

Gerard Ronge | ORCID: 0000-0001-6487-117X

A Study into One Metaphor

c r i t i c s :
Barbara Kaszowska-Wandor, *Res publica (post) litteraria. Od poetyki wspólnoty do postliteratury*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2020.

In her book, Barbara Kaszowska-Wandor quotes Edward Balcerzan, an intellectual patron of *Forum of Poetics* and a teacher of one of the journal's founders:

The shapes of the phenomenon perceived as 'literature' are transforming – in the transformations of the human world, its culture and civilization, as well as in subsequent scholarly doctrines. Its textual representation is changing – transforming the internal relations of the system. Literature happens, processes, creates, dies, reactivates its archaic being, it forgets and unforgets itself. Scholarly comments addressing those processes are possibly the most difficult duty of literature scholars, and only a few deal with that phenomenon¹.

As if in answer to that allusion-challenge, in her book Kaszowska-Wandor deals with the riskiest, most difficult questions concerning the most basic terms and notions used by literary scholars in their everyday work. A study into a specific metaphor, the "literary republic", provokes her to consider such basic issues as the role of literature in community building, mechanisms of creating reality by literature, that reality's ontology, ways of shaping collective memory by literature, and many more.

¹ Edward Balcerzan, *Literackość: modele, gradacje, eksperymenty* [Literocity: models, gradations, experiments] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2013), 149; quoted after: Barbara Kaszowska-Wandor, *Res publica (post) litteraria. Od poetyki wspólnoty do postliteratury* [from poetics of community to postliterature] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2020), 134–35.

That thematic variety of Kaszowska-Wandor's book results from the rigorous philological discipline to which she subjected her argumentation. Each time she discusses a term that interests her, she reaches for linguistic prehistory. It should be stressed that the quality of her etymological studies is frankly humbling. When analyzing the meaning of the terms she discusses and reconstructing the context in which their first definitions were articulated, she is vigilant not only towards reports that shaped their common understanding, but also she verifies canonical translations of antique and medieval texts. When she is convinced that some shade of meaning of a term was lost in translation, or – even worse – that there was some mistake, she rejects it and works on the Greek or Latin original.

She considers the Pythagorean school as the first “literary community”, “philosophical community”, “scholarly community”, whose ideas are reconstructed mostly on the basis of neoplatonic texts from the 3rd century A.D. The analysis of the conception that emerges from that reception, of a community of students surrounding a master, and a philological review of such basic terms as “community” or “republic”, allow the author to prove their unbreakable connection with such terms as “virtue”, “happiness”, “wisdom”, or finally “philosophy” organizing the whole history of European thought.

However, a philological, “close” reading of specific texts is not the only method used by Kaszowska-Wandor. She also refers to Franc Moretti and his concept of distant reading, focused not on the semantic contents of a specific text, but rather on situating it in broader contexts.

Decisions to take on a “closer” or “farther” perspective are made each time with a lot of awareness depending on which approach may be cognitively better in a given case. That methodological flexibility is also a tool that allows the author to maintain consistency of argumentation characterized by a huge variety in terms of discipline and material. Kaszowska-Wandor does not hesitate to take advantage of anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, and even (in the final part of the book) mathematics. When choosing philosophical and literary texts to analyze she does not limit herself by geography or chronology, incorporating Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Schiller, Thomas Bernhard, Jürgen Habermas, and Winfried George Sebald. Given the multi-layered character of the book, Kaszowska-Wandor cannot be accused of digressiveness. It is a centuries-long discussion of the metaphor of a literary community which she successfully deconstructs; the topic has attracted the attention of great humanists, who otherwise seem to be so distant from one another.

The complex, yet neatly arranged method on which *Res publica (post) litteraria* is based can be described with the aesthetics term of anamorphosis, to which the author gives a lot of attention in her book, and which proves to be a functional tool for describing a sort of literature. According to the author, the technique of painting pictures in such a way as to make them show different objects depending on the perspective has been more than a tool for attracting the recipient's attention and a proof of the artist's skill since the 18th century. Anamorphosis can be a tool for cognition:

In the 18th century anamorphosis attracted mostly the attention of Minimites, among whom we can find the most famous mathematicians of the time, such as Jean-François Nicéron. They are not

just authors of anamorphic representations, but also of theoretical works, in which they describe the technique of creating such paintings. They believe that what interests them the most about anamorphosis are not optical tricks and illusions. As Baltrušaitis and Jay remind us, in geometry and cartography anamorphosis is a tool for testing the correctness of representation. Paradoxically it does not question the correctness of what we see, but allows us to achieve it, by correcting imprecisions².

This is how I understand her vigilance towards the accepted ways of reading canonical texts and understanding philosophical ideas. Having at her disposal an impressive list of source literature, the author does not task herself with writing a complete essay – instead, she seeks an unobvious perspective, which would allow to extract from the topic something that has been long unnoticed and throw a new light on it. It seems that this is the source of the rhythm of the argumentation, in which suspended questions return after several dozen pages in a new context and look different due to new methodological assumptions.

Kaszowska-Wandor's discussion of the 15th century text by Ermolao Barbaro, Bishop of Verona, is the most vivid example of the effectiveness of her tool, which can also serve as an illustration of the method developed in the book. In the text, the bishop brutally attacks lay poetry, which he considers to be "harmful to the state and weakening the moral strength of society"³. He sees it as inferior to other liberal arts, and literary fiction, a tool for satisfying vanity and the desire for fame provided by Satan.

Kaszowska-Wandor notices the dissonance between that unequivocal pamphlet on poetry and the whole persona of the priest. He was the brother of the distinguished humanist Francesco Barbaro, fluent in Latin and Greek, and translated *Aesop's Fables* at the age of 12. Knowing that the philological reading of the discussed text cannot change its meaning in any way, the author analyzes it from some distance and places it in the broader context of discussions concerning early Italian humanism. Its Venetian variety was determined by complete financial dependence on the representatives of major aristocratic houses that ruled the republic. Scholars indicate that the vast majority of the texts written then were self-advertisement of a sort, to help the author find a patron. In those texts, beliefs, ideas, and philosophical concepts were not the most important elements, as their major goal was to flatter a potential patron. Hence according to Kaszowska-Wandor, it is hard to blame Ermolao Barbaro for failing to see the center of spiritual and intellectual development of man in lay humanism:

A very likely hypothesis can be proposed here, which would have to be verified by scholars who deal with Barbaro's writings. I consider his text to be a protest against not only Florentian neoplatonism, but also Venetian humanism. Did not his violent protest against the absolutism of literary means of expression and accepting literature to be the community's binder result to a great extent from the negative experience of humanist clientelism? As a representative of one of the most important Venetian families he had to be fully aware how those humanist texts were created, who commissioned them, and whose interests they represented. [...]

² Kaszowska-Wandor, *Res publica (post) litteraria. Od poetyki wspólnoty do postlitteratury*, 292.

³ Kaszowska-Wandor, 162.

Perhaps none realizes the fact that literature is an earthly, human thing, and that identifying it with theology is not just dangerous, but is in fact a blasphemy, better than the Venetian bishop. We can clearly see what a misunderstanding it is to consider Barbaro's voice to be an expression of scholastic fear of a new culture. Quite to the contrary: that voice remains perhaps even more aware of the practical consequences of making humanist poetics a community similar to a lay religion⁴.

A moment later, when discussing *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* by Schiller, the author goes in the opposite direction. Noticing distortions in their reception and making a diagnosis that they have been generally reduced to a collection of maxims deprived of context, she decides to reread them on her own, closely and from a philological perspective.

The combination of methodological creativity with a traditional, philological meticulousness and reliability makes *Res publica (post) litteraria* a book which is able to make a very strong impact on the contemporary discussion of the social impact of literature. The scholar convincingly demonstrates that the metaphor she discusses is one of the key notions, and that without understanding it, it is impossible to successfully investigate many topics which appear in contemporary discussions of humanist topics. According to the author, any questions concerning the political correctness of a text, its involvement in education, its relationships with ethics, and its general ability to (co)shape the reality are reduced to the basic question: if and what kind of community is created by people who read and write literature. For this reason, Kaszowska-Wandor's book, whose title may at first seem narrow and concrete, should be read by any literature scholar who wants to consider the most general questions related to the theory and philosophy of literature.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

⁴ Kaszowska-Wandor, 166.

References

Balcerzan, Edward. *Literackość: modele, gradacje, eksperymenty*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2013.

Kaszowska-Wandor, Barbara. *Res publica (post) litteraria. Od poetyki wspólnoty do postlitteratury*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2020.

KEYWORDS

HUMANISM

POLITICS OF LITERATURE

literary community

ABSTRACT:

The paper reviews Barbara Kaszkowska-Wandor's book *Res publica (post) literaria. Od poetyki wspólnoty do postliteratury*. The study into the etymology of the metaphor of the "literary republic" leads the author to consider fundamental questions concerning the role of literature in shaping communities and the ways in which literature impacts political reality. The author's erudition and bold methodological solutions allow her to answer those questions – often old and considered to be unanswerable – in an original, unobvious way.

poetics

HISTORY OF IDEA

literary ethics

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Gerard Ronge – PhD candidate at the Institute of Polish Philology, Adam Mickiewicz University. Head of the project *Kategoria nowości w polskiej literaturze współczesnej. Oryginalność po postmodernizmie* [The category of novelty in the contemporary Polish literature. Originality after postmodernism], financed by the program *Diamentowy Grant*. His research interests include the theory and philosophy of literature. |