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## A Republic of Dreams of Literary Studies

c r i t i c s :  
Jerzy Madejski, *Poetologie postrukturalne. Szkice krytyczne*, Szczecin 2018.

“Sealed in a self-sufficient microcosm, the town and its countryside have boldly installed themselves at the very brink of eternity.”

(B. Schulz, *Republic of Dreams*)

A book by Jerzy Madejski, *Poetologie postrukturalne. Szkice krytyczne* attracts attention with its intriguing title, which is perhaps even provocative. Thus we should start with explaining the meaning of the title – the same as the author does.

Poetology is a neologism which appeared in the German literary studies in the 1980s. At first it was applied in order to distinguish theoretical issues of the poetic art which differed from the normative poetics rules. Poetology referred to phenomena of individual style, as well as the author's self-consciousness, present in the poetic *mise en abyme* utterances, and indicating directly at its aesthetic, epistemological, axiological assumptions. The term soon extended its denotation. Today it is applied wherever the linguistic anatomy of knowledge is considered

(not only of literary character), as well as the conditions and rules of its production. Hence, there are poetologies of given trends, currents and periods, of literary genres and authorial poetics. However, poetics of knowledge, history, memory, transition (i.e. dying) or silence are also researched.

Madejski used this term in the meaning defined by the Polish literary studies for the first time in 1995 by Erazm Kuźma<sup>1</sup> (who was Madejski's teacher). The scholar highlighted the fact that – contrary to traditional poetics, which focused on internal rules of creation – poetology refers to the poetic doctrine behind poetics, and in a broader sense, to its theoretical (philosophical) background. Thanks to this reading, especially the 20<sup>th</sup>-century works, which escape the normative rules of composition, must lead to the reconstruction of the hidden epistemological conditioning. Without uncovering it, any reflection on literature is doomed

<sup>1</sup> E. Kuźma, *O poetyce negatywnej*, [in:] *Poetyka bez granic*, edited by W. Bolecki, W. Tomasiak, Warsaw 1995.

to being partial and superficial. Poetology understood in this way is done (and studied) through searching for a deeper and broader context (aesthetic, philosophical) for the analyzed texts. Such poetologies are of interest to Jerzy Madejski. In his book he consistently proves that literature studies are always conducted on the basis of a specific set of ideas regarding the status, character, function, and value of literature.

Poetological ideas are the foundation for methodological choices made by scholars. Obviously – nowadays the awareness in terms of literary studies is affected by the post-structural turn, which – irreversibly, it would seem – has changed the discipline's condition. However, Madejski offers another thesis already in the title of his book. For in the Polish literature studies we deal not with post-structuralism, but rather with after-structuralism. The subtle semantic difference between the two prefixes: post/after<sup>2</sup> allows the author to emphasize the variety of modern theoretical terms that go beyond post-structuralism, and to highlight the value and rank of structuralism, which is not an anachronistic methodology (what comes after structuralism is founded on its achievements). The proposed recovery plan for the discipline in crisis which – similarly to humanities in general – seems to be losing its identity, is a result of those ideas.

And so the adjective “after-structuralist” used by Madejski (his neologism) means – as he explains – something like: modern, following structuralism. After-structuralism should not be then prematurely associated with post-structuralism. It is a minor term, which includes also those phenomena which constitute the legacy of a rather big structuralist breakthrough, rather than those directions which have criticized

structuralism. After-structuralism is focused rather on indicating the continuation than breaking off. It does not highlight the critique element, which dilutes its dependence on structuralism, as drastically.

Madejski offers a review of the Polish literary studies from the past several years, analyzing the place of literature in culture and its opportunities. He assumes the position of an observer of literary modernity, distancing himself from any methodological fashions, as he is interested mostly in the long lasting history of literature, theoretical reflection, and the accompanying literary criticism.

The subtitle *Szkice krytyczne* suggests a less academically binding form of expression, something lighter, a mere introduction. However, we should not be misled, for a “sketch” is not just a “design” or a “project”. Michał Głowiński, the author of this term in *Słownik terminów literackich* completes this definition, pointing out to its character, which is more extensive than a review, bringing it closer to a dissertation or an essay, as well as its descriptive or polemical goal. Madejski highlights two out of those characteristics: a more ambitious intention than that of a review, and the polemical nature. It is important, because it indicates the rank of the essays included in the volume as not only situational texts referring to specific literary works, but also to their poetological dimension.

Thus we are dealing with a book which constitutes a truly comprehensive voice in such subjects as the status, condition, and tasks of modern literary studies. And moreover, this voice is a powerful proclamation of independence for literary studies. The introduction is very clear about it. It is also significant (there is nothing insignificant in this book) because today considerations regarding literary studies typically precede introductions, whose assertion is further

<sup>2</sup> In Polish, the difference is less tangible: *postructuralizm* vs. *poststrukturalizm* [translator's note, PZ].

weakened with the heading: *Instead of an introduction*. In Madejski's book we will not find any such defensive weakening of theorems, dilution of categories, and avoidance of definitions. To the contrary – the author does everything to stop the rhetorical element to prevail over logics and precision of thought. Every judgment is balanced, every diagnosis – justified. Every term is precisely and scrupulously explained in accordance with the rules of academic discourse.

Hence after reading this short introduction it is already known that we are dealing with a somewhat unusual book. For in the times when there are many voices claiming that the position and rank of literature studies are getting increasingly weaker, the author – contrary to those skeptical diagnoses – does not give up on his ambition to maintain and cultivate its identity and independence, which constitute its rank and academic character (with all the consequences associated with this term). What is more, his book is an attempt at contributing to strengthening this position, highlighting not just the academic, discursive qualities of literary thought, but also presenting comprehensively, yet not intrusively, all those qualities of literary studies, which made it a full-fledged field of science over the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

From this perspective the way in which the author explains the role and meaning of reviews and literary criticism in their academic version is significant. Writing reviews of academic books is marginalized by most literary scholars, and is done as a professional duty and an institutional requirement rather than an activity which contributes to creating the discipline's identity. Meanwhile Madejski treats this activity very seriously – as a form of activity which strengthens the value and quality of academic life. As he explains in the introduction, reviews of academic books are an important part of literary scholars' work. It is their number and quality that “testify to the condi-

tion of a given discipline”<sup>3</sup> (p. 7). It should be added that reviewing requires competence and professionalism. It is a critical activity, i.e. evaluating (from Latin *criticus*) the positive and negative characteristics of a given work from the perspective of its cognitive, academic, and didactic values. It is thus a necessary element of a way of thinking, with Immanuel Kant as its venerable patron. A reference to such an understanding of the cognitive act which is one academic reviewing the work of another allows us to treat them as a voice in a discussion, often even in a heated dispute, without which literary studies would be a collection of dead statements. For the disputes around specific books often play a revolutionary role in the development of humanities. Polemics is an important element of academic life in terms of development and increasing knowledge. A dispute also shows the rank and meaning of the object of the dispute – which is why it should be treated as a token of the discipline's good condition. And when after several years those texts are published in edited volumes, their meta-historical dimension becomes important. Then they present the rank of particular books from the perspective of studies of the history of the discipline.

Indeed – we now very well that the discussions of books function rather as journal papers or in edited volumes when they accompany a book which is only entering the academic scene. Texts published under one author's name are arranged into a historical-literary story about the changing priorities and methodological choices, about ways of reading and commenting on books, which frequently still function in the circle of literary studies. The same thing happens with Madejski's book, which subordinates the randomness of a reviewer's choices to the superior vision of a meta-comment as evidence of the rank of literary studies.

<sup>3</sup> All the quotations of Nycz's book translated by PZ.

*Poetologie postrukturalne* is a collection of previously published reviews of academic books, revised for the sake of this new edition, which were written between 2002 and 2017. The book includes both reviews of important, seminal works, as well as those less principled. Jerzy Madejski writes about *Pochwała poezji* by Edward Balcerzan, *Od Emila Zegadłowicza do Andrzeja Bobkowskiego* – a treatise on the Polish prose from the inter-war period by Stanisław Stabro, *We władzy pozoru* by Stanisław Fiut, *Poetyka doświadczenia* by Ryszard Nycz, *W sieci modernizmu* – a volume edited by Agnieszka Kluba and Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik dedicated to Włodzimierz Bolecki, *Od Szczecina do Października* by Jerzy Smulski, *O interpretacji* by Andrzej Szahaj, *Dyskont słów* by Anna Nasiłowska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne* by Ewa Domańska, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej* by Adam Dziadek, *Zbliżenia* – a collection of essays on the literature of the Lubusz Vovoidship by Małgorzata Mikołajczak, *Nowoczesna eseistyka filozoficzna w piśmiennictwie polskim pierwszej połowy XX wieku* by Andrzej Zawadzki, *Praktyki opowiadania* – a volume edited by Bogdan Owczarek, Zofia Mitosek and Wincenty Grajewski, *Literatura – punkty widzenia – światopoglądy* – a jubilee book presented to Marta Wyka, edited by Dorota Kozicka and Maciej Urbanowski, and *Ćwiczenia z rozpaczki. Pesymizm w prozie polskiej po 1985 roku* edited by Jerzy Jarzębski and Jakub Momro.

What is characteristic, regardless of the extent and range of the discussed works, all the essays are written in such a way that they turn into unique, erudite considerations on the history of literature and methodologies, as well as the beginnings of humanities and the discipline. Those considerations – referring to the intellectual biography of the scholars, to their achievements and position in the academic world – give a full voice to the discussed work of literature.

Let us take a closer look at *Poetyka trzecia*, which discusses *Poetyka doświadczenia. Teoria – nowoczesność – literatura* (2012) by Ryszard Nycz. Firstly the author refers to Nycz's two earlier, significant works: *Sylwy współczesne* (1984) and *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości* (2002), because they “changed our perception of literature and literary studies” (p. 49). Having briefly summarized their characteristics (“the first one is poetics of literature (contemporary), the second one – poetics of modern literature (20<sup>th</sup> century), and the third one – poetics of humanities (humanistic).” (p. 50)), he develops a comparative analysis, showing how Nycz's ideas evolved. To other books by Nycz – *Język modernizmu* (1997) and *Tekstowy świat* (1993) are characterized as significantly different from each other, not belonging to the poetics formula. This outline of Nycz's intellectual biography serves as a background for discussing Nycz's academic mindset. Madejski also argues with Nycz's typology of modernist literary discourses (fictional, factual, autobiographical, essay). By pointing out some illogicality regarding simultaneously referring to both discursive and genealogical categories Madejski argues that those settlements are connected to fundamental methodological assumptions regarding the status of academic cognition, representation, and text. Madejski carefully and meticulously reconstructs Nycz's academic strategy, showing relationships and dependencies between the tools that Nycz introduced for literary considerations, and he unveils their philosophical roots. This way a discussion of one book turns into an erudite existential hermeneutics, in which the subject of Madejski's interest is not the book itself, but the book's author as a scholar, and the broad context of historical, theoretical, and literary issues. By asking whether the category of literary poetics of experience applied by Nycz will save its autonomy in reference to other fields of art, Madejski leads the reader to the conclusion that institutional actions are necessary, as they will help

overcome the crisis of humanities and save the identity of literary studies.

Apart from those institutional relations, also personal, biographical relations, based on the fundament of academic discourse, play the key role in Nycz's academic approach. Here words such as academia, discipline, science sound not like a functional anachronism, but rather a current, extremely important commitment.

Nycz builds a broad context for each of the books he discusses, far broader than it would normally be expected from a reviewer. This is because discussing a given book serves only as a pretext for considerations regarding issues relating to the discussed work to a different degree, but yet are important from the perspective of a literature scholar: about methodology, about different literature concepts, about the state of humanities, about the influence of media on the shape of culture and literature studies.

Madejski indicates a list of benefits of collective publications of reviews of important books, to which I would add one more, which Madejski – for obvious reasons – does not mention. A review of books which interested Madejski and the way in which he writes about them reveals his own academic priorities. The author is significant: his authority, experience, his – in Madejski's own words – poetology validates his opinions on books. For the reader always assumes something. And it is always a specific researcher who reads: Sławiński, Kuźma, Bolecki, Madejski...

This last issue seems to be of significance. It should be noted that we are dealing with a book which – although the author does not accentuate its autobiographical dimension – is also a presentation of his personality as an academic and a literary critic. Literary studies,

which Madejski consistently treats as an autonomous academic discipline, are based not only on literary texts, which constitute the subject of its studies. History of literature is also history of academic personalities. The especially distinct interpretative proposals formulated by those personalities, as well as their voices in discussions, affect the development of the discipline's self-awareness and its methodologies. While reading the critical works by Błoński, Wyka, Stal, Sławiński (the list could go on and on) we get to know not just a piece of the history of literature and a review of critical discourses – first and foremost, we deal with the authors' worlds of literature, described from a specific perspective in a unique way. According to Jerzy Madejski, history of literature consists of not just texts, but mostly of a huge number of voices that comment on those text, building relations between them, proposing new, visionary ways of reading and understanding well-known phenomena. It is difficult to argue with this. Madejski's book plays exactly this role; it is a presentation of selected books and the poetologies that stand behind them, and it is also an important, consistently constructed voice regarding literature and literature studies.

Today parameterizing guidelines clearly organize various forms of academic activity, reducing them to a few major categories. These are: articles, treatises, and reviews, whose parameterizing value differs and depends on the place and aim of the publication. Publishing a monograph is the crowning achievement which typically follows many years of research. Meanwhile Madejski points out a myriad of forms of expression that represent literary studies. He does it almost in passing, while commenting on other issues. Thus we have a plethora of literature studies genres, which the researcher needs to precisely characterize the essence of his academic undertaking. For example we have: a discussion (regarding an academic

book); an academic review – treated as an important element of academic discourse; an academic polemic, i.e. critical discussion (and – by analogy – a collection of polemics); a jubilee book – a genre to which the author devotes a separate text; a study; and a review article. Moreover, we also get: a pamphlet; a critical picture; a polemic (explicit and hidden); an academic discussion (and its less substantial form, a clash); a variety of poetics as normative forms of expression; a synthesis; a report; a historical-literary parallel; an introduction to a subject; an interpretation; a case study; a contribution; an elaboration; an introduction (to a journal, an edited volume, a collection of papers, etc.); a voice in discussion; a footnote; an answer to a quarrel; a comment in a survey; an apologia (eulogy text, a laudatory); a critical analysis; an interpretative sketch; a model; a reconnaissance.

As can be seen, there is a myriad of “forms of presenting knowledge” (p. 53). The status of each of them depends mostly on the researcher’s attitude – his or her personality, authority stemming from his or her academic output, and the clarity of the judgments he or she formulates. All those aspects provide the adequate status. An elementary organization of a research field – clarifying the terms, classifying literature into genres – allow Madejski to engage in polemics with bravado and ease on the hard ground of assumptions which are indisputable from his perspective. Obeying the genealogical classification is then not an empty, scrupulous gesture; it shows concern about the academic credibility of the discipline, which develops within the established standards of scientificity. But moreover – to an even greater degree – it is the testimony of attentiveness to communicative effectiveness. The choice of form – be it a pamphlet, a polemics, or a critical sketch – is not meaningless. This classification into genres determines the rules of reception, placing the text on the map of literary

phenomena and evoking adequate context of other, related forms of academic expression, which allow to objectively evaluate the cognitive value.

The most important thing is that in the “literary household” (p. 70) nothing happens without a reason; every text and every statement have their own place, meaning, and function. It is “an active research subject” who “feels at home in the kingdom of literature” (p. 93) who manages the household, who organizes it.

Madejski also writes about the role of genealogical classifications in his comment to Ryszard Nycz’s book:

“(…) for the genre has a stronger connection with structuralist studies, which means studies that solidify the picture of the past. In our tradition the genre merges with convention and structure. The relationships between those categories and the world are not obvious. Especially convention stops the interpreter in his attempts at relating to the world (through text). Discourse has its own provenance. We owe its modern understanding to – among other things – the prolific thought of Michael Foucault. In this conception the text is not autonomous, but rather related to the network of dependencies with other social practices (and other texts)” (p. 56).

The quote explains the attitude of the academic subject of Madejski’s texts to the issue of classification. Later on Madejski explains that the genre classification has post-structural origins, whereas the discursive classification characterizes the modern way (unfortunately, Madejski does not provide any detailed explanation of those terms). Madejski himself clearly adopts the first, post-structural approach, although he does not shy away from using the academic discourse category, whose role is to subordinate the field of knowledge and to build relations with other

social practices. However, it does not seem that Madejski treats academic discourse like Foucault, merging knowledge with power. He uses discourse rather as a category that builds science's autonomy, allowing to work out separate sets of rules for the worlds of literary studies.

Madejski refers several times to the structuralist tradition developed by Warsaw-based researchers: Janusz Sławiński, Michał Głowiński, Teresa Kostkiewiczowa. It does not mean that he praises structuralism as a method uncritically. He knows full well about all the latest methodological tendencies, he is fluent in all the latest humanities discourses. However, he does not try to hide the fact that he is closest to the structuralist approach as devised by the Polish school, and he sees the usefulness of the methodological and institutional solutions worked out on the basis of structuralism as invaluable. He does not say that directly, but his meticulous approach, based on profound, inquisitive attitude to the studied subject, the approach of academic reflection – it is evident in the way he writes about literature, methodological problems, academia, other scholars, and finally about literature studies, which he treats as a field that needs to be protected from amateurs who would try to diminish its value and status. He himself bustles about precariously, nurturing the scientist's ethos, albeit not for economic reasons (indeed, today it takes some courage to be a structuralist), but because he believes in stability and durability the scientific provenance of his vocation. This allows him to make the following declaration:

„Although today structuralism is not a basic theory in the Polish literary studies, it is possible to trace some critical theory back to the methodologies that were devised in the past. This theory, which is useful in describing a poem, a novel, a drama, as well as many other forms of the modern discourse (...)” (p. 14).

This post-structuralist model of reflection, i.e. deeply rooted in the structuralist thought about the discipline's autonomy is perfectly illustrated by the following comment on the way in which Ryszard Nycz argues with Małgorzata Czermińska regarding autobiographism: “Indeed, it would be difficult to find a better example of elegance in our republic of literary studies” (pp. 51-52) [translation mine, P.Z.].

Jerzy Madejski does not accept diluting the identity of the discipline, and he mistrusts the light-hearted attitude of some people towards the mission of literature studies. He is unafraid to formulate his questions and doubts, and to argue with top researchers about key issues. And although not all of his views will be widely accepted, this noble conservatism of a post-structuralist does evoke some deal of respect. For Madejski builds bridges between the great legislators of literary studies and the modern state of literary self-awareness and future perspectives of humanities.

Madejski's considerations offer an unusually encouraging vision of literary studies – as an independent, self-sufficient discipline, aware of its own connections to other fields of humanities, and yet defending its own status with the power and significance of its ideas, which take the shape of poetologies fixed on the theoretical ground.

While reading *Poetologie postrukturalne* the reader may feel as if he or she was entering the republic of dreams of literary studies: a perfect place in which authors, researchers, and common readers make up a community focused on literature, in which everyone fully understands everyone else. Researchers debate with each other, as well as argue with each other about essential issues. Thanks to them the profoundness and essence of words and things are revealed, gaining meaning and values unavailable anywhere else. It is good to think in liter-

ary terms – as another scholar put it some time ago. It is good to think completely – even if this completeness is only projected and model-like – as an inhabitant of the republic of literary studies would put it.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza



# KEYWORDS

*after-structuralism*

## LITERARY STUDIES

*genres of academic forms of expression*

### **ABSTRACT:**

The paper is a critical discussion of Jerzy Madejski's book *Poetologie postrukturalne. Szkice krytyczne*. The author reconstructs the cognitive assumptions adopted by Madejski, who by reviewing academic works simultaneously diagnoses the state and opportunities for the future development of the discipline. The "after-structuralism" formula allows him to highlight the rank and influence of structuralism on the way of conducting academic considerations in Poland. The variety of poetological visions included in the books discussed by Madejski is supposed to be the evidence of the critical insufficiency of the "after-structuralism" category in reference to structuralism. The author confronts this way of thinking with the thesis which is characteristic for post-structuralism, i.e. that literary studies have little scientificity. The author reads the critical essays included in the volume as a coherent proposal for a method for academic critique, based on the conviction that it is possible for the discipline to be autonomous, as well as a practical realization of this idea.

poetology

*studies of literature*

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