

What Does Your Subject Do?

On the

Contradictory History
of the Lyrical Subject

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JR: [...] what should I be ashamed of if it is not
I who is speaking, but the lyrical subject?

JJ: [...] have you never felt ashamed for others,
especially when they speak using your words
and sign off with your name?

JR: everyday

Jan Rojewski, Jerzy Jarniewicz;
a Facebook exchange
(quoted by permission of both authors)

The lyrical subject is one of the most transparent literary concepts; a technical term, one of the primary “tools” available to a literary scholar. It is also one of the more transparent terms in literary criticism, commonly used by different generations of critics - despite any differences in temperaments, theoretical approaches or world views. At the same time, it remains a key term in certain conceptions of both poetry itself and its studies, and it has its own complex history.

Anna Nasiłowska traces the origins of the “lyrical ‘I’” to the year 1910 and German literary studies. Its original function was to signal the difference between the “old” and the “new” poetry (while elevating the latter) - a difference that lay in the latter’s moving away from the individual nature of the creative “I”. The term was rapidly adopted in Poland, where it replaced the earlier concept of the “poetic soul” (see Nasiłowska, following Ignacy Matuszewski), which was felt to be somewhat archaic due to its religious associations¹.

The concept of the lyrical subject is then a product of the modernization of poetry and of a modern interest in subjectivity as such. According to Nasiłowska,

The concept is relatively new. It was created under the influence of literary practices of modernist poets. Thus, it is not an absolute, universal category, even though it is commonly used².

This non-universal but commonplace concept of the lyrical subject soon becomes a defining feature of poetry itself: poetry is wherever the lyrical “I” is. With the development of modernity both the position and the self-awareness of that “I” no longer seem absolute but rather disorganised and broken, which, as Nasiłowska points out, changes little; it does not challenge the key role of this concept in modern literary discourse.

The modern nature of the lyrical subject is also emphasized by Andrzej Zawadzki in his overview of the concept’s history, published in *Kulturowa teoria literatury* [*For a Cultural Theory of Literature*]. He maintains that its philosophical background are the philosophical conceptions of subjectivity as developed by phenomenology and structuralism: a phenomenological “suspension, reduction of the concrete, empirical subject” and a structuralist “focusing on the “I” as a “place” in the space of speech [...], which is different from the personal “I”³. Following other scholars, Zawadzki links the tendency to substitute the personal author with a textual figure, with Hugo Friedrich’s category of depersonification (and a “dehumanization of the lyrical subject”⁴) as a marker of modern lyric.

In Polish literary studies the lyrical subject becomes one of the central terms in structuralists’ vocabulary thanks to Janusz Sławiński. In his *O kategorii podmiotu lirycznego* [*On the category*

¹ Anna Nasiłowska, “Liryzm i podmiot modernistyczny” [*Lyricism and the modernist subject*], *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (1999).

² Nasiłowska, 9.

³ Andrzej Zawadzki, “Autor. Podmiot literacki” [*Author. A literary subject*], in: *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy* [*A cultural literary theory. Key concepts and issues*], ed. by Michał Paweł Markowski, Ryszard Nycz (Kraków: Universitas, 2012), 237.

⁴ Zawadzki.

of the lyrical subject], dutifully read by all the subsequent generations of Polish literary scholars, Sławiński offered his own definition of the concept, which he later institutionalized as an entry in *Słownik terminów literackich* [*Dictionary of literary terms*]. It is worth recalling that according to Sławiński the lyrical subject is a “semantic correlate” in a poetic utterance; a one-off linguistic construct⁵ (following the dictionary entry, it is “a fictitious person, construed in a poem, expressing their emotions, experiences, thoughts and views”, “an individualized literary construct existing only in a specific text”⁶). In that same article Sławiński introduces the concept of the subject of creative activities, which both complements and completes the now-depersonalised lyrical subject - after it’s been deprived of a part of its traditional meaning. This new concept was meant as a textual manifestation of the historical author (the author in the role of the author).

Sławiński’s idea was picked up by other scholars of the same school, like Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska or Maria Renata Mayenowa, and this seems to have contributed both to the present-day popularity of this concept and to its problematic status. Sławiński’s piece contributed to literary studies’ general belief that the lyrical subject is not coterminous with a historically existing author – an individual with a specific biography (*Słownik języka polskiego PWN* [*PWN Dictionary of Polish*] repeats after the *Dictionary of Literary Terms* that it is “a fictitious person in a poem, expressing their emotions, experiences, thoughts”). Where lyrical subject is referenced specifically, it is recalled as having an essentially linguistic nature - it is a function of the language, and can be recovered from linguistic traces⁷. These elements of Sławiński’s concept were subsequently adopted into the Polish educational system. Core curriculum for grades 4-6 of primary school stipulates that any pupil should be able to “describe the lyrical subject, the narrator and the protagonist in the works read”⁸; whereas a *matura*-level student should know when, and according to what criteria, they are allowed to identify the lyrical subject with the author (and is taught to tread carefully whenever they do it)⁹. This dissemination - and henceforth trivialization - of the “lyrical subject” in the structuralist understanding of the term was already noted by Okopieńska-Sławińska in 1967, in the year following the publication of Sławiński’s article. She mentioned the “parodistic exaggeration” of the narrator’s, and the lyrical subject’s, assumed “übercompetence”, and she commented sarcastically:

⁵ Janusz Sławiński, “O kategorii podmiotu lirycznego (Tezy referatu)” [“On the category of lyrical subject (Essay theses), in: *Wiersz i poezja. Konferencja teoretycznoliteracka w Pcimiu* [*Poem and poetry. Theoretical-literary conference in Pcim*], ed. by Jan Trzynałowski (Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1966).

⁶ Janusz Sławiński, “lyrical subject” [entry], in: *Słownik terminów literackich* [*Dictionary of literary terms*], ed. by Janusz Sławiński (Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1976), 309.

⁷ In her pamphlet for teachers and students, *O sztuce czytania wierszy* [*On the art of reading poems*], published before the publication of Sławiński’s article, Maria Renata Mayenowa devotes the entire first chapter to the issue of the lyrical subject. In it, she explains the direct relationship between metrical analysis of the poem with the revelation of its lyrical subject. She writes that the “person speaking” in the poem manifests itself “if we hear their intonation, pauses and accents”, dependent on verse structure. She concludes somewhat proverbially: the lyrical subject is an effect, a result, a derivative of the belief that “rhythm is a person”. See Maria Renata Mayenowa, *O sztuce czytania wierszy* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1963), 36.

⁸ Core curriculum for general education in primary schools (grades 4-8) (dla klas IV-VIII). In effect since 2017 (<https://podstawoprogramowa.pl/Szkola-podstawowa-IV-VIII/Jezyk-polski>).

⁹ Core curriculum for general education in a 4-year high school and 5 year-technical school. In effect since 2018 (<https://podstawoprogramowa.pl/Liceum-technikum/Jezyk-polski>).

Both funny and scary are statements found not only in student essays but also in scholarly publications, like “the narrator chased after the criminals” or “the lyrical subject has selected for his expressions the form of *terza rima*, by rhyming aba bcb”¹⁰

Until recently, at some stages of education, claims like “the lyrical subject eats, runs or plays football” would have been considered erroneous. The reason for this was that in the structuralist framework the subject was only capable of communicative acts and characterized by linguistic properties; both caveats are hardly remembered today.

During the scholarly session on “Structuralism in Central and Eastern Europe: Visions and Revisions”, Marian Płachecki took it upon himself to consider Janusz Sławiński’s article in a new light. This analysis concerned both the article’s content and, perhaps more crucially, the context in which it was created: the latter was to shed new light on the former. Analysing subsequent paragraphs of Sławiński’s text, Płachecki attempted to follow his line of reasoning:

Literally none of the “persons” or “personalities”, to which the “utterance” in Sławiński’s conception refers “should be identified with the real person of the author”. Each and every time “the image of the person speaking materialises under the pressure of words and sentences which make up the literary text”. Actually, on close inspection one notices that it is not so much about “the image” as about the image of the image, categorized by reference to literary tradition. The “lyrical subject?” It is “an assumed personality in a literary work, which motivates all traces, which are then entered into the equation”. What does “assumed” mean? It means it is taken to be an element of a bigger collection. Because it is through identifying the “lyrical subject” that the reader evokes “the concept of a lyrical subject, developed through the collective effort of members of a poetry group or movement” [...] The definition offered in the article reads: “the lyrical subject, a one-off personality, which exists as a semantic correlate of a given text”. Let us highlight the idea of a “one-off personality”. Is it possible to accept this kind of “personality” in any general or psychological sense of the word? The personality itself, certainly not. What is possible is its depiction, a depiction of a particular form it takes. The “lyrical subject” then is not a “personality” but its depiction, or perhaps a depiction of a depiction. Notably, Sławiński gives this name to the “image” of the agentive subject: a categorial rather than nominal subject of each utterance¹¹.

Płachecki thus declares the impossibility of Sławiński’s concept; he points to its internal contradictions, complexities and incongruities. He does all this, however, not to dismiss Sławiński’s ideas; on the contrary, he believes the popularity of his article is well-deserved. He does wonder, however, whether it is at all possible to define the lyrical subject in a somewhat more strict manner. He also asks how it was possible that an article which had been clearly intended as provisionally sketching out a general outline of a certain idea, was never followed up by Sławiński, who himself failed to adhere to the “radicalism of his own directives” in his

¹⁰Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, “Relacje osobowe w literackiej komunikacji” [“Personal relations in literary communication”], in: *Problemy socjologii literatury [Issues in the sociology of literature]*, ed. by Janusz Sławiński (Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1967), 109.

¹¹Marian Płachecki, “Janusza Sławińskiego idea podmiotu (w szczególności: lirycznego)” [*Janusz Sławiński’s idea of the subject (especially of the lyrical subject)*], in: *Strukturalizm w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej. Wizje i rewizje [Structuralism in Central and Eastern Europe. Visions and revisions]*, ed. by Włodzimierz Bolecki, Danuta Ulicka (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2012), 284–285.

interpretative practices¹². The key issue here is that of purpose, or, as Płachecki would have it, authorial intent. This constant multiplication of various levels of authorship and mediation is then summarised in a common sense fashion by Płachecki:

This brings us to Zeno's paradox. The harder we try to move from the work to its author, the more mediations, images of images of images of images.... we encounter, or perhaps create ourselves...¹³

At the same time, he notes, this is not much of a problem for the internal logic of the concept under discussion:

We never reach the final destination, which does not make us too unhappy, for our intention is, in fact, minding the correct transition from one to another, rather than understanding someone or doing justice to someone, whose image is the final image of an image¹⁴.

According to Płachecki, the purpose of Sławiński's concept would be not so much to provide a definite classification of different kinds of author-like entities, as to delay permanently the possibility of identifying the speaking subject with a person behind the text and underlining the (mostly analytical) difference between the two.

Płachecki, not unlike a few other contemporary commentators of Sławiński's work¹⁵, attempts not so much to reconstruct his deliberations as to understand their basic aims and implications. To that end, he recalls the historical context in which the Polish school of structuralism was born in the 1960s, when intensifying political and social conflicts culminated in the events of March and August of 1968. The structuralist breakthrough in literary studies was triggered, among others, by the essay *O kategorii podmiotu lirycznego* [*On the category of the lyrical subject*], and by Janusz Sławiński's intense publication activity. According to Płachecki (who, incidentally, was Sławiński's doctoral student), Sławiński was reacting to a vulgar version of Marxism, then dominating the departments of Polish studies at Polish universities. But first and foremost, he was motivated by a desire to create space for free communication: "Sherwood forests, an open refuge for intellectual freedom"¹⁶ Through a purposeful separation of the subject of study from any material reality and creating a highly technical, theoretical dictionary, the idea of structuralist literary studies became a kind of a testament of its time. Płachecki points out that it was that technical, hermetic "ILS jargon" (i.e., the jargon used by the employers of the Institute of Literary Studies – Polish 'Instytut Badań Literackich' – at PAN, the Polish Academy of Sciences) that allowed its users to speak freely of the reality surrounding them. It acquired the features of an idiolect, a sort of a hidden code; it also served to protect its users, just like the ever-elusive "lyrical subject":

¹²Płachecki, 288.

¹³Płachecki, 285.

¹⁴Płachecki.

¹⁵See especially Maciej Michalski, "Podmiot między syntezą a definicją – dyskurs Janusza Sławińskiego" ["The subject between the synthesis and the definition – Janusz Sławiński's discourse"], *Jednak Książki* 4 (2015); Bartosz Ryż, *Koncepcja języka teoretycznoliterackiego strukturalistów polskich* [*The concept of the literary-theoretical language of Polish structuralists*] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Fundacji "Projekt Nauka", 2013).

¹⁶Płachecki, 292.

In a symbolic act of an intellectual community, Janusz Sławiński's concept of the lyrical subject protected the author, thanks to the endlessly multiplied mediations and "mediating spheres" between the work and the person that it introduced. It made the author intellectually impervious against all aggression from the authorities. Thus, the author became a free person. Independent court experts, if they were ever to be summoned, were thus provided with a defensive doctrine: every allegation of the author's deviation from the administratively imposed line could be countered by stating that the "biographically defined person" is not to blame, for they were the perpetrator of the reprehensible work only in the perversely literal sense. All they really wanted was to instigate shifts in the layers of tradition; a tradition that was solely and exclusively literary in nature¹⁷.

The lyrical subject thus becomes an answer to a dystopian vision of reality; a tool with a specific ethical and political function.

Even though Płachecki's narrative is somewhat romanticised (due to numerous references to his personal experiences of his formative years), it is also extremely valuable for understanding the history of literary studies in Poland and their very material background - as if in defiance of the author's own adherence to structuralist thought.

What does the lyrical subject mean for contemporary literary critics and the critics of modern poetry, as well as for poets themselves? Is it a handy, transparent term of general literary studies? Or is it a relic which, in the absence of a better alternative, is still used in discourse, sometimes in all earnestness, sometimes ironically, but mostly unreflectively? Or maybe it is a witness, a trace, a symptom - and if so, then of what?

In his overview of the lyrical subject's history from modernity to present times, Zawadzki states that after the turning point of the 60s and 70s there was a gradual return to the non-depersonalised subject, derived from other philosophical ideas of subjectivity. For Zawadzki, the one feature combining the different pathways of this return consists in "an attempt to go beyond the radical opposition of a "strong" presence and an equally "strong" absence of the author as an essentialist, fully autonomous subject (even if that subject were to be just a cultural myth) and of the "author" as an empty space in a structure".¹⁸ As a result, in Zawadzki's vision - deeply rooted in turn in his own philosophical readings - the subject becomes a residual being, a trace, a diluted version of a "cultural monument", in which state it existed prior to its abolition by structuralists (and poststructuralists). One should ask if such existence is really different from the one described by Sławiński, Okopień-Sławińska or Mayenowa. Or, more practically, what is this new status of the lyrical subject, in everyday terms, in critical discourse?

In order to answer this question, I think it is worthwhile to consider a related, albeit distinct concept, namely the "she-subject" [Pol. *podmiotka*]. Over the last decade or so this feminine form of the word "subject" [Pol. *podmiot*; masculine gender] has been disseminated in literary studies (including independent publications as well as reviews and overviews, published in

¹⁷Płachecki, 294.

¹⁸Zawadzki, 45.

literary and cultural journals). Piotr Sobolczyk, in an article from 2009, was required to add the following footnote:

I am adding this footnote, following the editors' request. The (lyrical) she-subject [Pol. *podmiotka*] is a feminine form of "subject"; not a dialectal form of 'a small broom', known in general Polish as 'handbrush' [Pol. *zmiotka*] [sic! – from editors]¹⁹

This footnote was quoted in 2020 by Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik in her introduction to the volume *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje* [*The century of Polish poetesses. Cross-sections – topics – interpretations*]. There, she explains some of the editors' terminological choices. She emphasizes the fact that the volume is concerned with "women's poetry" [*poezja kobiet*] (as distinct from "feminine poetry" [*poezja kobieca*]), which means that the authors are interested both in the works "which reveal their gender-marked subjectivity, and describe female experiences", and in those where "a universal subject" is being created".²⁰ In the former context, when the "I-speaking reveals its sex, presenting its position in the world as that of a woman, sometimes describing, sometimes topicalising its existential, social or biological experiences (which is also a relevant interpretative clue) [...] the authors resort to the still controversial and not-yet-well-established concept of the lyrical she-subject, typically identified with the female protagonist of a poem".²¹ The decision to resort to a "not-yet-well-established" and "controversial" term (sometimes used interchangeably with *podmiota* or *podmiot liryczna*, with feminine inflections added either to the Polish word for 'subject' or to its modifier – 'lyrical') testifies to its importance. Apparently, the authors find this terminological issue worth arguing for and demonstrate how the idea of the subject itself can be understood (prior to a gender-based classification).

The above-quoted fragment of Grądziel-Wójcik's introduction seems pertinent not only as a justification of an editorial decision but also as a hint to the possible consequences of introducing this new term. A "female subject" is not the same as subject in general; nor is it just a special case of a subject. A lyrical she-subject is not simply the female equivalent of a (masculine) lyrical subject; the introduction of that distinction changes the meaning of the basic term. It is only with the introduction of the she-subject that the question of the subject's gender becomes an issue. Grądziel-Wójcik indicates that the term "she-subject" is used in texts, where the "I-speaking" reveals not so much its grammatical gender as gender which is socially, biologically and existentially shaped (and these experiences seem to be relevant for the poem's interpretation). Thus, for a reader to locate the she-subject in a poem, they need to identify specific personal features of the speaking protagonist, i.e., they rely on that character's possessing personal features in the first place. From this perspective, the she-subject is possible, but not necessary in a poem, whereas Sławiński's lyrical subject is a prerequisite for every

¹⁹Piotr Sobolczyk, "Sabat Starych Bab" ["The coven of old women"], in: *Cielesność w polskiej poezji najnowszej* [*Corporeality in new Polish poetry*], ed. by Tomasz Cieślak, Krystyna Pietrych (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2009), 83. As quoted in: *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje*, ed. by Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik et al. (Kraków: Universitas, 2020).

²⁰Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik, "Stulecie poetek polskich – projekt otwarty" ["A century of Polish poetesses – an open project"], in: *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje*, ed. by Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik et al. (Kraków: Universitas) 2020, [epub] 11-12 of 1561.

²¹Grądziel-Wójcik.

poem, because it is a “semantic correlate” of the entirety of the work, revealed in the course of its “duration”; its status as a figure or a “fictitious person” was thus conventional and inherently contradictory. Płachecki clearly demonstrates that the problem lies in gaps in Sławiński’s concept, which does not account for the possible existence of a plot, a narrator or a protagonist in a poem.²² At the same time, as Okopień-Sławińska pointed out, the subject is not assigned any activities other than communication. Meanwhile, in Grądział-Wójcik’s approach, the she-subject and the protagonist are one (indeed, both notions are used interchangeably in the contributions to the edited volume, sometimes separated by a forward slash punctuation mark).

The protagonisation of the subject indeed offers a kind of solution to Sławiński’s impossible concept; at the same time, the interchangeable usage of the terms “subject” and “protagonist” - or using “subject” to mean “protagonist” - seems to obscure the problem rather than solve it. As indicated above, the key issue for the structuralist approach, for historical and ideological reasons, was the multiplying of author-like constructs, emphasizing the interdependence and indefiniteness of each of them. Soon enough the inoperability of this approach resulted in a common, yet mistaken - at least according to the original authors of the concept - identification of the subject with the protagonist and with a specific embodiment of the author themselves (see Okopień-Sławińska’s remarks); even if it was still widely acknowledged that poems do not have protagonists, and a poem’s subject is never to be reduced to an actual individual person. As a result, what was created was a very specific type of subject - one that determines the shape of the poem and its formal features, but that is also endowed with features such as gender, age, experience; a subject that, indeed, speaks, narrates, doubts and mocks but also walks, sleeps, shivers, and jumps; it has opinions but also governs the very scene where they are expressed or challenged. It is a subject that seems to be responsible for all dimensions of the poetic text at once. Does the history of the evolution of this term matter in light of the fact that nobody really maintains anymore that the lyrical subject is an indicator of poetry? Or given that structuralism has long been abandoned by most literary scholars? I think it does matter and that there are specific consequences of the Frankensteinian nature of the concept in question.

In an interview marking the publication of *Puste noce* [*Empty nights*] the poet Anna Adamowicz asked the poet Jerzy Jarniewicz about the political dimension of some of the poems in the book:

Recently, engaged poetry has become fashionable (yes, let us use this dirty word). While I strongly believe that any poetry is engaged, for the purposes of this conversation let us intuitively adopt a narrow definition of the term. With this definition in mind, let me say that I do not think your poetry is engaged, despite recurring references to recent events (like the protests of medical residents or the Grenfell Tower fire). Occasionally these references seem to demand something more than just the involuntary flashbacks in which they occur. Let me ask again, somewhat perversely: why are these merely flashbacks? Why do they never become larger images, whose subject would pick a side? Why does the subject merely stand by, rather than joining the walk or the counter-walk?²³

²²Płachecki, 288.

²³Jerzy Jarniewicz, “Wiersz jest synonimem czasu” [“The poem is a synonym of time”]. Anna Adamowicz in conversation with Jerzy Jarniewicz, *biBLioteka*, <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/wywiady/wiersz-synonimem-czasu/>.

In his answer Jarniewicz explains the nature and source of these flashbacks, only to address the issue of side picking a moment later:

Finally, does the subject pick sides? It does, when it feels it is necessary, when it feels personal about something, when it is enraged, depressed or worried. It does not pick sides, however, when it can discern that this side-picking is forced, because somebody had this idea that the world is black-and-white and announced conscriptions for their – of course, white – army. Non-declaration may well be a political gesture under such circumstances. And a revolutionary one at that. Just as picking sides may be and often is a sign of buffoonery or cowardice. Let me say it again, and I apologise if this is all too obvious, that the subject in a poem does not always enjoy the author's favour. The author of the poem may, because they can and have the power to do so, create a subject which is a thorn in the author's side, so much so that the author would never shake hands with that subject. It seems to me that a careful reader will be able to infer from these poems what my authorial side-picking is all about²⁴.

Adamowicz associates the question of poetry's engagement with the lyrical subjects' stance, as adopted in individual poems. Engagement is thus related to the author ("I do not think your poetry is engaged, despite recurring references to recent events"); even though how it manifests itself is the responsibility of the subject ("the subject merely stand[s] by, rather than joining the walk or the counter-walk?"). In his answer Jarniewicz talks briefly about the way the subject of the poem is shaped, only to then point out (with some hesitation, as if afraid of behaving too much like a teacher when the actual question concerned something entirely different) the inevitable separation of the subject and the author. More specifically, the author may intend for the subject to serve a specific purpose. The possibility of creating a subject, "whose hand the author would not shake" is taken as read by Jarniewicz. The poet recalls this axiom of modern literary studies (the lyrical subject is not identical with the author; the opinion of the protagonist is not identical with that of the author) not in order to avoid answering the question he was asked, but to show its implications: just like the protagonist, also the subject itself - in particular a subject identifiable with the protagonist - is and should be the object of interpretation, as it is a meaningful element of the work.

Of course, I am here using the instance of miscommunication between Adamowicz and Jarniewicz as a handy illustration of problems with the contemporary status of the lyrical subject; more specifically with what it means that it is "not identical with the author".

In a monograph devoted to the problem of authorship Aldona Kobus reminds us about the origins of what she terms the romantic phantasm of the authorial subject: its source was to be found in the fear of the recipient and the need to establish power over the text and its interpretations²⁵. The source of the *lyrical* subject phantasm – in its structuralist version – was, as demonstrated by Płachecki, a politically justified fear of being responsible (also legally) for

²⁴Jarniewicz.

²⁵Aldona Kobus, *Autorstwo. Urynkowanie literatury i fantazmat podmiotu autorskiego* [Authorship. The commercialisation of literature and the phantasm of the authorial subject] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2021), 80–113.

meaning. When conditions changed and literary studies began responding to rapidly adopted poststructuralism, the lyrical subject was one of those originally structuralist terms that lost their structuralist connotations - it became a basic concept in general literary knowledge, which was possible thanks to the distance created by the figure of the subject between the author and meaning. If the goal of romantic authorship was to “govern the entire scene” of textual reception²⁶, then deconstructivist literary studies emphasized the impossibility of this form of governance. This impossibility, in turn, helped draw conclusions about the construal of meanings by the recipient or by the language itself. The lyrical subject as a “semantic correlate of the poem”, always singular, yet immersed in literary tradition and therefore intertextual, remained symbolic of a non-naïve understanding of the status of a literary text. Along with the so-called new humanities shift, deliberations on this figure have refocused towards traces of experience, “literary traces of personal presence”, an existential mode of reading literature (Tomasz Bilczewski, *Wiek teorii [The Century of Theory]*)²⁷. As a result, what was originally devised - at a very specific point in the history of modern Polish literary studies - as an essentially utopian tool, protecting authors by means of conceptual negligence and line-blurring, nowadays serves to complicate the way we talk about intricate communicative situations, common in the newest poetry. This poetry rarely refers to itself as lyric, and may be seen as prose-like²⁸; it wants to be a full-fledged participant of the public debate²⁹; and, for the most part, is the extreme opposite of the poetics of confession. The lyrical subject was a programmatic concept for specific projects: modern poetry on the one hand and modern literary studies on the other. Today, as a term, the lyrical subject is invoked in an almost non-reflexive manner - combining contradictory stances, visions and goals, anachronistic aims and politically dubious consequences. As such it seems to be a blind spot of poetry criticism of recent decades.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

²⁶Following Derrida (Jacques Derrida, “Sygnatura, zdarzenie, kontekst” [“Signature, event, context”], translated by J. Margański, in: Jacques Derrida, *Marginesy filozofii [Jacques Derrida. Margins of philosophy]*, translated by Adam Dziadek et al. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 2002).

²⁷“Subiekt – obiekt – abiekt: «pajęczko wiotka tkanina»” [“Subject – object – abject: “a spider-like limp fabric”], selected and edited by Tomasz Bilczewski, in: *Wiek teorii. Antologia 1*, ed. by Danuta Ulicka (Warszawa: IBL, 2020), p. 86. In his reconstruction of the history of conceptualising subjectivity in Polish literary studies Bilczewski points to four stages, represented in texts by Kazimierz Troczyński, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, Ryszard Nycz and Michał Paweł Markowski, arranged into a narrative of attaining and transgressing modernity. Interestingly enough, Bilczewski points to the existential tropes in Okopień-Sławińska’s project of literary communication studies. He interprets them as anticipatory of Nycz’s work - focused on experience and transgressing the subject-object opposition - or of Markowski’s existentially framed history of culture.

²⁸Cf. Joanna Orska, *Liryczne narracje. Nowe tendencje w poezji polskiej 1989–2006 [Lyrical narratives. New trends in Polish poetry 1989–2006]* (Kraków: Universitas, 2006).

²⁹Cf. Roman Dziadkiewicz, Tomasz Pułka, Szczepan Kopyt, “Kryzys” [“Crisis”]. In conversation with Grzegorz Jankowicz, <http://archiwum.ha.art.pl/rozmowy/761-kryzys-rozmowa-z-romanem-dziadkiewiczem-tomaszem-pulka-i-szczepanem-kopytem.html>.

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KEYWORDS

lyrical subject

structuralism

ABSTRACT:

The article aims to analyse contradictions and ambiguities embedded in the structuralist concept of “the lyrical subject”. The researcher reviews contemporary applications of the term and overviews a history of related concepts in order to show meaningful shifts in the default meaning of the issuer in contemporary literary criticism. Initial programmatic abstractness of the “lyrical subject”, both intended and politically motivated, has been reduced to a general intuition concerning the non-identity of the author and the speaking subject. The secondary consequence is that it obfuscates perceiving issuers as the effects of specific and intended authorial decisions.

SHE-SUBJECT

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Marta Koronkiewicz – literary scholar, assistant professor at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Wrocław. Member of the editorial board of “Praktyka Teoretyczna” [*Theoretical practice*] journal. She published, *inter alia*, *I jest moc odległego życia w tej elegii. Uwagi o wierszach Andrzeja Sosnowskiego* [*There is a power of distant life in this elegy. Remarks on Andrzej Sosnowski's poems*] (Wrocław 2019). Her main interests are modern and recent poetry and the history of literary criticism. Contact: m.e.koronkiewicz@gmail.com. |