

Lucyna Marzec

# Here and Now: Literature. Use, Feel, Experience

c r i t i c s :  
Rita Felski *Uses of Literature*, Malden 2008

At a moment when we have practically abandoned the practice of reading books – as the statistics on reading testify – and gloomy diagnoses are intensifying from both literary theoreticians and poets, the most important question facing literary studies turns out to be why we read at all. How does it happen that there are individuals amongst us who – despite the equally powerful allure of historical reconstructions, escape rooms, computer games, strolls in shopping centres, discount streaming network memberships and the facebook social reality show – occasionally seek out literature?

In his latest book, *Litery* (Letters), Tomasz Różycki writes with deep irony:

Dzisiaj poznasz czytelnika.  
To robak, mieszka wśród liter.

Był nikim, teraz jest królem.  
Miał umrzeć, ale nie umiał.

Był nikim, teraz ma wszystko.  
Misję, wpływ, stanowisko.

Wystarczy, że komuś się przyśni.  
Wystarczy, że ktoś o nim myśli<sup>1</sup>.

(Today you'll meet a reader. / Hes a worm who lives among letters. / He was nobody, now he's king. / He was supposed to die but didn't know how. / He was nobody, now he has everything. / A mission, influence, a position. / It's enough if he appears in someone's dream. / It's enough if somebody thinks about him.)

Joseph Hillis Miller is pitiless in his diagnosis: literary studies with their clinical, deconstructionist and cultural studies readings are leading to the death of literature, whose influence and cultural importance do not distinguish it from (new) media's virtual worlds; like them, it is a product that opens the gates to enchantment and distraction in another reality.<sup>2</sup> Those gates have lost their power of attraction; the dangerous and alluring sphinx does not stand guard over them because mass access and the concomitant phenomenon of highly specialized reading practices have stripped literature of its last remaining veils of mystery. The centrifugal force of literature – drawn from enthusiastic childhood reading by readers lacking the tools of analysis and interpretation – have given way to the increasingly powerful status of literary studies and theory, breaking the literary text down into its basic elements, in order to lay bare its ideological and cultural entanglements.

<sup>1</sup> T. Różycki, "Kryzys czytelnictwa" (The Crisis of Readership), in *Litery*, Kraków 2016, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Miller, *On Literature*, New York 2002.

The American deconstructionist is only seemingly nostalgic or melancholic: since other virtual worlds (social networks, internet or TV series, computer games) operate according to the same principles as literature, then they, too, sooner or later, will land in the hands of media scholars, sociologists or game studies specialists, who after a phase of enchantment will begin their pitiless vivisection, soon to be joined by conscious users and those on the side of social knowledge. In other words, Miller argues for a truth which is not new: that knowledge kills the object of knowledge, and that technologies (including writing) are fugacious (historically variable) tools for assuaging the “primal” need for losing ourselves, intoxication, enthrallment with some sort of drug. For Miller, literature was such a narcotic, while the new ones do not speak to him, so that he sounds like an opium eater surrounded by cocaine sniffers or a cocaine sniffer among ecstasy takers (as the singer Fisz has it, “All these new drugs go to my head” – and that could be transposed to the situation of a devoted lover of literature; in fact romantic, narcotic intoxication with literature has been a frequent theme of poetry and poetasting).

Miller’s analyses arouse my suspicion because they separate, as a general principle, professional from amateur reading, as if there existed only two possibilities: ecstatic reading “through enchantment,” involving immediate suffocation by the ideology of the text in question, or reading without illusions, reclaiming the truth, and simultaneously draining the text of all pleasure... Real practices of reading (whether daily or holiday, occasional) seem in fact to be complex, multi-layered and not following a model. Their intricacies are discussed without any tendency toward reductionism or binary oppositions in Rita Felski’s *Uses of Literature*,<sup>3</sup> while a powerful counterpoint to Miller’s skeptical diagnoses is the earlier work of French literary scholar Pierre Bayard, *How to Talk About Books You Haven’t Read*,<sup>4</sup> based on a message that would surely be disputed by other voices besides Miller and Polish reading statistics: it is books (and especially belles lettres) that give us a sense of being at

home in culture and society, because without conversations about what we’ve read and without the language that literature offers us, we are culturally decrepit and compliant with forces we cannot comprehend (like the despairing subject of the famous poem by Leopold Staff who cries “O guide, thou art blind and mute!”). Bayard’s literature-centric position bears the marks of religious devotion; he suggests that without books we will die off, lose our voice, become deprived of our own will. Beside the philosophy of culture of the person of the book, he presents the emancipatory psychology of the reader: we read in order to write; to create, participate in a conversation with other readers, become arboreal or rhizomatous in the world. It is therefore of little importance that when we read we are also not-reading, perceiving individually, partially and interestedly, and furthermore we forget the real content of what we read, and it is not important that we do not discover meanings, only mark the texts with ourselves. As long as the conversation about books continues, culture continues and so does the relational self, involved in the world and self-knowledge.

This line of thought is close to Michał Paweł Markowski (*Życie na miarę literatury* [Life by the Standards of Literature]<sup>5</sup>) and Ryszard Koziółek (*Dobrze się myśli literaturą* [Literature is Good to Think With]<sup>6</sup>). In the introduction to his book, significantly entitled “A Declaration,” Koziółek subtly polemicizes with a well-known essay, written some years ago, by Markowski, though in fact both authors hold similar views: life with literature is fuller, has deeper meaning – whether in its individual dimension (development of the self), that of intimate relations (of friendship or love), or in the social-cultural realm of politics and great ideas. Markowski sets the problem on the existential blade of a knife: life should be measured using literature, because “literature provides us with a language by means of which we can form an alliance against the nonsensical. Literature in the broad sense, indeed the broadest possible, is the linguistic expression of our existence, the story that gives our life

<sup>3</sup> R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, New York 2011.

<sup>4</sup> P. Bayard, *How to Talk About Books You Haven’t Read*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, New York 2007.

<sup>5</sup> M. P. Markowski, *Życie na miarę literatury: eseje*, Kraków 2009.

<sup>6</sup> R. Koziółek, *Dobrze się myśli literaturą*, Wołowie, Kraków 2016.

form”;<sup>7</sup> Koziółek elaborates similarly: “Not only does literature provide us with meaning, but it is the sister to the great discourse of meaning, chiefly religion and history. Only she, however, argues that everything is worthy of meaning, that everything deserves the grace of being named: an individual person, an animal, a thing, and whatever happens to them.”<sup>8</sup> They have in common a belief in the power of language, which attempts (Markowski) and manages (Koziółek) to name things, which manages (Markowski) and attempts (Koziółek) to create a platform for nonviolent social debate. Both of these authors argue for their assertions as scholars of literature in positions of renown, who remain “ordinary readers,” and let themselves be swept away, moved, enchanted by reading without suspending their specialist modes of reading, modified by the influence of successive theoretical gestures, including the “affective turn,” the most influential current in recent years, which has legitimized (finally!) the capacity to feel moved and disturbed among those literary scholars’ reading bodies fed up with wearing lab coats. After the affective turn, we probably will no longer read – in conferences in hotels, in lecture halls, in newspapers and magazines – in ways that make it possible for poets to oppose, with distaste and facility, “intimate reading” and the academic “analysis and interpretation of a literary work,” as in Herbert’s famous “Epizod w bibliotece” (Episode in a Library): “A blonde girl is bent over a poem. With a pencil sharp as a lancet she transfers the words to a blank page and changes them into strokes, accents, caesuras. The lament of a fallen poet now looks like a salamander eaten away by ants.”<sup>9</sup> The poet places non-professional reading above the reading experience of a Polish Literature student, just as Miller laments the loss of a mode of reading that bridged the division between lay and academic readers. Markowski and Koziółek reject that division, though the languages of their books are products of it, they themselves represent the heights of literary (essayistic) language and literary scholarly analysis, where the salamander lies lifeless in the sun, and the blonde girl does not sow destruction, but gathers,

brings into relief, anchors in social life and her own existence the meanings of the poem she interprets.

Such thinking is soundly defeated by Rita Felski, whose *Uses of Literature* is free both of Miller’s decadent skepticism and of the admonition to “Read!” which is implicit or explicit in Bayard, Markowski and Koziółek’s books. Felski offers a multilayered analysis of the meaning – in theory and practice – of recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock for readers, i.e., the whole spectrum of reader reactions, expectations, habits, *styles of reading* (to use the title of a canonical essay by Michał Głowiński), which represent forms of everyday engagement in reading, corresponding to aesthetic and cognitive categories essential to literary theory. At the same time, Felski presents her argument as the *un-manifesto* of a pragmatist and phenomenologist who keeps her distance from both theological (including post-secular) and ideological currents in literary scholarship, while having at her disposal a comprehensive knowledge of feminist theory and being an experienced practitioner of it: “I want to argue for an expanded understanding of ‘use’ – one that offers an alternative to either strong claims for literary otherness or the whittling down of texts to the bare bones of political and ideological function. [...] ‘Use’ is not always strategic or purposeful, manipulative or grasping; it does not have to involve the sway of instrumental rationality or a willful blindness to complex form. I venture that aesthetic value is inseparable from use, but also that our engagements with texts are extraordinarily varied, complex and often unpredictable in kind.”<sup>10</sup>

Felski underscores how complicated and multidimensional readers are – corporeal and spiritual, politically conscious and simultaneously desiring to acquire knowledge, as well as casual entertainment with a fast-paced novel after a long day at work, sometimes skeptics, sometimes enthusiasts, socially situated but also eluding sociological categorizations. The conjectural background of the reader thus portrayed is naturally American society, considerably more diverse (culturally, ethnically and racially) than the Polish average as drawn

<sup>7</sup> M. P. Markowski, *Życie na miarę literatury*, p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> R. Koziółek, *Dobrze się myśli literaturą*, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Z. Herbert, *Selected Poems*, trans. Czesław Miłosz and Dale Scott, London 1968, p. 64.

<sup>10</sup>R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, pp. 7-8.

from statistical reports on reading or even than Polish academic professionals, a society that for several decades has manifested its diversity and multiplicity not only in politics but also in institutional academic forms and in developments in theory. At the same time, it is not true that the actual Polish reader is either a consumer of “virtual news” with no interest in literature or an erudite professor who performs psychoanalytical studies of Prus’s *Doll* or Leśmian’s “Girl.” The point is that reflection on the complexity of “reading minorities” experiences (which Felski calls forms of aesthetic engagement) should be preceded by the acknowledgement and recognition of social, ethnic and cultural minorities, the emancipation of the Polish reader whose first language is Kashubian, the reader whose father has traveled a hard road from the Tatras to Chicago, the reader who is a gay Silesian man, a village innkeeper, and so on, because otherwise, experiences of “intersectional” readings will be viewed as exotic visions or theoretical postulates. Such political and academic gestures remain ahead of us.

Whereas Markowski maintains a division between cool intellectual analysis and affective, corporeal encounter with the text (expressing his preference for the latter), Koziółek consistently pursues a project that joins contextualized historical reading with actualization of the meanings of historical readings, Bayard favors having a “conversation about the book,” with the possibility of using literature for many varied purposes, and Miller endures in an aporia (telling us we are damned if we do and damned if we don’t), Felski searches out spaces of understanding between theories and presents a vision of eclecticism that is constructive and creative, with the self at its centre. In translating Felski’s work, the team of translators affiliated with the translation specialization at the Institute of Polish Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University decided to translate the “self” (and, especially, “selfhood”) of her text into Polish as “sobość,” grounding the concept, in its Polish incarnation, in the philosophical tradition of Emmanuel Levinas and existentialism, though Felski in fact is not so much invoking the philosophical tradition as the American doxa of Heinz Kohut’s self psychology, which is not as popular in Poland as some other concepts of post-Freudian psycho-

analysis. Reflection inspired by self psychology strongly marks Felski’s vision of the reader (i.e. *user* of literature). This self occurs at the intersection of subjectivity (the psychological mechanisms and relations that construct the individual) and identity (the social conditions and temporal-spatial positioning of the self), the psychic (unconscious) and the mental (self-conscious), ergo it attempts to describe the human being simultaneously in relation to himself and those around him, and in the situation of social recognition and social self-understanding. The belief in effective mediation between theories and the tendency to build bridges between different languages of literary analysis grows out of the integrational aspect of self psychology, not reductive carelessness or Pollyanna-ish eclecticism- which still does not constitute an argument for adapting such a scholarly approach. Those arguments are: specific readings and interpretations of literary categories that have philosophical rather than psychological underpinnings.

### Go Inside Yourself

In her chapter on recognition, Felski comes out against deconstructionist formulations (arguing that the subject recognizes itself erroneously or naively), and existentialist ones (arguing that the subject recognizes itself in a book in order to form a new understanding of itself or undergo a political awakening), pointing to the complex motivations for and practices of self-recognition in literature, which, like readers, elude the grasp of theory’s reductive tendencies. “Literary texts invite disparate forms of recognition, serving as an ideal laboratory “Literary texts thus offer an exceptionally rich field for parsing the complexities of recognition. Through their attentiveness to particulars, they possess the power to promote a heightened awareness of the density and distinctiveness of particular life-worlds, of the stickiness of selves. And yet they also spark elective affinities and imaginative affiliations that bridge differences and exceed the literalism of demographic description. Such texts, moreover, can also underscore the limits of knowability through structures of negative recognition that underscore the opacity of persons and their failure to be fully transparent to themselves or others.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 46.

Recognition transcends the mechanism of Bovaristic identification and daydreaming of life becoming “like a romance novel,” though it is often based on the two pillars of self-intensification and self-extension. The former is typified by the readerly reaction of “I know what that’s like!” which is “triggered by a skillful rendition of the densely packed minutiae of daily life”;<sup>12</sup> as home-grown examples, we might cite the discussions about films in Warsaw cafés in Agnieszka Drotkiewicz’s *Dla mnie to samo!* (I’ll Have What They’re Having) or the reminiscences of house parties fuelled by imported booze in Communist-era Szczecin in Inga Iwasiów’s *Pięćdziesiątka* (Turning Fifty). The latter makes it possible to read science-fiction, fantasy and historical novels as well as those belonging to other linguistic and cultural spheres, as it involves “coming to see aspects of oneself in what seems distant or strange”<sup>13</sup> and, according to Felski, does not represent a form of the naïve universalization rejected by post-colonial theory, but a necessary condition of reading, leading to various localities with the help of modernism’s signposts, that is, toward the demolition of all kinds of self-illusion and the revelation of the terrible consequences of pseudorecognitions. In a metafictional gesture at the end of *Dla mnie to samo*, Drotkiewicz proposes a psychotest to her readers: “Which character in this novel are you?” She thus ironically suggests that someone might actually want to identify with any of them and then might be surprised by the test result, which could lead to a further retrospective analysis of the novel and, in the process, an analysis of the reader’s own life. The main character of Iwasiów’s *Pięćdziesiątka* speaks straightforwardly about the failures of self-recognition she has experienced and the therapeutic vivisection that may be delivered by psychology, religion, or even literature:

I was reading, lying with my back to Zbyszek, on my left side. I liked those moments of disconnection, aided by a sleeping pill. The letters began to fade, and turning another page demanded greater effort each time. [...] I waited for orgasm the same way. I relaxed my muscles and suppressed the surge. I

knew what would happen: the meaning of words turned into the meaning of lying on my side. The meaning of falling asleep next to him, falling asleep with myself, falling asleep without other people’s stories. With the book serving as the instrument for measuring the loss of consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

Replacing a glass of vodka with an orgasm, a book, a sleeping pill, does not bring relief in the midst of successive discussions of “who I was, why I drank, what it all meant.” Neither does the autobiographical gesture of narrating to the self about the self alleviate the sense that taking off successive masks of addicted self-delusions ever unveil the essential core of the self. *Pięćdziesiątka* functions as an anti-self-help book for those addicted to searching for meaning and a bucket of cold water for anyone who desires coherent, soothing therapeutic narratives.

The evening reading with a sleeping pill is not so much the character’s failure as an expression of Iwasiów’s renunciation of any claim to be leading her readers toward a state that awakens recognition. Identification with the heroine of *Pięćdziesiątka* takes place at the level of doubts about identity. Felski asserts that recognition in literature is most often a bitter and painful lesson and does not lead to reassurance or affirmation of our selves, but rather to uncertainty and a sense that there are no ready-made formulas to answer the question of who we are. Furthermore, “the condition of intersubjectivity precludes any programmatic ascription of essential traits to oneself or others. If selfhood is formed in a dialogic and relational fashion, no basis exists for ascribing an unchanging core of identity to one or more members of a group. What it means to be a certain kind of person will shift in accordance with external forces, under the pressure of seismological shifts in attitudes and forms of life. None of us have unmediated access to our own selves, which we are called upon to interpret through the cultural resources available to us,”<sup>15</sup> even when those resources are found disappointing.

<sup>12</sup>R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 39.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>I. Iwasiów, *Pięćdziesiątka*, Warszawa 2015, p. 251.

<sup>15</sup>R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 46.

## Put A Spell On Me

The question of enchantment with literature is more problematic, because it directs us toward the pleasures, raptures and ecstasies of reading, which are far removed from self-conscious recognitions based on the work of intellect, the basic tool for working with texts. Felski takes on the difficult task of defending both popular literature and nostalgic reading that activates forgotten thrills; she underscores the independence and critical competencies of readers who come to literature seeking enchantment, and above all, shows the inconsistency of theories that devalue that experience. Felski is right when she argues that the experience of modernism is based as much on irony and scepticism as it is on magical enchantment and oblivion, and that enchantment is not a synonym for passivity, weakness or naïveté. She is correct to detect an overblown ego and superiority complex protecting the divide between elite and mass culture (though the areas of overlap between high and popular art are presented more convincingly by Noël Carroll in *A Philosophy of Mass Art*) and to oppose the moralists who accuse those who partake of a mass culture of shallow consumerism. And yet the disproportion between theoretical divagations and examples of literature's enchantment elicit doubts which are reinforced by the attempt to discover further literary samples proving that it is possible to become enchanted without losing one's head – or to lose it and unabashedly admit having done so (if only temporarily).

Felski cites only one experience of enchantment, and it is not in fact an experience of reading, but that of a viewer of the anime film *Spirited Away*; as a motivational story of overcoming scepticism about the intoxicating power of stories (again filmed ones rather than written) she presents Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. She devotes a great deal of space to the confessions of an enchanted deconstructionist, J.H. Miller, mentioned several times above, and quotes Charles Bernstein's epic linguistics-centred poem on literature's captivating power. The predictable and problematic nature of this set of examples is heightened by a discussion of readerly avowals by two queer studies scholars: Joseph Boone, who argues that "close reading, far from being a dry-as-dust exercise in dissecting sentences, entails

an ardent involvement with what he calls the numinous power of aesthetic objects";<sup>16</sup> and D. A. Miller, for whom a scholarly interest in Jane Austen is a continuation of childhood reading, marked by "the primal shame of the boy who is caught reading Jane Austen. For such a boy, the lure of Austen's style – what Miller calls its thrilling inhumanity – may offer a temporary severance from a personhood that is felt to be anomalous, queer, out of place."<sup>17</sup> Boone and Miller's declarations are courageous and exceptional, as unconventional as the idea of queer readings performed in the context of Russian formalist practices: what counts for them is the authenticity of the reading experience, and an admission of uncomfortable feelings, whether shame, fear of rejection, bewilderment or dilemmas of identity, has a way of laying bare (in their own examples) the entanglement of the personal with the political, of identity issues and intersubjectivity, of the emancipatory and the subordinated. But even such declarations, made by a professional reader, established at a particular academic institution, are ambiguous: enchantment with the novels of Jane Austen does not arouse any aesthetic doubts, in fact it involves a preference typical of professional readers (Austen being a canonical writer), and the presentation of close reading as an aid to enchantment has the status of a "universal" admonition to work with the text. On the other hand, enchantment, Felski indirectly shows, is closely linked to recognition and the revelation of the most intimate areas of our reading selves – an uncomfortable state of exposure to being hurt, a state that in academic work takes a conventionalized form.

I get the impression that enchantment is a utopian project, and at the same time constitutes a taboo in literary studies, fortified by the postulate of professionalism (and of neutrality toward the object of study), which is additionally intensified by the still-acute division between elite, niche culture (the poetry of Justyna Bargielska, Barbara Klicka, Marcin Ostrychacz) and mass culture (*Fifty Shades of Grey*, the novels of Elena Ferrante or Katarzyna Bonda). I would like to agree with Felski's assertion that "[l]iterary theorists err when they

<sup>16</sup>R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 51.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

equate innovative form with mental states of knowingness, irony, and distance. Linguistic experiments can accentuate rather than block involvement, using the musicality and expressiveness of sound to trigger inchoate yet intense associations or sharpened auditory and sensory awareness<sup>18</sup>: this is an experience I know well, and yet it is not compatible or comparable with the enchantment of a detective story plot or an absorbing story about enchantment told by a friend, in which I can observe narrative dissonances and obvious procedures of composition. It is not possible to detach one's poetological knowledge, particularly poetological experience in reading, and allow oneself to be enchanted by a magician lacking in skills. Talking about our admiration for neolinguistic poetry or for prose that is uncompromising in its directness or its social diagnoses has little in common with a confession of enchantment, nor will it capture the masses or convince them of the worth of professional studies, while professionals who rarely apologize for preferring Kicińska to Kalecińska simultaneously stand up for experimental, niche literature in their interpretations and the topics they choose for their MA seminars.

A side effect of the institutionalization of enchantment with endangered genres is the intensification of the divide between what is elite and accessible to the few and what is popular and undemanding. Since there is no such thing as reading without evaluation, and an expression of enchantment represents the highest possible praise that a literary text can receive ("Enchantment is characterized by a state of intense involvement, a sense of being so entirely caught up in an aesthetic object that nothing else seems to matter"<sup>19</sup>), there is rarely pure, gratuitous rapture, and usually some other purpose at hand. For that reason as well, it is easier for literary scholars to recall the enchantment they experienced in childhood (that is Miller's narrative strategy). Childhood, uncontaminated by specialized reading, appears as a reader's paradise, in which literature works effectively and faultlessly – a paradise from which we were driven after eating of the tree of knowledge.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

Enchantment with a work (corresponding to infatuation with another person, a feeling similarly heavenly as childhood) functions unerringly as a didactic or interpretative allurements only in the short term: it exhausts itself with the act of breaking the text down to work on it. When used as a literary figure for readerly confession, it involuntarily acquires an ironic resonance or initiates tension between naïve enchantment and ironic distance, as in the case of the conversational essay "Dlaczego nie lubię książek" (Why I Do Not Like Books) by Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna, who uses the Mickiewiczian topos of a tale of brigands to present her readerly biography and perversely argue that one ought not to read, that reading leads to perdition and disconnection from reality, before finally citing a few quotations from her own translations and delighting in them with her listener/readers:

upon being reminded of this ballad, while preparing this talk, and so in the process of translating the ballad itself, I gave in at once to that all-too-familiar toxic stupor that isolates one from real life. I immediately went off the rails of duty, and indifferently greeted someone I had not seen for years, which I now bitterly regret; I responded curtly and distractedly to a long since longed-for favour and nearly forgot about a vote I was bound to take part in. Is that right? Is that fitting? So I very very strongly and with great emphasis warn you against books. The better the book, the easier for it to devour you. I do not like books. I avoid books!<sup>20</sup>

The journey from enchantment to avoidance is short, leading through anecdote and play with convention (in Iłakowiczówna's case this is a parody of Party-imposed self-criticism) to irony which is lined with the reflexivity of modernity and modern reading practices.

There is, notwithstanding, nothing bad about enchantment itself (aside from the fact that it is impermanent) and perhaps the evidence of literature's unflagging charms should be looked for elsewhere than in works of theory and literature: it is entirely possible that the

<sup>20</sup>K. Iłakowiczówna, "Dlaczego nie lubię książek," in *Niewczesne wynurzenia* (Untimely Effusions), Warszawa 1958, p. 241.

strongest argument in favour of enchantment can be made by literary blogs, fora, social platforms, above all, perhaps, in fan fiction. This gray zone of literary production, based on the fan posture of captivation and zeal, represents a dynamic and active form of engagement with literature. Enchantment can then be understood as a preliminary condition for another use of literature – as fuel for one’s own creative works. It would then fulfil Bayard’s postulate of self-recognition in books, conversations about them, and then living a book: “this inaugural moment when [...] the reader, free at last from the weight of the words of others, may find the strength to invent his own text, and in that moment, he becomes a writer himself”<sup>21</sup> – in the culture of immersion and the web community, and thus the conditions that transfer the intimate experience of enchantment into the area of intersubjective activity.

## Surprise Me

On the opposite shore from enchantment there lies the equally complex phenomenon of shock: a readerly (and cultural) experience which has its own temporal-spatial and cultural framing, which renders us passive in relation to corporeal sensations and lays bare our fears, obsessions, psychic defects – together with our moral convictions and sensitivities. Felski demonstrates that we should think about shock differently than in the framework developed by the modern avant-garde (whose centennial we are celebrating, so that it clearly has become part of our tradition) and, instead of examining the immediate, electrifying feeling relating to the holy terror elicited by a text that threatens our customs, opinions and beliefs, ponder the timeless shock of Greek tragedy or, by means of shock, perform a diagnosis of contemporary culture: “The desire to shock and be shocked acquires an unprecedented intensity and visibility in the fabric of modern life, displayed in the sensational thrills and spills of cinema and other popular entertainments as well as the calculated outrages of the avant-garde. To be modern, it seems, is to be addicted to surprise and speed, to jolts of adrenalin and temporal rupture: to be a shockaholic.”<sup>22</sup> The shockaholicism of Polish cul-

ture can be measured by the literary debates over the work of Rafał Wojaczek and Antoni Pawlak, the “menstrual” literature of Izabela Filipiak and Olga Tokarczuk, the prose of Dorota Masłowska, Bargielska’s *Obsoletki*: the further we get away from concrete discussions, the weaker become such works’ power to shock, which nonetheless does not diminish the genuine nature of readers’ experiences to the contrary.

Felski asserts that “The literature of shock becomes truly disquieting not when it is shown to further social progress, but when it utterly fails to do so, when it slips through our frameworks of legitimation and resists our most heartfelt values. It is at that point that we are left floundering and speechless, casting about for words to make sense of our own response.”<sup>23</sup> This conceptualization of shock explains perfectly why Greek tragedies, shocking stories based on myths about the violation of basic laws of culture, transgressing taboos against patricide, incest, infanticide and others, resonate with readers of many different epochs, but it does not explain the endless development of new forms of shockaholicism itself, drawing on both “universal” sources from classical antiquity and the present moment. In such cases, alongside sensational stimuli there comes into play the whole weight of sociocultural beliefs, prejudices and the aesthetic doxa of a given moment: to admit to shock and describe its source means to analyze our immersion in the world. Perhaps the gesture of denying that anything can still shock represents only an expression of distance, detachment, indifference, and not satiety or boredom. Though there can be no doubt that the most agitated reactions are elicited in society not by literary texts but by visual presentations (the work of Katarzyna Kozyra and Dorota Nieznalska, Rodrigo Garcia’s *Golgotha Picnic*, Oliver Frljić’s *The Curse*, Agnieszka Holland’s *Spoor*), these works, like literary texts that trigger shock, testify to conflicts and astigmatic desires as to the directions in which the “stimulation of social development” is supposed to flow. Likewise, texts of engaged literature that strike at feelings of harmony and order, such as they are, also shock and arouse contradictory reactions.

<sup>21</sup>P. Bayard, *How to Talk About Books You Haven’t Read*, p. 180.

<sup>22</sup>R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 121.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 110.



Bargielska's *Obsoletki* is a shocking work because it uncompromisingly compiles and juxtaposes discourses of medicine, religion, law, psychotherapy and media relating to miscarriage and scenes of (extra)ordinary family and social life and morals whose shared point of reference is a sense of loss and mourning. The juggling of these different languages gives the narrator, a social activist and a mother, the nonchalant features of a juvenile narcissist, but above all elicits a sense of the grotesque. Justyna tells about her inner pain and despair while simultaneously distancing herself from the forms of reassurance and comfort that she offers to other women. Here, the frightening mixes with the amusing, the personal with the public, the private with the shared, the representable, everyday, colloquial with the inexpressible experience of a miscarriage, which functions outside of the rules of symbolic representation: "Nobody advances our cause, because we are not sure if photographs of dead foetuses are allowed by the constitution, and we don't know how to ask for such advancement. The only definition of a child in Polish law is the one in the law about children's rights advocates. Such an advocate protects the interests of the child from the moment of conception. That probably makes us even more embarrassed – that the law is on the side of our suffering. So we take pictures with a sense of guilt before progress."<sup>24</sup> A photoshopped image of a deformed, dead fetus generates a sense of shock for which it is quite impossible to prepare oneself. No matter which of the epithets that synthetically define contemporary culture we use – iconoclastic, hyperrealistic, pornographic – that culture does nothing to render us immune to such an image of the destruction of fetal matter, certain areas of life and experience remain inexpressible. An image that it would be impossible to reproduce if not for advances in medicine and technology is simultaneously not ideologically neutral, being tied to the controversy (and culture wars) over abortion. It jars our eyes, because "we have grown ever more sensitive to, and repulsed by, reminders of our mortality – disease, decay, suppurating wounds, rotting flesh, nauseating body odors and the like," Felski writes.<sup>25</sup> It shocks,

because despair at the loss of a long-awaited child is so great that it is jarring as a photograph (here we see manifested the aggression, analyzed by Felski, of an artist oriented toward shocking her readers, but also the mechanism of hyperbole). What we see in the photograph (the "it," object of taboos) is narrated by Justyna, who has lived through losing a child in a miscarriage and is familiar with the sight of dead fetuses, and simultaneously conscious of the inadequacy of discourses, images, and signs. Her narration does not bring any feeling of catharsis or provide any solutions – schemata or metaphors – that lend themselves to telling about such an experience without eliciting shock. *Obsoletki* remains a shockingly anti-social work in its resistance to an intimate yet devastating experience for which there are no words, while it simultaneously reveals the fragility of all communal activities (including verbal communication). The grotesque metaconsciousness of Justyna, an "ordinary photographer," becomes detached from temporary and transitory languages and draws from what is ancient and tragic: she becomes Antigone, placing in opposition to power and public injunctions her intimate wound and private duty to bury and mourn the dead. Shock, grounded within tradition, is not voided: "leaving us hard-pressed to explain the continuing timeliness of texts, their potential ability to speak across centuries."<sup>26</sup>

### Getting Better Acquainted

Because I never doubted for a moment that "one motive for reading is the hope of gaining a deeper sense of everyday experiences and the shape of social life. Literature's relationship to worldly knowledge is not only negative or adversarial; it can also expand, enlarge, or reorder our sense of how things are,"<sup>27</sup> I see the part of *Uses of Literature* concerning knowledge as a summary of the debates on modern discussions of mimesis whose apotheosis, for Felski, is Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* (translated into Polish a few years ago). Felski offers a synthetic (and, as a result, condensed) discussion of the most important and most frequent metaphors relating to the question of *mimesis*: appearances, mirrors, maps, the symptom; she treats theories

<sup>24</sup>J. Bargielska, *Obsoletki*, Wołowiec 2010, p. 41.

<sup>25</sup>R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 124.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>27</sup>R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 83

that reject all forms of referentiality as one-sided and inconsequential. Here we see Felski's pragmatism – both in the methodological perspective she adopts (the book focuses on the uses of literature, not a survey of the most important aesthetic and ontological concepts) and in her approach to argumentation. Only theories that are interpretatively productive, intersubjectively communicative and socially influential are of value to Felski, which is why she turns (after feminism and other socially conditioned theories) toward phenomenology. Felski rejects the suspicious stances of Marxists and deconstructionists, and makes an opposition between divagations into unknowability and a position of ethical engagement and responsibility.

Literature makes it possible to know the world via the same principles by which we learn the truth about ourselves – it broadens our perception, redefines meanings, opens us to new metaphors with which we can once again (and again) describe reality in its flickering, murky, complicated nature from the position of a limited but also multidimensional subject. At the same time, Felski discusses the cognitive values of three literary texts: *The House of Mirth* by Edith Warthon, *Cloudstreet* by Tim Winton, and the odes of Pablo Neruda.

A Polish analogue for the first of those works might be Zofia Nałkowska's *Romans Teresy Hennert* (Teresa Hennert's Romance), in view of the two authors' similar interests, their temporal contexts and the kind of particular reflection they engage in on the entanglement of the private and public spheres, or, to use Felski's terminology, the ontology and phenomenology of their literary worlds. Even the term "deep intersubjectivity," borrowed from George Butte, describing "this capturing of the intricate maze of perceptions, the changing patterns of opacities and transparencies, through which persons perceive and are perceived by others"<sup>28</sup> fits comfortably with the proposals of various interpreters of *Romans Teresy Hennert*, which provides a glimpse of, and simultaneously draws readers into, the workings of gossip, slander and secrets as elements in political, social and personal games played between per-

sons with contradictory aspirations and desires. From Nałkowska's novel, as from *The House of Mirth*, one can learn a great deal about the practices of life in society, in which no one is pure and innocent and the narrative is conveyed in such a way as to both be absorbing and to engender critical reflection on political and business relationships in Warsaw in the interwar period. "As a form of context-sensitive knowledge conveyed to readers, it [sensitivity to the smallest nuances of social interaction] is more akin to *connaître* than *savoir*, 'seeing as' rather than 'seeing that,' learning by habituation and acquaintance rather than by instruction."<sup>29</sup>

The ventriloquistic practices of Tim Winton, involving "imitating idioms, delving into dialects, echoing the tics and mannerisms of styles of speech,"<sup>30</sup> which in fact is a mimetic practice of old and contemporary stylists (and can there be literature without stylization?), could be compared to the artistic solutions familiar to Polish readers from Szczepan Twardoch's *Drach* or Dorota Masłowska's *Wojna polsko-ruska*. Zofia Mitosek has shown the mimetic aspects of the latter, working with a conviction, based in the tradition of literary scholarship, that "stylistic skills form the meaning of a work, and knowledge in the novel is achieved through knowledge of the novelistic language."<sup>31</sup> The "non-standard Polish usage" of the character and that appears in other works by Masłowska is, as Koziółek has demonstrated, "made from fragments of living speech, a variety of sociolects, but we never find it in its entirety outside of writing,"<sup>32</sup> but precisely because we recognize the multiplicity of registers and can point to the everyday, the medial, the courtyard, and other "sources" of this language, we are able to appreciate its "miracle of the idioms." *Drach* is, compared to Masłowska, less idiomatic, but it upholds the tradition of bravura stylization manoeuvres and its Silesian dialect is as convincing as the language used by Edward Redliński or Ryszard Schubert. Both novels are examples of how "[h]eteroglossia [...] describes the moment when linguistic

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Z. Mitosek, *Poznanie (w) powieści. Od Balzaka do Masłowskiej* (Knowledge [in the] Novel. From Balzac to Masłowska), Kraków 2003, p. 332.

<sup>32</sup>R. Koziółek, *Dobrze się myśli literaturą*, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup>R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 91.

distinctions match up with socio-ideological ones, when historical divisions are actualized and verbalized in unique configurations of lexis, grammar and style.”<sup>33</sup>

Personally, I am less interested in “the description of things in themselves” (and the entire school that studies the history, ontology, phenomenology and emancipation of things) than a different cognitively-oriented use of literature – those cases in which literature functions alongside history and journalism as documentation in social, political and anthropological diagnoses. Taken outside the framework of specialized academic and theory – or literature-centric reading, it then reveals its basic, paradoxical property of the capacity to build and undermine social ties and a community’s shared myths. At that point, it often – through procedures typical of literature and alien to other discourses – reveals itself as “the most perfect example,” illustration, and starting point in a discussion.

In *Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej*<sup>34</sup> (The Dreamt Revolution. Exercises in Historical Logic), Andrzej Leder diagnoses the Polish twentieth century using the methods of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a tool of inquiry into the unconscious processes, subject to repression and denial, that shaped successive generations. Literature and the literature of fact: the memoirs of Czesław Miłosz together with the reportages, quoted therein, of Zbigniew Uniłowski and Ksawery Pruszyński, *Pan Tadeusz*, but above all Gombrowicz’s *Ferdydurke*, all play crucial roles in Leder’s argumentation: “It was Gombrowicz who created the most powerful, dialectical image of the peasant’s imaginative self-perception, an image that embodies the position that falls to the peasant in the symbolic universe of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Second Republic. It is undoubtedly the most penetrating reconstruction, and simultaneously, deconstruction, of the phantasms that ruled the imagination of that Poland which grew out of a farming culture. This is why I devote a great deal of attention to that image and do not hold back from extensive quotations from that work.”<sup>35</sup> We can describe the function of *Ferdydurke* in Leder’s work using Felskian

language: it is not capable of replacing the diagnostic tools of Lacan and Marxist psychoanalysis, but neither are they capable of replacing it. It is simultaneously an example of how critical dialectical thought that can be grasped within the framework of post-Marxism operates (in this case using literature to explain the functioning of Polish culture; i.e. working with deconstruction, with theory) and an illustration of social relations in the interwar period (thus at the same time functioning as an example of historical argument, of reconstruction).

This is exactly the kind of use of literature that proves it to be irreplaceable for all attempts at analyzing “What does it all mean?” – attempts that have at their centre the symbolic, the social, the anthropological, and the fact that literary studies have not brought about the death of literature, since they represent only one of the many fields of knowledge that creatively use it. Literary theory “has manifest difficulty in acknowledging that literature may be valued for different, even incommensurable reasons. Instead, it remains enamored of the absolute, dazzled by the grand gesture, seeking the key to all the mythologies in the idea of alterity or sublimity, desire or defamiliarization, ethical enrichment or political transgression,”<sup>36</sup> writes Felski in the Conclusion to her book. She is right in the sense that theory is getting worn out, exhausted; every so often it needs a paradigm shift (and Felski’s book is either a symptom or an omen of one), inasmuch as it appears to be unproductive and chasing its own tail; literature, on the contrary, is an inexhaustible discourse: “It’s enough if it appears in someone’s dream. / It’s enough if somebody thinks about it.”

<sup>36</sup>R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 148.

<sup>33</sup>R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 94.

<sup>34</sup>A. Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej*, Warszawa 2014.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 101.

post-structuralism

## KEYWORDS

AESTHETIC CATEGORIES

COGNITION

experience

affective

uses of literature

turn

shock

everyday life

repulsion

ETHICAL TURN

ENCHANTMENT

knowledge

neophenomenology

**ABSTRACT:**

The article discusses arguments in favour of the importance (or irrelevance) of literature in social life and that appears with a psychological dimension in the work of J. H. Miller, Pierre Bayard, Michał Paweł Markowski, Ryszard Koziółek and, above all, Rita Felski (in her book *Uses of Literature*), dealing with the most important currents and trends in theoretical reflection on literature in the last quarter century. The author of the article finds the affective turn and the study of relations between life and literature within the context of the domination of discourse by other (new) media not based on writing to be a particularly important encounter in the re-evaluation of literature's meaning. The author's close and critical reading of Felski's *Uses of Literature* involves a) discussion of the theoretical inclinations and problems that generate individual aesthetic categories; b) application of the American scholar's proposed aesthetic categories to the interpretation of particular prose, poetic and essayistic works by Zofia Nałkowska, Inga Iwasiów, Justyna Bargielska, Dorota Masłowska, Szczepan Twardoch and Andrzej Leder.

**NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

Lucyna Marzec is a lecturer at the Institute of Polish Philology at AMU. She is the author of the monograph *Po kądzieli. Gatunki pisarstwa feministycznego Jadwigi Żylińskiej* (On the Distaff Side. Genres of Jadwiga Żylińska's Feminist Writing, 2014) and editor of the collected letters of Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna to her sister, Barbara Czerwijowska (2014). Her articles have been published in scholarly journals, and she is also the co-editor of several collective volumes, including *Poznań pisarek i pisarzy* (Poznań of Writers; 2016); *Twórczość niepozorna. Szkice o literaturze* (Modest Work. Essays on Literature; 2015); and *Wielkopolski alfabet pisarek* (Wielkopolski Alphabet of Women Authors; 2012). She belongs to the Scholarly Council of the Interdisciplinary Centre for the Gender and Cultural Identity Studies at AMU. Marzec is also an occasional coordinator of cultural activities and participates in several organizations involved in promoting cultural and intellectual life. She is an editor of the magazine *Czas Kultury*.