

On Waves, Lands and Margins

Metaphors and the Possibilities for a Feminist History of Literature

Arleta Galant

The rhythm of feminism as an emancipatory social movement can be mapped using the metaphor and dynamic of the wave: first wave, second wave, and third wave¹... Needless to say, these waves describe the state of feminism in the United States and Western Europe, but apply to the Polish context as well – and my focus lies here. In the context of literary studies, feminism's waves have more complicated meanings, which remain significant for the ways in which we speak of the tradition, history and contemporary state of women's literature. In terms of its literary scope, second wave feminism turns out to have the widest range.² In Poland, its nature is both extremely paradoxical and entirely understandable. Paradoxical is the attempt to use an event not yet recognized in the Polish environment as a reference point for a worldview. Understandable, however, is the fact that *women's studies* first emerged as a field within Polish feminist scholars' interest, which, thanks to second wave feminism (if we continue to draw from oceanographic language) *flowed* into the academy and became the institutional extension of the socio-political revolt of the 1960s.³

¹ We recall that the first wave of feminism is characterized as the struggle for equal rights for women, taking place at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, while the second wave began in the 1960s, and the third wave is usually associated with feminism of the 1990s.

² See K. Kłosińska, *Feministyczna krytyka literacka*, Katowice 2010.

³ See B. Chołuj, *Różnica między women's studies i gender studies*, "Katedra" 2001, issue 1.

In her text *Feminism in "Waves": Useful Metaphor or Not?*, Linda Nicholson recalls the genesis and original contexts of the metaphors of the wave.⁴ The metaphor was originally intended to designate the relationship between contemporary claims on gender equality and the past. The term "wave" sought to locate feminist activities and feminist reflections within the tradition of the struggle for women's rights, and at the same time, flag them so that they are not ascribed to historical scandal, or, as Nicholson writes, defined as a historical aberration or regression, but instead belong together with the activities initiated by nineteenth-century suffragists⁵. In this way, we might add, to evoke the metaphor of the wave is to establish and depict a continuity of women's experiences, which has in turn allowed us to accent their specific variations and consistency, their newness and continuity, and their unity and internal ruptures. The wave structure carried with it an emancipatory blow and a pull towards the future in the name of sisterhood and solidarity. Each wave's breadth was measurable according to the span of its era's transhistorical thoughts on the patriarchy, and inversely: the transhistorical imagination of the patriarchy forms the basis for the breadth of feminism's waves.

Nicholson recalls the meaningful implications of "watery" connotations in order to cast doubt on their usefulness, for in the American scholar's view, they do not do justice to the complexity of feminism. This is particularly true for its contemporary iteration, which has proven to have a less collective, less agreeable, and certainly less monolithic range. In Nicholson's opinion, when we consider the kaleidoscopic nature of contemporary feminism, its departure from a movement-based format, its lack of obvious social effects and its persistent ties to changes conceived and postulated by feminists, we see that all these features point to the radio wave as a replacement metaphor for the oceanic wave. This new metaphor does a better job of grasping the heterogeneity of political realities and generational relations that interest Nicholson⁶. I will revisit the theme of the wave concept's usefulness (or lack thereof, but at the moment, what interests me – as a small contribution – is rather the fates, contexts, uses) of what turns out to be the controversial figure of the wave in projects associated with a feminist history of literature.

It sometimes happens that feminist literary criticism is embedded with the wave dynamic, but women's literature less so.⁷ This does not, however, mean that the oceanic metaphor is absent from discussions of work by women: for example, we find its traces – not always explicitly alluding to the wave itself, which structures thinking on feminist activism – in the work of Elaine Showalter, the scholar perhaps most frequently cited by Polish literary historians, or to speak more cautiously, by gynocritically-oriented Polish literary historians. When drawing from the British scholar's observations, they do not necessarily adopt her

⁴ L. Nicholson, *Feminism in "Waves": Useful Metaphor or Not?*, "New Politics" 48/2010 <http://newpol.org/content/feminism-waves-useful-metaphor-or-not> (12 June 2017)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The author evokes another scholar's suggestion: Edna Kaeh Garrison, *Are We On a Wavelength Yet? On Feminist Oceanography, Radios and Third Wave Feminism*, in: *Different Wavelengths: Studies of the Contemporary Women's Movement*, ed. J. Reiger, New York and London 2005.

⁷ See S. Benstock, S. Ferriss, S. Woods, *A Handbook of Literary Feminisms*, New York 2002.

visual language.⁸ Meanwhile, the author of the now-classic title *A Literature of Their Own*,⁹ developing her own project for a history of English literature founded on an opposition between masculine history and women's tradition, built out a story of a creative and existential community of women, and located this community in the lands of a long-lost but rediscovered continent: a submerged but now recovered, resurfacing (via energy waves?) Atlantis.¹⁰

The ultimate history of this newly discovered land that was to furnish proof for the existence of real texts and experiences of women not yet deformed by patriarchal culture is well known. As it turns out, there is no "island of women", no alternate world, no secret women's language or literature. In brief, it turns out that no single *no man's land* is possible. Studying the past and the creative work of women can not, therefore, proceed according to any script that envisions a methodological encounter of the first order. Instead, scholarship has to make use of a series of displacements.¹¹

The objective of Showalter's literary history has therefore become an attempt to grasp the continuity of women's writing through a reconstruction of shared themes, intergenerational reference points and aesthetic contexts. This reconstruction must, however, be accompanied by distanced perspectives that also attend to the requisite categories found within the framework of the male-centric canon. It becomes necessary to pose questions concerning the economic, legal, and experiential mechanisms of women's writing, for theorizing work by women without creating anew the conditions of its time would make academic access impossible. Metaphors of the wave and a virgin land undergo a rupture here, and cease to truly resonate as means for formulating a history of women's literature. In fact, the British scholar elsewhere identifies Atlantis as a wild realm or Dark Continent¹², but these metaphors appear in entirely new contexts – not so much in reference to the specificity of women's literature, but concerning, rather, the methodological necessity of establishing relations between women's literature and the male canon. In other words, this time around the metaphors refer to what is different, but not necessarily particular.

It bears mention, however, that the rupture we describe is not totalizing. When discussing the aesthetic and conscious dimensions of writing by women in *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter does, in fact, (as the author of *Feministyczne krytyki literackiej* and others have astutely noticed) "consistently employ the categories of nineteenth-century evolutionists: development, progress, and mainly, evolution"¹³. If we scrutinize her proposal for a theory of

⁸ It is both interesting and telling that Ewa Kraskowska, when writing about the historical and literary gains yielded by Showalter's project, uses metaphors that are rather "earthly" or "grounded". She writes, for instance, of "literary tectonics" and "a strong, stable ground"... E. Kraskowska, *Polskie pisarstwo kobiet w wieku XX – projekt syntezy*, "Ruch Literacki" 2012, vol. 2, p. 142. K. Majbroda writes about a few other metaphors present in historical and literary writing by Polish feminist scholars in *Feministyczna krytyka literatury w Polsce po 1989 roku. Tekst, dyskurs, poznanie z odmienną perspektywą*, Kraków 2012.

⁹ E. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own. British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, Princeton 1977.

¹⁰ E. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, in: *Feminist Literary Theory. A Reader*, ed. M. Eagleton, Blackwell 2011. See also: M. Świerkosz, *W przestrzeniach tradycji. Proza Izabeli Filipiak i Olgi Tokarczuk w sporach o literaturę, kanon i feminizm*, Kraków 2014, p. 37.

¹¹ See A. Galant, *Prywatne, publiczne, autobiograficzne. O dziennikach i esejach Jana Lechonia, Zofii Nałkowskiej, Marii Kuncewiczowej i Jerzego Stempowskiego*, Warsaw 2010, p.20-30.

¹² E. Showalter, *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*, "Critical Inquiry", 1981 vol. 8, no. 2, p. 201.

¹³ K. Kłosińska, op. cit., p. 104.

women's literature, we notice that the history of emotion inscribed in this theory is closely linked to the metaphor of the wave. While anger may remain essential, as we see most clearly in her discussion of the sensation novel,¹⁴ it is in good company: equally important here are boredom, joy, and other emotions.

In gender studies and literary criticism, it is precisely the confessional impulse or, more broadly construed, emotions that so often co-create the methodological project of reading literature:¹⁵ the emotions of authors, narrators and protagonists all remain significant in the field of feminist textual critique. Showalter's book is not the only proof of this. What I personally find curious is – to return to watery language – the stream of reflections that have facilitated yet another attempt to discuss the past of women's literature. This is a task that deserves its own book, in which the premises of continuity and progress would have to concede to that which is unpredictable if not entirely eccentric and even controversial to narratives of emancipation.

Such an “emotional” project for literary history would require an exceptionally expanded perspective and would require not only a revisiting of aesthetic questions (concerning the literary articulation of feelings), but above all, a departure from the conviction dominating feminist critique that the history of gender cultural identity is a history of suppression and emotional subjugation.¹⁶ Perhaps it is a matter of adjusting the optics to a still larger scope and interrogating the influence of what we might, in fact, call a cultural-literary history of emotion on concepts of gender and gender's role in the construction of subjectivity.¹⁷

There is one more perspective on the study of women's literature that is underwritten by the wave metaphor: yet another interpretive possibility confirming the metaphor's usefulness. Monika Świerkosz addresses this directly in her book *In the Spaces of Tradition / W przestrzeniach tradycji*, in her section on contemporary Polish feminist discourse, titled *Lost between the waves or between methodologies / Zagubione między falami czy między metodologiami?*¹⁸ Świerkosz analyzes the discourse of Polish feminist scholars and attests to the complicated generational relations within this movement — complicated and frustrating due, in some part, to the lack of a second wave in Polish feminism, as well as to the fact that the second wave came to the shores of the Wisła River significantly later than it reached the countries of Western Europe (in the 1990s) and had a character that was more “academic” than popular. Świerkosz identifies the discontinuities that determine the specific nature of Polish feminism, but offers the thesis that Poland's native waves of feminism could be more effectively organized not by generation, but by worldview.¹⁹

¹⁴See E. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own. British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, op. Cit., p. 180.

¹⁵I. Iwaszów, *Gatunki i konfesje w badaniach “gender”*, “Teksty Drugie” 1999, issue 6, p.41-55.

¹⁶I am inspired here by many, including W. M. Reddy, *Przeciw konstruktywizmowi. Etnografia historyczna emocji*, trans. M. Rajtar, in: *Emocje w kulturze*, ed. M. Rajtar, J. Straczuk, Warsaw 2012.

¹⁷See. *ibid*, p. 130. I believe that a good example of partial research on the ideas I sketch out here is E.

Kraskowska's essay – *Z dziejów honoru (w powieści XIX i XX wieku)*, in: *ibid*, *Czytelnik jako kobieta*, Poznań 2007, p. 129-165.

¹⁸M. Świerkosz, *op. cit.*, p.79-89.

¹⁹*Ibid*, p. 82.

This is an interesting conclusion, which might also apply as a means for interpreting contemporary women's literature. As a helpful category for grouping texts, attitude, or worldview, should be broadly understood. Quite simply – this is not a question of the author's political views but of their vision of the world and of literature's social uses, their aesthetic choices, as well as their attitude towards women's tradition and/or feminist writing, which I would locate within the net of relations tying literary conventions to the force of individual experience. The wave metaphor ought to cede space to a more dynamic process: unity and continuity would no longer be the orientation points for analysis, but rather all countercurrents embedded within the wave.

This view would demand a deeper re-evaluation, and in this article, I merely reference it. I realize that to overtake familial and generational metaphors deeply rooted in feminist thought as proposed above would be no small challenge.²⁰

In addition to waves and lands, feminist scholars of literature have evoked and continue to evoke the metaphor of the margins. I take the margins as a metaphor precisely because even the current overview of feminist critique and its scholarship maintains that the margin amounts to something larger than a (spatial) category for describing literature, praised mainly as a solution to the now-disputed spectre of a comprehensive, linear map of literary history. The margin is something larger still, than a textual game of sense-making, a game of peripheral meanings to deconstruct the canonical interpretation of texts. Finally, the margin is still larger than a maneuver to displace power from the center. Of course, all these contexts and meanings of the margin in literary gender studies are simultaneously present and important,²¹ but in literary feminist critique, the word evokes additional meanings.

In her book *Canon-woman-novel. On the Work of Józefa Kisielnicka / Kanon-kobieta-powieść. Wokół twórczości Józefy Kisielnickiej*²² Aleksandra Krukowska discusses the margin, referencing Maria Janion, among others. Krukowska mobilizes an archeological metaphor that has much in common with the second-wave rhetoric described above. Marginalized, extra-canonical literary texts by women demand– writes Krukowska - our interpretive excavations, our pursuit of the remainders, “micronovels, snippets, fragments, everyday notes.”²³ The margin describes the realm Krukowska intends to unveil as women's literary treasure trove. This simultaneously becomes problematic in the context of Krukowska's project, which is concerned with nineteenth-century popular prose:

Polish literature always reverts to tradition, and I do not mean to undermine this basis by searching for that which is less obvious – a prototype for contemporary and twentieth-century interwar women writers, writers excluded from our “national treasure” and yet so very present in the actual experience of our great grandmothers. Has this reading revealed to me a “second” history? I will

²⁰The germ of this undertaking might be a text by Inga Iwasiów who, when writing elsewhere on Polish women's literature from the early twenty-first century, uses the “watery” metaphor of “backwater” - *Cofnięcie czy cofka*, “Pogranicza” 2005, p.56-62.

²¹See K. Kłosińska, *Czytać na marginesie, pisać na marginesie*, “Katedra” 2001, issue 3.

²²A. Krukowska, *Kanon-kobieta-powieść. Wokół twórczości Józefy Kisielnickiej*, Szczecin 2010.

²³Ibid, p. 62.

admit straight away` that it did not so much unveil an alternative literary history, as it revealed the very conditions of its marginality. This experience is well known to feminist literary historians and avengers. It turns out that to work on Józefa Kisielnicka's body of work requires an enumeration of the mechanisms by which literature functions, and above all, by which its reception functions. The actual interpretation of text takes up much less space in this reading and turns out, (somewhat contrary to my expectations) in spite of everything, to be marginal.²⁴

The margin is therefore impossible as an alternative space. Its contingent function, its relation to the canon, to literature of the "center" and to the impact of all these things on the status, circulation, and public and private reading uses of marginalized texts become necessary conditions for historical literary analysis. A focus on the text expands into the mechanisms that co-create that text and govern its literary messaging. The specific conditions of women's writing inform the specificity of the output, and the scholar takes these in turn as the basis for claiming the need to revise literary studies' evaluation thus far of texts by women.

These proceedings allows us to locate "second-tier" women's literature on a truly broad plane: not removed to the margin, but in close proximity to the main literary current. Nineteenth-century popular prose, viewed as the "primary texts" that sparked the works of interwar and contemporary writers, bears witness to the airtight borders demarcating the canon's fringes. It bears mention that in Aleksandra Krukowska's book, the margin, understood as an archeological metaphor, loses its confrontational potential and opens a possibility for peaceful relations, so to speak. The margin becomes a hypothetical tool for reevaluating the concepts of literary history, and provokes doubts concerning the horizon of readers' expectations, institutional literary critique, and the interweaving of gender and genre, etc.

The margin/marginality as a mildly confrontational or non-confrontational metaphor and concept remains, in any case, proper to Polish feminist literary critique.²⁵ This might be explained by the engagement of the canon by scholars against whom and together with whom a *gender studies* native to Poland developed in the 1990s and at the beginning of this century. The Polish literary canon has a specific nature and often excellently camouflages its own internal variations. One of the many scholars who speak to this point is Błażej Warkocki. His book *Man Unknown. Polish Prose Against Otherness / Homo niewiadomo. Polska proza wobec odmienności*²⁶ follows after German Ritz in demonstrating that the homoerotic tradition's presence in Polish modernist prose is not marginal but central.

What do we mean by the specificity of the Polish homosexual Mystery, which leads – as Ritz claims – to a sector of homosexuality within the Polish canon 'in the case of most comparative literatures'? Ritz identifies the poetics of 'inexpressible desire' and ties it to the discourse of modernism. Homosexual literature expressed the impossibility of expression. It availed itself of codes, signs, and subterfuges, and operated according to elements of high culture, where it quickly found its home.

²⁴Ibid, p. 50.

²⁵This claim does not pertain to *close reading*. See K. Kłosińska, *Czytać na marginesie*, op. cit.

²⁶B. Warkocki, *Homo niewiadomo. Polska proza wobec odmienności*, Warsaw 2007. Warkocki's book is a queer work, not a feminist one. And yet I include him in close proximity to feminist texts, since some of the claims he proposes have become more or less critical resolutions of questions posed in literary gender studies.

Love and death became tangled in an unravelable modernist knot (...). In short: homosexuality became an art and can therefore withstand any form of social reality. Oppression did not exist.²⁷

Warkocki seldom mobilizes the concept of the margin. When he writes about instances of alterity within the canon, however, he reveals the paradox (or simply the misfortune) of narratives of “otherness” current in literary discourse of that time, or of the opening (as well as the closed circle of canonical texts) towards “the other”, which is located precisely in marginal spaces on which it became possible to project a fantasy of excess.²⁸

The questions: at the margins meaning where, exactly?; the other, meaning who?, have become important for any literary analysis that utilizes the strategy of *re-writing* interpretations domesticated in the canon as well as *writing them away* from the canonical center. This is a matter of re-interpreting literary texts and appreciating motifs located at the margins of historical interpretations, but essential for understanding and approaching a history of women or of alterity.²⁹ In this way, the margin has recovered a power that is revealing if not revelatory, which has enabled the restructuring of literary texts within literary history, somewhat unaligned with the canon.

We might add that in the concepts sketched here, marginality has little in common with post-structural theory’s fetish for affirming the fragmentary, the parenthetical, and the peripheral, and is rather closer in character to a figure of essential alienation and deracination that recalls the words of bell hooks: “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body.”³⁰ The sense behind these words has a dimension that is political, experiential existential, and not least, textual.

Yet the margin, as a metaphor not of the auxiliary, subsidiary or adjacent, but of the deep, wide edge located within the realm of the literary canon, turns out to be equally important for the analysis of poetic writing by women. The texts included in the volume *Private/Public. Genres of Women’s Writing/Prywatne/publiczne. Gatunki pisarstwa kobiecego*³¹ demonstrate this. The authors of this publication, working towards a gendered genealogy, mainly evoke the concepts of new historicism. I do not intend to repeat here the already well known and often discussed methodological alliance between feminist critique and the theories of new historicism.³² I do, however, wish to draw attention to a certain detail that is immediately tied, first off, to the pursuit of a “new set of terms”³³ used to interpret and write a history of women’s literature. Secondly, I wish to focus on elements of literary history narrative that allow us to grasp the genealogical choices of women writers within the context of the canon (not alongside it, not outside of it, and not at its borders).

²⁷Ibid, p. 191.

²⁸See A. Galant, „Ja” czyli „ty”, „inny” czyli kto, in: idem, *Prywatne, publiczne, autobiograficzne. O dziennikach i esejach Jana Lechonia, Marii Kuncewiczowej i Jerzego Stempowskiego*, Warsaw 2010.

²⁹See T. Kaliściak, *Płeć Pantofla. Odmienne męskości w polskiej prozie XIX i XX wieku*, Warsaw 2017.

³⁰bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Pluto Press, London 2000, p. xvi

³¹*Prywatne/publiczne. Gatunki pisarstwa kobiecego*, ed. I. Iwasiów, Szczecin 2008. See also G. Ritz, *Gatunek literacki a gender*, in: idem, *Niż w labiryncie pożądania. Gender i płeć w literaturze polskiej od romantyzmu do postmodernizmu*, Warsaw 2002.

³²See K. Majbroda, op. cit.

³³S. Greenblatt, *Towards a Poetics of Culture*, “Southen Review”, 1987 no. 1, p.13-14.

The place of the margin has also been described with terms such as an “alcove” (Iwasiów), “the reverse side” (Galant), and “microhistory” (Czerska). It is, of course, not incidental that these terms appear in a book devoted to literary genre that takes the relationship between private and public as a theoretical rubric. This is a means for marking women’s letters with the aura of the unofficial, the hidden, the classified, and the closed. This is not, however, the end of the story. This is also about what we might call the subversive “safe deposit” value of women’s letters. The role of women in the history of literary genres is situated, settled, and “assigned lodging” at the very center of the process of literary history³⁴.

The alcove and the alley as a substitute for the margin suggest that we are dealing with a somewhat supplementary form of thought on the literary achievements of women authors. These scholars make an attempt to reorganize women’s achievements from a genealogical perspective and therefore speak more frequently of genre oscillations and modifications than negotiations. It is obvious that, in the end, what has been given simply cannot be negotiated.

³⁴“Isolated womanhood” (similarly to homosexuality) is as much the counterpoint to a (masculine) discourse of culture, as it is a counterpoint undone at the very center of that discourse, covert and unnoticed, but in such a way that it co-creates that discourse. This is why it is not a “women’s alternative genre: this, for me is a point of departure (and entry), and a genre alliance, in the context of which I read the essayist Kuncewiczowa as a revision of essays that are canonical, official, and by a huge margin written by men. (...) The history of women and their role in culture, however marginalized, is not, if you ask me, marginal – the history of women and their role in culture “does not occur” at the margins, but in the very framework of our reality and our tradition”. A. Galant, “Potłuczone klisze”. *Eseistyka Marii Kuncewiczowej*, in: *Prywatne/publiczne*, op. cit., p. 89-90.

KEYWORDS

feminist literary critique

ABSTRACT:

This article takes up a consideration of certain metaphors present in feminist projects of literary history. The essay's author formulates questions about the meanings and critical and descriptive potential of the metaphors of the wave, the land, and the margin. In the case of describing women's literature, these questions highlight not only the fundamental dilemmas resulting from attempts to conceptualize women's literature in broader comparative perspectives, but they also allow us to identify the most important means for grasping women's writing in terms of its relation with sociopolitical transformations, academic and literary biographies, and the canon.

metaphor

THE HISTORY OF WOMEN'S LITERATURE

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