenced by both knowledge of language and the reader’s individual experience; 6) awareness of the rhetorical dimension of the text’s effect on the reader through suggestion.

The above list enables us to oppose rational and objectivizing thought to contextual thought, which reveals the influence of the various factors of language, culture, the subconscious mind, and so on within our “images of the world.” These two polarized perspectives express two completely dissimilar approaches to literature, motivated by different methodologies. At the same time, they each demand that we adapt different tools, that

is, a different poetics. Obviously they present extreme instances, between which, as Piotrowska notes, there spans a whole range of varied solutions. Her conclusion (on p. 142) is that “the art of the scholar is to perceive both positions.”

Korwin-Piotrowska underscores that structural cohesion in a literary text is an illusion, since the text is composed of “images, events, themes, scattered about and reconstructed into cohesive wholes” (p. 70). This diagnosis, though it might sound radical, is not an echo of deconstructive skepticism, but rather an emergency resort to semiotic and cognitive science categories. On the one hand, the text is an organized system of signs, while on the other, its cohesion is dissolved by our awareness that it is a projection of a linguistic imagination; first, the writer’s, then the reader’s. According to Korwin-Piotrowska, the philologist’s (or literary scholar’s) reading, in keeping with the standards of poetics, is based on both the ability to reliably recognize procedures (including prosodic, grammatical, stylistic, and compositional, among others) used at the level of linguistic organization to express meanings, and readiness to accept the text’s status as open, and awareness that interpretation is a dynamic act of meaning creation. Korwin-Piotrowska illustrates this approach in her commentary on her own work: “I treat all sweeping divisions, categorical oppositions or schemata as strictly working models of solutions, exhibiting the extreme possibilities, the poles in between which the whole sea of individual literary solutions plays out.” (pp. 11-12)

In her perspective, poetics is shown to be an important and relevant area of Polish Studies, and more broadly, of the humanities, of knowledge and self-knowledge, which should underpin theoretical reflection with technical skills. What is more, poetics is the only one among the branches of knowledge focused on literature that treats literature as a thing intrinsically worthy of study, the one branch that deals with literature on its own terms, making it the most important field of reference in itself.

Korwin-Piotrowska is trying to rescue that separate status of literature and literary studies as a discipline engaged with the identity of the work of art. To this end,

she presents philologists with a straightforward analytical method, enriched by her knowledge of the latest trends. In the end, every work of literature should be examined individually, though the purpose of such a guide is to find common elements. Korwin-Piotrowska manages to do it in such a way as to save what is most essential in analytical explication. She presents her intentions using an image, likening care for literary texts with looking after a garden: "Poetics give us a selection of basic analytical tools—it is worth getting to know them, even or perhaps especially when we intend later to abandon the literary and textual territory of poetics and investigate the world of culture. It is difficult to lay out gardens or otherwise use plants without knowing anything about plants and their properties, without knowing what stalks, leaves, and roots are—and the same thing applies to literary texts." (p. 26)

Korwin-Piotrowska borrows this metaphor from Jonathan Culler's *Literary Theory*, which, in the course of reconstructing the changes in the definition of literariness, asserted that it is the reader, like a gardener, who now decides which plants to cultivate and which ones are weeds.

In any case, this particular analogy is problematic (if for no other reason than that in botany, the singularity of the plant becomes submerged in the traits of its species, while in literature it is the differences that create the singularity and uniqueness of each work, the quality Korwin-Piotrowska is trying to underscore here), and once again shows an understanding of literature bound by traditional categories and distinctions. It is as if the changes taking place in the cultural environment where literature develops touched its condition and shape only superficially, while the essence of literature remained unchanged.

Finally, in recapitulating the situation of literature in the light of new theories, media and definitions of the text, Korwin-Piotrowska relies on the collective judgment of the community of readers, who feel and know that the word literature is not an empty concept, and therefore should not agree to the erasure of the boundaries between literature and non-literature: "And regardless of whether we are tasters (literature specialists, critics) or mere connoisseurs (lovers of literature), we will not

give up the pleasure of recognizing and distinguishing those items that are essential who, after all would want to make an ordinary product the object of his fascination?" (p. 32)

This argument, made not on the basis of literature's merits, and invoking the category of essentiality (and thus verging on essentialism) in regard to literature, is her least convincing one. However much I understand the scholar's longing for clear organizing principles and criteria (poetics creates understanding at a level of relative—if illusory—stability of the structures it analyzes), it is difficult to accept her proposed perspective of a division of texts into those that are more and those that are more and less essential. That approach appears to contradict, at the very least, the cognitive science close to Korwin-Piotrowska's heart—for cognitive science, ways of using language are always connected with ways of understanding and experiencing the world; knowledge of the world, after all, is the goal of the literary analyst as well.

Nonetheless, from the literary studies perspective that she clearly and consistently articulates, the artistic value of the literary text does thrust itself forward as one criterion of literature's specificity. And it is, of course, that feature that allows Korwin-Piotrowska to distinguish which texts are more or less essential for poetics. That is why she defends the identity of the discipline, though she is perfectly well aware that scholarship has no monolithic subject, since the concept of the "literary work" has been questioned and transgressed from various quarters: "(...) yet literature does not want to disappear, in spite of the dozens of doubts as to its definition; it has its own history, and possesses, or rather "is possessed by" a language of interpretation, of evaluation or discussion, which revolves unceasingly around literature." (p.11)

Let us reiterate: the criterion for distinguishing what is literary from what is not remains, for Dorota Korwin-Piotrowska, the aesthetic function. Only literature, she argues, is characterized by its particular kind of "impartiality" and self-directedness, not subordinated to any private purposes in the way that other forms of communication are. Only literature exists for itself, as a self-

sufficient and self-explanatory creation. For that very reason, in furnishing examples for successive categories, Korwin-Piotrowska uses outstanding and brilliant works as examples, ones which leave no doubt as to their literary pedigree.

Throughout the book, Korwin-Piotrowska consistently invokes the tradition of the structural-semiotic analysis of texts, among other reasons because those twentieth-century theories developed the entire arsenal of analytical tools used in literary studies today. While listing the important descriptive categories, she constantly underscores their programmatic, propaedeutic nature. This humility before the subject of her study is what makes Korwin-Piotrowska's textbook valuable. She awakens her readers to the reality that all organizing principles take shape after texts and that the purpose of all interpretative activities is to serve the understanding of language and the images that emerge from language, and to serve the imagination.

In invoking that tradition, Korwin-Piotrowska consciously distances herself from such concepts as cultural poetics, geopoetics, intertextual poetics, or the poetics of experience. Not because she doubts their utility and cognitive value, but because they are too far removed from the study of language, the stuff out of which literature is made. On the other hand, she stresses the role of linguistic stylistic studies, in particular those that use cognitive science, in the scholarly study of texts. She values cognitive linguistics for its attention to the relationship between language and representation and how it treats all grammatical units as semasiological elements (elements in meaning-creation).

The cognitive studies approach features prominently in the book as Korwin-Piotrowska underscores the connection between an author's language choices and the images that they create in the text and the cognitive processes that come to light as a result. This approach also helps us understand the reader's approach to his tasks: inspired by the mechanisms of language at all levels of its organization, he builds a specific type of relationship with the work of literature and activates certain modes of reception. The emphasis placed here on

the linguistic status of the work of literature is recognizable from a straightforward statement in a previous book by the author:

Regardless of terminological nuances or disputes, the point is that in the course of interpreting a particular literary text, we want to better understand its linguistic nature.<sup>2</sup>

Text (understood at the level of language) and interpretation are activities that bear witness to an understanding of the world, creating an explanation of that understanding in language. That explains why Korwin-Piotrowska takes pains to present exceptions from the rules in the section of her chapter on prosody in which she describes in detail the principles of accentuation and the different types of accents in Polish. That section is also clearly marked by the influence of cognitive linguistics, which attributes great importance to the ties between grammar and representation. All of her detailed remarks lead, however, to the rather obvious conclusion that the text of printed literary works is a prosodic score that can be vocally performed in a variety of ways (including going against the rules of accentuation).

It is worth noting, in connection with that aspect of the book, that a cognitive science approach allows us to describe the individual style of a literary utterance and to reveal the language mechanisms that create representation in literature. The meanings of words do not exist in ready-made form, but are dynamically constructed in the process of communication. Metaphor becomes a cognitive tool, and mental spaces are opened by various linguistic behaviors. Linguistic conceptualization (a basic concept of cognitive science) binds together various humanities discourses. From a literary studies point of view, cognitive science tools allow us to build a bridge between the sensitivity and imagination of the author, the text as an expression of his experiences and understanding, and the reader, who also activates his linguistic sensitivity as he enters into contact with the work. Korwin-Piotrowska therefore strongly emphasizes these subjective aspects of literature studies scholarship,

<sup>2</sup> D. Korwin-Piotrowska, *Powiedzieć świat. Kognitywna analiza tekstów* (To Speak the World. The Cognitive Analysis of Texts), Kraków 2006, p. 20.

highlighting the individual dimension both of reading and of the ontology of the work of literature, which always represents a separate, inscrutable world of values. (The influence of cognitive science can also be felt in many of the Exercises in Thinking offered to the reader, such as: “Be conscious of the trajectory of your reception of a work, taking note of the different stages and the motivations that drove you.” (p.74)

We should stress, however, that in the precepts cited here, we find convictions shared among a wide spectrum of theoretical schools. That is a deliberate strategy on the part of the author of the guide, who is attempting to reconstruct the current state of literary studies self-knowledge rather than subscribe to a particular methodology. For, as she writes: “The definition of a work of literature is changing before our very eyes—instead of expecting a complete whole and the representation of a world, there appears a need to experience something astonishing, delivering the opportunity for the reader to independently assemble its elements into a whole, creating a sojourn in space, or offering interaction with the text.” (p. 111)

That is why the most interesting passages in the work are those that take note of changes and attempt to show how literature and poetics have dealt with change. All textual categories now exist along a continuum of gradual change and variation. For Korwin-Piotrowska, poetics is an acute recorder of these metamorphoses, just as literary texts function as their barometers, reflecting the dynamics of cultural and anthropological changes. These changes affect not only the fabric of the text, but also the needs and perceptual sensitivity of the audience, who are shaped by the new, dynamically changing media environment. It would therefore be worthwhile to take that changing world of texts, and their influence on the position of literature, into consideration.

Indeed, a lesson in reading attentively should prepare pupils and students to cross the boundaries of logocentric experience and acquire competencies that allow them to navigate the contemporary multimedia culture, in which they must reckon with such new developments as hypertext, electronic literature, and multimedia

genres, new forms of reading and writing activity based on the interactive, polysemiotic and ephemeral nature of cultural texts.

The author begins from the premise, with which I fully agree, that experience gained in analytical and interpretative work with linguistic texts offers the best possible preparation for critical engagement with all forms of culture. She also correctly notes that old and new ways of making sense of the world exist alongside each other, and thereby brushes up against the essence of contemporary culture, which does not eliminate familiar categories and ways of reading, but enriches them by adding an infinite number of new ones.

In my opinion, the lesson in mindfulness, criticism, and self-awareness that Dorota Korwin-Piotrowska offers to adepts of philology and literary studies is priceless. The remarks that close the extensive and exhaustive exposition of the problem of analyzing and interpreting texts illuminate once more the essential condition of the contemporary humanities: no study, even the most reliable, of works made by human hands, can lead us to knowledge of absolute truth. They are a process that allows us to see the complexity of our world, its multidimensionality and fluidity. As Korwin-Piotrowska illustrates in her summing-up: “A literary text is not a piece of amber with an insect preserved inside, whose identification and dating solves the problem—it is rather scholars who, measuring, naming, and describing, preserve themselves in time, solidifying and “fixing” the state of their analysis on its theme.” (p. 342)

The purpose of analysis and interpretation, then, is not to close the text, but to open up the horizon of questions that can help the scholarly reader learn respect for the work’s autonomy, humility before history, and his or her own cognitive limitations.

With that message, the author sends her readers off to continue their literary journey independently. Those who take the lessons she offers seriously will find themselves thoroughly well-prepared for it, even if their sense of where they are heading is shaky, and their destination uncertain, hidden beyond the horizon.