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“Critical” and Empathetic Realism: Modernist Writing Projects (of Prus and Others)

c r i t i c s :
Ewa Paczoska, *Lekcje uważności. Moderniści i realizm* [Attentiveness lessons. Modernists and realism], Warszawa 2018.

The problem of representing the world through literature has played a significant role in the history of the modern novel, attracting attention of authors, theorists and literary critics.

It is closely connected to aesthetic-literary, poetological, and normative issues; it also encompasses the philosophy of literature, relating to – at least in an implicative way – epistemological strategies and ontological assumptions of a given historical-cultural period¹. In her latest monograph, *Lekcja uważności. Moderniści i realizm* Ewa Paczoska presents an innovative proposal: to redefine the realism of early modernist prose, focused (among other things) on the problem of representation, as well as anthropological-literary issues (subjectivity). This is a genuinely fascinating idea in terms of its exegetic applications. Modernity, which has been

the subject of many of Paczoska’s excellent previous studies, serves as the modal framework for the monograph in question as well. According to Paczoska, the realistic prose of the turn of the 20th century, which is mostly represented by Bolesław Prus and Henry James (their literary work is the main subject of the analysis in the first part of the book, *Testowanie granic*) is an important literary manifesto of modernity. Their prose, which transformed the earlier realism model, is closely related to the “mindfulness” theory. The writers analyzed by Paczoska are typically associated with realism poetics and they are classified as realists. However, as highlighted by Paczoska, “they continue to expand its field in different directions and they test its boundaries”². She goes on: „The program of new realism, supported by Prus and James, moves from «representation» to «presence»”³. “The truth imperative” still guided them in their artistic endeavors.”

¹ Ian Watt has convincingly justified the relationship between the poetics of the English realistic novel with empirical philosophy, focused on the concrete and individual experience. See: *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. University of California Press 2001[1957], Chapter 1. *Realism and the novel form*, pp. 11-36.

² E. Paczoska, *Lekcje uważności. Moderniści i realizm*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN. Warsaw 2018, p. 15.

³ Ibidem, p. 15.

Brian McHale, one of the greatest experts in modernist and postmodernist prose, characterized the former as shaped by the epistemological dominant. „That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as [...] «How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?» [...]. Other typical modernist questions might be added: «What is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty? How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of certainty? How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower? What are the limits of the knowable? » [...]”⁴.

It seems that similar (or even identical) epistemological questions formed the structures of “new” realism in the prose by Prus, James, as well as Stanisław Brzozowski and Virginia Woolf – the latter is the protagonist of two studies that can be found in the second part of Paczoska’s monograph, *Poszerzanie obrazu*. The interpretations of each work and of the theoretical-literary assumptions of the authors focus on the discontinuity hypothesis, chaos, or even defragmentation of the world. It is worth mentioning here that Paczoska published an important book on *The Doll*⁵, in which she used this formula in her brilliant exegesis of the novel, thus establishing an important interpretative trend, which has been frequently employed ever since.

Paczoska defines realism by Prus, James, Brzozowski, Woolf as aesthetics determined by the sense of a cultural crisis of modernity, which impacts the forms of literary representation, the protagonist’s behavior, and finally the narrative structures and fictional compositions of a novel.

For example, Paczoska conducts a comparative interpretation of *The Doll* by Prus and *The American* by Henry James, uncovering many analogies and similarities between the literary imaginations of both authors, which project on the format of the protagonists, as well as their romantic and social experiences. According to Paczoska, the crisis of idealism (in life) affected the global meaning of both novels. She writes that “In the world touched by a modern change, a spiritually romantic (as well as physical, like in Mrs. Bovary’s dreams) idealism builds anachronistic and dysfunctional phantasms, which do not allow their believers to truly develop, blocking their energy, and ultimately –not allowing instincts and feelings to reveal themselves”⁶ [translation mine, P.Z.].

Paczoska makes the artistic and critical work by Virginia Woolf – who found her own ancestor in Jane Austen – a manifesto of the search for the complex reality of life. Paczoska precisely captures the theory of Woolf’s novels and her metaphysical ideas regarding existence, and the author herself – confronted with Austen – appears to be a critic who is highly self-aware in terms of the rules of her own literary work, as well as knowledgeable about the poetics of her great predecessor. Woolf motivated her objection against traditional realism (characteristic of, for example, Galsworthy’s work) with an attempt at capturing the full reality, i.e. the willingness to write a truly realistic novel, unbiased by literary conventions and cognitive schemes. Such a novel would show a relationship between the detail and the concrete with authentic existence, it would contain inconspicuous epiphany moments, those “drops of lightness” evoked in *To the Lighthouse*, in which reality that cannot be conceived in its totality appears for a brief moment.

⁴ B. McHale, *Postmodernist fiction*. London 1987, p. 11.

⁵ See E. Paczoska, „Lalka”, czyli rozpad świata. Trans Humana Wydawnictwo Uniwersyteckie. Białystok 1995 (2nd edition – Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne. Warsaw 2008).

⁶ E. Paczoska, *Lekcje uważności. Moderniści i realizm*, pp. 61-62.

In the early modernist prose analyzed by Paczoska one can find evidence of “critical” realism, which stands in opposition to earlier varieties of “naïve” realism (presentationist) which were codified in the first half of the 19th century (mostly in works by Balzac, but also in, for example, Dickens). This “naïve” realism did not problematize either the status of reality, or of the protagonist, treating a novel’s artifacts (according to the rule of direct reference) as a recreation of the objectively existing world (outside the literary work). The critical *mimesis* would in turn be based on questioning the status of both the represented reality, and the protagonists themselves, as well as the ways of learning about it by the narrator and/or the protagonist⁷. Obviously, the latter question was related to cognitive perspectivism or, in other words, to the point of view technique, which was both discussed theoretically and put in practice by Henry James, Bolesław Prus, and many other early modernist writers. Paczoska convincingly shows that both Prus and James were distinguished by their “unusual awareness”, as “both of them devote separate, deep reflection to the question of the mechanics of a novel”⁸ [translation mine, P.Z.]. This is an accurate diagnosis, which reveals the context that was absent in Paczoska’s previous work on the theory of novel (and literature), which focused on the relationships between the Polish author with other writers and traditions.

Moreover, Paczoska argues that in the model of the early modernist novel by Prus and James

a new anthropological concept played the key role – “a psychological man” (a term coined by Prus)⁹. The concept is an accumulation of various factors, and it constitutes a correlate of quests of writers who sought to discover the truth of the authentic experience. The cognitive structures of “a psychological man” did not lay the foundations for the objective truth, as they had become relativized positions, subjected to various determining factors, including the contents of unconsciousness. The protagonists who are “formatted” according to the concept of “a psychological man” functioned in an increasingly heterogeneous world, which confronted many cognitive and emotive approaches with each other, yet lacking the superior perspective which would hold the global meaning of a novel thus making it a coherent whole. Such a form of “emphatic realism” (Paczoska’s term¹⁰), i.e. realism which focused on exploring subjective feelings, sensations and thoughts of the protagonist who experienced the world solipsistically is definitely represented in *The Doll* by Prus. When it comes to *Emancypantki*, it was a different matter due to an ideological correction introduced by Prus in the form of a strong metaphysical thesis. The above-mentioned formula is also evident, obviously, in the works by Henry James.

Dealing with the interpretations of the „critical” realism of Prus and James in Paczoska’s book one would sometimes wish for the explanation of the author’s understanding of the „reality” category, which unfortunately is not provided and thus functions as a presupposition. It can be concluded from Paczoska’s speculations

⁷ The definition of „critical” realism or critical mimesis (which is proposed here as a working definition) does not fully agree with Jerzy Franczak’s 2007 proposal: “one can [...] say that the traditional *mimesis* was based on the assumption that experience is – in its nature – able to be put into words. The critical *mimesis*, instead of copying the scenarios offered by the culture, aims at showing its nomenclature, at describing the mechanism of reproduction of the existing linguistic experience [translation mine, P.Z.] (J. Franczak, *Poszukiwanie realności. Światopogląd polskiej prozy modernistycznej*. Kraków 2007, p. 49).

⁸ E. Paczoska, op. cit., p. 75

⁹ Ibidem, p. 76.

¹⁰ Paczoska claims that: „The novel in James’s and Prus’s versions could be put in the formula of <<the e m p h a t e t i c r e a l i s m>>, i.e. focused on ways of experiencing the world by the protagonists, in which the camera eye is directed at the sphere of sensations, feelings, relationships between what is hidden and what is manifested” [translation mine, P.Z.] (ibidem, p. 76, emphasis by Paczoska).

that the metaphysical ideas of Prus, Brzozowski, James, and others did not revolutionize the realistic hypothesis after all. This means that those authors assumed that the reality whose accessibility in the cognitive process had become a significantly complex problem, nevertheless functions in separation from the subject. The absence of this issue resulted from a conscious assumption; the book simply focuses on different perspectives of realism.

I would consider Paczoska's attempt at „modernizing” realism by Prus and other discussed authors, which she consistently conducts, as the biggest substantive advantage of *Lekcje uważności*. Paczoska creatively develops her earlier diagnoses by (re)constructing the poetics and world view of the realist novel at the turn of the 20th century as possibly the most important artistic emanation of modernity.

This novel introduced significant transformations in the realism model. It may be generally stated that the picture of the world became cognitively impenetrable, complicated, complex, even chaotic. As has been mentioned before, the concept of subjectivity was also transformed, which can be seen both in the narrative construction, and in the profile of protagonists. In the final part of the chapter *Empatia i ironia. Bolesława Prusa i Henry'ego Jamesa gry z powieścią wiktoriańską* evaluating the game of illusion and disillusion in the works of both those authors, Paczoska states that “In *The Doll* or *Ambassadors* not only [...] the mistakes or cognitive errors of the protagonists which result from insufficient knowledge or cognitive bias are uncovered, but it is also shown the general tendency of the human mind for easy stories, sensational elements, finished storylines, easy classification of ambiguous life events. This leads to the deconstruction of realism of Dickens-type”¹¹ [translation mine, P.Z.].

¹¹Ibidem, p. 80.

Paczoska considers dramatization as a significant component of the „critical” (and emphatic) realism of the novels by Prus and James. At the same time she does not treat this dramatization as a well-recognized indicator of modernist prose. This dramatization, which shapes “a new formula of realism”, is “an important idea of the novel's construction”¹² [translation mine, P.Z.], which impacts the structure of the represented world that gains dynamics thus becoming a confrontation and a game of meanings directly engaging the protagonists' experiences. Paczoska sees in this dramatization (by the way following Richard Shusterman¹³) as an evident frame which focuses and intensifies the substance of a given event or experience. That way dramatization would become a means to achieving reality obscured by various cognitive mystifications and literary conventions. The literary world would become more liquid, and the protagonists would have to discover the truth about it and about themselves through actions, events, confrontations. According to Paczoska, “substantialization of reality” achieved thanks to the dramatization technique, meant that new, partially modified model of literary realism, which obviously still has not broken its connections to the 19th-century *mimesis*, but focused on (among other things) insightful exploration of the human psyche and psychological sensations and experiences of the protagonists.¹⁴

Treating the novel as “an important cognitive task”, which had to be dealt with by both the author and the reader would place Prus and James in the very center of modernism. The representation pact, which constitutes the paradigmatic characteristic of the *mimesis*

¹²Ibidem, p. 87.

¹³A critical essay *Art as Dramatization*, which appeared in the edited volume by Shusterman *Surface and Depth: Dialectics Critics and Culture*. Cornell University Press 2002.

¹⁴See E. Paczoska, *Lekcje uważności. Moderniści i realizm*, p. 96.

aesthetics and – at the same time – the realist novel, has been subjected to partial contestation in the practice of both those authors. It is evidence by (among other things) the conviction that the external and internal world cannot be fully experienced. As the author of *The Doll* Prus was close to the cognitive agnosticism, at times even touching upon skepticism, whereas James problematized the very method of writing a novel, testing – so to say – its various capabilities¹⁵.

In her latest book, Paczoska makes an important proposal for an interpretative synthesis through the study into the evolution of the 19th-century Polish prose as seen through its relationships with Victorianism. Paczoska is convincing and innovative in proving the existence of both ideational and artistic similarities between the Polish and English literature, that – despite different political contexts – developed in comparable ways, which is evidence of the cultural identity of the 19th-century formation all over Europe. Emotional moderation, the primacy of social duties over individual aspirations, work as man's true vocation and the criterion determining his moral value, the ideas of ethical utilitarianism – all this comprised the ideological structure of the Polish and Victorian prose. However, Paczoska failed to mention Charles Darwin – whose influence on the world view of writers have been long recognized¹⁶ – among the great figures of the Victorian culture who inspired Polish authors. Victorianism became a distinctive emanation of 19th-century spiritualism, and in the novel – it somewhat justified the representation pact. The breaches in this pact also meant breaking with the Victorian ideological principles, which Paczoska accurately notes down at the end of the discussion.

¹⁵See *ibidem*, pp. 113-114.

¹⁶See for example G. Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists. Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*. The University of Chicago Press. London and Chicago 1992 (1st edition 1988).

According to Paczoska, a particular case of a Polish-English dialogue which developed at the beginning of the 20th century was the potential contact between Irzykowski and Virginia Woolf, which imitates the evolution of the modernist novel. This excellent study is a display of Paczoska's competence: her broad knowledge of the space of modern literary awareness, the ability to write comparative studies, hermeneutical imaginativeness, and the ability to apply newer theories and concepts to historical-literary "empiria". Here she confronted *Pałuba* by Irzykowski and an early novel by Woolf *Day and night* (1919). One could say that Paczoska considers the poetics and world views of both these novels as examples of "critical" realism, i.e. a cognitive-artistic strategy which – let us repeat – questioned both the stable identity of the subject and interpersonal relations, and the ontological status of the outside world. This new realism by Irzykowski and Woolf rejected the traditional, 19th-century esthetic forms of *mimesis*. Those authors reformulated the understanding of reality, being in favor of "a lesson in mindfulness" in relation to life in all its chaos, liquidity, and complexity. They both try to capture this reality *in statu nascendi*, which required new methods for the novel's descriptions and psychological analysis. The artistic aspect of this reality lost its former – significant for the poetics of 19th-century realism – clarity and explicitness, as it constantly escaped the conceptual framework, it was a complex, mysterious, impenetrable structure. Modernist novelists, adepts of "critical" and at the same time "emphatic" realism, complicated the worlds they created and made them more ambiguous, becoming increasingly more focused on the individual human experience. The last study of the second part of Paczoska's book is the perfect confirmation of this hypothesis. It is devoted to *Powieść pod różą*, a novel which was written in the 50s and 60s of the 20th century by Jerzy Kornacki and Helena Boguszewska, published only recently. The authors were co-

founders of the famous interwar literary group “Przedmieście”, whose members promoted engaged realism.

Paczoska concludes with interesting considerations regarding the position of “realism” in literature and modern art. She seems to think that its presence – obviously in a different form than 150 years ago – constitutes an inalienable element of literary communication. The possibility that realism will again become (?) a vehicle for individual and social experience and the most efficient way of retrieving the truth, of course the truth no more universal and intersubjective but – similarly to early 20th-century modernism – contextualized and perspective, cannot be ruled out. Paczoska’s analysis into the works of Polish and foreign modernists who created this process of restitution and redefinition of realism in the times of modernity confirms it. Moreover, this analysis can function as a catalyst for future studies into the transformations of the modernist novel of the first half of the 20th century.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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ABSTRACT:

The review concerns Ewa Paczoska's book *Lekcja uważności. Moderniści i realizm* (Warsaw 2018), which is an innovative attempt at interpreting the new model of realism in the Polish and foreign prose from the turn of the 20th century, which constitutes an important stadium in the history of modern culture and literature. Paczoska' offers an insightful presentation of the change processes which affected the understanding of reality and the ways of its textual (re)construction in the (early) modernist novel. According to Paczoska, criticism and empathy defined the cognitive and creative strategies of contemporary authors. Paczoska's analysis focus mostly on the works of Bolesław Prus, Henry James and Virginia Woolf – authors whose work and poetic awareness paved the way for the development of the 20th-century modernist novel.

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criticism

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