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# TERMS IN LITERARY CRITICISM



**Is literary criticism evolving? If so, how?  
Do the terms and concepts used by critics change  
as the socio-communicative context changes?  
Or maybe such changes need to be initiated?**

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# New Dimensions of the Literary Debate.

## Terms and Concepts in Literary Criticism

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*In its traditional understanding, literary criticism is often accused of being outdated, hermetic, incompatible with reality, and elitist. Trying to find itself in the new space of understanding and interpreting artistic forms – both in its social and communicative understanding – literary criticism needs to replace or update its tools, i.e., terms and concepts, if it wants to remain valid. Writing about the*

*functions of criticism, Janusz Sławiński opted for a literary-centric model, useful in discussing autotelic problems of a literary work. Do academic, journalistic, or, for that matter, fan communities still employ a similar model of interpretation, despite the declared need to change the rules of literary criticism? Do contemporary literary agendas and, at times, vague critical programs and evaluation criteria still rely on the established literary narrative? Many critical concepts aimed at organizing a literary scene or field come from the history of literature which still “thinks” and “operates” in terms reminiscent of the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.*

*Is literary criticism evolving? If so, how? Do the terms and concepts used by critics change as the socio-communicative context changes? Or maybe such changes need to be initiated? Literary criticism tends to adapt concepts from the history of literature and literature studies, e.g., from poetics or literary theory, and from other disciplines, e.g., philosophy, sociology, anthropology, art history, and even science, on an ad hoc basis. Sometimes the changes are justified and motivated by the desire to update critical tools, and sometimes they are simply dictated by trends. If the latter is true, they fail to transform the essence of critical discourse, which continues to function as a set of, at times, anachronistic ideas and beliefs, connected with the canon and the history of Polish literature.*

*Another issue is the marginalization of professional literary criticism in Poland, first identified in the early years of the systemic transformation. It is connected with marketization and the new network model of communication – its digitization and democratization – and the “popularization” of the discourse on culture. These developments went hand in hand with the emerging new contexts of critical reception, increasingly dominated by self-serving and opportunistic authors and critics who show little regard for critical ethics and little interest in the real value of literature.*

*Critical debate in Poland also calls for – perhaps more than ever – reflection on how literary criticism has viewed class society over the years and the changes this vision has underwent. Reintroducing, or indeed reclaiming, the category of class into literary criticism affects the way in which we view the process of communication in critical texts. What aspects of the language of class has been preserved in criticism and what aspects appear to be (irretrievably?) lost? Also, we need to define the place from which critics speak today, i.e., define the social goals and functions of their texts*

*Such a metacritical discussion, which also helped map the current state of literary criticism, led to the organization of an academic conference in Karpacz in November 2021. The conference was co-organized by three academic centers: the Laboratory of Contemporary Critical Forms at the University of Wrocław, the Section of Critical Questions at the Jagiellonian University and “Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne” [The Silesian Journal of Polish Studies] published at the University of Silesia.*

*The articles published in this issue of "Forum of Poetics" were inspired by this conference. Examining terms and concepts in literary criticism, we were, of course, aware that they were often rooted in various disciplines, within which their meaning and function were carefully defined. However, we were primarily interested in the ways in which different categories are being adapted by literary criticism and in the interests they serve.*

*For the purposes of our studies, we distinguished the following groups of concepts of interest to us:*

*Evaluative concepts* such as "originality," "masterpiece," "canon," "avant-garde," and "readerly pleasure" help us define the characteristics of a literary work and are important in the process of its evaluation. Depending on the context, they may concern the theme, the main assumptions of the work, its place in history, its formal or aesthetic qualities, or its use of generic/formulaic patterns. These concepts refer to the history of literature and literature studies, as well as to the market reality. *Analytical concepts* – "commodity," "mainstream," "class," "identity," and others – originally have clearly defined, sometimes even technical, meanings; they are usually used to talk about the relationship between literature and the "real" world. *Organizing concepts* are useful tools for structuring the literary field, allowing us to discuss given concepts in a wider context. Sometimes, however, they are "hollow concepts," they are used to legitimize ad hoc judgments. In our reflection on how ordering concepts, which are adapted both from the history of literature and literature studies and from sociology, function in contemporary literary criticism, we wanted to examine why categories such as "generation," "caesura," "romanticism," "classicism" and the like are used in critical texts. How and why are they being redefined?

*Concepts related to critical postulates* are categories used to formulate and articulate artistic agendas (such as "the autonomy of art") and categories used by critics to directly express their commitments (writing "programs" and "manifestos"). Such critical texts use numerous *slogans and interpretive metaphors*, which help one summarize and organize the argument or locate new critical voices against the background of earlier texts and social questions. Anthropological, sociological, cultural, and economic terms used as metaphors, such as "authenticity," "everyday life," "privacy," "experience," "violence" or "truth," are not necessarily interpretative "tools" but function as mental and rhetorical abbreviations that critics willingly use to express their observations and intuitions in a more precise manner.

*Undoubtedly, some philologists still resort to a category of "basic" concepts in literary criticism. However, do classic poetological and theoretical literary tools, such as, for example, structuralist concepts, still correspond to the state of contemporary literature? How*

*do specialist categories, such as “subject,” “lyrical context,” “intertextuality” and others, function today? How do concepts such as “Anthropocene” and “dialectics” infiltrate literary criticism and how do they change in the process? The relationship between the old and the new languages of academic analysis – after all the actual and the supposed “turns” – and the praxis of literary criticism thus seems particularly interesting.*

*Even this survey look at the categories used in critical discourse today, more or less successfully, demonstrates how complex the discussion about the communicative situation in which literary criticism finds itself today is. While the articles in this issue develop the important section of “Forum of Poetics,” which “The Dictionary of Poetology” has been from the very first issue, they do not touch upon all possible critical contexts important in the process of revising terms and concepts in literary criticism. Due to the nature of the ongoing debate and its intergenerational character, individual voices seem to complement and resonate with one other, and at the same time show the changes that have taken place in the past thirty years.* |

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

# The Canon – (Im)movables

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## Introduction

The literary canon is a problematic category because it functions, on the one hand, as an umbrella term and, on the other hand, as a self-evident concept. As a useful point of reference in contemporary literary criticism and contemporary literature, it is usually not subject to major revisions, going beyond the selection of specific works or authors. However, it may become a serious problem at times of major cultural shifts, especially if it is understood broadly – not only as a collection of timeless works but also as a set of values and the resulting expectations towards literature which guide both writers and critics.

The 1990s were such a “turning point” in Poland and the ongoing canon debate, with its sources in post-communist reevaluations, post-transformation realities, and cultural theories widely discussed in the West since the 1960s, shows that it is not only the object but also the locus of fundamental disputes. Andrzej Skrendo, among others, emphasized the fundamental nature of the canon debate in his paper presented at the *Kanon i obrzeża* [The canon and the margins] conference,<sup>1</sup> and Przemysław Czapliński further commented on such a vision of the

<sup>1</sup> The canon is a place “where not only fundamental questions about literature but also the most important social and political questions are formulated: what is literature? What does it mean to be a critic and a literary scholar? How to educate through literature? How should we view our history, and what is the relationship between the past and the present? Who are we and who do we want to be? – and finally – what does it mean to be Polish?” Andrzej Skrendo, “Kanon i lektura” [The canon and reading], in: *Kanon i obrzeża* [The canon and the margins], ed. Inga Iwasiów, Tatiana Czerska (Kraków: Universitas, 2005), 69.



canon. Skrendo was primarily interested in how different ways of thinking about literature are revealed in the canon debate and he discussed the close correlation between the understanding of the canon and the ways of reading in Piotr Śliwiński's and Inga Iwasiów's works, arguing that they both create a "counter-discourse" to the contemporary canon debate, but their understandings of the canon differ radically. According to Skrendo, Śliwiński, especially in his book *Przygody z wolnością* [Adventures with freedom] (2003), longs for the canon as a "permanent and universal bond" that may only be created by literature; Iwasiów, in *Gender dla średniozaawansowanych* [Gender for intermediate learners] (2004), argues that the universal canon is harmful, and that literature is not a privileged sphere but "an institution like any other, meant to protect the interests of certain groups."<sup>2</sup>

I refer to this comparison of two critics who were very active in the 1990s to emphasize the fact that my goal is not to define the canon, not to show all the critical perspectives and positions,<sup>3</sup> nor to classify or evaluate them,<sup>4</sup> but to try to look at the role this concept has played (and still plays?) in literary criticism over the last thirty years. Thus, I will refer to critical voices and different definitions of the canon and examine how and why various critics use this concept, bearing in mind the fundamental fact that the understanding of the canon translates into how we think about literature and the role/obligations/possibilities of literary criticism.

The conference organized in 2004 by the Department of Polish Literature at the University of Szczecin in a way allowed scholars to summarize the discussions that had taken place in the 1990s and also contributed to this debate. In the introduction to the conference proceedings, Iwasiów emphasized that the canon debate does not belong to the sphere of pure theory, since it is also a discussion about "equal rights, being open to different opinions, and understanding that every voice matters. Not only in the sphere of theory but also in the real world [...]"<sup>5</sup> Among texts published in the conference proceedings, also titled *Kanon i obrzeża* [The canon and the margins], the ones written by, at the time, active literary critics<sup>6</sup> seem particularly interesting and I will refer to them repeatedly.

<sup>2</sup> Skrendo, 67–68.

<sup>3</sup> I do not refer to, for example, the discussion concerning the canon of interpretation, important in the 1990s, which took place, inter alia, in "Teksty Drugie" (see no. 6 (1997) entitled "Granice interpretacji" [The limits of interpretation] and no. 4 (1998) entitled "Granice tekstu" [The limits of the text]). I also do not refer to the reception of Harold Bloom, a staunch opponent of cultural studies, defender of the canon and the aesthetic autonomy of literature (in 2003, excerpts from his book were published in "Literatura na Świecie" (No. 9-10); Polish translation of *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* was published in 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Bogusław Bakuła, "Kanon, antykanon, postkanon w dyskursie o tożsamości kultur w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej (1991–2011)" [Canon, anti-canon, post-canon in the discourse on the identity of cultures in Central and Eastern Europe (1991–2011)], *Porównania* 9 (2011): 13–43.

<sup>5</sup> Inga Iwasiów, "Wstęp" [Introduction], in: *Kanon i obrzeża*, 8. A few years earlier, she argued that canon debates did not bring about any "real revisions." In her opinion, "titles from one list were replaced by titles from a different list, and they were always connected to some superior 'values,' which gender criticism did not consider important" (Inga Iwasiów, "Wokół pojęć: kanon, homoerotyzm, historia literatury" [Discussing concepts: Canon, homoeroticism, history of literature], *Katedra* 1 [2001]: 102–103).

<sup>6</sup> Importantly, some of these texts also appeared in journals of literary criticism: Arkadiusz Bałajewski, Konrad Cezary Kęder, Piotr Śliwiński and Krzysztof Uniłowski published in the Szczecin quarterly "Pogranicza" (No. 3 (2004)). Uniłowski and Śliwiński also published their texts in the following books: Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę! Szkice i recenzje* [Buy a book! Essays and Reviews] (Katowice: FA-art, 2008); Piotr Śliwiński, *Świat na brudno. Szkice o poezji i krytyce* [Dirty world. Essays on poetry and criticism] (Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, 2007).

1.

In its traditional understanding, the canon refers primarily to the broadly understood authority, mastery, a stable hierarchy of values, the common and the “obvious.”<sup>7</sup> The belief in the existence of such a “space of community and understanding, represented by the widely known works from the past”<sup>8</sup> is accompanied by a belief in a certain whole. It was in this context that Janusz Sławiński wrote in 1994 about the disappearance of the center (the collapse of the Whole) as a point of reference for the interpretation of what is new (in poetry).<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Maria Janion wrote about the “uniform, symbolic and romantic style of culture” as a canonical style which, until the fall of the People’s Republic of Poland, had organized culture “around shared spiritual values [...]”<sup>10</sup> In 2004, Arkadiusz Bałajewski described the history of canon debates and the key critical literary metaphors of the 1990s in terms of *Od ‘zaniku centrali’ do ‘centrali’* [From the disappearance of the ‘center’ to the ‘center’].<sup>11</sup> Przemysław Czapliński also described the canon as a “whole” in his book *Polska do wymiany* [Polish exchanges] (2009) – his history of the 1990s and the 2000s is similar to the history of the gradual immobilization of the center which he had written two years earlier. The changes in literary life discussed in *Powrót centrali* [The return of the center] (2007) in terms of the disappearance and return of the center were described in *Polska do wymiany* as a gradual transition from the deconstruction (“institutional, ideological and aesthetic breakdown”) to the reconstruction of the canon, treated by Czapliński broadly, not so much as a collection of works, but as an institution of collective life.<sup>12</sup>

However, while in the essay about the reconstruction of the canon, which is based on two opposing interpretative attitudes – the traditionalist one, which endows literature with importance and communal meaning and is based on hierarchical assessments and timeless principles (hereinafter referred to as “the culture of the canon”), and the modernizing one, which grants art freedom and the right to individual expression at the cost of it losing its importance (referred to as “the culture of uncertain meaning”) – we learn about an inevitable conflict and the inability to develop strategies other than these two, in the introduction to the anthology *Polityka Literatury* [The politics of literature], also published in 2008, Czapliński, describes an alternative possibility. He calls the broadly understood interpretative attitudes canons, and instead of the “actively discriminatory” “national canon” and the “liberal canon” which “excludes discrimination,” he formulates the politics of literature (commitment to commitment).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See: Michał Głowiński’s entry “Kanon” [Canon] in: *Słownik terminów literackich* [Dictionary of Literary Terms], ed. Janusz Sławiński (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 2002), 234.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Piotr Śliwiński, “Kanon, hipoteza konieczna” [Canon, necessary hypothesis], in: *Kanon i obrzeża*, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Janusz Sławiński, “Zanik centrali” [The disappearance of the center], *Kresy* 2 (1994). Reprinted in: *Prace wybrane* [Selected works], vol. 5: *Przypadki poezji* [Poetry] (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 335–339.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Janion, “Zmierzch paradygmatu” [The end of the paradigm], in eadem: *Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś* [Will you know what you have experienced] (Warsaw: Sic!, 1996), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Arkadiusz Bałajewski, “Od «zaniku centrali» do «centrali»” [From the disappearance of the ‘center’ to the ‘center’], in: *Kanon i obrzeża*, 97–122.

<sup>12</sup> Przemysław Czapliński, “Kanon” [Canon], in idem: *Polska do wymiany* [Polish exchanges] (Warsaw: W.A.B., 2009), 227–276.

<sup>13</sup> Przemysław Czapliński, “Polityka literatury, czyli pokazywanie języka” [The politics of literature, or showing the language/sticking the tongue out], in: *Polityka literatury* [The politics of literature], edited collection (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2008).

Czapliński uses the concept of the canon in the most spectacular way when he treats it as a useful term to define, jointly, the accepted hierarchy of works, writers, poetics, ideological beliefs and attitudes, evaluation criteria, interpretation strategies, mechanisms of communal/institutional action, public image, and the language of a given community. Thus, he goes beyond the obvious ways of describing the canon in the 1990s and the 2000s, analyzing not so much its legitimacy, the mechanisms of its production or its dependance on market values, but the practices and beliefs which organize how communities function. Such an approach may be treated as one of the main achievements of contemporary canon debates. What seems important is both how Czapliński defines the canon and how he employs this term,<sup>14</sup> as well as the very fact that he uses the term “canon” to tell the story of the 1990s and the 2000s, proving the importance of this concept in the critical debate at the turn of the century.

## 2.

When Poland first embraced a transition to democracy back in the 1990s, various forms of producing, publishing and selling literature (domestic, emigration, underground) were combined, the world of literature underwent decentralization and reorganization in accordance to market principles, and the intense interest in post-structuralist cultural theories inspired heated canon debates. As a result, the role of the canon as the objective center was radically undermined. Many users of literature became interested in the question of the canon, understood primarily as a list of literary works and methods of interpretation, as evidenced by numerous public disputes over school reading lists and works and authors who should be remembered (or forgotten). Moreover, critical disputes concerned not only school reading lists but, more importantly, also the canon itself as a mechanism for evaluating and prioritizing literary phenomena and the place of literature in the new reality. The process of dismantling the canon was described in 2004 by Teresa Walas in the wider context of changes in the cultural paradigm. Walas emphasized that “one of the [...] obvious things on which permanent ideas about Polish culture were built was the conviction [...] that it was characterized by a concentric system, in the center of which was a shared permanent canon of traditions.” These beliefs came hand in hand with attempts to “reconstruct the canon, namely attempts to restore works which were removed from the canon for ideological reasons [...] as well as attempts to introduce new works.” At the same time, however, contradictory processes of “decentralization, differentiation, dispersion were revealed, triggered by [...] a new historical epoch [...]. And this sudden clash between ordering and differentiating, integrating and disintegrating, is one of the most important experiences of post-communist Polish culture, forcing it to revise [...] its own beliefs and prejudices.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>“The canon is a set of rules of collective life – it is a way of integrating the world, it is a clear cultural identity. An orderly, hierarchical and holistic reality” (*Polska do wymiany*, 26). Czapliński returns to this understanding of the canon and explains it in more detail in the conversation about the canon conducted as part of a series of masterclasses entitled “Canon from scratch” at the 2018 Festiwal Fabuły [Story Festival]. He describes it as a “multiple medium;” the books included in the canon are for him “the tip of the iceberg,” underneath which we find the rules of social life. He argues that it is difficult to imagine a society that would function without a canon, but also one in which there would be only one, <https://www.zamekczyta.pl/kanon-albo-o-tym-czego-nie-widac-rozmowa-z-przemyslawem-czaplinskim/> (date of access: 6 Sep. 2022).

<sup>15</sup>Teresa Walas, *Zrozumieć swój czas. Kultura polska po komunizmie. Rekonesans* [Understand the times you live in. Polish culture after communism. Reconnaissance] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003), 116.

The acts of breaking with tradition, refusing to accept the canon as the bedrock of a unified literature and culture, and rejecting hierarchies, objective authorities and evaluation criteria, perceived as ways of imposing authoritatively accepted (and exclusive) norms, were accompanied by numerous texts and discussions. In 1994, Jerzy Jarzębski published his seminal article *Metamorfozy kanonu* [Metamorphoses of the canon] in the special issue of "Znak"<sup>16</sup> devoted to the canon of European culture. Jarzębski described three different ways of understanding the canon: as a timeless "edifice of culture," as a commodity (culture functions as a "shopping mall" – people take what they like, and the guardians of the canon "cannot even for a moment forget about the tastes of the public"), and as a tool of sociopolitics (a means of influencing society). Referring to these three concepts, the critic outlined his own project, in which the "disinterested" vision of the canon as a cultural edifice was combined with "openness" and "pragmatism" (corresponding, let us add, to the other two discourses), in keeping with the liberal and universal ideal of European tradition and its susceptibility to change. Jarzębski thus combined the notions of market conditions and political mechanisms which influenced the canon, especially considering the political and social changes which took place in Poland in the 1990s, with an optimistic vision of rational and liberal European culture, "hungry" for new literature that would respond to the new reality.<sup>17</sup> Also in 1994, in "Ex Libris," Dariusz Gawin wrote about the need to find a compromise between traditionalists and supporters of the new, insofar as the canon had to be protected in the name of "true culture understood as a vocation, duty and challenge," based on traditions fostering a sense of community. Gawin responded to Kinga Dunin's radical arguments, postulating "stock-taking rather than liquidation."<sup>18</sup>

The dangerous repercussions of giving up on the existing "obligations" were mainly exposed by those critics for whom the undisputed value of literature was an obvious point of reference in the recent past, and for whom the canon, as an indisputable tradition, was a measure of stability and merit without which it was impossible to make meaningful judgments about contemporary literature.<sup>19</sup> "Young" critics (I use quotation marks because generational differences were not the only factor) criticized not only the canon and its institutional functions but also the very principle and criteria of hierarchization and canonization. What was at stake was not so much the history of literature as contemporary literature and the challenges which criticism had to face. As a result, the axiological perspective was abandoned (the critic only took responsibility for

<sup>16</sup>Znak 7 (1994). Special issue entitled "Czy kryzys kanonu kultury?" [The canon of culture in crisis?].

<sup>17</sup>Jerzy Jarzębski, "Metamorfozy kanonu" [Metamorphoses of the canon], *Znak* 7 (1994): 12–17. Reprinted in idem: *Apetyt na przemianę. Notatki o prozie współczesnej* [Appetite for change. Notes on contemporary prose] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1997).

<sup>18</sup>Dariusz Gawin, "Kłopoty z literaturą" [Problems with literature], *Ex Libris* 49 (1994). Kinga Dunin's essay *Literatura polska czy literatura w Polsce* [Polish Literature or Literature in Poland] (*Ex Libris* 48 [1994]) was one of the first texts to raise the issue of the canon of Polish literature in the context of the reader's expectations and the boom in foreign/popular literature at that time. Dunin wrote: "the whole sacred canon would make sense if there was a living continuation, if the knowledge forced upon children at school allowed them to decipher the existing cultural meanings [...]. Polish literature did not "fail" because it did not describe the People's Republic of Poland [...]. The problem is that it lost touch with the books that Poles read [...]." Cf. also: Jerzy Sosnowski, "Bładaczka w krainie leguinów" [Bładaczka in the land of legouins], *Ex Libris* 50 (1994).

<sup>19</sup>Cf. among others: Andrzej Zawada, "Co ja tutaj robię?" [What am I doing here?], *Znak* 9 (1993); Jan Prokop, "Kanon literacki i pamięć zbiorowa" [The literary canon and collective memory], *Arcana* 5 (1995): 42–49; Andrzej Werner, "Otwórzmy okno" [Let's open the window], *Więź* 4 (2003).

one's own reading of the text, criticism was a form of private reading),<sup>20</sup> and, respectively, other evaluative criteria and other possibilities of organizing the canon were introduced.

The canon's universal claims were challenged by minority groups. Inga Iwasiów, who joined the canon debate as a female reader and critic, wrote: "[...] the canon and what it had to offer were selected as if we all were men dreaming of sublime Platonic feasts."<sup>21</sup> Exposing the violent nature of the male-centered canon and its mechanisms, Iwasiów referred to Foucault's guards of the "panoptic universe" and the well-known notion of temple guards. Furthermore, she argued that the so-called "labor camp literature," "reclaimed" after 1989, demonstrates how "the changes in the canon camouflage the fact that the canon actually excludes works which threaten to undermine it." According to the feminist critic, labor camp literature became a "new sacred form of martyrdom" which made it impossible to notice in it "moments of silence and exclusion" which did not fit into the heteropatriarchal pattern.

Feminist and queer perspectives revealed the historical, political, and institutional nature of the procedures that legitimized a literary work; they exposed the claims of universality and the mechanisms of excluding or obscuring non-heteronormative works and authors. They also showed different interpretative strategies and ways of reading, those that were not only individual but also community-based. This revisionist procedure was, on the one hand, part of the evaluation process characteristic of the canon, insofar as authors marginalized in or excluded from the history of literature were to be reclaimed; on the other hand, it expanded and opened the canon, validating minority voices guided by values which differed from those considered "universal." It also gave rise to interpretation procedures which differed from the canonical ones, insofar as they were focused not only on the text but also on the outside of the text.<sup>22</sup>

In the canon debates which focused on the place of minority groups and the consequent revisions of the canonical history of literature and the ways of reading, the main point of reference was the traditional procedure of recognizing the "value" of given works. Issues related to the role played by the media and the market, which were at the center of the "majoritarian" critical debates, were not as important. This difference is also visible in language: in gender

<sup>20</sup>The rejection of objectivism and the privatization of criticism took different forms; for example, let us observe the radical differences between Karol Maliszewski's empathetic reading and Krzysztof Uniłowski's criticism governed by the postmodern ideas of differentiation, rejection of institutional positions legitimizing the value of literature and accepting responsibility for one's own reading of the text.

<sup>21</sup>Inga Iwasiów, *Gender dla średniozaawansowanych. Wykłady szczecińskie* [Gender for intermediate learners: Szczecin lectures] (Warsaw: W.A.B., 2008), 54.

<sup>22</sup>I refer to, on the one hand, the procedures of restoring forgotten authors (less often female authors) to the history of literature, establishing the relationship between women's literature and the male canon, and, on the other hand, revealing what is hidden in texts considered canonical or following in the footsteps of Nancy K. Miller, who read works by women as if for the first time – in opposition to the masculine, universalizing, readings which appropriated these works. And, also, to the ways of reading contemporary literature. Cf., inter alia, the discussion on the gender of literature entitled "Męska, żeńska, nijaka" [Male, Female, Neuter], *Ex Libris* 85 (1995); Grażyna Borkowska, "Zeskrobać starą zaprawę z pomnika polskiej literatury (O «młodej» prozie kobiecej)" [Scrape the old mortar from the monument of Polish literature (On «young» prose by women)], in: *Sporne sprawy polskiej literatury współczesnej* [Contested issues in Polish contemporary literature], ed. Alina Brodzka, Lidia Burska (Warsaw: IBL, 1998), 387–402; Inga Iwasiów, *Rewindykacje. Kobieta czytająca dzisiaj* [Revindication. Woman Reading Today] (Krakow: Universitas, 2002); Wojciech Śmieja, "Kanon i kanony, czyli jak rozumieć pojęcie literatura homoseksualna?" [Canon and canons, or how to understand the concept of homosexual literature?] *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2008): 96–116. Błażej Warkocki, "Skradziony list, czyli homoseksualna tajemnica wobec kanonu literatury polskiej" [The purloined letter, or homosexual mystery and the canon of Polish literature], in: *Kanon i obrzeża*, 295–307.

criticism, the canon was mainly contrasted with the metaphors of the margin<sup>23</sup> and the apocrypha.<sup>24</sup> The “majoritarian” critics, in turn, referred mainly to the private canon, the canon in motion, the canon (as opposed to the Canon). Various market “substitutions” of the canon – “the canon as a center of market operations,”<sup>25</sup> rankings, popularity contents and awards – were also discussed. For young critics in the 1990s, an art niche (a high art niche) was a metaphorical space which sheltered literature (and criticism) from both canonical / traditional claims and market appropriations.

At the turn of the century, when the mass media ruled the world, “normal life” was difficult, capitalist mechanisms were widespread, “the Center” returned, and the illusions about the optimistic visions of culture of “moving margins” were shattered,<sup>26</sup> one first began to seek a way out of the impasse in which, according to critics, literature and criticism entangled in media and market mechanisms found themselves. One of the possible ways out was to recognize the mechanisms governing culture in liberal market economy and to use this knowledge to inspire political commitment, taking responsibility for what, how, and where something was said and written. This led to widely discussed communal/political projects which were especially important for critics and writers born in the 1970s and the 1980s.

Rebuilding traditional evaluation criteria in the new world was one possibility. From the perspective of the modernist tradition, movement and fluidity were not so much a positive form of decentralized and democratic culture as a damaging and dangerous threat to hierarchies and boundaries between high and low literature. Consequently, they posed a threat to literary value, eclipsed by market demands or old boys’ club mentality. From this perspective, the canon remained a space of unquestionable values, which sheltered one both from market fads and politics (power/ideology). Thus, it was supposed to guarantee a perspective that goes beyond temporary and local triumphs: as in Marian Stala’s famous text *Coś się skończyło, nic się nie chce zacząć* [Something has ended but nothing will begin] in which decentralization is considered the most painful experience both for poetry and criticism. Stala writes: “To be an

<sup>23</sup> Arleta Galant wrote about the many different meanings of the metaphor of the margin in feminist criticism, also in relation to the canon. She drew attention to the fundamental difference between the post-structuralist understanding of the margin as fragmentary or peripheral and the feminist understanding of it, which, drawing on bell hooks, she read as a figure of alienation and uprooting (which endowed it with a political and existential dimension). She also emphasized, among others, the role of the margin in the reinterpretations and discussions of the history of women and minority groups, creating an alternative historical and literary approach to literary texts across the canon. She also pointed out how the change in the meaning of this metaphor (as a deep/wide edge in the literary canon) translated into how the history of women’s writing in relation to the canon was presented (e.g., if we consider genealogical approaches). (Arleta Galant, “On Waves, Lands and Margins. Metaphors and the Possibilities for a Feminist History of Literature,” *Forum of Poetics*, <http://fp.amu.edu.pl/on-waves-lands-and-margins-metaphors-and-the-possibilities-for-a-feminist-history-of-literature/>).

<sup>24</sup> Inspired by the definition of the apocrypha found in Biblical studies, Inga Iwasiów read the apocryphal story as a “feminist commentary on the state of social and literary consciousness:” the apocryphal story was a text of uncertain origin, containing often hidden knowledge, available only to the chosen few (Iwasiów, “Wokół pojęć: kanon, homoerotyzm, historia literatury”, 98).

<sup>25</sup> Śliwiński, “Kanon, hipoteza konieczna”, 88.

<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, as Czaplinski nostalgically described in 2002, when he was already disappointed by the new capitalist reality, “the center does not remain haughty and stable” and “no one is considered inferior indefinitely.” Przemysław Czaplinski, *Ruchome marginesy* [Moving margins] (Krakow: Znak Publishing House, 2002), 7.

outstanding poet in the eyes of a number of peers is not the same thing as to be an outstanding poet for the majority of contemporary readers.”<sup>27</sup>

A similar mechanism of disappointment and critical expectations towards contemporary prose was discussed in detail by Czapliński, for whom they were the consequences of the “victory” of late modernity over postmodernity (projected in the symbolic sphere). Czapliński showed how “the preference for the canon that is permanently renewed, the canon which is expanded to include problematic writers, eventually mutated into the will of stability.” Czapliński further argued that the canon debate was not about literature but about fundamental issues: literature/prose which “in the symbolic sphere will validate the rights of the majority, and not because it possesses some great literary value, but because it is part of shared official history.”<sup>28</sup>

The special issue of “Znak” from 1998, devoted to literature and criticism, is also testimony to the need to legitimize criticism and stable evaluation criteria. It featured extensive commentaries to Jarzębski’s original text, entitled *Wartościowanie w sieci kultury* [Evaluation in the network of culture], and responses to the questionnaire entitled *Krytyka i jej kryteria* [Criticism and its criteria].<sup>29</sup> Optimistic (despite all odds) reflections of Jarzębski, who analyzed the crisis of hierarchies and the problems with evaluating works of art in the network model of culture “with its incredibly multiplied possibilities” and “the demon of relativism,” and nevertheless insisted on using traditional criteria for judging the value of literature believing that the critic, as a “guardian of relative continuity and stability of the canon,” should in a way guarantee the status of literary criticism, clashed with much less optimistic opinions of other critics.

Jarzębski argued that the canon plays a more important role in network culture than in traditional culture (paradoxically, it still functions in it as a system of references). He perceived the canon as a “structure in motion,” arguing that the measure of the value of a new work of art should be its ability to enter into relationships with canonical texts and stimulate the processes of constant reinterpretation. And although in the network model of culture “an objective model of literary criticism does not seem to exist,” we may turn to the pragmatic category of “using” literature if we accept the fact that it always takes place in the context provided by the canon and the related reading and interpretative procedures.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Marian Stala, “Coś się skończyło, nic się nie chce zacząć” [Something has ended but nothing will begin], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 2 (2000). Reprinted in: *Była sobie krytyka. Wybór tekstów z lat dziewięćdziesiątych i pierwszych* [Criticism. A selection of texts from the 1990s and the 2000s], ed. Dariusz Nowacki, Krzysztof Uniłowski (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2003), 110.

<sup>28</sup>Czapliński, “Kanon”, 261, 244. Czapliński discussed in detail the context of popularity contests, polls, discussions and texts from the 1990s, within which the literary canon was reformulated (disassembled), as well as texts and discussions related to “realistic expectations” (i.e., expectations towards prose which drew on the canon of Polish Romanticism and Realism). He also discussed the clash between liberal and nationalist models of culture. Czapliński was interested in the mechanisms governing the social functioning and reconstruction of the canon (that is why he emphasized the disputes over Szyborska’s Nobel Prize and Miłosz’s funeral). I am mainly interested in his comments on the critics’ expectations about the novel.

<sup>29</sup>“Krytyka i jej kryteria”, *Znak* 7 (1998).

<sup>30</sup>Jerzy Jarzębski, “Wartościowania w sieci kultury” [Evaluation in the network of culture], *Znak* 7 (1998): 8–15.

Piotr Śliwiński, instead argued that “the network and the canon are incompatible,” because the canon is neither a prop room at a theater of culture nor an element in an intertextual game, but “a living bond, implying the center, context and hierarchy.” It is not so much a structure that adjusts to the new model of culture but a model that allows “to clearly distinguish idols from authorities, fads from classics,” a reference point that allows “to build a counter-discourse of the present, within which evaluation will be possible.” Furthermore, as Śliwiński emphasizes in the title of his text, which was later published in his book, the concept of the network should be replaced by the concept of the bond.<sup>31</sup> That is why the critic, as “the guardian of the canon” (and not only, as Jarzębski argued, the guardian of “the relative continuity and stability of the canon”), must oppose the infinite multiplication of traditions and must be aware of their own reactionary nature.

Dariusz Nowacki addressed Jarzębski’s text from a different perspective. He undermined the overly optimistic (or, indeed, traditional) vision of both network culture and the role that the canon plays in it. For Nowacki, the network is a postmodern rhizome, and participating in the network culture means “participating in the late capitalist culture of consumption.” The critic further argues, after Jean Baudrillard, that the canon that is dominant in the network culture is “a cultural cliché [...] a cluster of stereotypes subject to the law of uncontrolled reproduction and simplification.” While Jarzębski writes about “noble postulates,” Nowacki emphasizes the realities of literary life and criticism which are controlled by market mechanisms and focused on the category of the new (thus weakening its links with the canon). And, consequently, Nowacki shows two incompatible worlds: the connoisseurs who pay attention to the links between literature and tradition, and the users who value literature for the exact opposite reasons.<sup>32</sup>

Nowacki’s comments on the problems of criticism in the new market reality, firmly rooted in postmodern theories and practical challenges posed by postmodernity, reflected the attitudes of critics associated with the literary quarterly *FA-art* published in Katowice. Indeed, these critics (Konrad C. Kęder, Dariusz Nowacki, Robert Ostaszewski, Krzysztof Uniłowski), clearly influenced by postmodern literature and philosophy, did not use the term canon in their texts. Even in his early critical essays, Nowacki discussed new market conditions and the “dethronement” of literature and criticism.<sup>33</sup> Uniłowski (whose answers to the *Krytyka i jej kryteria* questionnaire were also published in this special issue of *Znak*) consistently argued that postmodern liquid values and worldviews not only do not undermine the significance of literary criticism but actually justify it, making the critic responsible for their chosen criteria. Their observations regarding the legitimacy of criticism and the situation of literature in the late 1990s resonated with the voices of other critics but their diagnoses differed significantly.

<sup>31</sup>Piotr Śliwiński, “Inna krytyka?” [Different criticism?], *Znak* 7 (1998): 22–28. Reprinted as “Sieć czy więź” [Network or bond] and slightly altered, with the addition of the part entitled “Miejsce kanonu” [The place of the canon], in: *Przygody z wolnością. Uwagi o poezji współczesnej* [Adventures with freedom. Notes on contemporary poetry] (Kraków: Znak Publishing House, 2002), 35–45. In the book version, Śliwiński writes about replacing the concept of the canon-as-core with the notion of “the movable canon” – in this model, the center follows current debates and trends. The perception of the canon as a key tradition is also more distinct in this text.

<sup>32</sup>Dariusz Nowacki, “Szczypta sceptycyzmu” [A pinch of skepticism], *Znak* 7 (1998): 16–21.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Dariusz Nowacki, *Zawód: czytelnik. Notatki o prozie polskiej lat 90.* [Occupation: Reader. Notes on the Polish prose in the 1990s] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1999).



In the introduction to a selection of critical texts from the 1990s and the 2000s, entitled *Do Czytelnika* [Remarks for the reader], Nowacki and Uniłowski described contemporary literary life as a combination of commercial market conditions with superficial “social, cognitive and aesthetic respect for the art of the word,” which, consequently, gave rise to a preference for traditional, conservative, poetics and issues “traditionally considered to be serious and important.” Nowacki and Uniłowski wrote about a political and ideological “contract” under which “universal acceptance of liberalism in the economic sphere is (or should be combined) with sensitivity to social problems and traditionalism in the axiological and ethical spheres. Literary critics have nothing else to do but confirm judgments and maintain hierarchies that have been codified elsewhere.”<sup>34</sup>

Consequently, Uniłowski’s critical texts, in which he criticized so-called middlebrow prose and analyzed the mechanisms of reactivating modernist traditions of literary studies or the model of culture-network, consistently exemplify a project of criticism focused on differences (and not on community) and on the description of (actual or imagined) cultural changes in the spirit of postmodernity.<sup>35</sup> It is no coincidence that Śliwiński in his essay devoted to the remains of the old canon in 2004 refers to Uniłowski. If I understand it correctly, Śliwiński reads Uniłowski’s critical texts as an admission of defeat, insofar as postmodern critics (and criticism, beginning with the 1990s) appeared to have failed. In his essay published in *Kanon i obrzeża*, Śliwiński explains how the canon rejected by “postmodern enthusiasts” was replaced by its doubles. Such doubles included (albeit for various reasons) the lists of books nominated for prestigious awards, rankings listing the greatest achievements of the year or lists of contemporary works in school textbooks,<sup>36</sup> as well as the utopian notion of a “community united by its belief in eternal values” (this is how Śliwiński reads Wojciech Wencel’s works).<sup>37</sup> Still, the canon as a “necessary hypothesis,” as a credible and true measure of literary value, remained a necessary/possible answer to market demands.

In the same book, Uniłowski describes the contemporary hybrid literary scene, paying attention to its “double structuring.” When modernism and liberal economy unite, the critic explains, the traditional vertical model (high-low, elite-popular/populist) may be superimposed

<sup>34</sup>Dariusz Nowacki, Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Do Czytelnika” [Remarks for the reader], in: *Była sobie krytyka*, 21.

<sup>35</sup>In a collection of essays and reviews published in 2008 entitled *Kup pan książkę!* these diagnoses act as introductions to the respective chapters (*Zaangażowani i ponowoczesni* [Committed and Postmodern]; *Modernizm kontratakuje* [Modernism Strikes Back]; *Elitarni i popularni, głównonurtowi i niszowi* [Elite and Popular, Mainstream and Marginal]; *Z popem na ty* [Getting to know pop]). In the latter, Uniłowski criticizes Czapliński’s essay devoted to the canon, where he argued that the most important literary event at the turn of the century was the ideological conflict between the “liberals” and the “national-Catholic right.” According to Uniłowski, both continued the discourse of modernity, and therefore this dispute was not significant from the point of view of cultural changes. It is worth adding that Czapliński points out that the progressive camp and the reactionary camp follow the same rules of canonization, which seems to corroborate Uniłowski’s claims. Guillroy comments on progressive and reactionary critics’ shared views on the canon and literary values. Cf.: John Guillory, *Cultural Capital. The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>36</sup>They are doubles, because “they imply eternity,” they refer to the mechanisms which “anticipate accepting the values which are necessary for a given community to communicate.” (Śliwiński, “Kanon, hipoteza konieczna”, 86).

<sup>37</sup>This “double [...] is at the service of the consolation industry.” According to Śliwiński, “Wencel [...] does not seem to realize that his muse-comforter is celebrated by mass culture” (Śliwiński, “Kanon, hipoteza konieczna,” 95).

onto the horizontal model (central-peripheral, mainstream-marginal). The two incomparable perspectives challenge, or “at least question,” one another, and, as a result, clash.<sup>38</sup> Uniłowski thus puts emphasis not only on the fundamental problems but also on the concepts employed in literary debates about values and hierarchies. The most frequently discussed questions (the benefits of the traditional canon, the mechanisms of canonization, value judgments, the legitimization of interpretation procedures or a sensible answer to the domination of the media center) and the very concept of the canon (which may be noticed, indirectly, in the traditional division into the high and the low) were addressed in the wider framework of the literary and artistic “mainstream.” As Uniłowski showed, the “mainstream” (and not the canon) became the actual point of reference in the hybrid model of literature, a “schizophrenic mix,” where a work of literature must be, paradoxically, both popular and of high artistic merit.<sup>39</sup>

For Uniłowski such an approach was nothing new. He commented on this question, among others, in *Skąd wiemy, kto jest ważny (w literaturze najnowszej)* [How do we know who matters (in contemporary literature)],<sup>40</sup> *Chcieliśmy rynku...* [We wanted free market ...],<sup>41</sup> and the introduction to the anthology *Była sobie krytyka...* [Criticism ...] written together with Dariusz Nowacki, where the clashes between various critical circles and the mainstream were discussed.<sup>42</sup> In the latter text, Uniłowski also explained (mainly in the context of the Warsaw-based magazine *Lampa* [Lamp]) how the new market and the network society allow for smooth transitions between the non-mainstream and the mainstream. Consequently, the “avant-garde” (traditionally regarded one of the last bastions of non-commercial literature and criticism) loses its idealistic character.

The new circumstances in which literature and criticism functioned (as exemplified by, at least for Uniłowski, the blog [kumple.blog.pl](http://kumple.blog.pl) and artistic and media strategies allowing for smooth transitions between the non-mainstream and the mainstream) and, more broadly, the manner in which the schizophrenic model of the literary scene was described may be read as alternative conclusions to be drawn from the canon debate (alternative to the ones reached by Czaplinski). They teach us that we should carefully consider other categories and points of reference which better reflect cultural changes and the state of literature and criticism in the new reality.

<sup>38</sup>Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Elitarni i popularni, głównonurtowi i niszowi” [Elite and Popular, Mainstream and Marginal], in: *Kanon i obrzeża*, 79.

<sup>39</sup>For Uniłowski the mainstream is a broad category – it is a place where the significance/popularity of individual works is established in accordance with adopted norms and criteria.

<sup>40</sup>*Pogranicza* 5 (2003): 9–19. Referring to numerous examples, Uniłowski argued that critics neither recognize nor set any values. He wrote: “Which writer matters? Which book is worth reading? Both [the critic and the literary scholar] independently get their answers from the same source – a market that operates at the intersection of the publishing business, influential media, ideological and political forces, current trends and cultural fashions. The influence of the market seems overwhelming, and its verdicts are unquestionable. However, its status is unique. It is powerful but it does not rely on authorities; on the contrary, it is powerful because it relies on anonymous, intrusive, infinitely multiplied, endlessly resonating repetitions. The verdicts of the market reach us as gossip, as rumor: suddenly everyone likes Olga Tokarczuk’s *Primeval*, everyone wants to read Pilch, everyone knows that Jerzy Sosnowski’s debut will be fabulous and Dorota Masłowska’s novel is a revelation.” [https://rebus.us.edu.pl/bitstream/20.500.12128/10400/3/Unilowski\\_Skad\\_wiemy\\_kto\\_jest\\_wazny.pdf](https://rebus.us.edu.pl/bitstream/20.500.12128/10400/3/Unilowski_Skad_wiemy_kto_jest_wazny.pdf) (date of access: 2 August 2022).

<sup>41</sup>*Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2002).

<sup>42</sup>Analyzing the role of the media in the Polish literature and criticism of the 1990s, they write: “After 1989, the humanistic intelligentsia, which was one of the groups most burdened with the costs of systemic transformations, ceased to determine society’s cultural aspirations. It also ceased to define literary hierarchies and cultural patterns.” [Nowacki, Uniłowski, “Do Czytelnika”, 23].

3.

In the political and market realities of the 2010s, the canon ceased to be an important or, for that matter, useful concept in literary criticism. While political decisions concerning school recommended reading lists were still controversial and the repeated attempts to reformulate the canon were discussed in the media (e.g., as exemplified by debates concerning the best books of the 20th century, publishing editorial collections of “canonical” books to boost sales),<sup>43</sup> in literary studies and criticism, the canon, as a point of reference, was appropriated by the mainstream and other categories, which were deemed better-suited to describe the heteronomous nature of the literary field. This was due to the strong divisions between different ideological and intellectual communities, which became more antagonistic over time, not only because of political reasons, but also because of digitization, the social media, networking, and massification, which altered the networks and relations in the literary field and literature itself.

One of the few attempts to bring the canon back into critical debate was an invitation to participate in the second edition of the “University criticism” competition organized by the *Biuro Literackie* publishing house in the spring of 2015. Entitled the “Grand Canyon,” it aimed to compile a new canon “for the new reader.”<sup>44</sup> The invitation to participate in this debate, the issues it aimed to raise, as well as the majority of the twenty published student texts reflect the traditional understanding of the canon as a collection of works considered important (specific names and genres which should be included in the canon were discussed; respectively, teachers were asked to change their approach to contemporary literature). What further reflected the political and cultural climate of the 1990s was the follow-up question posed by the organizers about the “the role of books published by Biuro Literackie in revolutionizing the canons and hierarchies in Polish literature.” This question, as Przemysław Rojek writes in his conclusion, was posed because “from the very beginning, Biuro Literackie and its Forts/Ports wanted to challenge the hierarchies in Polish mainstream literature, to destroy, as one of the critics [...] put it, ‘elite poetry.’”<sup>45</sup>

A number of “Grand Canyon” texts touched upon the problematic nature of the canon and the value of literature in a world where culture is commodified (writers function as well-designed brands) and authorities are “local.”<sup>46</sup> Krzysztof Sztafa commented on how anachronistic the

<sup>43</sup>Cf. e.g., Justyna Sobolewska’s article on the “Literary canon marking 100 years of Polish independence” published in 2018 in the weekly *Polityka*; the canon was compiled by “critics, scholars, journalists and the like:” “We need the canon – also so that we can discuss it, change it, revise it. This is how we approach the list of Polish twentieth-century books that we have prepared – **as triggers for change in the national canon**, including many overlooked authors and works” (emphasis original) (Justyna Sobolewska, “Literacki kanon na 100-lecie niepodległości” [Literary canon marking 100 years of Polish independence], *Polityka*, 23 October 2003, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/1768460,1,literacki-kanon-na-100-lecie-niepodleglosci.read>).

<sup>44</sup>Przemysław Rojek, “Wielki kanion” [Grand canyon], <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/wielki-kanion/>.

<sup>45</sup>Przemysław Rojek, “Wielki kanion – podsumowanie” [Grand canyon – conclusion], <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/wielki-kanion-podsumowanie/> (date of access: 2 August 2022).

<sup>46</sup>Exposing how anachronistic Jarzębski’s *Metamorfozy kanonu* was, Zuzanna Sala wrote: “First of all, contemporary literary value cannot be based on any objective authority [...] We are democrats, we are capitalists. A poet, an association, a literary magazine, a group, an event – they all function as brands. With different target groups, different brand strategies.” (Zuzanna Sala, “Kanon: wartość, estetyka, prawda” [The Canon: value, aesthetics, truth], <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/kanon-wartosc-estetyka-prawda/>) [date of access: 2 August 2022]).

concept of the canon was. He analyzed the dictionary definition of this concept, concluding that aesthetic dominants which “ensure cultural continuity” are, by definition, discriminatory and arbitrary. The critic argued that we should look for new aesthetic categories to describe new poetry, because numerous contemporary poetics render “the concept of (literary, aesthetic) value (but also ‘value’ as such) obsolete.”<sup>47</sup>

Jakub Skurtys, whose voice appears to be representative of young poetry critics, argued that “the canon, be it old or new, potentially brought to life by the book series [published by Biuro Literackie], should be avoided.” He weighed in on the debate on the “Poezja polska od nowa” [Polish Poetry from scratch] series which was to be published by Biuro Literackie in 2010. According to Skurtys, Polish poetry needs neither a new canon nor its drastic reevaluation, and if “something is to take place ‘from scratch,’ it must direct its rebellious force of ‘ordering and choosing’ against tradition [...]” What lies at stake is not a historical selection of good or bad poems but deciding what is important and attractive today. Skurtys writes: “a new canon is not the goal, and the selection will take place not so much against as beyond the canon.”<sup>48</sup>

I argue that the act of “going beyond the canon,” not so much questioning but disregarding it, making individual choices, represents the views held by the majority of this new generation of critics.<sup>49</sup> If they mention the canon in their texts, they refer to a tradition of not so much values as literary conventions accepted by a given community. The following rhetorical tricks are a testament to this:

If today we start (And what does that even mean? We? Who are we?) to read Ważyk and Wat instead of Białoszewski and Różewicz, it will of course be as grave an oversight as the fact that they are currently not part of the so-called “Canon.”<sup>50</sup>

To give you an example – to refer to the so-called canon – let’s take Whitman’s understanding of democracy, and how it influenced his poetics, insofar as he preferred enumeration [...] and complex sentences with subordinate clauses [...].<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Krzysztof Sztafa, “«Why so real?». Nowa poezja i rzeczywistość alternatywna” [«Why so real?». New poetry and alternative reality], <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/why-so-real-nowa-poezja-i-rzeczywistosc-alternatywna/>.

<sup>48</sup>Skurtys is convinced that the questions concerning the possible reevaluation of Polish poetry and a new canon are tantamount to “war market rhetoric;” poetry itself is left out of this debate. He also has his doubts about not including some authors in the canon (“the so-called canon”) and introducing others. Jakub Skurtys, “Nie(do)czytani” [Un/read], <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/niedoczytani/>.

<sup>49</sup>I refer to leftist poetry critics, mainly based in Wrocław and Katowice, who declare a generational bond based on a community of beliefs (Monika Glosowicz, Paweł Kaczmarski, Marta Koronkiewicz, Dawid Kujawa, Jakub Skurtys). They discuss, inter alia, issues of commitment/politics and the legitimacy of criticism. In the communal context they envision, the manifested indifference to the canon as an essential category is even more interesting. Cf., for example, Karol Poręba, “Czas pokoleń. Pokolenia literackie i tożsamość ponowoczesna” [Time of generations. Literary generations and the postmodern identity], *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne* 1 (2019): 276–305; Jakub Skurtys, “Strategie niezaangażowania, czyli jak przeczekać zwrot polityczny” [Non-commitment strategies, or how to wait out the political turn], in idem: *Wiersz... i cała reszta. Rozważania o poezji i krytyce po 1989 roku* [Poem... and all that. Reflections on poetry and criticism after 1989] (Kraków: Universitas, 2021).

<sup>50</sup>Skurtys, “Nie(do)czytani”.

<sup>51</sup>Paweł Kaczmarski, “Wyrastanie z wielogłosu” [Growing out of polyphony], in idem: *Wysoka łączliwość. Szkice o poezji współczesnej* [High connectivity. Essays on contemporary poetry] (Wrocław: Fundacja im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2018), 240.

If we were to ignore the linguistic refinement and thoughtful strategies of both critics, the language they use (“the so-called canon”) could be read in terms of mere rhetoric. However, I would like to argue that it reflects their critical perspectives. We use the phrase “so-called” to either introduce a term that is not that well-known (and then we refer to a generally accepted and known term), or to keep our distance from a given concept or phrase.<sup>52</sup> I have the impression that Skurtys and Kaczmarski try to do both: they use a well-known term in order to emphasize their distance. For them, the canon is a canon that both somehow exists (since we refer to it/ can refer to it if necessary – because no one questions the principles which govern school/university recommended reading lists) and does not exist (in the universal meaning that is traditionally attributed to it) because its various contexts, be it class, market, political, aesthetic, or social, are evident. Indeed, as both critics argue, the fact that the concept of the canon is of little use today is evident as well.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

<sup>52</sup>“Co to znaczy tzw.?” [What does ‘so-called’ mean?], <https://polszczyzna.pl/co-to-znaczy-tzw/> (date of access: 2 August 2022).

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# KEYWORDS

canon

**ABSTRACT:**

This article discusses the concept of the canon in Polish literary criticism in the 1990s, the 2000s, and the 2010s. The author discusses contemporary social and critical debates and different definitions of the canon employed in them and shows the contexts and repercussions of redefining (disassembling, reconstructing) the literary canon. Bearing in mind the fundamental fact that the understanding of the canon translates into the way of thinking about literature and the role /obligations/possibilities of literary criticism, she analyzes both the goals and the ways in which the concept of the canon is used. She also analyzes the circumstances in which the canon, as a point of reference, was replaced in discussions and texts devoted to literary hierarchies and/or literary criticism by the mainstream and other categories which were better suited to describe the heteronomous nature of the literary field.



## LITERARY CRITICISM

### *e v a l u a t i o n*

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# The Mainstream and the Margins Trade Places:

## The Mainstream as a “Runaway” Concept of Literary Criticism

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We may start by advancing a thesis that, obvious as it may be for literary critics, raises many questions. When we look at how the concept of the mainstream is used in contemporary literary criticism, in which, in addition to the so-called professional, most often academic critics, bloggers, journalists and authors of fan fiction also function, we learn that it is actually used in place of the old concept of the “canon” or the more contemporary concept of the “center” (as defined by Przemysław Czapliński). Canon debates took place in the 1990s and

in the new millennium, and perspectives varied; the understanding of the canon in classical 20th-century literary studies was discussed mainly in intradisciplinary terms – often in the modernist context of the autonomy of (institutionalized) literature.<sup>1</sup> The marketization of art after 1989, which made Czapliński come up with the concept of the “center,” inspired essential revisions of the concept of the canon, especially as regards its place and role in society. As the “core” of literary discourse and a stable premise for critical judgments, the canon was rooted in literary traditions, literary institutions, and the literary scene of the People’s Republic of Poland. Thus, it somewhat corresponded to the literary “Whole,” as defined by Janusz Sławiński, who discussed the disappearance of the “poetic center” in Poland in the early 1990s, just as critics began to embrace postmodern theories of crises. New local communities and aesthetics flourished.<sup>2</sup> Sławiński argued that the opinion-forming cultural “center” of the Polish People’s Republic relied on hierarchies of literary works, which, in turn, were governed by (academically and politically) institutionalized artistic rules and disseminated by 20th-century media. Indeed, the “center” was determined by abstract mechanisms of reproduction of universal cultural meanings and the critic did not perceive it as a center of political and social influences. The “return of the center,” analyzed in detail by Czapliński in his famous 2007 book, clearly showed how texts that used to be at the “center” which controlled modern social imagination moved, because of changing social contexts, towards the margins of postmodernity.<sup>3</sup> The center was from then on conditioned by market demand and competition. As a result, in the modernist binary system of, on the one hand, ambitious masterpieces and, on the other hand, popular bestsellers, the two “unexpectedly traded places” in the internal hierarchy of broadly defined culture. It certainly could not be described as a (supposedly) positive effect of postmodern transformations, the long-awaited democratization of various literary circles.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Such discussions were collected in the publication *Kanon i obrzeża* [The canon and the margins] (2005), inspired by feminist critics: Inga Iwasiów and Tatiana Czerna from the Department of Polish Literature of the 20th century at the University of Szczecin organized a thematic conference and edited the book. In Poland, canon debates took place mainly in the 1990s, among various circles. In 1993, a canon questionnaire was prepared by the weekly *Polityka*, and in 1993/1994 the canon and its revisions were discussed at academic sessions organized by The Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Warsaw SPP; the results of these deliberations were published in three volumes in *Sporne postaci polskiej literatury współczesnej* [Disputed Figures of Polish Contemporary Literature] (1994, 1995, 1996). In 1994, “Znak” published a special issue devoted to the canon with contributions from, among others, Jerzy Szacki, Ireneusz Kania, and Jerzy Jarzębski. The article was a starting point for Jarzębski’s pioneering book *Apetyt na transformę* [Appetite for Change] (1997), where he discussed new phenomena in Polish prose after 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Janusz Sławiński, “Zanik centrali” [The disappearance of the center], *Kresy* 2 (1994). Reprinted in: *Prace wybrane T. 5, Przypadki poezji* [Selected works Vol. 5, Poetry] (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 335–339.

<sup>3</sup> Inga Iwasiów wrote about how values previously associated with the canon and ambitious literature “moved” to the margins; she interpreted the supposed marginalization of high literature in terms of elitism (“Wokół pojęć: kanon, homoerotyzm, historia literatury” [Around the concepts: canon, homoerotism, history of literature], *Katedra* 1 [2001]: 98–122). Apart from Czapliński, “the return of the center” was also discussed by Piotr Śliwiński (“Gorzej czy normalnie” [Worse or Normal], in: *Przygody z wolnością* [Adventures with freedom] [Kraków: Znak, 2002], 12; Kinga Dunin (“Kopciuszek, Księżę DyDo i wolność” [Cinderella, Prince DyDo and freedom], in: *Karoca z dyni* [The pumpkin coach], [Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2000], 58) and Krzysztof Uniłowski (“Cała prawda o «prozie środka», cz. 2” [The whole truth about middlebrow prose, part 2], *FA-art* 4 [2002]: 32–41).

<sup>4</sup> In “Teksty Drugie” (5 [1995]: 5–26), Edward Balcerzan wrote about “trading places unexpectedly,” expanding Sławiński’s reflections on the “disappearance of the center” in the context of the cultural, methodological and communication breakthrough. However, he focused on the effects of the disappearance of old, canonical orders, among others, in literary studies.

Before the “return of the center,” Czapliński discussed the phenomenon of “the moving margins,” which were meant to destabilize the center, in its many different meanings. This concept was, as it seems from today’s perspective, an extension of lofty ideas associated with modernism’s community-creating and value-creating powers. For Czapliński, “the moving margins” were part and parcel of a utopian democratic culture built on community values, which were, nevertheless, subject to renegotiation. Thus, it can be said that, in a sense, the dream of “the moving margins” built on Sławiński’s narrative, insofar as the approach to newly democratized Polish culture was cautiously optimistic. “Because if the margins are moving, no one occupies an inferior position forever,” Czapliński wrote, “respectively, the center is never un-touchable and unchangeable, which means that no institutionally endorsed or market-driven center may be created independently of writers, readers, and critics.”<sup>5</sup> Optimistic as this may sound, Czapliński then explained: “I refer to culture whose margins are not created by the mechanisms of depersonalized mass culture, which is interested in monetary and not spiritual value, and only pretends to be democratic. The domination of the market, using targeted media and mass promotion to reach audiences, immobilized the center and the margins.”<sup>6</sup> The very idea of a constantly renegotiated diverse canon, an exciting prospect in post-communist Poland in the early 1990s, was ultimately dismissed by literary critics – such a canon appeared to have more in common with a free-market economy than with democracy and freedom. Czapliński advanced this thesis in the introduction to the edited collection *Polityka Literatury* [Politics of Literature] (2009) – Krytyka Polityczna’s guide to new literature which heralded the famous “political turn” in post-transformation Polish criticism.<sup>7</sup>

As I have said, when Czapliński wrote about “the return of the center,” he actually wrote about the media and the publishers becoming new exclusive opinion-forming centers; book buyers now determined the value of literature and literature was dependent on the market and money. New institutionalized tools, literary awards (which were and still are founded by city councils and thus dependent on municipal cultural policies), literary festivals and galas, began to shape the literary scene in Poland.<sup>8</sup> Czapliński presented his preliminary findings on the “shifts” in value judgments that had taken place in Polish culture in the 1990s in *Ruchome marginesy*, brilliantly describing a phenomenon that perfectly corresponded to the most popular sociological (Zygmunt Bauman) and cultural (Jean Baudrillard) definitions of postmodernism in Poland. However, the nature of the “return of the center,” as preliminarily discussed in *Ruchome marginesy*, implied a secondary “immobilization” of the center and the margins – “the exchange of values” was continually taking place between the

<sup>5</sup> Przemysław Czapliński, *Ruchome marginesy* [Moving margins] (Kraków: Znak, 2002), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Czapliński, *Ruchome marginesy*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Czapliński distinguished between two “political” canons undergoing reproduction at the end of the 1990s. The nationalist canon triggered identity and patriotic debates; the liberal canon, noble and open to ever new works, concealed its tendency to “sanctify” works of literature and “create” masterpieces – authorities were no longer needed and everyone could make their free, or indeed arbitrary, choice (Przemysław Czapliński, “Polityka literatury, czyli pokazywanie języka” [The politics of literature, or showing the language/sticking the tongue out], in: *Polityka literatury* [The politics of literature], edited collection (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2008, 20-21).

<sup>8</sup> Przemysław Czapliński, *Powrót centrali* [The return of the center] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007), 55; Grzegorz Jankowicz, “Piękni wygrani. Wpływ nagród na strukturę pola literackiego” [Beautiful winners. The influence of awards on the structure of the literary field], in: *Literatura polska po 1989 roku w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieu Podręcznik* [Polish literature after 1989 in the light of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory. Textbook], ed. Grzegorz Jankowicz, Piotr Marecki, Jan Sowa (Kraków: Korporacja Halart, 2015), 113-155.

center and what we could more accurately define as fringe culture – and thus the two were constantly being revised because the fixed assets of the literary canon were constantly being exchanged.<sup>9</sup> The constant exchange of values thus permanently replaced the accumulation of symbolic capital around fixed and stable authorities.<sup>10</sup> Not only objects of critical interest, which were assigned one value or another, were subject to exchange, but, perhaps more importantly, also value judgments, which, in the traditional canon, have traditionally evolved at a slow pace dictated by the history of literature. Respectively, margins were also ever-moving and ever-changing – promotional campaigns turned dazzling debuts into books worthy of the “center,” often overnight, while high-profile titles often lost value and returned to the margins within a year. This phenomenon of the capitalist cultural market was preliminarily described in *Powrót centrali* [The return of the center]. This constant movement of values, a situation where stable community-forming evaluative criteria are being replaced, makes the job of the literary critic difficult.<sup>11</sup> Identifying and defining evaluative criteria also proves difficult, except, perhaps, for the simplest ones (bullish literary market with its increasing values and bearish literary market with its decreasing values). The exchange and the movement of capital are autotelic. Czapliński’s remarks on the nature of the “liberal canon” put forward in *Polityka Literatary* still hold true: media attention “sanctifies” a work of literature; such an approach is indeed “canonical” in nature but the need to justify the attention disappears.<sup>12</sup>

The “return of the opinion-forming center,” described by Czapliński primarily in terms of statistical facts and sociology of literature, was, of course, recognized and defined during a long debate: Kinga Dunin wrote about “dominant public discourse,”<sup>13</sup> in 2000, a number of critics and literary scholars took part in the debate entitled *Literatura w uścisku mediów* [Literature in the grip of the media] in the magazine “Res Publica Nowa;”<sup>14</sup> Anna Nasiłowska published her famous pamphlet *Literaturka* [Little literature] in “Tygodnik Powszechny” in 2005;<sup>15</sup> and Krzysztof Uniłowski discussed the so-called middlebrow fiction (prose for the new middle class) in his books.<sup>16</sup> In a way, this debate found its most potent expression in

<sup>9</sup> The intersection of two evaluation systems, the modernist one, which relegates popular and generic productions to the margins, and the postmodern one, which excludes overly ambitious works from the mainstream is discussed by Krzysztof Uniłowski in *Elitarni i popularni, głównonurtowi i niszowi* [Elite and Popular, Mainstream and Fringe] (Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę!* [Buy a book!] (Katowice: Wyd. FA-art, 2008, 204–220). I will refer to it later on in this article.

<sup>10</sup> Tomasz Warczok, Alicja Pałęcka, Piotr Marecki, “Pole literackie w Polsce po 1989 roku” [Literary field in Poland after 1989], in: *Literatura polska po 1989 w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieua. Raport z badań* [Polish literature after 1989 in the light of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory. Report], ed. Grzegorz Jankowicz et al. (Kraków: Korporacja Halart, 2014), 135–136.

<sup>11</sup> Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę!*, 372–373.

<sup>12</sup> Czapliński, *Polityka literatary*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Dunin, 41–87.

<sup>14</sup> “Literatura w uścisku mediów” [Literature in the grip of the media] [panel discussion between Przemysław Czapliński et al.], *Res Publica Nowa* 7 (2000): 49–60.

<sup>15</sup> Anna Nasiłowska, “Literaturka. Polska bez pisarzy” [Little literature. Poland without writers], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 46 (2005).

<sup>16</sup> Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Proza środka, czyli stereotypy literatury nowoczesnej” [Middlebrow prose, or the stereotypes of modern literature], in idem: *Granice nowoczesności. Proza polska i wyczerpanie modernizmu* [The limits of modernity. Polish prose and the end of modernism] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2006), 156–195.

political literary essays published by “Ha!Art”<sup>17</sup> and “Krytyka Polityczna.”<sup>18</sup> Though their approach to the place and the social role of literature differed, all critics pointed to how the meaning and the function of the “center” changed. Dunin argued that the center no longer established the foundations for community values (whether by force or as a result of negotiation) but instead promoted fashions, invalidated all that was not fashionable, made some writers famous and rendered others obsolete.<sup>19</sup> So, the center was not so much concerned with evaluation as with marketing, and in the Polish People’s Republic the latter was associated with the margins of literary criticism. According to many contemporary writers and critics, the social (and thus political) importance of literature and criticism postulated by Dunin could be critically read against the contemporary incoherent and fluid field of literary criticism dominated by mass and social media. It is, after all, as Dunin explained, determined by ethical concerns. To what do we owe the popularity of the concept of the mainstream? Perhaps we still think about art in terms of “new market rules” which were first introduced in 1989 and discussed by critics in the late 1990s and the early 2000s? Can we think about the mainstream in terms of the canon? Or is it an opinion-forming entity which resembles Czapliński’s media “center” but functions under a different name? I will try to answer these questions below.

Firstly, in the 2000s, and both Dunin’s and Czapliński’s texts were written in the 2000s, we witnessed another shift in socio-cultural meanings previously associated with and governed by the canon and the center: the digital media revolution relegated twentieth-century mass media (such as magazines, radio, TV) to second place.<sup>20</sup> Concurrently, we noticed the simultaneous homogenization and massification in the sender-receiver communication model in literature. From the perspective of the critical literary debate discussed in this article, the changes brought about by the digital revolution, to refer to Manuel Castells’ notion of network society, involved fundamental decentralization and de-hierarchization of the entire structure of sending and receiving information. This new communication model was essentially “flat” and limitless. From our point of view, this rendered defining what we call literature or art increasingly difficult. Castells’ information network has replaced Max Weber’s pyramid-like hierarchical communication model of bureaucratic institutions.<sup>21</sup> While it may sound banal, this new “network” approach to social communication, including literary criticism, essentially allows us to transcribe Czapliński’s notion of the media center into a new mainstream context. In contemporary criticism, it seems, the mainstream is defined in a fairly simple way, even if it is sometimes metaphorized by critics. The mainstream is both a center and a tool for

<sup>17</sup>*Literatura polska 1989–2009: przewodnik* [Guide to Polish literature 1989–2009], ed. Piotr Marecki (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2010); *Literatura polska po 1989 roku w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieu. Podręcznik*, ed. Grzegorz Jankowicz, Piotr Marecki, Jan Sowa (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2015); *Literatura polska po 1989 w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieu. Raport z badań*, ed. Grzegorz Jankowicz et al. (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2015).

<sup>18</sup>*Polityka literatury. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, edited collection (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009).

<sup>19</sup>Dunin, 58.

<sup>20</sup>Bogusława Bodzioch-Bryła, “Nowe media wobec jednostki i społeczeństwa” [Individual, society and the new media], in: Bogusława Bodzioch-Bryła et al., *Przepływy, protezy, przedłużenia...: przemiany kultury polskiej pod wpływem nowych mediów po 1989 roku* [Flows, prostheses, extensions ...: new media and the changes in Polish culture after 1989] (Kraków: Akademia Ignatianum w Krakowie, Wyd. WAM, 2015), 33–34.

<sup>21</sup>Anthony Elliott, *Contemporary Social Theory: Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 290.

exercising pure influence; like the information network, it does not require any permanent value-creating point of reference, be it in the form of a canon or an authority, to function. In the network model of social communication, the concepts of the canon and the center lose their meanings – and not because the center, the foundation for the public debate, is seized or “controlled” by the caste holding political power. Przemysław Czapliński discussed such scenarios in *Powrót centrali* and, more recently, in an online debate on new concepts of literary criticism organized by the Laboratory of Contemporary Critical Forms in Wrocław.<sup>22</sup> An opinion-forming and value-creating center which could be “controlled” by a political group only exists in Max Weber’s twentieth-century model of social communication with its hierarchy of community values and bureaucratic institutions (or, as Max Weber put it, “the iron cage of bureaucracy”). In the “network society,” the communication model is de-hierarchized and fragmented, divided into (physically) separate, yet deliberate and sequential, programmable identities.<sup>23</sup> If we apply this organizational principle to the exchange of information and cultural goods in mass communication in the network society, it will turn out that sending, receiving, the message, and the code all undergo homogenization.<sup>24</sup> In the network model, anyone can be a sender and anyone can be a receiver and everyone becomes exchangeable information, and thus a commodity and an artistic performance, at least in theory based on unique codes. However, contrary to what Castells argued, in the network society, the notion of the center does not entirely disappear. The center may and does manifest itself everywhere: as a momentary success that immediately turns into a failure. The mainstream does not provide a point of reference for critical evaluation; as in the case of the center, the point of reference is the exchange, which is a value in itself. However, the changes within the mainstream and the margins are not as predictable as in the case of the popular and the avantgarde – as seen in Czapliński’s more stable concept of the center that relies on 20th-century media. In the critical perspective I propose, I read such dynamic exchanges in the “network” communication model in and through the telling act of “running away from the center.” After all, the center always implies immobilization and “canonization” which could put an end to the exchange of values, which, from the point of view of the liberal cultural market, is not desired.

The concept of the mainstream has been used and defined in a number of ways in literary criticism. It is not a stable aesthetic and ideological category. However, it is almost universally assessed in terms of something undesirable and negative. Usually, in literary criticism, the “mainstream” functions as a synecdoche for imaginary unauthorized violence and as such it challenges criticism, which once occupied the position of an authority on the literary scene. Today, literary criticism, in all its more and less professional forms, is deliberately located in the marginal space.

<sup>22</sup>Przemysław Czapliński, *Pojęcia krytyczne i krytyka pojęć literackich* [Critical concepts and the criticism of literary concepts] (panel discussion, unauthorized statement), <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBeKx7WCAAd5ecuDmokLTdg> (date of access: 23 Feb. 2022).

<sup>23</sup>Manuel Castells, *The network society* (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2005), 410-411.

<sup>24</sup>I deliberately do not take into account the context which in the perspective of network communication ceases to represent what is heteronomous in the act of communication; if I did, in our new model of literary criticism, we would have to take into account factors which were absorbed into the mainstream mechanisms of continuous exchange of all values. One could even say that Castells’ network society, because it is an endless network, makes it impossible to evaluate anything in terms applicable for autonomous and heteronomous communication models. A very good example of this has been discussed during the panel discussion *O niezgodzie w literaturze* [On resistance in literature] at the 24th Stacji Literatura [Literature Station] in Stronie, which I describe below.

The critic usually wants to reside on the redefined, forever moving margins, which, especially in the era of the mass media, are synonymous with independence. Thus, what is unique for new critical discourses is that they either move away from the mainstream or that they remove this concept outside the scope of their field; as a result, as I have said at the beginning, broadly understood literary criticism cannot treat “the mainstream” as its point of reference and only refers to it occasionally, usually situating it in opposition to its “marginality.” The mainstream as such does not need to be strictly defined; it is whatever literary criticism currently needs to oppose. As a result, the mainstream’s purely operational understanding holds virtually no stable meanings; the mainstream is conceptually reduced to an act of abusing power. In the next section, I will try to show how contemporary literary critics define the mainstream.

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In an essay which summarized the 25th *Stacja Literatura* [Literature Station], entitled “W stronę mainstreamu” [Towards the mainstream], Weronika Janeczko, a critic who cherishes the more avant-garde past of the *Biuro Literackie* publishing house, expresses some concerns about its current publishing policy. The jubilee goal of *Biuro Literackie* in 2020 (the publishing house celebrated 25 years of history and growth) was not only to publish Polish poetry but also “to turn towards the mainstream, and so far, at least explicitly (perhaps with some exceptions, including Kora’s or Ciechowski’s books), *Biuro Literackie* did not tolerate the mainstream.”<sup>25</sup> According to Janeczko, this “turn towards the mainstream” was marked by the publication of novels, almanacs, and commemorative poetry collections by iconic foreign authors, Bronka Nowicka’s mainstream poetic prose, and two books of poems by Joanna Roszak and Katarzyna Szweda, described by the critic as “conventional.” The fact that the mainstream often functions as an undefined concept becomes clearly visible at this point, which, however, only raises further questions. Did Janeczko objectively discuss *Biuro Literackie*’s “love affair” with the mainstream? After all, the publishing house simply published books that could potentially be sold at the Polish bookstore chain *Empik*. Or perhaps *Biuro Literackie* simply entered into a dialogue with literary tradition, trying to co-build a new canon of modern poetry by occasionally publishing selections of poetry by Karpowicz, Różewicz and Wojacek? Or maybe there is something wrong with the way Janeczko defines the mainstream? After all, in my understanding, *Biuro Literackie*’s “turn towards the mainstream” simply involves popularizing culture. Is Janeczko right to criticize authors who employ a slightly more conventional form of modernist aesthetics but modernist nonetheless? Or, perhaps, *Biuro Literackie*’s jubilee picks are at odds with how the mainstream works? Is it simply impossible to define the mainstream, since it is so difficult to determine what can or cannot be classified as such? It is not surprising that the publisher of Polish poetry is trying to appeal to the mainstream reader. As for Janeczko, she simply uses only one of the possible intuitive definitions commonly associated with our new fragmented and “networked” center. Before I summarize how other critics define the mainstream, however, let me first address the abovementioned question of “running away” from the mainstream. The guests of the festival in *Stronie* in 2019 experienced it firsthand. At this point, let me recount an anecdote.

<sup>25</sup>Weronika Janeczko, “W stronę mainstreamu” [Towards the mainstream] (2021), <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/w-strone-mainstreamu-1/> (date of access: 16 Nov. 2021).



The motto of a poetry panel on “resistance” organized at the 24th Stacja Literatura was “Suffer not,” a quote from Patti Smith’s “Radio Baghdad.” Three poets, a translator, and a book publisher discussed different, at times conflicting, roles and functions of literature. The entire literary scene and all forms of resistance were taken into consideration, including, for example, the enforcement of copyrights by publishing houses, an action which Czapliński once associated with the center.<sup>26</sup> One of the panellists, Filip Łobodziński, told his story of active resistance and transforming social reality: he recounted a media scandal in which he was involved. An anonymous internet user criticized his translation of Bob Dylan’s lyrics on *onet.muzyka*. She posted many unfavourable remarks and, according to Łobodziński, she also lied: “she said that my friends and family were responsible for the best translations in the book *Duszny kraj* [an anthology of translations of Dylan’s lyrics].”<sup>27</sup> This particular case, which Łobodziński discussed in response to Magdalena Rigamonti’s question, who chaired the panel, was resolved in a court of law. The court ordered for the IP address of the computer which the anonymous internet user used to be disclosed. The woman was found guilty of libel and sentenced to a fine, as reported in the Polish daily newspaper “Dziennik. Gazeta Prawna.” Łobodziński, who agreed with Rigamonti’s suggestion, told this story to show that he, as a writer, would “suffer not” cyberlibel committed by anonymous internet users. It should be added that in this case it was a court of law, and not a literary institution *per se*, that reacted. This reaction was directed against internet fora and the fact that they spread misinformation, hatred, and lies, often without legal consequences. Thanks to a Weberian institution, Łobodziński could make this dispute over the translation of Dylan’s lyrics “real.” Acting beyond the “network,” he shocked the decentralized center, which posulated that every author was inevitably within the immediate reach of the reader. I will not comment further on the effects of this, undoubtedly, fascinating interaction, both in political and sociological terms. I am instead interested in the unexpected act of “trading places” – roles and functions – between the powerful center and the subordinated margin, with its language of contention. The margin, namely the reader, comes up with a libelous story about a book of translations by a “mainstream” writer, translator, and journalist and poses a threat to this writer because it, too, functions as an opinion-forming, albeit unwarranted, authority. Interestingly, the focus is not on fiction writing and literary techniques, which is usually the subject of heated online debates, but on the writer’s intellectual property, which may only be defended in a court of law. This particular literary debate is about the truth about whether Łobodziński did translate all the lyrics himself or not, and not literature *per se*; respectively, the values associated with such a dispute by its participants, the writer and the reader, are not rooted in literature, although the conflict itself, which concerns the quality of the said translations, may be considered “literary.” For Łobodziński, this deformed communication situation in the network society (in this case concerning a quasi-literary debate) – neither real nor unreal, decentralized and boundless – and revolving around self-proclaimed authorities who base their judgments on their own opinions, personally hurt

<sup>26</sup>Beata Stasińska was one of the panelists. She was an extremely influential publisher at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. She is currently partner at the Foksal Publishing Group. She is also one of the three founding editors of the famous WAB publishing house.

<sup>27</sup>Filip Łobodziński, “O niezgodzie w literaturze” [On resistance in literature] ([2020] panel discussion, unauthorized statement), <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/nagrania/o-niezgodzie-literaturze/> (date of access: 16 Nov. 2021).

him and he chose to use pure power and the law to reach the fluid core of the networked center. At the same time, Łobodziński discussed his experiences at a panel which celebrated resistance to the soulless, the normative, and the systemic, reminiscent of Weber's "iron cage of bureaucracy," using language which corresponded to non-institutionalized forms of resistance to such power.

I specifically refer to such a striking example of a dynamic transformation of concepts that organize and hierarchize social reality into networked concepts-entities operating in the non-hierarchical communication model. The concept of the mainstream is used in a much more stable manner in literary criticism; literary criticism is, after all, academic and objective, and the mainstream is usually defined and described with greater specificity. In academic texts, the mainstream does not openly or unequivocally function as a negative category. Nevertheless, different critics define the mainstream in different ways, and it often seems that taking a "mainstream" position is not commendable. Indeed, let us take a look at Dorota Kozicka's and Inga Iwasiów's texts. Differ as they may in terms of intention, style, and date of publication, similarly to Janeczko's essay, both books refer to a broad understanding of the mainstream. In Kozicka's book *Krytyczne (nie)porządki* [Critical (dis)order], published in 2013, the mainstream functions in a twofold manner. We read about "mainstream, journalistic criticism, and criticism practiced in fringe literary magazines"<sup>28</sup> and "the mainstream media."<sup>29</sup> Respectively, Kozicka writes about "masters, guardians of the truth and beneficiaries of the literary mainstream"<sup>30</sup> and "projects of literary feminist criticism rewritten by a mainstream critic" (Kozicka refers to Czapliński<sup>31</sup>). In *Odmrażanie* [Defrosting], a book from 2020 with a more self-reflective and artistic rather than metacritical or critical character, Iwasiów refers to the mainstream a number of times. She writes, for example, about "biopolitical mechanisms implemented into the intellectual mainstream thanks to Michel Foucault's books" – "which are no longer fashionable after the turn to the non-anthropocentric humanities;"<sup>32</sup> biographies written "between the mainstream culture and the academic margin," which feature "either indiscretions or meticulous footnotes;"<sup>33</sup> and "the limits imposed on women writers in Poland, the requirements of the shallow market, and censorship imposed by critical habits and mainstream tastes."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Dorota Kozicka, *Krytyczne (nie)porządki* [Critical (dis)order] (Kraków: Universitas, 2013), 130.

<sup>29</sup>Kozicka, 161.

<sup>30</sup>Regarding modern classics. Kozicka, 152.

<sup>31</sup>Kozicka, 210.

<sup>32</sup>Inga Iwasiów, *Odmrażanie. Literatura w potrzebie* [Defrosting: Literature in need] (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2020), 8.

<sup>33</sup>Iwasiów, *Odmrażanie*, 173.

<sup>34</sup>Iwasiów, *Odmrażanie*, 194. Of course, not all critical texts employ such varied approaches to the "mainstream." In Paweł Kaczmarek's *Wysoka łączliwość* [High Connectivity], the "mainstream" is consistently defined as a popular media discourse (socio-cultural press, television, digital editions of literary magazines addressed to the general public) which slowly consumes critical debate. Professional criticism and popular criticism give rise to "middle-brow criticism," which responds to the media demand. Kaczmarek is consistent in his argumentation, allowing us to conclude that the mainstream is something negative, undesirable. For Kaczmarek, Andrzej Franaszek is such a "mainstream" critic and what the mainstream (i.e. capitalist and liberal) media, which (occasionally) discuss poetry, want might be described as follows: "«How did Franaszek become perhaps the most important mainstream literary critic?». If Franaszek's texts are genuinely interesting today, it is because his growing influence exposes the essentially defective nature of contemporary cultural life in Poland. He is the Balcerowicz or Korwin-Mikke of Polish criticism – lots of common sense, strong views and a lot of energy invested into the creation of his public persona." Paweł Kaczmarek, *Wysoka łączliwość* [High Connectivity] (Wrocław: Fundacja im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2019), 211.

Let us also take a look at shorter critical texts associated with specific literary events. I shall discuss poetry criticism, referring to numerous reviews, answers to questionnaires, and discussions that may be found on Biuro Literackie's website. The term mainstream is employed there in all kinds of contexts, many of them negative. Regardless of what the mainstream represents, one thing is clear: firstly, the mainstream is no good, and secondly, no critic would ever define themselves as "mainstream," regardless of their affiliation and the meanings with which the mainstream is occasionally associated. In response to Biuro Literackie's 2016 questionnaire *Nowy (polski) głos w Europie* [The New (Polish) voice in Europe], Karol Maliszewski talked about Mirka Szychowiak and Krzysztof Bieleń in the wider critical context of underrated/overrated authors: "They both belong to my world, the hierarchy of values I have built for 30 years, because they are so perfectly invisible to the mainstream, so true to themselves, and at the same time they are open to people who read differently, who read next to them."<sup>35</sup> In 2020, commenting on the books published by Biuro Literackie that year (and, apparently, adopting a different perspective than Janeczko), the critic thus described Katarzyna Szweda's *Bosorka*:

So, at first, we find it surprising that such poetry may exist in this day and age and that it has been accepted and not banished as a provincial literary movement – a charming folklore-like curiosity. Something must have happened to the way in which we read literature; after all, the mainstream appreciated and honored this post-Lemko novel; it was considered noteworthy, maybe even equal to Dyciu's [Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki – JO] post-Ukrainian novel. First of all, we witness gender mainstreaming, that is, including gender issues in mainstream politics, by all means: affirmative action (also known as "positive discrimination") or compensatory measures.<sup>36</sup>

For Karol Maliszewski, the mainstream comprises academic criticism, literary awards, literary criticism, and, last but not least, the opinion-forming media – and his findings, as a "marginal" critic, are interesting insofar as he undoubtedly is a part of all these (poetic) mainstream dimensions, and his voice is recognized there. For Kacper Bartczak, who participated in the *Nowe języki poezji* [New Languages of Poetry] debate, also organized by Biuro Literackie, the mainstream is only the media, although Karolina Felberg, whom he praises below, is an academic critic:

When some years later Karolina Felberg discussed Rae Armantrout's *Dark Matter* in "Tygodnik Kulturalny" [Cultural News] on TVP Kultura, her knowledge and great understanding of Armantrout's innovative poems clashed with the incoherent stutter of other guests who were only able to talk about this clear poetry in terms of how difficult it was and how it broke down language. And this was not original. Unoriginally, almost predictably, the mainstream cannot interact with contemporary poetry which does not make anything easier by employing the confessional mode and instead constantly takes formal, intellectual, political and conceptual risks. The power of such poetry is still off the media radar.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Karol Maliszewski, "Konrad Góra, którego najmocniej czuję" [Konrad Góra, whom I feel the most] (2016), <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/konrad-gora/> (date of access: 17 Nov. 2021).

<sup>36</sup>Karol Maliszewski, "Zamykam oczy, otwieram oczy" [I close my eyes, I open my eyes] (2021), <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/zamykam-oczy-otwieram-oczy/> (date of access: 17 Nov. 2021).

<sup>37</sup>Kacper Bartczak, "Język jest grą. Planszówka bez planszy" [Language is a game. A board game without a board] (2020), <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/jezyk-jest-gra-planszowka-bez-planszy/> (date of access: 17 Nov. 2021).

As an academic critic and poet, Bartczak strongly emphasizes his marginal position in relation to the mainstream tools of popularizing culture; however, he still holds on to his power as an opinion-forming authority. It should be said that our understanding of the mainstream is further challenged when we analyze how poets speak about poetry in public debates, which does not take place often these days. Although Dawid Mateusz, Bartczak's co-panelist, does not use the word mainstream, we know exactly what he means when he talks about exerting influence on the status of literature and the questionable actions of some authors:

I asked if [the poets, J.O.] would like to say something, and in response I got: it got boring / it no longer affects us / it is a waste of time and gets on your nerves / it is impossible to read it. And I am not surprised at all. I am also not surprised that they do not want to annoy the main players in the field (jurors, academic professors, important critics). But I've already seen too much, I know this field and the rules that govern it too well to take it seriously. Unfortunately, I can see quite clearly what is behind this game, who aspires to what, who supports whom and why, who will write a positive or a negative review for whom, but also, on the other hand, who works hard for award nominations, mainly through socializing, and also who desperately wants to get on some award boards.<sup>38</sup>

In Mateusz's essay, entitled *Damy wam tam, gdzie was nie ma* [We will give it to you where you are not], the mainstream are effectively networks established in the literary field, associated with hierarchies and traditions which date back to the 1990s. In this perspective, the "mainstream" represents the poetics of the generation gap, insofar as the older generation, the winners, are in control of awards, positive reviews and popularity contests in a manner which has virtually not changed since the times of the Polish People's Republic.

In *Kup pan książkę*, published in 2008, Krzysztof Uniłowski does not actually use the English term "mainstream;" instead he writes a lot about "główny nurt,"<sup>39</sup> describing its various incarnations.<sup>40</sup> Uniłowski argues that Polish criticism no longer follows "vertical" classifications (high-low, elite-popular) but instead is organized in horizontal terms (central-peripheral, mainstream-marginal). He emphasizes that the ideological premises of "literary modernism" were transformed into "an ideology which validates, or even glorifies, contemporary society and the free market, which effectively leads to the devaluation of literature's critical functions."<sup>41</sup> Uniłowski also shows how confusing the mainstream, as a concept, is, because the old hierarchical system of values and the new market system of values, in which the author competes for the reader's attention, overlap. The critic analyzes Agnieszka Wolny-Hamkało's review of Drotkiewicz's novel *Paris London Dachau*, published by the Lampa i Iskra Boża publishing house, which Wolny-Hamkało described as kitschy and criticized the publishing house for lowering its standards. According to Uniłowski, Wolny-Hamkało criticized the publishing house from an elitist perspective – she presented it as a mainstream (popular)

<sup>38</sup>Dawid Mateusz, "Damy wam tam, gdzie was nie ma" [We will give it to you where you are not] (2020), <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/damy-wam-tam-gdzie-was-nie-ma/> (date of access: 17 Nov. 2021).

<sup>39</sup>"Główny nurt" may be translated into English as "the mainstream" (translator's note).

<sup>40</sup>The first edition of the article, to which I will refer, was published in 2005 in the book *Kanon i obrzeża*, which I mentioned at the beginning of my essay.

<sup>41</sup>Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę!*, 208.

entity and contrasted this new-found popularity with the publishing house's niche, artistic, and avant-garde history:

[...] the publication of Drotkiewicz's novel is not only a betrayal of the highest artistic ideals, but also destroys the literary scene. [...] Indeed, the applied criteria appear confusing: the reviewer refers to modernist elitism but only for the greater good of ... civil society. Her review appeared in an alternative medium (at least it appears to be alternative), namely on the Internet, on the Polish Radio's webpage. However, the Polish Radio, as an institution, is more influential and significant for mass communication than a newly founded literary magazine, but it is the latter that appears to be a breeding ground for populism and kitsch, while the website of the Polish Radio goes against the popular and the kitschy and defends "high" culture endangered (by the young). The young poet and reviewer Wolny-Hamkało criticizes Dunin-Wąsowicz for betraying the "niche," but at the same time she employs the logic used by mainstream critics.<sup>42</sup>

Uniłowski shows that contemporary evaluation criteria are somewhat incoherent, insofar as to defend the interests of the literature of the center, whose status is unquestionable, criticism employs the language of resistance to the centralized. I have also tried to show this earlier in my text. And Uniłowski, in a way, personally witnessed that "the mainstream and the margins may unexpectedly trade places" when Monika Świerkosz accused him of criticizing "middlebrow fiction" from an elitist perspective. Świerkosz accused the critic of conservatism, drawing parallels between his position and the dominant and traditional opinion-forming cultural center, once supported by the authority of the academy – without questioning whether such a position may today, objectively, be adopted by (after all) marginalized literary criticism. Świerkosz, who will be the last critic I shall discuss in the present article, reevaluates the positions held by the margins and the canon, which she identifies with the mainstream, from the perspective of feminist criticism. She discusses the reception of Olga Tokarczuk's works, as it moved from the margins to the mainstream. Her perspective, which is to some extent consistent with the critical rhetoric of the 1990s, is as follows:

I think of Tokarczuk's initial marginality as a writer in the sense in which "femininity" ("menstruation"), provincialism, and popularity ascribed to her texts are considered in our culture, and in the canon, to be the opposites of "masculinity," universality, elitism – genuine artistic values. This gradual, but not easy, transition of Tokarczuk's works to the literary mainstream is confirmed by the numerous and telling changes of her publishers.<sup>43</sup>

Świerkosz redefines the concept of "middlebrow prose" by referring to a "male-centered" canon of literary tradition, which Uniłowski, as an academic, supposedly defends, thus admitting that, in fact, Tokarczuk is in a win-win situation. The new center is based on both popularity and engagement; it builds new paradigms of resistance towards the "male-centered" world from the perspective of, firstly, creativity, and secondly, ethical change. And "making the world a better place" constitutes today the very essence of the mainstream. It is not my

<sup>42</sup>Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę!*, 210.

<sup>43</sup>Monika Świerkosz, "«Czystej między niewiastami» droga do kanonu" [«Pure among women» moves to the canon], in eadem: *W przestrzeniach tradycji. Proza Izabeli Filipiak i Olgi Tokarczuk* [In the spaces of tradition. Izabela Filipiak's and Olga Tokarczuk's prose] (Warsaw: IBL, 2015), 156.

intention to enter into the debate on Tokarczuk's prose; I only point to the fact that if the center manifests its "marginality," combining potential for social change and social criticism with formulism, which makes massification possible, we operate in a non-critical, counterfactual, space. In such a space, it is no longer possible to evaluate both literature and criticism without contradictions. In Świerkosz's opinion, the strength of Uniłowski's elitism lies in his elite marginality, but this does not mean that this discourse controls the language and the logic of the margins. It seems that academia, a former center that today is synonymous with immobilizing meanings, is losing in the critical literary debate – as a central margin, it is bound to fail. And the potential of the real center, the mainstream, is the margins' prongness to change, refusal to follow the rules. This does not necessarily have to have anything to do with the findings of the critic who chooses to position himself outside the mainstream. The elitism of the avant-garde, the elegant ghetto of intellectuals – such critical contexts of the debate on the center and the margins after 1989 are simply unthinkable in the network society. Online literary debates on various fan fora clearly show that direct communication between authors and readers, usually in the form of direct and quick exchanges, is formative in the creation of values. Educated middlemen are not needed. However, critical debates are always inscribed in a communicative model associated with the act of forcing cultural phenomena into the mainstream (which is both desired and abhorred). This model could also be part of the transactional space. Although being in the center is desired, it is also associated with the accepted, the sacred, and the canonical – soon, whatever is in the center will become conservative and thus obsolete. Understandably, such a negative view of the mainstream poses a threat to any authority.

Over a relatively short period of time, the nature of the opposition between the center and the margins had changed many times, giving rise to even more chaotic and deformed critical criteria, especially in the network model of communication about literature. Contemporary critics struggle to define and understand the "mainstream" because, as Uniłowski suggested, we live in strange times – the times in which the old and the new critical criteria overlap. This confusion, which ten years ago frustrated literary criticism, in the 1990s had been often associated, in positive terms, with freedom, with the blurring of distinctions between high art and popular art which gives rise to one egalitarian postmodern culture. While I argue that the concept of the mainstream in network society is incomparable with the "center," which is associated with institutionalized literary debates and old hierarchical systems, one thing remains unchanged when it comes to the new Polish literary scene. Aleš Erjavec, an art historian who studies avant-garde and political changes which have been taking place in the Soviet Union's satellite countries since the 1980s, has identified a common feature of "post-socialist" postmodernism. Unusual in the eyes of Western modernism, it is art's power to provoke social change. This belief in art's power has been shaped, in equal measure, by Marxist criticism and Romanticism.<sup>44</sup> According to Erjavec, the belief that artists may "change the world for the better" is what makes modernism and postmodernism in the former USSR satellite countries special.

<sup>44</sup>Aleš Erjavec, "Introduction", in: *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, ed. Aleš Erjavec (London: University of California Press, 2003), 24–25.

In Poland, the “mainstream” could also be defined as a set of dominant artistic styles and beliefs, similarly to the English-language dictionary definition. The mainstream is “the culture of the center” that we would define as universal, insofar as it is accepted by most people (cf. *Cambridge Dictionary*). The concept of the “mainstream” was used in the United States as early as in the 1950s; we can speak not only of the mainstream media, mainstream republican politics, but also mainstream Hollywood movies. Certainly, the concept of the mainstream, like all concepts in the late modern world, is prone to, at times, drastic changes; we know that the mainstream absorbs values from the margins (whatever their definition may be), that it is receptive and that it imitates everything that it may benefit from. Nobody expects the mainstream to be “deep,” to offer interesting readings and fair judgments. However, even though the mainstream is thriving in Poland, the post-socialist context is bound to make things interesting. This concept remains anachronistically elitist in Poland. On the one hand, like the old communist-modernist “center,” it is “serious” and occupies a high position in the artistic hierarchy. On the other hand, it plays the role of a (relatively and digitally popularized) post-culture, which ensures its universality. The Polish mainstream, an entity that is not entirely critical, literary, publishing, journalistic, nor academic, has inherited from its two very different ancestors a unique aura of intellectualism. On the one hand, there is nothing wrong with it; on the other hand, it is problematic – because we want to zoom in on the mainstream. And yet, whenever one wants to touch or control the mainstream, it moves, as if it did not exist – and occasionally it even becomes us. Those who bask in mainstream waters think they operate in the margins and offer their (hard?) work as proof. Beyond the margins, more and more ruthless policies flourish. Marginal fighters on all sides, with effects adjusted to the actual power of their messages, try to be different from one another and yet they compete for the same mainstream position, which they will, at least ostensibly, want to abandon immediately.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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# KEYWORDS

## CANON

*opinion-forming center*

## THE MAINSTREAM

**ABSTRACT:**

This article discusses the concept of the “mainstream” in relation to the old concepts of the canon and the opinion-forming center, as terms which have gradually replaced the more traditional and institutionally justified premises of literary criticism in the public debate. The changes in the meaning of the “literary canon,” inspired by the new pragmatic cultural market and the political transformation in Poland after 1989, have already been discussed in the last twenty years. The concept of the “mainstream” is often treated in literary criticism as a substitute. This article aims to show the difference between the abovementioned terms and the “mainstream,” which may be considered an entity to a greater extent dependent on the network model of communication in a society influenced by factors which shape culture on a “global” basis.

## NETWORK SOCIETY

### *literary criticism*

#### *literary criticism in digital media*

#### MEDIA DEBATES ON LITERATURE

##### **NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

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# The Concept of a Commodity in Polish Literary Criticism After 1989

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The book, apart from its internal values, is also a commodity, but a very special commodity [1948].<sup>1</sup>

At this point, we touch upon a delicate issue, whether the book is simply a commodity like any other or whether it is special. It is debatable [...] [1991].<sup>2</sup>

A commodity like any other

Apart from the questions connected to the plot, the reviewers of Maciej Płaza's novel *Robinson w Bolechowie* [Robinson in Bolechów] repeatedly addressed two other interconnected issues. The first issue concerned the sophisticated style inspired by the tradition of modernist prose, filled with ekphrastic descriptions of Andrew Wyeth's paintings or hidden references to Czesław Miłosz's, Bolesław Leśmian's and William Butler Yeats's poems. The second issue, respectively, concerned the goal of such an elaborate stylization. According to Maciej Duda, this question divided the critics into two distinct camps: the camp of influencers and the camp of academics.<sup>3</sup> For example, Wojciech Szot, the then co-author of the Kurzojady blog, stated at the end of his review of the book, which was otherwise favorable, that:

<sup>1</sup> *Jak sprzedać książkę? Poradnik dla sprzedawcy* [How to sell a book? A guide for the seller] (Warsaw: Gebethner i Wolff, 1948), 3, <https://polona.pl/item/jak-sprzedac-ksiazke-poradnik-dla-sprzedawcy,MTEExNjM1MjM4/>.

<sup>2</sup> „Człowiek na kryzys. Z Grzegorzem Bogutą, dyrektorem Państwowego Wydawnictwa Naukowego, rozmawiała Danuta Zagrodzka” [A man that could handle a crisis: Danuta Zagrodzka interviews Grzegorz Boguta, director of the Polish Academic Publishing House], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 13, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Maciej Duda, „Robinson” [Robinson], *Czas Kultury* (a biweekly), January 23, 2018, <https://czaskultury.pl/czytanki/robinson/>.

It was as if someone had sprinkled glitter on this wonderful work, albeit patchily. All these sentences on the page, lists, literary references, stylizations and literary games are aimed at fierce critics rather than readers. One could easily fall for it, but I am skeptical.<sup>4</sup>

Szot does not state it directly, but he implies that *Robinson* is a work subordinated to the logic of a commodity: created in response to market demands, however niche it may be. However, the blogger does not criticize it *per se*. The only problem is that Płaza supposedly writes with fierce critics in mind, i.e., he focuses on a different consumer group than the people who read the Kurzojady blog (the apparently transparent mention of “readers” most likely refers to the readers of the blog). Interestingly, a similar conceptual construction may be found in Dariusz Nowacki’s enthusiastic review (and Duda would argue that Nowacki is an academic critic):

Undoubtedly, Maciej Płaza writes for those who can still concentrate, for connoisseurs, for those who savor reading. And above all, for those who are still able to distinguish between *belles lettres* and commercial literature, the art of the word and the book market.<sup>5</sup>

Nowacki, unlike Szot, clearly identifies with the educated middle-class connoisseurs who still “can” recognize true literature and he is pleased that someone wrote a novel with their needs in mind. However, he falsely believes that today “writing for connoisseurs” is not commercial, that terms such as “high literature” and “popular literature” are but labels which point to different market segments. The alleged “class rift”<sup>6</sup> between academic criticism (focused on form, style) and influencer criticism (focused on the plot) which Duda introduces in his review of *Robinson*, disappears when we realize that both Nowacki and Szot share a vision of literary production which involves commodities like any other. According to this worldview, the novel (its style, form, plot, etc.) is determined by the author’s presumptions about the tastes and needs of various consumers, i.e., people whom the author recognizes to be potential buyers of a given commodity. The author does not even care about what they will do with it after the purchase.<sup>7</sup>

What we could see in Szot’s and Nowacki’s reviews, the American literary scholar Nicholas Brown calls a manifestation of the dominant aesthetic ideology of late capitalist societies. It may be

<sup>4</sup> Wojciech Szot, „Maciej Płaza, «Robinson w Bolechowie»” [Maciej Płaza, «Robinson in Bolechów»], *Zdaniem Szota*, December 11, 2017, <https://zdaniem.szota.pl/1070-maciej-plaza-robinson-w-bolechowie>.

<sup>5</sup> Dariusz Nowacki, „«Robinson w Bolechowie» Macieja Płazy: powieść dla tych, którzy potrafią odróżnić literaturę piękną od produkcji książkowej” [Maciej Płaza’s «Robinson in Bolechów»: A novel for those who can tell *belles lettres* and commercial literature apart], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, January 3, 2018, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75517,22847981,robinson-w-bolechowie-macieja-plazy-powiec-dla-tych-ktorzy.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Duda, “Robinson”. I drew on Duda in my review of Płaza’s novel, see: Łukasz Żurek, “Drugi modernizm” [Second modernism], *Dwutygodnik*, February 2018, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/7643-drugi-modernizm.html>.

<sup>7</sup> “His commodity possesses for himself no immediate use-value. Otherwise, he would not bring it to the market. It has use-value for others; but for himself its only direct use-value is that of being a depository of exchange-value, and, consequently, a means of exchange. Therefore, he makes up his mind to part with it for commodities whose value in use is of service to him. All commodities are non-use-values for their owners, and use-values for their non-owners.” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, Volume I, *Book One: The Process of Production of Capital* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 2015), 60. After one of the reviewers of *Capital*, David Harvey, I argue that Marx in his most important work tried to describe the internal logic and dynamics of capitalism as a whole, and not one of its historical forms. In other words, although the 20th and the 21st centuries abound in technologies and goods which Marx did not know, it does not change the fact that the dialectic of exchange-value and use-value shapes the commodity form even today.

identified both in the mass media and in the contemporary humanities.<sup>8</sup> In one of his most recent articles, Brown characterizes this ideology in such a way as to indicate its connection with the commodity form in its developed form, which involves the entire spectrum of social relations:

Contemporary aesthetic ideology, correctly grasping that commodity exchange is the mode in which things come to count as socially existing in capitalist societies even when they do not circulate immediately as commodities, insists that artworks are not only commodities, but commodities like any other.<sup>9</sup>

Brown states that a contemporary work of art, e.g., literature, in principle is also a commodity, that it functions or may begin to function on the market in a similar way to other goods (we buy them for a certain amount of money for which we may also buy other products etc.). Brown is interested in whether we can find any inalienable (irreducible to differences in points of view, opinions, etc.) ontological difference between a work of art and other products circulating on the market. What he finds problematic, however, is the fact that many would gladly remove the word “also” from “a work of art is also a commodity.”

Brown’s book *Autonomy. The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* attempts to give a positive answer to this question.<sup>10</sup> However, taking Brown’s observations as my starting point, I would like to focus on precisely what Brown reflects negatively on. I am interested in outlining the history of how the foundations of an aesthetic ideology, according to which a literary work is thought of as “a product subject, above all, to market and marketing rules in favor of the heteronomy of the field,”<sup>11</sup> developed in Polish culture and Polish literary criticism. The systemic transformations of the 1990s, and especially those that directly affected the literary field, such as the collapse of state patronage and the rise of private publishing houses,<sup>12</sup> effectively resulted in the capitalist commodity form influencing not only literature but also concepts used in literary criticism and literary studies. Even though, as Joanna Orska wrote, Jan Błoński’s famous

<sup>8</sup> I am merely signaling Brown’s criticism of various theoretical discourses insofar as they blur the ontological difference between a work of art (an object having an immanent meaning identical with authorial intent) and a commodity (an object with a socially determined use value and any number of possible uses), because the exhaustive reconstruction of this discussion goes beyond the issues discussed in this article. A convincing criticism of one of them, the so-called new materialism, may be found in Paweł Kaczmarski’s essay; see: Paweł Kaczmarski, “Materialism As Intentionalism: on the Possibility of a «New Materialist» Literary Criticism”, *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 34, 4 (2019), <https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/prt/article/view/21971>.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Brown, “Late postmodernism”, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22, 3 (2020): 9.

<sup>10</sup> See: Nicholas Brown, “Introduction. On Art and Commodity Form”, in: *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 1–39. Brown’s theses are summarized in the polemics with Dawid Kujawa, emphasizing their links with Walter Benn Michaels’ “strong intentionalism.” See: Łukasz Żurek, „Wiersz i gumowa kaczka. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie” [A poem and a rubber duck. In response to Dawid Kujawa], *Mały Format*, July 13, 2021, <http://malyformat.com/2021/07/wiersz-i-gumowa-kaczka-odpowiedz-dawidowi-kujawie/>.

<sup>11</sup> Piotr Marecki, Ewelina Sasin, “Geneza i rozwój pola literackiego w Polsce po 1989” [The genesis and development of the literary field in Poland after 1989], in: *Literatura polska po 1989 roku w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieu: podręcznik* [Polish literature after 1989 in the light of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory: a textbook] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2015), 56. Sociological and literary research internalizing this perspective, with all its consequences, is conducted in Poland by Dominik Antonik, see: *Autor jako marka: literatura w kulturze audiowizualnej społeczeństwa informacyjnego* [The Author as a Brand: Literature in the Audiovisual Culture of Information Society] (Kraków: Universitas, 2014); “Przeciw autonomii: pisarze-celebryci i próba rewizji illusio literatury” [Against Autonomy: Celebrity Writers and an Attempt to Revise Illusio Literature], in: *Filozofia filologii* [The Philosophy of Philology], ed. Łukasz Żurek et al. (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2019), 286–309.

<sup>12</sup> In the early 2000s, an important role was played by “new actors in the field,” namely “marketing specialists, managing editors and literary agents,” who appeared on the book market “as the interest in the book as a product” declined and the need to “spend a lot of money on promoting each and every book” intensified. Marecki, Sasin, 54.

claim put forth in the title of one of his essays from the 1990s that “1989 is as important as 1918”<sup>13</sup> does not, from the point of view of the history of literature, hold, similarities between the two historical moments, at least as regards the economic and political planes, still exist:

Literature ceased to be a propaganda tool and a form of epiphany and, just like before the war, it once again functioned as a market commodity.<sup>14</sup>

Back in the times of the Polish People’s Republic, the sociology of literature which limited the question of the commodity form only to its communication and distribution aspects could not prepare literature and literary criticism for the “ice-cold rules of competition.”<sup>15</sup> For example: in the concluding remarks to his 1978 article entitled *Proces i aparat komunikacji literackiej* [The Process and Apparatus of Literary Communication], Janusz Lalewicz emphasized that material and economic factors, such as the fact that a work of art acquires certain features of a commodity in the process of its distribution, “[...] do not directly concern the text” and the author who addresses “conceptual” problems.<sup>16</sup> According to this theory, the market’s influence on literature is limited to communication. It has no influence on the production of literature.

A similar problem may be found in Stefan Żółkiewski’s 1977 essay *Pomysły do teorii produkcji literackiej* [Ideas in the theory of literary production]. Żółkiewski distinguishes between “optimization norms” (or “normative dominants”) applicable in a given system of literary communication; they concern the author and the people involved in publishing, distributing, and selling books, etc. In the case of the author, these standards, Żółkiewski argues, are internal: “they concern the optimal organization of the text in accordance with its assumed functions.”<sup>17</sup> In the case of the people involved in publishing, distributing, and selling books, they are external, because they concern “mitigating the risk of addressing wrong target readers, limited diffusion,” and as such they strengthen the effective strategies of “distributive success.”<sup>18</sup> Already at the beginning of his essay, Żółkiewski notices that both types of norms are contradictory “regardless of variable historical conditions;” however, depending on different social forms of circulation of literature and different production models, “these contradictions may be greater or smaller.”<sup>19</sup> In the socialist system, the “tensions between literary production and control,” according to Żółkiewski, were deepened by bureaucratization and preventive censorship but socialism “succeeded” in “[...] decoupling literature and culture in general.” On the other hand, in capitalist, but also

<sup>13</sup>Jan Błoński, „Rok 1989 jest równie ważny co 1918...” [1989 is as important as 1918], *NaGłos* 1 (1990).

<sup>14</sup>Joanna Orska, „O «lewicowej» strategii współczesnej krytyki literackiej wobec wolnego rynku mediów” [The „leftist” strategy of contemporary literary criticism as a response to the free media market], in: *Dyskursy krytyczne u progu XXI wieku. Między rynkiem a uniwersytetem* [Critical discourses at the threshold of the 21st century. Between the market and the university], ed. Dorota Kozicka, Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), 220.

<sup>15</sup>Orska, 20.

<sup>16</sup>Janusz Lalewicz, „Proces i aparat komunikacji literackiej” [The Process and Apparatus of Literary Communication], *Teksty: teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja*, 37 (1978): 23. The extent to which Lalewicz’s approach to the issue of commodities was influenced by Robert Escarpit’s research, which was one of the Polish scholar’s main methodological inspirations (along with the works of Émile Benvenist and Jean-Paul Sartre), is another question.

<sup>17</sup>Stefan Żółkiewski, “Pomysły do teorii produkcji literackiej” [Ideas in the theory of literary production], in: *Kultura, socjologia, semiotyka literacka: studia* [Culture, sociology, literary semiotics: studies], works by the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1979), 475.

<sup>18</sup>Żółkiewski, „Pomysły do teorii produkcji literackiej”, 475.

<sup>19</sup>Żółkiewski, „Pomysły do teorii produkcji literackiej”, 475.

social-democratic, Sweden,<sup>20</sup> even a strong system of financial support for writers did not effectively respond to “the demands of the market [...] in terms of the dangerous commercialization of literature.” “In the capitalist system,” Żółkiewski writes “all good intentions have been defeated by the market and its laws.”<sup>21</sup>

Respectively, within the framework introduced by Żółkiewski, who distinguishes between the (antithetical) norms for “the author” and “the book dealer,” completely subordinating literary production to the logic of the market, as described, for example, by Theodor Adorno in his essay on the culture industry,<sup>22</sup> would be unthinkable. It would not be possible, first of all, because Lalewicz’s and Żółkiewski’s theories were limited by the horizon of the social and economic conditions of the People’s Republic of Poland, insofar as their starting point was the commodity form in the socialist system and the problems posed by contemporary cultural policies.<sup>23</sup>

However, while Żółkiewski and Lalewicz simply did not have to take into account the influence exerted by the commodity form on literature, critics in late capitalism, as exemplified by the heated discussion of *Robinson*, “overlooked” this aspect for different reasons. Therefore, we should actually investigate how the naturalization of the commodity form (as seen in the works of Warsaw sociologists of literature) and, more broadly, how different historical factors which provide context for criticism and literature functioned in the times of the new market “normal”<sup>24</sup>. Instead of analyzing such manifestations of commodification of literature as middlebrow prose, bestsellers, or the blurred border between critical and advertising discourses,<sup>25</sup> I propose to focus on one aspect of the intricate history of the commodity, which is a complex term in and of itself, in Polish criticism after 1989. Obviously, the aim of this constellational story is not to provide

<sup>20</sup>In the 1970s, trade unions were a force to be reckoned with in Sweden; they almost managed to implement one of the most ambitious economic plans in the history of the post-war left. See: Mio Tastas Viktorsson, Saoirse Gowan, “Revisiting the Meidner Plan”, *Jacobin Magazine*, 22 August 2017, <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/08/sweden-social-democracy-meidner-plan-capital>.

<sup>21</sup>Żółkiewski, „Pomysły do teorii produkcji literackiej”, 482–483.

<sup>22</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry”, in: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 94–136. It is hard to imagine that a Polish literary scholar who referred to Adorno’s theory of the culture industry in their sociological analysis of how literature functioned in the People’s Republic of Poland in the late 1970s would be accepted and understood. The problem was not the fact that many Polish humanists were not familiar with Adorno’s theory but the fact that it grew out of an analysis of the production relations prevailing in post-war capitalism, in the US and West Germany.

<sup>23</sup>We must remember that Żółkiewski could not have imagined a situation in which the state would give up on its cultural policies, leaving writers and artists at the mercy of the market. As Żółkiewski wrote in 1981, “only a person who believes in a utopia can give up on state patronage [over culture] controlled by society.” Stefan Żółkiewski, *Cetno i licho: szkice 1938–1980* [A guessing game: sketches 1938–1980] (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1983), 74.

<sup>24</sup>On the metaphor of “the return to the normal” in the critical-literary discourse of the 1990s, see: Marta Koronkiewicz, “Żeby było normalnie. W jaki sposób początek opowieści o trzydziestoleciu literatury najnowszej wyznacza jej koniec” [Back to normal: How does the beginning of the story about thirty years of modern literature mark its end?], *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne* 18, 2 (2021): 1–16.

<sup>25</sup>See, among others, Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Cała prawda o «prozie środka». Cz. 1” [The whole truth about „middlebrow prose”. Part. 1], *Fa-Art* 3 (2002): 10–15; Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Cała prawda o «prozie środka». Cz. 2” [The whole truth about „middlebrow prose”. Part. 2], *Fa-Art* 4 (2002): 32–41; Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Cała prawda o «prozie środka». Cz. 3” [The whole truth about „middlebrow prose”. Part. 3], *Fa-Art* 1/2 (2003): 72–75; Bernadetta Darska, „Reklamować czy polecać. O towarze jakim jest literatura” [To advertise or recommend. About the commodity which is literature], in: *Dwadzieścia lat literatury polskiej: 1989–2009*, ed. Dariusz Nowacki, Krzysztof Uniłowski, vol. 1, part 2: *Życie literackie po roku 1989* [Literary life after 1989] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2011), 13–26; Przemysław Czaplinski, „Żwawy trup. Krytyka literacka 1989–2004” [A lively corpse: Literary Criticism 1989–2004], in: *Powrót centrali. Literatura w nowej rzeczywistości* [Return of the center. Literature in the new reality] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo literackie, 2007), 87–133 (especially the sections *Masowe i medialne* [The mass and the media] and *Marketing i sieć* [Marketing and the net]).



the reader with a comprehensive description of the problem but to identify the general logic embedded in the reflection on the relationship between literature and the free market found in heterogeneous critical essays published in different decades.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps it will help us understand why both Szot and Nowacki believe that literature is a commodity like any other.

### The “distrustful,” the “impatient,” and the “demanding”

On June 29, 1990, Izabella Cywińska’s column entitled *Rynek i wartości* [The Market and Values] was published in the popular daily newspaper “Gazeta Wyborcza.” Cywińska was minister for culture and arts in Tadeusz Mazowiecki’s cabinet at the time. She characterized the state of culture as follows:

In the past years, culture’s heavy dependence on the economy has not been evident. Financed by the totalitarian state and to a large extent used as a propaganda tool, culture had a life of its own. It is difficult to accept that it is different now; one needs more than a few months to come to terms with this fact. Many artists lived in a kind of cocoon, believing in the inexhaustible possibilities of the state that censored and classified but paid.<sup>27</sup>

Cywińska reproduces the view inherited from oppositional criticism, according to which, after March 1968, the authorities ordered writers (or more broadly: artists) not to speak up on political matters, offering them in return a margin of creative independence.<sup>28</sup> This is why she criticizes the fact that culture in the People’s Republic of Poland “had a life of its own” and praises “culture’s heavy dependence on the economy” in capitalism. Artists, who had not treated the “audience as their most important partner” and lived off state subsidies, now had to strive for “social acceptance,” “trying to understand their direct relationship with their audience and commit their future to them, for better or for worse.”<sup>29</sup> For Cywińska, then, anonymous recipients, the potential buyers of goods, who “should feel like the main patrons of the arts,”<sup>30</sup> are synonymous with the economy, since the neo-liberal state had given up on it, either to a large degree or completely. In closing, Cywińska quotes the Poznań sociologist Marian Golka:

[...] It is not a question of recognizing that art is only a commodity, it is a question of recognizing that art is also a commodity.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup>My methodological inspiration is, of course, the project of critical constellations, focused on revealing “the conditions in which criticism operates [...] in the perspective of material entanglement of critical languages.” Dorota Kozicka, Monika Świerkosz, Katarzyna Trzeciak, „«Innowacyjne rozumienie». Konstelacyjne badania krytyki literackiej” [«Innovative Understanding». Constellation studies of literary criticism, in: *Konstelacje krytyczne* [Critical constellations], vol. 1: *Teorie i praktyki* [Theories and practices] (Kraków: Universitas, 2020), 13.

<sup>27</sup>Izabella Cywińska, „Rynek i wartości” [The Market and Values], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 29, 1990, the digital archive of „Gazeta Wyborcza”.

<sup>28</sup>As Tadeusz Komendant wrote in 1981, “the ‘call to action’ issued in March 1968, for ‘writers focus on writing,’ determined the fate of our culture for many years.” Tadeusz Komendant, “Zostaje kantyczka. Tekst wygłoszony na zjeździe poetów” [All that is left is *Canticum*: Lecture delivered at the congress of poets], in: *Zostaje kantyczka: eseje z pogranicza czasów* [All that is left is *Canticum* remains: essays from the borderland of time] (Warsaw: Oficyna Literacka, 1987), 11.

<sup>29</sup>Cywińska.

<sup>30</sup>Cywińska.

<sup>31</sup>Cywińska.

In the 1990s, Golka published several works in which he argued that the market best regulates relations in the field of art,<sup>32</sup> but in the statement quoted by Cywińska, he did not say anything controversial. The problem is that, in accordance with the vision of culture under capitalism presented in *Rynek i wartości*, art, including literature, must be only a commodity.<sup>33</sup> The audience cannot act as “patrons of the arts” because they do not finance the creative process – they only voluntarily pay for the finished product, which, moreover, is created with them in mind: in the capitalist system “the most important partner” is the market.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, art must not so much conform to what Żółkiewski would call external optimization norms as pretend that no other norms exist.

Cywińska’s words unexpectedly reverberated in 1995 in Jerzy Sosnowski’s polemic with Grzegorz Musiała’s satirical story *Wielki bajer czyli o czerwonych plackach, pejczach i jeszcze trochę* [Humbug: Red cakes, whips and more]. Musiała’s story today reads primarily as a document of the era – it shows how the commodity form completely changed the accepted rules of literary life. In this optics, Marcin Świetlicki’s media persona could be associated with the selfish *homo oeconomicus*:

Then marketing, about marketing, with marketing, or promotion, with promotion, about promotion – this is Nurowska. The others lost. I will win. I’m great. Others give in to prolixity. After publishing the collection *Schism*, he does not want to be compared with Axl Rose from Guns N’Roses, because he is afraid that he is two people.

I thought to myself: indeed, one is a poet, and the other is an advertising agent.<sup>35</sup>

In the mid-1990s, *Wielki bajer...* functioned primarily as a moralizing and grotesque attack on Natasza Goerke, Marcin Świetlicki and Marcin Baran and the fact that they had “sold out.” In response to these accusations, Sosnowski criticized literature created by the representatives of Henryk Bereza’s so-called artistic revolution, a school with which Musiała himself was associated:

[...] the average Polish reader, having learned from the sad experience of [Schubert’s] *Trenta Tre* or [Musiała’s] *Stan płynny* [Liquid form], prefers to reach for Wharton or Heller than risk reading a Polish debut novel. This distrust [...] must be overcome today by literature written by 30-somethings.

[...] you have to fight for the reader.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Marian Golka, *Rynek sztuki* [Art market] (Poznań: Artia, 1991); Marian Golka, *Socjologiczny obraz sztuki* [A sociological view of art] (Poznań: Ars Nova, 1996).

<sup>33</sup>Golka also comment on it. On the one hand, he points to the unique value of a work of art as a commodity (although he does not define it in detail). On the other hand, he argues that the meaning of a work of art is identical with its potential use value: “Different works have [...] different use value: they offer different and varying values. When a given buyer (or buyers) gets to know the use of a given work of art he (they) effectively get to know its meaning, its importance. [...] Values expressed by a work of art (and the needs they correspond to) are usually difficult to grasp. Each recipient, each buyer, specifies them for his private use.” Golka, *Socjologiczny obraz sztuki*, 110–111.

<sup>34</sup>“When the insinuating system is the market, and we are customers, then the insinuating system is us”. Brown, „Late postmodernism”, 9.

<sup>35</sup>Grzegorz Musiała, „Wielki bajer czyli o czerwonych plackach, pejczach i jeszcze trochę” [Humbug: Red cakes, whips and more], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 7 (1995): 13.

<sup>36</sup>Jerzy Sosnowski, „Grześ wśród Rastignaców” [Grześ among Rastignacs], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 4 (1995): 12.

Sosnowski observes that, and it is by no means commendable, contemporary writers ignore the wider political and social reality and focus only on themselves. Such a literary focus is a sign of, as Cywińska would say, culture that is no longer dependent on the economy.<sup>37</sup> More important than this social and literary diagnosis, however, is the fact that Sosnowski seems to imply that blurring the boundary between a literary work of art and a commodity is not so much inevitable as necessary. According to Sosnowski, “30-something writers” and not, for example, reviewers or even publishers, should focus on persuading the “average Polish reader” to give literature a chance – and “overcome distrust.” This postulate, however egalitarian, is still commercial, insofar as it relies on the understanding of freedom as access to various goods offered to various consumer groups.

So transparent was this conceptual matrix in the mid-1990s that we can also find it in Przemysław Czapliński’s classification of young prose writers presented in his 1995 article *Rzemieślnicy, kpiarze, immoraliści* [Craftsmen, mockers, immoralists], later included in the book *Ślady przełomu* [Traces of a breakthrough]. Czapliński defines the first group of writers, craftsmen, almost as professionals who could produce, for example, good-quality winter shoes: they are experts, specialists, they produce fine products.<sup>38</sup> Above all, however, craftsmen “respect the average understanding of what literature is and is not,” that is they write for a specific group of readers, bearing in mind what kind of literature they might want to read.<sup>39</sup> For Czapliński, such a characteristic has no negative connotations; although, interestingly, in a series of interviews with Piotr Śliwiński conducted between 1996 and 1998, both scholars refer to the features of a work of art as a commodity to criticize bestsellers.<sup>40</sup> Their critique, it is worth adding, is rather superficial. They point to the “unfair” practices of publishers, booksellers, and the media but not to the dominance of the commodity form in culture; they criticize bestsellers but not the more general mechanisms that are behind them.

At first glance, the immoralist who “[s]hould free himself from all cultural myths, taboos, prohibitions, systems of oppression, in a word, from everything that restrains the individual”<sup>41</sup> should be the exact opposite of the craftsman. Not at all. As Czapliński observes:

The immoralist writes because writing is regarded by readers as a means of subjective expression, a way of representing the world or meeting aesthetic needs. [...] The [immoralist] is an artist without obligations: his art is a product, and he adapts it to (or contrasts it with) the ever-changing economic environment.<sup>42</sup>

The immoralist, who creates works which are not as popular as those created by, for example, the “craftswoman” Olga Tokarczuk, simply writes for a different group of readers, with slightly

<sup>37</sup>Michał Głowiński, „Socparnasizm” [Socialist Parnassianism], in: *Rytuał i demagogia: trzynaście szkiców o sztuce zdegradowanej* [Ritual and Demagogy: Thirteen Sketches on Degraded Art] (Warsaw: Open, 1992). The article was published in 1981. Głowiński first used the term “Socialist Parnassianism” in an article published in 1973, see: Michał Głowiński, “Tak jest dziwnie, tak jest inaczej” [It feels different, it feels strange], *Teksty* 10 (1973): 9–15.

<sup>38</sup>Przemysław Czapliński, „Rzemieślnicy, kpiarze, immoraliści” [Craftsmen, mockers, immoralists], *Czas Kultury* 5/6 (1995): 4–5.

<sup>39</sup>Czapliński, 5.

<sup>40</sup>Piotr Śliwiński, Przemysław Czapliński, „Arcydzieło na tydzień” [One masterpiece per week], in: *Kontrapunkt. Rozmowy o książkach* [Counterpoint. Conversations about books] (Poznań: Obserwator, 1999), 167–171; Piotr Śliwiński, Przemysław Czapliński, „Paragon kasowy, czyli historia literatury w odcinkach” [Receipt, or the history of literature in episodes], in: *Kontrapunkt. Rozmowy o książkach* (Poznań: Obserwator, 1999), 163–166.

<sup>41</sup>Czapliński, „Rzemieślnicy, kpiarze, immoraliści”, 8.

<sup>42</sup>Czapliński, 8.

less traditional tastes. Adapting to the “ever-changing economic environment” and opposing it are therefore two variants of the same gesture performed in relation to the market.

In 1997, Rafał Grupiński and Izolda Kiec devised their classification of young Polish prose and poetry writers which clearly alluded to Czapliński’s system.<sup>43</sup> They wanted to focus on different attitudes towards the new reality and not towards literature. And while Czapliński wrote about craftsmen, immoralists and mockers, Grupiński and Kiec wrote about the “unpleasant,” the “haughty, and the “rough.” Shifting the focus from professions and/or social roles to personal impressions is significant in itself. First, it seems to be a logical consequence of urging writers in the 1990s to understand their “direct relationship with their audience.” And what could be more direct than impressions? Secondly, “unpleasantness,” “haughtiness,” and “roughness” may be linked with the category of “emotional realism” which is central to *Niebawem spadnie błoto* [Soon mud will fall]. It defines the most general framework in which Grupiński and Kiec discuss writers as diverse as Andrzej Sosnowski, Jacek Podsiadło, Izabela Filipiak and Krzysztof Koehler.<sup>44</sup> From today’s perspective, it is not difficult to notice that “emotional realism,” which favors apoliticality, extreme individualism and the perspective of the specific, emotional, personal “I,” borrows heavily from Polish capitalist realism of the 1990s. However, what is much more interesting is what Grupiński and Kiec write about one of the “haughty” authors: Adam Wiedemann. The chapter devoted to the author of *Samczyk* [Male] brings together the problems which revolve around our previous considerations on the concept of commodity in Polish literary criticism. And the analysis of this fragment of *Niebawem spadnie błoto* will serve as a summary of the whole article.

Grupiński and Kiec criticize Wiedemann’s work from the quasi-market perspective of impatient and distrustful readers:

This kind of writing often irritates the reader; the reader, trying to carefully navigate this space, demands justification for his impressions, demands justification for the prolix description of a tram ride, a cold lunch [...]. The reader demands a literary justification for such a strategy [...].<sup>45</sup>

Grupiński and Kiec’s comments should not be read only as a critique of Wiedemann’s work (expressed by other critics as well). Of course, the “demands” made on the stories collected in *Wszędobylstwa porządku* [The Omnipresence of Order] can be reformulated into interpretative questions concerning the meaning of the text, for example: “Why do we find such a long description of a tram ride in one of the stories?” However, Grupiński and Kiec do not write about questions but about demands: they write about readers demanding something other than what Wiedemann’s prose actually is

<sup>43</sup>Rafał Grupiński, Izolda Kiec, „Schizmatycy, pielgrzymi, duchobiorcy, czyli niezrównana całość, która się rozpadła...” [Schismatics, pilgrims, Doukhobours, or, the unsurpassed whole that has fallen apart ...], in: *Niebawem spadnie błoto czyli Kilka uwag o literaturze nieprzyjemnej* [Soon mud will fall, or a few remarks on unpleasant literature] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Obserwator, 1997), 53–54.

<sup>44</sup>Rafał Grupiński, Izolda Kiec, „Emocjonalny realizm” [Emotional realism], in: *Niebawem spadnie błoto czyli Kilka uwag o literaturze nieprzyjemnej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Obserwator, 1997), 145–149.

<sup>45</sup>Rafał Grupiński, Izolda Kiec, „W poszukiwaniu absolutnego słuchu” [In search of perfect pitch], in: *Niebawem spadnie błoto czyli Kilka uwag o literaturze nieprzyjemnej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Obserwator, 1997), 112. While they adopt this perspective, Grupiński and Kiec still mock the segmentation of the book market: “Umberto Eco is for the lovers of erudite journeys into the past; if you love scandal, John Irving is for you; Maria Nurowska is your pick, if you like women’s prose”, Rafał Grupiński, Izolda Kiec, *Niebawem spadnie błoto czyli Kilka uwag o literaturze nieprzyjemnej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Obserwator, 1997), 125.

– perhaps some additional explanations (“justifications”) for the “external” factors which determined the final form of the book. The problem is that, as Nicholas Brown argues, objects, including books, which function as commodities are made with their external use-value in mind:<sup>46</sup>

If I make a bowl for the market, I am primarily concerned only with one attribute, its exchangeability – that is, the demand for bowls. That demand, and therefore all of the concrete attributes that factor into that demand, are decided elsewhere – namely, on the market. Intention is realized in exchange but not registered in the object. While I still make decisions about my bowls, those decisions no longer matter as intentions even for me, because they are entirely subordinated to more or less informed guesses about other people’s desires.<sup>47</sup>

At the end of this quoted excerpt, the two critics write that “the author [Wiedemann] haughtily tells his readers: it is so because I want it to be so.”<sup>48</sup> Wiedemann’s alleged “haughtiness” has nothing to do with declarative, emphatic opposition to mass culture, an attitude that is easily commodified, as seen in Bohdan Zadura’s, Tadeusz Różewicz’s<sup>49</sup> or Ewa Lipska’s<sup>50</sup> later works. Indeed, Wiedemann’s approach should remind us of culture “with a life of its own,” culture that does not cater to the demands of the market. One could say that Grupiński and Kiec find Wiedemann’s novel problematic because this book in a peculiar way emphasizes that it is governed by its own internal rules (“it is so because I want it to be so”). Therefore, at the end of the chapter devoted to Wiedemann, they find something else to complain about:

Adam Wiedemann’s works are poetry [...]; they are formally beautiful but very complex and difficult to access in what is their true inner element [...]; Wiedemann’s works are open before the reader’s eyes, and at the same time they are finished, almost perfect; so, the reader can see and find in them only as much or as little as the author allows them.<sup>51</sup>

As absurd as it may sound, Grupiński and Kiec seem to accuse the writer of creating literary works that are complex, thought-provoking, focused on the form, in other words, works which simply require interpretation. Perhaps Grupiński and Kiec would prefer it if Wiedemann’s works met the reader’s, that is, the market’s expectations and did not impose anything on them; in a word, they should be more like any other market commodity.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

<sup>46</sup>Brown tries to prove that Marx’s concept of the product of labor uninfluenced by market demands is rooted in Hegelian externalization, which in turn for Brown is a reinterpretation of Kantian aesthetic judgment. See: Brown, “Introduction. On Art and Commodity Form”, 4–8. Interestingly, in their analysis of Wiedemann’s prose, Grupiński and Kiec claim that it is “[...] essentially that Kantian disinterestedness, which allegedly should characterize art”. Grupiński, Kiec, „W poszukiwaniu absolutnego słuchu”, 112.

<sup>47</sup>Brown, „Introduction. On Art and Commodity Form”, 7.

<sup>48</sup>Grupiński, Kiec, „W poszukiwaniu absolutnego słuchu”, 112.

<sup>49</sup>See: Anna Kałuża, “Estetyczna autonomia poezji: krytyka kultury masowej” [The aesthetic autonomy of poetry: a critique of mass culture], in: *Bumerang. Szkice o polskiej poezji przełomu XX i XXI wieku* [Boomerang. Essays on Polish poetry at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2010); Łukasz Żurek, “Lustro akustyczne” [Acoustic mirror], *Dwutygodnik*, May 2018, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/7796-lustro-akustyczne.html>.

<sup>50</sup>See: Anna Kałuża, „Pęknięcia” [Cracks], in: *Wielkie wygrane. Wspólne sprawy poezji, krytyki i estetyki* [Big wins. Shared questions of poetry, criticism and aesthetics] (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2011), 224–227.

<sup>51</sup>Grupiński, Kiec, „W poszukiwaniu absolutnego słuchu”, 113.

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# KEYWORDS

NICHOLAS BROWN

**commodity form theory**

**ABSTRACT:**

In the first part of the article, the author attempts to employ concepts discussed by Nicholas Brown in *Autonomy. The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* in the analysis of the history of Polish literary criticism. In the second part, inspired by the project of critical constellations, the author traces the manifestations of the aesthetic ideology characteristic of late capitalist societies, according to which a literary work is a commodity like any other. He analyzes heterogeneous critical writings from the 1990s.



HISTORY  
OF POLISH  
LITERARY  
CRITICISM

## AUTONOMY OF LITERATURE

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# Concerning Elitism. Three Case Studies

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Rafał Matyja, the author of *Wyjście awaryjne* [Emergency Exit],<sup>1</sup> an interesting study on the political crisis in contemporary Poland, has stated that the manipulated concept of the political elite is the “founding lie” of this crisis:

The Polish political scene has been shaped by two parallel processes, namely, two wars. In Wałęsa’s words, there is a “war at the top” between two leading Polish political parties, PO [the liberal-centrist Civic Platform] and PiS [the right-wing Law and Justice], and a “war at the bottom” between two fractions of Polish society shaped by the “war at the top.” Showing both conflicts as one war – society against the elites, those at the bottom against those at the top – is the founding lie of PiS’s political agenda.

<sup>1</sup> Rafał Matyja, *Wyjście awaryjne. O zmianie wyobraźni politycznej* [Emergency exit. Change in political imagination] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Karakter, 2018).

The right-wing PiS party, self-proclaimed “steadfast opponents of the elite,” has accumulated political capital and won voters over by standing up against the elites of the Third Polish Republic (accused *en bloc* of upholding the corrupt system) and appealing to the “good, uncorrupted people.”<sup>2</sup> However, as PiS pushed its political agenda, elite theories have become obsolete, and the former elites have been discredited in the social consciousness. The conservatism of the 1990s failed because it was based on opposition rituals inherited from the 1980s, and its representatives had no ideas for a new Poland. Matyja thus argues that thinking in terms of elitism does not make sense today; in other words, he argues that elite theorists were wrong to see elites as something permanent – that this phenomenon turned out to be important only for a certain moment in the history of modernity. Therefore, he apparently agrees with Christopher Lasch’s observations discussed in his influential book, *The Revolt of the Elites*.<sup>3</sup> Lasch argues that American elites failed because they failed to accept responsibility for the world; they have become, Lasch writes, well-organized groups of particular interests and social control, accelerating the processes of globalization and neoliberalization. And yet, in *Wyjście awaryjne*, Matyja repeatedly refers to elitism, also after he announced its death. On the one hand, the new elite (or rather a group trying to benefit from the elitist tradition) suffers from the “oblivion syndrome:” it is passive, nostalgic, or tries to gain prestige by adhering to old principles. On the other hand, “the elites’ systemic suspiciousness, paired with a sense of responsibility for institutions which are hundreds of years old” is a source of hope for the world.<sup>4</sup>

Even if today elites and elitism are in decline, we still need these concepts – the critics of the elites need them. They are often used as arguments in disputes with political and ideological opponents or with people who compete with us for power or prestige.

Different definitions of elitism prove this. From a neutral category, as defined in elite theories, it has evolved (I refer here to the broad meaning proposed by Wikipedia) into a term that describes the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a small, privileged group which possesses financial resources and political influences (in a given region, state, part of the world). According to Lasch, elitism effectively propels neoliberalism.

This is neither the only possible, nor, as I believe, the only desirable position in the contemporary debate on elitism. Let me briefly recount the history of the concept.

Almost everyone agrees that every form of social organization is based on hierarchy, and the negative effects of elitism are and have been “acceptable,” at least since the beginning of the 20th century. It is true that not only the ancients, but also Vilfredo Pareto, the founding father of elite theory, believed that individuals who have the highest indices of excellence in any particular activity (intelligence and skills) hold the most power, and that this is the

<sup>2</sup> The fact that the anti-elitist strategy continues to set the tone for the Polish government’s policy is evidenced by one of Mateusz Morawiecki’s latest podcasts (January 14, 2022). The prime minister argues that those who criticize the “Polish new deal” are “mainly financial elites; they are detached from reality; they live in big cities and do not understand the needs of normal people.”

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites: And the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: Norton, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Matyja, 159.

natural order of things.<sup>5</sup> Respectively, Robert Michels and Charles Wright Mills pointed to the degeneration of the power elite.<sup>6</sup> One of the most important, and the most disillusioned, observations on this subject is Michels' iron law of oligarchy.

Positive, neutral, or negative references to the concept of "elitism" are dependent on changing elite theories, which usually correspond to current social needs. Although the word "elite," contrary to its French origin, is not encumbered with value judgements, the axiological contexts of its use have been and still are dominant. Admittedly, some articles which promote elitism have recently been published in Polish sociological magazines, exemplifying a non-evaluative, technical, and descriptive approach to the problem of the elites, but politicians, culture at large, and the media rely on classic, that is negative, elite theories. Supporters of "positive" elitism argue that it endorses (or at least does not affect) procedural democracy, while critics of "negative" elitism emphasize the essentially anti-democratic inclinations of the ruling elite. On the one hand, there is a lot that proves that elitist democracy is but a dream, *vide* the neo-liberal order of the modern world. On the other hand, classic elite theories seem to be outdated; the so-called new politics needs new concepts, and the idea of more diverse heteronomous elites seems interesting.<sup>7</sup>

Although elitism, be it in the negative or positive sense, does not imply thinking in terms of social classes, it is usually assumed that the higher the position in the hierarchy of power, the higher the percentage of people with high social status (although status also concerns prestige, position in the power structure, and wealth).<sup>8</sup> This does not mean, however, that we must recognize social conflict as the "natural" context of elitism.

Below I analyze three different uses of the term "elitism" in the wider context of Polish post-1989 literature. I am interested in the understanding of elitism that goes beyond class and is closer to Max Weber's, and not Marxist, understanding of social structure. My point of reference is Pierre Bourdieu and his followers.<sup>9</sup> I have the impression that the three analyzed case

<sup>5</sup> See: Małgorzata Stefaniuk, "Vilfreda Pareta rozważania o elitach i demokracji" [Vilfredo Pareto's reflections on elites and democracy], *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, sectio G, vol. 45 (1998): 231–249.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Power Elite* (1956), Mills analyzes American society governed by the owners of large industrial corporations, politicians, and military decision makers who all have similar interests (see: Charles Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956]). Respectively, Robert Michels writes about the so-called iron law of oligarchy, which states that any organization will eventually develop oligarchic tendencies, asserting its power (see: Robert Michels, *Political Parties: a sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*, trans. Edan Paul, Cedar Paul [New York: The Free Press], 1962).

<sup>7</sup> The shortcomings of modern democracy, its inability to face economic crises, the decline of traditional political parties, the growing role of populist leaders, the growing power of technology and the media, and the overproduction of ideas do not necessarily mean that the elite is no longer needed (or that the elite should disappear), but they certainly call for its re-structuring, re-definition and greater diversification. On the elitist contexts of contemporary democracies see: Jacek Wasilewski, "Demokratyczny elityzm: geneza i podstawy paradygmatu" [Democratic elitism: genesis and foundations of the paradigm], *Studia Socjologiczne* 3 (2020): 5–30.

<sup>8</sup> This is Putnam's law of increasing disproportion. See: Robert D. Putnam, *The Comparative Study of Political Elites* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 33–37.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Ralf Dahrendorf, who describes the elites as groups of people occupying the most important positions in socially important structures, be it political, cultural, economic, religious, educational, military, etc. See, for example, Ralf Dahrendorf, *The Modern Social Conflict* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

studies prove not only, in a broad sense, that the understanding of the very term “elitism” have changed, but also, specifically, that the field of literary criticism has been transformed in recent years.

1.

Discussing “negative” elitism in the context of so-called Polish contemporary literature may be considered banal. Elite poetic circles have been discussed, more or less fiercely, a number of times and these disputes have already been summarized in different publications. Of course, this does not mean that we will not return to this question in some other form.<sup>10</sup> The structuring of the literary market along the vertical axis, i.e., the high and the low, the elite and the popular, has long since become obsolete. The horizontal axis, based on the categories of centrality and peripherality (in other words, the mainstream and the margins), still appears to be valid: it is, arguably, better suited to describe the situation of literature on the neoliberal market. From today’s perspective, the above-mentioned ways of structuring the literary field, contrary to what Krzysztof Uniłowski argued in *Kup pan książkę* [Buy a book],<sup>11</sup> are not mutually exclusive; most of all, however, they do not seem as operationally useful as several years ago. Uniłowski’s line of thought, one can probably assume, goes hand in hand with Bourdieu’s theory of distinction, based, broadly speaking, on the assumption that social status and social class correspond to cultural practices and preferences. Still, Bourdieu postulates, or rather presupposes, transparent rules which organize cultural circles (insofar as class affiliation and lifestyles and the rules which govern cultural circles reinforce one another).

Let us add that Bourdieu links his elitist disposition with the understanding of a literary work (and a work of art in general) rooted in Parnassianism and high modernism, emphasizing its autonomy and self-sufficiency (distance, disinterestedness, indifference, lack of commitment). “Popular taste,” respectively, affirms the continuity between art and life, and therefore postulates an affective or ethical involvement, unrefined gullibility, naiveté, and innocence.<sup>12</sup> Since, as Bourdieu argues, only the upper classes have a tendency to take risks in terms of aesthetic (and not only aesthetic) choices and other classes choose proven solutions, the elites effectively are “the chosen few” who hold the (aesthetic) power.

Uniłowski distinguishes between the aesthetic order (in his classification: the vertical axis) and the societal order (the horizontal axis): he imposes onto the rules of elitism (high – low) the criteria of market or media presence (the mainstream – the margins). While he proves that these are two separate systems, he exceeds the limits that he imposed.

Let us take a closer look.

<sup>10</sup>See: Dorota Kozicka, “Poezja w klinchu (z)rozumienia” [Poetry in the clinch of understanding], *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka* 26 (2015): 51–72.

<sup>11</sup>Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Elitarni i popularni, głównonurtowi i niszowi” [Elite and popular, mainstream and niche], in: *Kup pan książkę* [Buy a book] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo FA-art, 2008), 204–219.

<sup>12</sup>See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 4–10.

Specifically, Uniłowski discusses Agnieszka Wolny-Hamkało's review of Agnieszka Drotkiewicz's novel *Paris London Dachau*, which is in fact a pretext for criticizing Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz's publishing strategy. Wolny-Hamkało writes that Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz's publishing house, *Lampa i Iskra Boża*, is no longer "elite" but populist. According to Uniłowski, the mistake lies in the confusion of orders: Dunin-Wąsowicz has never aspired to elitism, although his early texts might have suggested this. In the elitist (that is avant-garde, counter-cultural) order, Dunin-Wąsowicz's gesture was, similarly to Marcel Duchamp's *ready-mades*, unparalleled. Dunin-Wąsowicz's artistic "policies," though not elitist, were niche (elitism is but one of the "niches"). However, when Dorota Masłowska's *Red and White* became a best-seller, with the help of a new pop-culture version of the once niche literary magazine *Lampa* [Lamp], Dunin-Wąsowicz became concerned, Uniłowski writes, only with popularity (a large target audience). And he succeeded. Thus, the separate orders began to overlap: the "popular," initially treated by Uniłowski as a synonym for "low" (and the opposite of "high," "elite"), points to a wide target audience – it is "non-niche." For the time being, however, this is only a terminological convergence.

Uniłowski appreciates Dunin-Wąsowicz's early niche artistic "policies" and his subsequent critical gestures. Dunin-Wąsowicz has managed, the critic writes, to refresh the discourse of literary criticism; talking about literature in a way which had been previously associated with popular music challenged the outdated forms of "celebrating literature's authority in such publications as 'Res Publica Nowa,' 'Plus Minus,' and 'Tygodnik Powszechny.'"<sup>13</sup> However, just as it is impossible to maintain the critical potential of early artistic gestures, it is also impossible to maintain the critical potential of Dunin-Wąsowicz's anti-celebratory approach to literary criticism. Transitioning from the counter-cultural niche to the popular center inevitably is, by definition, counter-elitist. In other words, "niche" does not have to mean "elite" but "popular" certainly means the opposite of "elite." When Uniłowski writes about other forms of cultural democracy, first and foremost about the disappearance of artistic strategies in favor of pursuing "a love affair with pop culture,"<sup>14</sup> he appears to miss traditional hierarchies, he appears to miss elitism. In other words, Uniłowski would gladly uphold Bourdieu's distinctions in the field of literary criticism. He knows that they are becoming outdated, but he nevertheless uses these traditional criteria: he consistently separates the order of values from the order of popularity. Thus, he appears to guard the system, whose shortcomings, perhaps unknowingly, were pointed out by Wolny-Hamkało.

I do not wish to imply that Wolny-Hamkało turned out to be more insightful; Uniłowski accuses her, and rightly so, of misreading the orders and inconsistency – Wolny-Hamkało judges Dunin-Wąsowicz's transition to the mainstream from a mainstream position: she published her text on Polish Radio's website. If we assume that she did it intentionally, then we should call her out on her hypocrisy, but that is not the point. As this example shows, ten years ago it was possible to defend Bourdieu's distinctions in Polish literary criticism, even though so-

<sup>13</sup>Uniłowski, 216.

<sup>14</sup>He writes that the writers and critics associated with HA!art pursued this love affair because they "lacked useful patterns" (Uniłowski, 217). Respectively, he observes that the people behind the magazine "Meble," together with the people behind HA!art, ended up editing the self-advertising and gossip blog [kumple.blog.pl](http://kumple.blog.pl) (Uniłowski).

cial changes had already triggered the process of their deactivation. Uniłowski distinguishes between the aesthetic order and the “popular” order and sees this gap, but most critics (like Wolny-Hamkało) do not.<sup>15</sup>

One of the most important reasons behind the changes in how the concepts of status and elitism function is “*omnivorousness*,” or cultural mobility, discussed by Bourdieu’s Western followers. In Poland, this process only just began in the 2000s.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Uniłowski studied it and was one of the first to notice that high culture ceased to be a marker of social status in post-transformation Poland. In 2005, when his essay *Elitarni i popularni, głównonurtowi i niszowi* [Elite and popular, mainstream and niche] was published in “FA-art,” this process could not be fully comprehended. After all, it began around 2002, even though it had been discussed for some time in the West. Richard Peterson questioned the functional and structural relationship between social status and lifestyle, including cultural preferences and choices, as early as 1992, but he described a reality that was different from ours.<sup>17</sup> In his opinion, at the beginning of the 1990s, the ties between cultural choices and cultural capital clearly loosened, and the only regularities in this respect concerned the fact that high-status persons were more likely to be involved in a wide range of cultural activities, both highbrow and lowbrow. Thus, we can talk about a change in the field of cultural tastes: the vertical system, with popular tastes at the bottom and elite tastes at the top, transformed into an inverted pyramid, where the broad upper part represents the eclectic tastes of the globalized “elite,” and the narrow bottom part represents more homogeneous and coherent cultural preferences of low-status individuals. High and low statuses are no longer synonymous with Bourdieu’s categories, i.e., they do not refer to people with high or low capitals, be it social, cultural, or economic, but to cultural mobility – “*omnivorousness*” (high status) and “*univorousness*” (low status). High status is usually associated with young age, higher education, higher income, and higher professional position, but in the understanding typical of the middle class and not the upper class. Secondly, the loosening of the ties between cultural capital and cultural choices is evidenced by just how openly “high-status” people talk about their varied cultural tastes; perhaps it is this openness and not the nature of cultural practices which proves that Bourdieu’s categories have become obsolete.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Another example of blurring the distinctions between different orders, Uniłowski writes, is the popularity of the postmodern trend of “small homelands.” It cannot be described as elitist, because it was a simplified and, above all, popular version of mythographic prose. Thus, although the old elite tradition of literature adds some “validation” to the trend of “small homelands,” it is nevertheless popular. Importantly, according to Uniłowski, the best examples of postmodern prose, as well as the best examples of academic criticism, can be described as elitist. And Uniłowski was particularly partial to postmodern texts. Indeed, postmodern prose perfectly corresponds to the determinants of elitist literature / art defined by Bourdieu (autonomy, disinterestedness, lack of commitment). Respectively, as Uniłowski ironically observes, engaged prose, literature which meets some social expectations, is not elitist.

<sup>16</sup>The magazine “brulion” was omnivorous, but mostly because of its strategic use of scandals. This notwithstanding, provocation, when viewed from the perspective of artzine traditions, is connected with counterculture, and it is celebrated in equal measures by high culture and pop culture.

<sup>17</sup>Richard A. Peterson, “Understanding Audience Segmentation: From Elite and Mass to Omnivore and Univore”, *Poetics* 21 (1992): 243–258; relations between social status and lifestyles “after Bourdieu” are discussed by Konstanty Strzyczkowski – see: idem, “Szlachectwo nie zobowiązuje. Zmiany we wzorach konsumpcji kulturowej” [Nobility does not obligate. Changes in patterns of cultural consumption], *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny*, vol. LXXI, no. 1 (2009): 195–219.

<sup>18</sup>Bourdieu’s followers noticed other regularities, e.g., in some countries high social status does not translate into increased participation in culture, but only into greater material consumption. See: Strzyczkowski, p. 204–205.

If we were to classify Uniłowski, he would turn out to be an upper-class individual who believes in cultural mobility. I would say that he in fact renounced Bourdieu's distinctions before he renounced them de jure. He was an unpretentious self-proclaimed omnivore (which is confirmed by his wide and varied literary interests, discussed in his reviews and essays). When he "defended" elitism in *Elitarni i popularni, głównonurtowi i niszowi*, it had nothing to do with class snobbery; rather, it was ethical – Uniłowski, as he put it, tried to defend the ethos of the counter-cultural idealist.<sup>19</sup> Besides, he did not do it "at any cost." After all, Uniłowski did not criticize Dunin-Wąsowicz for abandoning counterculture for the sake of the mainstream (the critic thought that "Lampa" could actually help literature, because it discussed it using more accessible and "fashionable" language). What Uniłowski did criticize was the lack of moral values exemplified by people aspiring to mainstream privileges (their ironic distance disappeared when they were invited to big mainstream events). "Collaborating" with pop culture in itself was not as compromising. Of course, the very fact that Uniłowski wrote about "a love affair with pop culture" (in 2005) means that he was not a fan of pop culture. He did not treat pop culture like post-Bourdieu researchers, who suggested that due to the transformations it had undergone we should no longer think of it as "easy culture." Instead, Uniłowski points to threats, which Mark Fisher had discussed before him: there is no place for the alternative and the independent in the system because, even when it appropriates potentially subversive content, the mainstream prefabricates it in accordance with the needs of capitalist culture.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps, however, young literary circles, which Uniłowski criticizes (they are not consistent; at times, they are even opportunistic), should not be judged according to the old distinctions. Perhaps, they simply (as post-Bourdieu sociologists claim, the change in distinction is primarily a generational change) responded to new circumstances. Either way, they too were subject to double standards. These "new circumstances" allowed them to broaden their aesthetic choices, but the old elitist bonds imposed a self-ironic distance on some of them. The two versions of the transition phase thus are: Uniłowski's old-school attachment to elitism and "classic" distinctions, as if in defiance of the observed disintegration of this system, and the (then) young generation of critics' omnivorousness, restrained by declining but still active socio-aesthetic orders.

## 2.

Some time ago, the papierwdole publishing house (specifically, Konrad Góra) and the Dzikie Przyjemności publishing house (specifically, Dominika Łabędzie) joined forces to publish *Dzień został w nocy. Wiersze miłości i z nienawiści* [The day stayed in the night. Poems of love and hate]. The activist poet Konrad Góra and the graphic artist Dominika Łabędź worked on the book together. Each hand-made copy is different; it is like a work of art and only 100 copies were made. Some were sold at auctions, and some were distributed using social media.

<sup>19</sup>While it may seem to be a joke, Uniłowski discusses generational differences not only in the approach to pop culture but also in Polish criticism. He writes that it is easy for him to criticize because he has never been part of to big mainstream events: "from the moment the almanac *Tekstyli* [Textiles] was published, the people born in the 1960s, apart from the one and only Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz, were considered old pricks. So, I should be quiet ..." Uniłowski, 219.

<sup>20</sup>See: Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2009), 9.



The whole action, which looked suspiciously elitist, confused some critics (although tangible traces of this confusion will be difficult to find). The very idea of putting a book of poetry up for auction and its price, initially PLN 200 (sic!), was not consistent with Konrad Góra's poetic and non-poetic actions. It is true that in some cases the poet lowered the price (he waived his fee), but it did not change the fundamental facts concerning the whole situation.<sup>21</sup> Góra was aware of the speculations. At a publicity event during which he promoted the next "normal," or "non-artistic," edition of the book (the first, or in fact the "zero," edition was the elite edition), he said that he could finally explain what this project was all about. The money raised at auctions was used to pay for the "non-artistic edition," the price of which was lower than the average price of a book of poetry – it amounted to PLN 15. *Dzień został w nocy. Wiersze miłości i z nienawiści* is thus Góra's most expensive and cheapest book.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, I was not able to buy either one – I borrowed both. The "regular" edition is unavailable (you can only borrow it from someone); online stores which sell books published by papierwdole either do not offer this particular title (Bractwo Trojka) or the product is unavailable (Ogniwo). The price is PLN 20.

Konrad Góra's project does encourage speculation. It would probably be easier if, instead of an auction, a simple crowdfunding campaign was started (they are popular on the literary market, also among authors published by papierwdole: currently, a fundraiser for the publication of Robert Rybicki's book is advertised on the publishing house's Facebook account). If a non-commercial publishing house wants to publish a book for which it has no funds, and this book is then to be sold at a very low price, raising money among the publishing house's "followers" seems logical. When he chose auctioning instead of crowdfunding, Góra problematized the class aspect of his project. He chose elitism instead of egalitarianism – his project met all of Bourdieu's criteria (auctions, usually of works of art, are snobbish events aimed at the upper class – specifically, the people with money). The poet, however, did not "lose control" over his project, he "called the shots" (he was in charge of everything, including the price, which he controlled, etc.), which seems quite important in this situation.

One possible explanation behind the game played by Góra is that the poet takes money from the rich and gives it, in the form of a cheap edition of his book, to the poor. Such a strategy makes sense in terms of class conflict. The auction appears to be a neo-liberal event, but in fact it is an anti-neoliberal Robin Hood-like project aimed at undermining the existing hierarchies. Unfortunately, this is not true. And not because representatives of the upper class do not buy Góra's books, even the expensive editions (it would be interesting to analyze who bought the books and for how much, but I do not have access to this data). In fact, Góra's friends and acquaintances, or, more broadly, people associated with the papierwdole publishing house were the target audience. Some of them, I believe, are not even middle-class, not to say upper-class. Thus, reading Góra's project in terms of class conflict would be unreasonable.

<sup>21</sup>All my knowledge on this subject is obtained from my colleagues; in a word, it comes from "word of mouth." I do not have a Facebook account.

<sup>22</sup>The meeting took place on September 11, 2021. The recording is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=248288233841937>, date of access: 13 Nov. 2021.

Obviously, Góra's project defies the logic of capitalism. Neither does it appear to be egalitarian, although it appears to toy with this idea. Indeed, Góra had long wanted to publish a book bound in sandpaper, but the publishing houses refused because of the high costs.<sup>23</sup> The book, bound in used sandpaper, embodies the idea of recycled writing and living; unfortunately, its production, like the production of any handmade product, is expensive. Thus, the concept of a cheap book inevitably turns into the concept of a work of art. It is difficult to say whether the price suggested by Góra (PLN 200) reflected the work invested in creating the book. At "ordinary" auctions which take place on capitalist terms, the capital, the author's prestige, is monetized. So, if we add to it production costs, the question of price becomes more complicated – it would differ depending on the tastes of the public, i.e., target readers. After all, today it is difficult to unequivocally determine which "works" are, as Bourdieu put it, valid, that is, expensive. Paradoxically, people who value Góra do not value capitalism. In other words, this community can "buy" the idea of other auctions, for example, charity auctions or auctions whose purpose is clear and corresponds to the system of the shared expectations and values (similarly to crowdfunding). However, as I said, Góra disclosed his motives after some time and potential buyers had to rely on their intuition, i.e., they had to trust the author and his anarchist authority. Alternatively, perhaps, they acted as actual bidders and simply paid for the prestige of the author they valued (which, however, contradicts Góra's anti-capitalist logic). As it turned out, those who "trusted" Góra were right. Still, eight copies of the book which had not been auctioned off and which Góra wanted to sell on similar terms (which he announced during the publicity event during which he promoted the "cheap" edition of his book) prove problematic. These "similar terms" in no way resemble the original plan. Still, they could be sold at an "ordinary" charity auction: buyers already know what the money is for (Góra's book was published in a set number of copies but the publishing house can use the money to publish other books) and contribute; in return, they receive a "better" edition of the book, which they would buy anyway.

And the last speculative question: why is Góra playing a game with the rules of the capitalist market, if it is limited to his Facebook friends? The answer "so that he can test them" seems quite alluring to me. It is easy for me to imagine that a possible reaction to Góra's project would be accusations – of embracing capitalism, or at least of turning "less" anarchist. Because Konrad Góra, this is at least my impression, is one of those people in the Polish literary world who does charity "for us;" it is a simple psychological mechanism: if he were to change, we would have the "right" to feel disappointed, or perhaps even deceived. Had these been Góra's intentions, he should have extended his campaign and tested his readers' patience and ethics in a more demanding manner.

Regardless of the poet's intentions, his actions can be read in the anarchist context of the economy of symbolic goods. This is where Pierre Bourdieu meets David Graeber.

In the dominated part of the field, Bourdieu writes – and avant-garde cultural production functions in the dominated part of the field – opportunities have to be created.<sup>24</sup> The balance

<sup>23</sup>Góra talked about it at meetings with his readers.

<sup>24</sup>See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, trans. Randal Johnson et al. (Cambridge: Polity University Press, 1998), 37.

of forces established in the field of production must be transformed; one must fight to occupy a new position and new rules of the game in this field must be created. The distribution of symbolic capital must be redefined. This is the difference between occupying a dominant position and fighting for it. What possibilities does one have? Bourdieu presents the fight against the subfield of dominant production as a struggle for autonomy, almost as “art for art’s sake,” insofar as producers produce for other producers. In *Practical Reason*, where he outlines the principles of this strategy, he no longer thinks only in terms of social classes (or in terms of hierarchies) and tastes which correspond to them or tastes which were developed within them (so this space is not reserved for the upper class). Of course, he still fails to discuss the precariat, which would complicate his “class” argument. Bourdieu talks about pure art, that is, art which defies market economy. This new logic turns out to be the old pre-capitalist logic, transforming economic acts into symbolic acts. While for Bourdieu this mechanism is not a “way out” of capitalist structures, but merely invokes a universalist logic, it can be used in this way. Attempts to bypass the economy, to create a “non-economic economy,” essentially activate the mechanism discussed by anarchists: a return to the exchange of gifts.

In terms of “non-economic economy,” Góra is fighting for his position: he is trying to create new rules in the field of production and exchange, turning the mechanisms of capitalist economy against themselves. Transforming “economic economy” into the economy of symbolic exchange is always problematic, and may even, Bourdieu argues, seem contradictory, because this is how the gift economy works: thinking in terms of debt and repayment must be “suspended;” one cannot think that a gift is a debt that must be repaid. Góra’s project is problematic in different terms. It can be said that the poet reverses the gift economy: he does not reject the logic of price, he does not render it taboo. On the contrary, he turns the price into an auction fetish, but he does it so that he can invalidate it, so that he can capitalize on it *à rebours*: he transforms the capitalist economy into the gift economy. The logic of debt/repayment is not suspended – the logic of the gift is, and it ultimately prevails.

Contemporary anarchists also refer to the gift as one of the human foundations on which our societies are built. David Graeber draws on Marcel Mauss in his project of contemporary anarchist anthropology;<sup>25</sup> respectively, Paolo Virno speaks of an “engaged withdrawal” (or civil disobedience), a form of popular resistance which involves abandoning institutional practices *en masse* and creating in their place new alternative forms of social life which can be defined as a gift.<sup>26</sup> In all gift economies and grassroots social actions in general, as in the case of Góra’s project, not only specific artifacts or new types of services are created, but, and perhaps above all, social bonds are forged. They initiate the process of changing the *status quo* in the field of production.

The game with elitism which Konrad Góra plays has been part of his artistic strategy for a long time. Although Góra’s poetic language refers to (elitist) avant-garde traditions, his social strategy, the strategy of being a poet and understanding the roles which poetry plays,

<sup>25</sup>See: David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, (Cambridge: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004). Jadwiga Zając analyzes the anarchist contexts of Konrad Góra’s works (she writes about in her doctoral dissertation; I would like to thank Jadwiga for helping me analyze the anarchist aspects Góra’s works).

<sup>26</sup>On these and other practices of the anarchist exodus see: Graeber, 60-64.

contradicts the avant-garde, because anarchism and the avant-garde contradict one another. Perhaps it should be said, however, that what matters are not (stable) strategies but tactics (always developed at the spur of the moment and always temporarily), invisible practices which help protect the “temporary autonomous zone”<sup>27</sup> (co)created by the poet.

### 3.

The comparison between the “discourse of elitism” in literary criticism in the 2010s and literary criticism in the 2000s, as exemplified by Krzysztof Uniłowski’s works, shows that it has lost some of its appeal. Respectively, the very term “elitism” has been used in a more deliberate manner in the 2010s and the 2020s. In the 2000s, “elitism” was either a neutral or a positive term. For critics and poets who valued tradition, especially the tradition of high modernism, elitism determined modernism’s sphere of influence. In the avant-garde circles, as exemplified by Uniłowski, elitism referred to the level of cultural competences and expectations towards art that was experimental in terms of form. And such art connoisseurs corresponded to Bourdieu’s notion of the elites, as they took the risk of investing, aesthetically and intellectually, in the unknown, in unconsecrated literature and art, which were yet to be recognized. Obviously, Bourdieu’s classifications are based on, and require, a transparent social structure with its divisions into the lower, the middle and the upper classes (and fractions of these respective three classes, which only slightly complicate the entire picture). In the new reality, however, the situation did not develop as one might have expected, at least considering the diagnoses of Bourdieu’s followers and their focus on omnivorousness. When class transparency, which we never achieved in Poland, was disturbed by the emergence of the precariat, the reaction to which was the strengthening of the anti-neoliberal discourses, elitism, both the word and its connotations, stabilized as a marker of capitalism. This question is, of course, complicated. The precariat is fundamentally different from the lower class, especially the lower class which possess high cultural capital (we can say that then it is actually closer the middle class). In the eyes of the former, however, the latter is the elite. In a society where the order of social classes is disturbed, conflict-based class concepts appear to be more useful. And it seems that conflict has governed the Polish literary scene in recent years. The words “elite” and “elitism” have occasionally been used in debates, essays, and reviews: either in relation to high-status individuals who are supported by institutions (this type of conflict, of course, resembles a generational conflict) or to describe attachment to highly theoretical issues, which could be associated with the increasingly self-centered cultural capital (young critics engage in such discussions). Still, even if no explicit references to elitism are made, the conflict still exists. And it often resembles the good old rules of power struggles, or, for that matter, other types of struggles.

<sup>27</sup>This is how Hakim Bey describes the goal of the anarchist movement. It is an eternal insurrection, whose goal is not to introduce a new order desired by the revolutionists (whose goals are not the same as the goals of anarchists). The TSA is endowed with a stable, though always temporary, subversive potential; all revolutions eventually lose their momentum and give rise to the new *status quo*. See: Hakim Bey, *Temporary Autonomous Zone* (Williamsburg: Autonomedia, 2009).

We have always known that ideological struggles are accompanied by “ordinary” power struggles. Let us again refer to Bourdieu, Graeber, and Fisher. Bourdieu says that if the field is oriented towards change, and not the status quo, the majority of agents are *trying* to occupy dominant positions. The nature of the fights in the field depends on its structure and on the external context – if the new system of social forces supports you, you win. According to Bourdieu, two conflicts develop concurrently: the advocates of pure art and the supporters of commercial art fight and the old avant-garde and the new avant-garde fight. And this fight is always between title holders (writers, critics, scholars) and “challengers” (who aspire to hold these titles).<sup>28</sup> It is not hypocritical. Agents usually fight for the highest (in their opinion) goods, and, sometimes, they are ready to die to achieve their goal. What they win is not material: it is a game of recognition and acknowledgment. Recent poetry debates revolve around social exclusion, inequality, and other problems of contemporary capitalism, so it should not come as a surprise that the same problems are addressed by literary critics, although in such a critical context they appear to be, I dare say, less compelling. I do not want to repeat the clichés about the hypocrisy of the left-wing and its need to demonstrate its moral superiority – that would be a simplification. My point is that there are different types of conflicts. And not all conflicts are class struggles as defined according to Marxist criteria. Today, most struggles resemble conflicts described by David Graeber, who argues that Marxist politics is modeled on, on the one hand, an academic discipline and, on the other hand, on how radical intellectuals communicate:

From the perspective of the academy, this led to many salutary results – the feeling that there should be some moral center, that academic concerns should be relevant to people’s lives – but also, many disastrous ones: turning much intellectual debate into a kind of parody of sectarian politics, with everyone trying to reduce each other’s arguments into ridiculous caricatures so as to declare them not only wrong, but also evil and dangerous – even if the debate is usually taking place in language so arcane that no one who could not afford seven years of grad school would have any way of knowing the debate was going on.<sup>29</sup>

Many metacritical debates which, at the beginning, were triggered by some “issue,” for example, poetry, ended with the participants critiquing one another, calling one another out on their wealth, and accusing one another of gatekeeping, which resembled political disputes. I refer to, among others, the debate devoted to the “New Languages of Poetry” that took place on Biuro Literackie’s website. “New languages of poetry” were silenced by personal resentments.

The agonistic logic behind the academic and the critical field is of course not unusual; in fact, it can be very productive, especially if the goals of the fight are universal. This is where Bourdieu and Fisher meet: they both consider the goal of art, criticism, and science universal. The more universal the goal, the more common good.

<sup>28</sup>See: Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 34.

<sup>29</sup>Graeber, 5.

Earlier (in *Distinction*), Bourdieu suggested that, and many would still agree, universal values are imposed by the upper class and as such they are elitist. Anarchists, like Graeber, argue that there are no universal goals – there are only temporary goals. But Graeber would also agree that some of these temporary goals (like, for example, taking action to end the debt crisis) are universal. Elitism seems to be the opposite of universalism (and in recent years it has been treated as the opposite of all, please excuse my corporate language, “good practices”), but it is only true if we assume that it is based on anti-democratic premises. If, on the other hand, we assume that the elites can, and should, be democratically elected so that they may care for the common good, elitism and universalism cease to be competitive values. The rhetorical adventures of this concept should probably be watched more closely today. This is because elitism is a disturbingly capacious category, and as such it may be, as I hopefully have managed to show, easily weaponized in a fight against one’s opponents inside the field, including both opposing fractions and fractions which are close to my own.

For Krzysztof Uniłowski and Konrad Góra elitism remains an ambiguous category; it is an element of social status games, differ as their rules might today. Their goals may be assessed differently, but we cannot say that they are self-serving.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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# KEYWORDS

*elitism*

EXCLUSIVITY

social class

*economy of symbolic exchange*

**ABSTRACT:**

This article examines literary criticism in Poland after 1989 from the dynamic perspective of elites and elitism. Drawing on various elite theories, mainly the more contemporary ones, for which the most important point of reference is Pierre Bourdieu's concept of distinction, the author shows how these concepts function in relation to the aesthetic and social dominants of the Polish literary scene after 1989. The author analyzes three "critical case studies:" Krzysztof Uniłowski's article from 2005, a Facebook event related to the "auctioning" of Konrad Góra's book of poetry in 2020, and recent trends in the language used by the young generation of critics. The author is interested in the relationship between literature and criticism and the dominant aesthetic tendencies and the socio-political context, especially the use of the concepts of elites and elitism, be it analytically or persuasively, consciously or unconsciously, positively or negatively, etc.



## socio-cultural distinctions

*social status game*

*anarchism*

CULTURAL CAPITAL

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# How Are Evaluative Notions Created? On the Example of a Dispute over Louise Glück's Poetry

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I would like to present a few working theses regarding ways of creating evaluative notions in literary criticism.

I understand evaluative processes (to which I connect evaluative notions conceptualized here as theoretical tools and materializations of these processes) broadly, but this paper will focus on the context of literary criticism. Evaluating is a complex social and cultural practice rooted in specific systems of values, connected with selection processes, which participate both in cognitive and emotional decisions<sup>1</sup>. In this sense evaluative practices can become synonymous with practices of valuations, but they should be seen as narrower than valuating behaviors. When we evaluate, we do not need to incorporate our judgments into systems – axiological, aesthetic, political *et cetera* – and we do not need to recognize our motivations and needs. I assume here that evaluation is a part of valuating practices, directing our attention and interest not at values, but also at price, costs, and benefits<sup>2</sup>. I also advocate for an approach which problematizes the difference between evaluative and descriptive judgments without absolutizing it, and accepts that it always works within the practice of a specific language and context. Relationships between the evaluator and normative character of notions connected with valuating practice and institutions normalizing mechanisms creating literary values also require some explanation. These relationships allow us to think about the cultural reproduction (reinforcing) values, and they are

<sup>1</sup> See Zdzisław Najder, *Wartości i oceny* [Values and evaluations] (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1971), 6–45; Barbara Hernstein Smith, “Przygodność wartości” [Contingencies of value], translated into Polish by Agata Preis-Smith, in: *Kultura, tekst, ideologia. Dyskursy współczesnej amerykanistyki* [Culture, text, ideology. Discourses of modern American studies], edited by Agata Preis-Smith (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2004), 213–254.

<sup>2</sup> See Najder.

constantly studied and considered from the historical perspective. However, for the purpose of this paper I will focus on this aspect of normativity out of the complex and rich history of the dispute about normative foundations of values, which allows me to introduce the concept of the binding power of values. When a value becomes normative, supported by culture, knowledge, education, the most ambivalent character of valuation practices is revealed, which may lead to canonization (absolutization) of specific literary-aesthetic values and literary definitions. This is why it is so important to think about valuation as something systematic and continued – this way we can prevent the absolutization of values and their elimination from social life.

Obviously initial differentiations are not an organized discussion through theoretical frames. This is a peculiar paradox of considerations regarding valuation: although values basically integrate our motivational and emotional systems<sup>3</sup>, they remain ambiguous (see e.g., the definition of value) and complex. It is best to study them on specific examples. So, how are evaluative notions created? I shall look into the process behind the emergence of notions which were used in Polish literary criticism after Louise Glück was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2021.

There are no non-evaluative notions (in criticism)

Translators and poets argued about the value of Louise Glück's (a Nobel Laureate) poetry. It all started with Julia Fiedorczuk's enthusiastic Facebook post ("What poetry! Not pretending that it is what it isn't. Poetry by a woman. Joy!!!"<sup>4</sup>) and Kacper Bartczak's comment, which introduced several categories to the discussion: narcissism, authenticity game, egotism, lyricism, monologueness and vision (prophetic tone), all of which were supposed to depreciate Glück's poetry. Bartczak stressed that:

[...] I used to read Glück but I was always put off by the "I" fetish, very strong narcissism – but the kind that serves poetry and is necessary for it. In Glück I hear narrowing narcissism. Glück plays the "authenticity game" and modifies this category poorly: she believes and follows it far too much. And this is an inbred kind of authenticity, which does not engage readers much. [...] She turns poetry to monologueness, which has always been a threat for it. And moreover, there is this unbearable tone of vision. And yet another disappointment, because this vision concerned – again – "myself and I"<sup>5</sup>.

Natalia Malek replied to Bartczak, citing intellectualism and antimoralism in defense of Glück: "Sometimes it is lyrical, where lyricism is a groan which puts you off, but sometimes it is completely alyrical, surgical even? I do not find Glück stilted *en masse*, in fact it was one of the reasons why I found her interesting"<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> "The grand promise, grand suggestion of values is thus – third of all – their power of structuring the world. Those who do not believe in values typically believe that they can be numbered, that there are many of them, and that they significantly determine the way in which we perceive and shape our world [...]" Andreas Urs Sommer, *Wartości. Dlaczego ich potrzebujemy, chociaż ich nie ma* [Values. Why we need them although they do not exist], translated by Tadeusz Zatorski (Warszawa: Fundacja Augusta Hrabiego Cieszkowskiego, 2021), 39. [Translation from Polish mine, PZ].

<sup>4</sup> Julia Fiedorczuk, Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/profile/1056624955/search/?q=gluck>.

<sup>5</sup> Kacper Bartczak, Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/profile/1056624955/search/?q=gluck>.

<sup>6</sup> Natalia Malek, Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/profile/1056624955/search/?q=gluck>.

If we did not know the emotional charge of notions used by Bartczak, which resulted from the generally devaluating character of his comment, it would be harder to understand why he criticizes Glück for vision and prophetic tone, and why monologueness becomes an evaluative notion, losing its neutral, analytical character. Monologueness and vision are two categories from a dictionary of literary studies; although originally they are different from ethical or psychological categories of authenticity and narcissism, they cease to refer to formal aspects of poetry, and start to characterize its value. A similar mechanism can be observed in Malek's comments – it is default values that stand behind alyricism as a category opposed to lyricism, it is not only a historically defined structure of an utterance.

As can be seen, when one discursively enters the space of circulation of capital (as proposed by Bruno Latour), most notions become evaluative. Then it is the context and appositions that stabilize the evaluative meaning of used notions. It would thus seem that there are no non-evaluative notions – if specific categories enter the field of impact of social critical practices, they become infected with the evaluative character of the activities which they are a part of. Generally, it is the complex spectrum of social and political behaviors within which a given notion gains meaning and informs the value of the object it refers to that determines the evaluation of artistic phenomena, rather than stabilized meanings of the used notion.

Let us return to the discussion about poetry. “For me, these terms (narcissism, egotism) do not mean much in the context of this author” – Fiedorczuk replies to Bartczak. It is difficult to tell how much Fiedorczuk's comment says about the work performed by notions in critical-literary discussions, and how much about the character of social media discussions. For Fiedorczuk the aesthetic notions and related values introduced by Bartczak are only subjective, insignificant details. We do not learn why they do not mean much, nor what makes them inadequate – but perhaps this is the moment to consider what happens when we ostensibly ignore certain values and notions which refer to them; it is easier to imagine that such a gesture can have a re-evaluative character. Some kind of stripping off of established values and working on the effectiveness of change of evaluative notions can produce new social relations. And although Fiedorczuk's comment is not an example of such an action, as she only questioned the reasonableness of the notions used by Bartczak, she did not introduce new meanings nor did she attempt to reshape those already used for the benefit of the discussed poetry<sup>7</sup>, the strong negation gesture should be considered in the valuation process. It seems that in this context – when it is not said which terms would be more adequate for evaluating this poetry, leaving the question open – we are dealing with an attempt at situating poems outside of any systems of values. Then it is praising the idea – opposite to what I have just described – that aesthetic notions are basically non-evaluative<sup>8</sup>. Obviously, the question about non-aesthetic notions used for describing or evaluating a piece of art arises, whether or not they can be seen as non-evaluative. I shall return to the problem of aesthetic and non-aesthetic notions (moral, cognitive, political) later in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Later Julia Fiedorczuk has discussed Glück's work extensively. However, I have not found any references to Kacper Bartczak's opinions questioning the value of that poetry. This is not the case in Natalia Malek's text (discussed later in this paper), which takes into account negative opinions about Glück's work.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. James Sommerville, “Czy istnieją jakości estetyczne?” [Are there any aesthetic qualities?], in: *Estetyka w świecie. Wybór tekstów t. III* [Aesthetics in the world. Selected texts, vol. 3], edited by Maria Gołaszewska, translated by Leszek Sosnowski (Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 1991), 123.

## Scouts

The Facebook dispute did not end the discussion about Glück's poetry. Malek and Bartczak continued, clarifying their opinions, later joined by Joanna Piechura, Justyna Sobolewska, Maciej Stroiński, Magda Heydel, and others. Most Polish texts discussing Glück's work, which is generally little known in Poland, represented the laudatory convention of post-Nobel opinions, resulting in a descriptive-interpretative, and sometimes anecdotal character – which is not to say that they were deprived of evaluative functions. It is common knowledge that the laudatory convention is the basic reproducer of values and forms which are already well-established and appreciated, or those considered worthy of appreciation. Evaluative notions are used as stabilizers in such a convention – they should convince us that a work of art represents values which should be appreciated. As viewers of art, we do not consider one specific artistic realization then – we rather think about it as a representation of specific aesthetic, political, ethical values, etc. However, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to extract the intersubjective potential of such vaguely defined notions, which is why they are becoming scouts rather than indicators of universality of aesthetic judgments. If we share the idea that, say, the notion of universality reasonably informs us about the value of a given object, then we belong to the same ideological club. Evaluative notions scout for potential allies.

So-called “feminine writing” is one example of such a functioning of a notion in a discussion about Glück's work. Malek concludes her text with: “This ease [overlooking erudition in Glück's poetry – A.K.] represents a certain protectionist tradition regarding feminine writing”<sup>9</sup>. It is easier to understand (e.g., compared to the notion of vision) why “feminine writing” becomes an evaluative notion – it can express praise or criticism. For Malek “feminine writing” may automatically cause depreciation. We know the history of this notion and numerous examples of its usage – see e.g., Krystyna Kosińska's work, in which she outlines its depreciating character<sup>10</sup>. Feminine writing, processed via various theories, revealing relationships between writing and gender (or, more broadly, between artistic work and gender), is still characterized by its evaluative aspect rather than by its analytical-theoretical value. In discussions about the difference between female and male writing, it can be either positive or negative, depending on intention. Recently it seems that due to feminist and media practices it suggests that a female author allows us to reevaluate literary texts, slightly disregarding the values they carry.

## Exchange of notions: universality and longevity

In work on notions their exchange is a basic mechanism. In *Philosophy of Money*, Georg Simmel seeks value in the exchange process rather than in characteristics of specific objects<sup>11</sup>. Values and

<sup>9</sup> Natalia Malek, “Za co ziemia nienawidzi nieba” [Why earth hates heaven], *Dwutygodnik* 295 (2020), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/9228-za-co-ziemia-nienawidzi-nieba.html>.

<sup>10</sup> See Krystyna Kłosińska, “Kobieta autorka” [Woman author], in Kłosińska: *Ciało, pożądanie, ubranie. O wczesnych powieściach Gabrieli Zapolskiej* [Body, desire, attire. Early novels by Gabriela Zapolska] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo eFka, 1999), 7–37.

<sup>11</sup> Georg Simmel, *Filozofia pieniądza* [Philosophy of Money], translated into Polish by Andrzej Przyłębski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Fundacji Humaniora, 1997), 59.

notions referring to them are produced because value is always negotiable<sup>12</sup>. However, it seems that there are notions which have more trans-historical potential than others (e.g., the notion of beauty which was exchanged with ugliness and the grotesque in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or the categories of authenticity or honesty, which were used to valorize works of art). Exchange of notions results from the interaction of different forces: aesthetic, political, cultural, religious, social. A history of the human world told from the perspective of the transformation of dominating evaluative notions which were modeling culture and society of a given point in time would be genuinely interesting.

In the discussion about Glück's poetry universality is a notion whose trans-historical activity is undeniable. Magda Heydal writes:

Her poems discuss issues which affect everyone, such as loss, death, love, loneliness, experiencing one's own existence in the world (this is the "universality" mentioned by the secretary of the Swedish Academy), at the same time using simple language, without any experimental transformations<sup>13</sup>.

Maciej Stroiński writes in a similar tone: "Her poems were written long before the pandemic, but – as any truly successful and universal work – they are good for any time, including a «dark hour»"<sup>14</sup>. Bartczak also mentions universality:

We are told that Glück seeks the universal, but her universalism focuses on archetypal, hurt women (Dido, Persephone, Eurydice) who experienced only pain and injustice. [...] It is difficult to disagree with Glück. Reaching for personal experience, she universalizes it relentlessly<sup>15</sup>.

In literature, evaluative notions often function automatically. We more or less know what universality means in the context of poetry; vagueness seems to be its most important distinguishing feature. Compromised by various theories – minority, postcolonial and gender-queer – universalism as a criterion for evaluating poetry remains significant. It definitely will not be able to mark hidden values of dominating groups, which camouflage their historicity, locality, certain interests (economic, gender, racial, class) and elitist ideas regarding what can become poetry/art. It will rather be an indicator seeking intersubjective possibilities of constructing social relations around aesthetic experience (multisensory intellectual work). Is this what is happening in the dispute in question?

Let us look into how Bartczak and Malek interpret universal images in Glück's poetry. According to both authors the universal is connected with a certain type of imaging, with references to the Bible, Greek mythology, and American poetic tradition, and focused on communicating the human experience of death, trauma, suffering, torment. Malek appreciates the most con-

<sup>12</sup>See Luc Boltanski, "Od rzeczy do dzieła. Procesy atrybucji i nadawania wartości przedmiotom" [From object to masterpiece. Processes of attribution and attributing value], translated into Polish by Iwona Bojadziejewa, in: *Wieczna radość. Ekonomia polityczna społecznej kreatywności* [Eternal joy. Political economy of social creativity], edited by Aniela Pilarska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Bęc Zmiana, 2011), 17–44.

<sup>13</sup>Magda Heydal, "Literacki Nobel dla Louise Glück" [Nobel Prize for literature for Louise Glück], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 42 (2020), <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/literacki-nobel-dla-louise-gluck-165192>.

<sup>14</sup>Maciej Stroiński, "Louise Glück: Dla zdrowych i chorych" [Louise Glück: for the healthy and the sick], *Przekrój*, 2.11.2020, <https://przekroj.pl/kultura/louise-gluck-dla-zdrowych-i-chorych-maciej-stroinski>.

<sup>15</sup>Kacper Bartczak, "Zima w centrum: post-konfesyjny pat Louise Glück" [Winter in the center: Louise Glück's post-confessional stalemate], *Mały Format* 01-03 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/04/zima-centrum-post-konfesyjny-pat-louise-gluck/>.

structuring lyrical stories which reveal the fundamental “non-negotiability” of basic parameters of human existence that are difficult to accept – especially today:

Glück uses literary biblical or antique tropes not to practice any religion. With every book she is getting more confirmations and proof that there is nothing beyond “the dying order” (a quote from the poem “Thanksgiving”), unforgiving. [...] For modern readers the awareness of ruthlessness combined with the omnipotence of the superlative “instance” can be shocking. Hierarchism and predestination of such an outlined world clashes with the conviction of the democratic negotiability of rules organizing the world, and the forbearance of “human” instances upholding agreements which resulted from social negotiations. It is this dissonance which is partially responsible for the power of Glück’s poetic images<sup>16</sup>.

According to Malek, the consistent methodological observation of the world of suffering in Glück’s poems, always focused on the inevitable end of biological bodies, is a brave, radical contestation of conviction about the vitality and activity of individuals. In Glück’s poetry they encounter a “demiurgic force”, which is an unknown and incomprehensible power. Here universality is a temporality perspective other than that of people, laws of nature, and space. It just so happens that they are hostile to people.

Bartczak recognizes universality on an interpretative-philosophical level in a similar way to Malek, connecting it to mythological and biblical rhetorical tropes characteristic for confessional poetry – however, in his text this universality is described with obvious disdain. According to Bartczak the way Glück uses poetry, language and tradition invalidates the work of American poets on changing readers’ habits. In this sense universality would be an evaluative notion, specifically referring to aesthetic (pathos, loftiness) and artistic (monologue, confessionalism, cultural intertextuality) values, upholding writing which resigns from poetry’s possibility to react to (technical, ethical, political, etc.) transformations of a person’s situation in reality. Universality understood in this way would be a worldview perspective, thematized in poetry, but also a specific idea about how to do poetry. It masks its historical background, considering a specific perspective as the only, universal one.

However, Bartczak demonstrates that it is impossible to separate the universal concept of poetry from the concept of the subject (human) clashing with a demiurgic force (of nature, fate, destiny). According to Bartczak, “an aesthetically solemn formula”, formal rigor, distanced observation which highlight the vegetative status of all beings abstract Glück’s poetry from a specific, sensual-material space which leads to “the female subject not arguing with any socially established system of beliefs, but rather with timeless necessity. [...] Nature, together with body, sexuality, and ultimately gender are victims of this desert metaphysics”<sup>17</sup>.

Bartczak clearly refers to the relationship between imagination and death (“In this poetry cemetery is the place of speaking, with elegy as its main formula”), when he compares the motif of light in Glück and Wallace Stevens. This comparison introduces the category of longevity, which may be fundamental for Bartczak’s argument. He interprets the poem *Messengers* – about deer as messengers of death – pointing out that the signs of life/vitality/youth turn out to be an illusion;

<sup>16</sup>Malek, “Za co ziemia nienawidzi nieba”.

<sup>17</sup>Bartczak, “Zima w centrum: post-konfesyjny pat Louise Glück”.

the deer are in fact skeletons, dead since forever, leading us towards archaic thanatology. In *Sunday morning*, a poem by Stevens, “before the last stanza gives justice to death, deer and birds will be caught for a moment in the amazing light of their inexplicable longevity”. Bartczak formulates his accusations clearly, although he does not specify the notion of longevity as a source of value in poetry and as an evaluative notion. He does not directly oppose universality to longevity, but we understand that his criticism of Glück stems from his objection to Glück’s imagination, which is trapped in thanatological images. He does not see her poetry as removed from the receptive-social sphere of solitary confessions; instead, he suggests various forms of influence of poetic record on social imagination, prejudice, fears and beliefs. His argumentation leads us to the question of how such poetry reinforces social conformism and acceptance of the *status quo*:

Meanwhile human carnality and general erotic emotionality related to it remain like corpses in the battlefield – true love or sexual energy glows in some places, but paralyzed by religious-cultural prohibition (one prayer in “Wild Iris” is about incestuous longing for brother’s body), cut short by hieratic patriarchal order (father as an object of longing and a silent ruler, preoccupied with his own dying), or reduced to pure mechanical sexual attraction<sup>18</sup>.

Bartczak thus replaces universality with longevity, in which paths of (tradition of) lyrical-confessional poetry and ideology cross. Longevity as a theoretical-visual category would be opposed to images of death, freezing and corpses, but it would also be a part of the idea of poetry as something taking advantage of its predecessors’ practices in a life-giving way.

William J. Thomas offers a similar conceptualization of the notion of longevity; he introduces understanding images (which he differentiates from representing) as forms of life which have their counterparts in genres and specific representations of genres:

With pictures, the question of vitality is generally posed in terms of liveliness or lifelikeness, a sense that the picture either “captures the life” of its model, or that it has in its own formal qualities, an energetic, animated, or lively appearance. With images, the question of vitality has more to do with reproductive potency or fertility. We can ask if a picture is a good or bad, living or dead specimen, but with an image, the question is, Is it likely to go on and reproduce itself, increasing its population or evolving into surprising new forms?<sup>19</sup>.

Taking into consideration what Bartczak wrote about Glück’s poetry and developing Mitchell’s metaphors, we should summarize the status of such a poetic practice as pseudo-longevity, zombie-like functioning. Glück is able to use the energy forces of her predecessors; however, she cannot give them new life in different conditions. She is like a vampire, sucking on past poetry, digesting it into dead signs. Stevens’s deer are only carcasses. Glück’s poems mimic “dead images”, because thanatological scenes, images and figures transform any form of life into a prop room of dead conventions.

<sup>18</sup>Bartczak, “Zima w centrum: post-konfesyjny pat Louise Glück”.

<sup>19</sup>William John Thomas Mitchell, *Czego chcą obrazy?*, translated into Polish by Łukasz Zaremba (Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2013), 120. English version: *What do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 89-90.



Paradoxically it might seem that such a “universal” idea of writing poetry, with its different variants, is sometimes understood as classical/modernist poetry of culture, a dead museum piece which has a huge reproductive potential, as evidenced by its institutional appreciation. We should nonetheless remember that institutions which distribute “universal” values (reinforcing e.g., the idea that poetry is an anachronistic medium, which gives her a nostalgic allure, but also deprives it from undertaking current problems) and block “lively” images uphold the reproductive potential of various artistic and aesthetic concepts.

## Evaluative notions and aesthetic values – honesty

Using an evaluative notion which does not refer to a collection of notions and values developed by aesthetic concepts of art, but is used in order to reinforce aesthetic concepts of art – i.e., those which consider aesthetic values as basic criteria for evaluating a piece of art – is another interesting phenomenon. These aesthetic values are shaped during an aesthetic experience, and they were considered significant or distinguishing between art and non-art since connecting aesthetics with fine art<sup>20</sup>. I have to admit that these are the most interesting situations, as they testify to the constantly significant, not fully explicit definition processing of writing practices and attempts at negotiating what is considered to be literature (value).

Perhaps today thinking about historical-social production and transformation of evaluative notions is obvious, however we should bear in mind that not long ago (more or less 60 years ago) such notions still functioned in aesthetics ahistorically, as universal points of reference for evaluative practices. The process of dismantling traditional criteria for evaluating art and literature (i.e., reserving a separate set of values and judgments for art, inadequate for other cognitive-axiological systems) started around the 1960s. We could refer to e.g., feminist attempts at developing different rules for evaluating art, which ultimately was supposed to result in criticism of the aesthetic idea of evaluating art, reinforcing non-aesthetic values in evaluating art, and acceptance for evaluating art using ethical, political, or cognitive notions<sup>21</sup>. However, this is not a complete process, nor one which would take a regular course in all areas of art, environments, institutions – its diversification would surely refer to geographical-political diversification which we can recognize in artistic traditions, practices, and theories. However, currently there are increasingly more artistic projects which question the aesthetic character of art and literature – suffice it to mention various performances, bio-art, or art using tech-science. It even seems that due to the collective character of artistic practices evaluative strategies based on notions (authorship, originality, innovation) developed by modern aesthetics lose their functionality.

In the Facebook dispute in question honesty is a notion which – despite being outside the dictionary of aesthetic values – is seen as proof of high artistic-aesthetic quality of Glück’s poetry. Magda Heydel presents the question of honesty in the following way: “Glück’s poetry stems

<sup>20</sup>Monroe C. Beardsley, *W obronie wartości estetycznej* [In defense of aesthetic value], translated into Polish by Barbara Smoczyńska, in: *Estetyka w świecie. Wybór tekstów*, tom II [Aesthetics in the world. Selected texts, vol. II], edited by Maria Gołaszewska (Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 1986), 153–175.

<sup>21</sup>See Grzegorz Dziamski, “Estetyka wobec feminizmu” [Aesthetics versus feminism], *DYSKURS: Pismo Naukowo-Artystyczne ASP we Wrocławiu* 25 (2018): 58.

from the confession tradition, but her poems are furthest from emotional nudity or so-called «honesty», which we might associate with this term”<sup>22</sup>. Joanna Piechura writes that “Glück loses her honest and direct tone in translation – whereas it is in this tone where the power of her poetry lies”<sup>23</sup>. Bartczak writes about authenticity in the context of confessional tradition in more detail, taking into account the complex character of this category in the context of historical luggage which it carries: “Trying to modify the confessional formula, Glück leaves out any news which could weaken the authenticity category, e.g., that about the subject depending on language. Thus, she leaves out postmodernism and returns to Eliot, however changing his understanding of major organizational structures and reinterpreting his metaphysics”<sup>24</sup>.

All the participants of the dispute are convinced that authenticity/honesty figures need to be processed in such a way as to “be far from emotional exhibitionism” (Heydel), so that they “maintain a direct tone” (Piechura) or – what Bartczak does – to consider their historical supply base. There is no doubt: these are important notions, even though authenticity replaced with honesty bears the marks of ahistorical obviousness in texts by Piechura and Heydel. We should mention here the modern origin of authenticity. Michał Warchała reconstructs its tropes, highlighting their philosophical-anthropological dimension. Tensions affecting authenticity – communicative, rhetorical-linguistic, semiotic, psychoanalytical and its relationships with truth, illusion, pretense, fiction, fantasy – are responsible for, as one can expect, sustaining the interest in this Enlightenment idea (thanks to *Confessions* by Jean Jacques Rousseau), through Romanticism corrections, until today – when many still believe that the truth about who we are is still to be discovered. As explained by Warchała: “Authenticity as a certain moral postulate contains the traditional issues of reality and appearance. Longing for «authentic existence» is accompanied by constant fear of non-authenticity, pretense, affectation, and the manipulation associated with them”<sup>25</sup>. Remaining in the game of reshuffling the categories of authenticity, directness, honesty – the less openly entangled in illusion, imagination, pretense, fantasy, the better – are still important criteria for evaluating a literary text. And yet it is difficult (especially after the semiotic turn) to evaluate artistic confessions with directness. Are evaluative practices actually taking place here? Or maybe we are dealing with the ritualistic upholding of empty critical gestures? It seems that Bartczak refers to a naïve understanding of authenticity, which does not incorporate awareness about the medium through which a given message is realized, when he criticizes Glück for wasting the achievements of her predecessors, among other American confessional poets. Considered more broadly, this would be a call for real work on understanding, usage, and production of (the values and meanings of) evaluative notions, rather than reproducing them, simulating critical decisions.

Critics who use the notion of honesty/authenticity in order to evaluate positively the value of a literary venture typically also believe that a work of art should be understood in terms of aesthetics. If we assume that aesthetic notions referring to aesthetic values are notions which

<sup>22</sup>Heydel.

<sup>23</sup>Joanna Piechura, “Wyznania, którym nie należy ufać. O poezji Louise Glück” [Confessions which are not to be trusted. On Louise Glück’s poetry], *Wizje*, 11.12.2020, <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/piechura-gluck>.

<sup>24</sup>Bartczak, “Zima w centrum: post-konfesyjny pat Louise Glück”.

<sup>25</sup>Michał Warchała, *Autentyczność i nowoczesność. Idea autentyczności od Rousseau do Freuda* [Authenticity and modernity. The idea of authenticity from Rousseau to Freud] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2006), 5–6.

construct aesthetic experiences, and that aesthetic experiences interfere with the sense of reality, going beyond the order of dominance and leading to a sensual “free game” (according to e.g. Jacques Rancière, a representative of Kant’s tradition)<sup>26</sup>, then authenticity as an artistic practice which constitutes a work of art (in conceptualizations which differentiate between art and non-art) should automatically take a form incorporating such effects as illusion, pretense, and mediation. However, this is not the case in the dispute over Glück’s poetry. Honesty/authenticity are used here as categories (with reservations) which obviously justify the value of poems in the same way as we justify liking honest people. At most, an artistic utterance is distinguished from other forms of communication due to its “emotional oversharing”.

Such a conceptualization of honesty/authenticity – showing that aesthetic values are tied with cognitive, ethical, or existential values – is one step away from dispelling doubts regarding how to evaluate artistic practices which are examples of activism, a specific political idea, or experiment with untypical materials, and as such do not subject to aesthetic evaluations.

There is no need for hierarchical differentiations between evaluation referring to aesthetic criteria and evaluation based on moral, ideological, political, cognitive criteria; there is no need to argue whether a work of art can be evaluated considering only non-aesthetic values – every value is in debt to every other value.

The dynamics of evaluative notions is connected to the process of producing values by artists. In other words, if Małgorzata Lebda, a poet herself, considers running along the Vistula River an artistic-poetic activity, which is directly connected with her books, should these books be evaluated from the perspective of the value of that water performance? We could also ask: where in this project are the values we want to notice and appreciate, framing them with appreciation practices? How should we evaluate them?

Evaluative notions have always referred to aesthetic categories and values in a mixed way, which is especially evident when we consider individual examples, such as the case of honesty. It is important because in discussions about evaluating engaged artistic forms which are at the intersection of craftsmanship and activism, it is possible to use history of artistic forms and talk about aesthetic experiences. And vice versa: we should not be afraid that the perspective of aesthetic valuation will significantly extend with non-aesthetic values when evaluating a piece considered a model representative of the formalist-aesthetic concept of art.

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Obviously, this case study is not an exhaustive review of ways of producing evaluative notions. Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s postulate to introduce a systematic reflection of the rich and complex evaluative practices seems to deserve some consideration. She explains the lack of studies in valuation of literature, which is surprising in the light of theories accentuating

<sup>26</sup>Jacques Rancière, *Estetyka jako polityka* [The Politics of Aesthetics], translated into Polish by Julian Kutyla, Paweł Mościcki (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2007), 21–39.

mostly interpretative aspects of research. She also points out the basic consequence of the decline in studies in valuation and values of literature:

[...] literary evaluation is not merely an aspect of formal academic criticism but a complex set of social and cultural activities central to the very nature of literature has been obscured, and an entire domain that is properly the object of theoretical, historical, and empirical exploration has been lost to serious enquiry<sup>27</sup>.

This loss, which has also happened in Polish literary criticism, is responsible for the lack of discussion about processes of producing values and working with them: processing, circulating, re-evaluating. However, these issues seem to be having a comeback in literary criticism and theory, which is unsurprising given that more and more artistic activities are facing us with the problem of producing and distributing (aesthetic-political) values.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>27</sup>Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value. Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 23.

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# KEYWORDS

honesty

evaluative notions

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**ABSTRACT:**

The paper is a reflection about ways in which notions related to valuation function in literary criticism, focusing on processes of constructing, consolidating, and exchanging notions in socio-cultural circulation. Based on essays by, among others, Kacper Bartczak and Natalia Malek, who have different opinions about Louise Glück's poetry, such notions as universality, honesty, female writing are considered.

*aesthetic value*

**exchange**

POETRY

*non-aesthetic categories of valuation*

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# What Does Your Subject Do?

On the

Contradictory History  
of the Lyrical Subject

Marta Koronkiewicz

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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 associations<sup>1</sup>.

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 used<sup>2</sup>.

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”<sup>3</sup>. 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”<sup>4</sup>) 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*

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

<sup>2</sup> Nasiłowska, 9.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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 construct<sup>5</sup> (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”<sup>6</sup>). 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 traces<sup>7</sup>. 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”<sup>8</sup>; 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)<sup>9</sup>. 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:

<sup>5</sup> 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).

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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>).

<sup>9</sup> 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”<sup>10</sup>

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 utterance<sup>11</sup>.

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

<sup>10</sup>Aleksandra 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.

<sup>11</sup>Marian 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 practices<sup>12</sup>. 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...<sup>13</sup>

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 image<sup>14</sup>.

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 work<sup>15</sup>, 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"<sup>16</sup> 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":

<sup>12</sup>Płachecki, 288.

<sup>13</sup>Płachecki, 285.

<sup>14</sup>Płachecki.

<sup>15</sup>See 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).

<sup>16</sup>Płachecki, 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 nature<sup>17</sup>.

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".<sup>18</sup> 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

<sup>17</sup>Płachecki, 294.

<sup>18</sup>Zawadzki, 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]<sup>19</sup>

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".<sup>20</sup> 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".<sup>21</sup> 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

<sup>19</sup>Piotr 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).

<sup>20</sup>Joanna 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.

<sup>21</sup>Grądziel-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.<sup>22</sup> 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?<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Płachecki, 288.

<sup>23</sup>Jerzy 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 about<sup>24</sup>.

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 interpretations<sup>25</sup>. 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

<sup>24</sup>Jarniewicz.

<sup>25</sup>Aldona 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 reception<sup>26</sup>, 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]*)<sup>27</sup>. 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-like<sup>28</sup>; it wants to be a full-fledged participant of the public debate<sup>29</sup>; 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

<sup>26</sup>Following 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).

<sup>27</sup>“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.

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

<sup>29</sup>Cf. 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](mailto:m.e.koronkiewicz@gmail.com). |

# Romanticism as a “Travelling” Notion of Literary Criticism. Discourse about Poetry after 1956

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## 1. Literary-historical categories in literary criticism

In the history of twentieth-century literary criticism there is a clear (maybe even ritualistic) regularity in terms of returning to some discussions to notions which are seemingly outdated, incapacious, insufficient. The discussion about classicism and romanticism taking place in completely different social, political, and artistic conditions from the origi-

nal nineteenth-century dispute, is one such example of a ritual. Many significant semantic changes, relocations and shifts within historical-literary notions which originally referred to nineteenth-century literary phenomena have resulted from this trend, leading to diluting their proper meaning. Literary criticism has thus temporarily recontextualized these notions, giving them new meaning depending on current attempts at establishing dominance in the literary field. In this paper I would like to consider this phenomenon, which constituted the basis of manifestos initiating important discussions stemming from political transformations in the second half of the 20th century. Following 1956, the dispute about vision and equalization initiated by Jerzy Kwiatkowski's text, published during a political thaw in "Życie Literackie" [Literary life] in 1958, was an important discussion about the shape of the poetic field in the new political reality. The text was one of the first significant attempts at organizing the literary field in a new social and political reality, using the opposition of romanticism and classicism in order to set the axis of the discussion (*contraria*) and to name, characterize, organize or appreciate (or disavow) current literary phenomena. Several factors contributed to that special (over)presence of this opposition in post-war Poland, such as the party's politics and attempts at seizing the "romantic legacy"<sup>1</sup> (especially its national version<sup>2</sup>), atmosphere of a return to romanticist revisions of the interwar period, which constituted an important point of reference<sup>3</sup>, or new historical-philosophical programs which comprised new attempts at characterizing traditions

<sup>1</sup> See Anna Artwińska, *Poeta w służbie polityki. O Mickiewiczu w PRL i Goethem w NRD* [A poet in the service of politics. On Mickiewicz in People's Poland and Goethe in GDR] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> It should be stressed that even until the end of the 19th century the cult of romanticism was strengthened and inspired a lot of interest. As explained by Andrzej Waśko who presented the views of Ignacy Matuszewski and Zygmunt Wasilewski on the romanticist legacy of modernism: "They both assumed that romanticist poetry – especially Mickiewicz's and Słowacki's – was absolutely crucial for Polish culture from the turn of the 20th century. This idea was common at the time – since we are talking about the peak of their cult started by Mickiewicz's funeral at Wawel in 1890, and continued by erecting his statues in Warsaw and Cracow (1898), as well as a new wave of fascination with Słowacki in Young Poland – and the two critics elaborated on it and justified it in original, yet different ways. Matuszewski dubbed modernism *neoromanticism*, treating the two terms synonymously (Andrzej Waśko, "Sztuka i czyn. Dwie modernistyczne interpretacje romantyzmu – Ignacy Matuszewski i Zygmunt Wasilewski" [Art and act. Two modernist interpretations of romanticism – Ignacy Matuszewski and Zygmunt Wasilewski], in: *Wizje romantyzmu w literaturze i publicystyce polskiej* [Visions of romanticism in Polish literature and journalism], edited by Maciej Urbanowski, Andrzej Waśko [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Księgarnia Akademicka, 2020]). More pronounced attempts at revision started to emerge in early 20th century. The question about romanticism was oftentimes political, related to constructing historical narratives. As Maciej Urbanowski observed, "before 1914 it was the political and literary right that dominated among anti-romanticists, especially in France, but also in Poland – this was no longer the case following 1918, in the Second Polish Republic" (Maciej Urbanowski, "Antyromantyczne rewizje w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym: Miller, Boy, Gombrowicz" [Anti-romanticist revisions in the interwar period: Miller, Boy, Gombrowicz], in: *Wizje romantyzmu w literaturze i publicystyce polskiej* [Visions of romanticism in Polish literature and journalism], 64). Pointing out to the history of assimilating various elements of romanticist traditions in Polish poetry, Urbanowski stresses that early 20th-century revisions aimed "not at rejecting romanticism as such, «liquidating» it, but at revision in its etymological sense, i.e. «looking again», with additional meanings/intentions: «examinations», «inquiries»" (Urbanowski, 65).

<sup>3</sup> In 1958 Andrzej Stawar stated that romanticism was "a social religion" in the interwar period, a foundation for education, and that it permeated customs. It was conceptualized as a political force for education. Polemics with romanticism sometimes meant polemics with the Sanation government and its dominating discourse (Urbanowski, 68). Revisiting interwar disputes was still common, especially that those reevaluations had a varied character and were made from different artistic positions (among others postmodernist, Skamander, generation 1910), as well as ideological and political (Urbanowski, 67).

of romanticism<sup>4</sup> and classicism<sup>5</sup> in Polish culture. Almost a decade later Stanisław Barańczak based his program on the dichotomy of classicism and romanticism, publishing *Nieufni i zadufani* [The distrustful and the conceited] (his poetic program, first published in 1967) which he incorporated in a collection of essays published under the same title in 1971<sup>6</sup>. Just as Kwiatkowski used the notion of “vision”, Barańczak employed “distrust” for defining the characteristics of contemporary romanticism. That division returned yet again soon after the 1989 political transformation in attempts at a critical-literary organization of post-1989 poetic phenomena in Poland. In 1995 Karol Maliszewski published a program paper *Nasi klasycyści, nasi brabarzyńcy* [Our classicists, our barbarians], consciously renewing the century-long dispute and proposing – one more time – a simplified, dichotomized typology of poetic phenomena, this time opposing classicists with poets-barbarians. This is how the romanticist tradition returns in the second half of the 20th century as “visionary” poetry (Kwiatkowski), poetic “distrust” (Barańczak), or “barbarianism” (Maliszewski), treated synonymously in regard to loosely understood romanticism. What is significant, critics who decided to reuse these categories as critical-literary ones consciously refer to earlier manifestos in which they were employed – Barańczak rejects Kwiatkowski’s perspective, proposing his own classification, whereas Maliszewski refers to Barańczak’s manifesto in terms of structure and notions (barbarism as “distrust”), at the same time applying new meaning to the classicism-romanticism dichotomy. Interestingly, romanticism is presented as the positive tradition, whereas negative phenomena are labeled as “classicist” in all manifestos highlighting that dichotomy via historical-literary categories.

It is thus impossible to establish constant, accepted meanings for those two notions, which would always refer to specific aesthetic and ideological systems – it is not my goal either, since

<sup>4</sup> Academic discourse was also significant. In 1970s several important books were published, such as *Legenda romantyczna i szydery* [Romanticist legend and taunters] (Marta Piwińska, *Legenda romantyczna i szydery* [Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1973]), or Maria Janion’s theses about romanticist imagination and romanticism as a paradigm of contemporary culture, outlined e.g. in her 1975 *Gorączka romantyczna* [Romanticist fever]. Romanticism appears not only in theoretical, philosophical, and historical works, but it is also declared in poetic programs, e.g. a neoromantic program by Konfederacja Nowego Romantyzmu [Confederation of New Romanticism], which inspired harsh criticism both from contemporary poetic groups and from literary historians (Leszek Szaruga, *Literatura i życie. Ważniejsze wątki dyskusji literackich 1939-1989* [Literature and life. Key issues in literary discussions] [Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2001], 118).

<sup>5</sup> These dichotomies are simultaneously considered by authors of neoclassicism programs (Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, *Czym jest klasycyzm: Manifesty poetyckie* [What is classicism: Poetic manifestos] [Warszawa: Państwowy instytut Wydawniczy, 1967]), and later in many texts by Przybylski, e.g. *To jest klasycyzm* [This is classicism] (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1978); *Orientacja Poetycka Hybrydy* [Hybrid Poetic Orientation] was another declaratively classicist option, criticized by Barańczak.

<sup>6</sup> Stanisław Barańczak, “Nieufni i zadufani. Rzecz o walce romantyków z klasykami w poezji najmłodszej” [The distrustful and the conceited. On the dispute between romanticists and classicists in modern poetry], *Nurt* 10 (1967). Among others, Marzena Woźniak-Łabieniec wrote about his project: “However, Barańczak does not try to participate in the fight for imagination, which was already dying out at the time. He applies his own evaluative meanings to those terms. He opposes the dogmatic classicism of *Orientacja Poetycka Hybrydy* with linguism, i.e. dialectic romanticism. Linguism allows to unmask language, it reveals «objective contradictions within it, its ambivalence, which concerns not only meanings, but also consequences in terms of worldview». Dialectic romanticism unmasks «antinomies of the existing order of things from the perspective of their potential synthesis». Marzena Woźniak-Łabieniec, “Lekcja Barańczaka. *Nieufni i zadufani* po latach” [Barańczak’s lesson. *Nieufni i zadufani* revisited], *Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis* 13 (2010): 333.



the proper meaning of those two categories can be read only by analyzing the context in which they appear every time. In spite of structural similarities between manifestos based on the classicism-romanticism dichotomy (to which I will return later in this text), there are significant differences on the program level often reflecting critics' individual approaches, not limited to expressing postulates about poetry – a politically unconscious collection of expressed (open inexplicitly) assumptions, and actions for a given agenda.

Considering the complexity of contexts in which the two notions functioned throughout the history of literary criticism (especially poetry), I am going to analyze three texts which display a systematic character of this critical-literary debate, as well as key solutions regarding rhetorical strategies used in order to dominate or achieve a visible position in poetry.

Among others, Michał Głowiński, Kazimierz Wyka (to whom Kwiatkowski referred to as his "only comrade in arms"<sup>7</sup>), Julian Przyboś, Bohdan Drozdowski, Włodzimierz Maciąg, Tadeusz Różewicz and Jan Brzękowski wrote in answer to Kwiatkowski's text. Agata Stankowska saw his appreciation of lyrical imagination as "a synecdoche of social freedom", i.e., seeking new space for poetry, in the imagination lyrics trend. The need and attempt to find new forms of expression and content were noticed (and appreciated, also by such critics as Głowiński or Maciąg) in texts which argued with Kwiatkowski<sup>8</sup>.

The opposition of classicism and romanticism in Kwiatkowski's text is recontextualized; in the discussion initiated by Kwiatkowski it functions as a dichotomy relating to tensions within the avant-garde and the traditions it shaped in Poland. Both romanticist and classicist poetics are described as tensions between the Kraków avant-garde and the Second avant-garde. Kwiatkowski understands the titular vision as imagination, oneiric poetics, which would be most similar to expressionism or surrealism. The "equalization" situated on the classicist line is a remnant of the Kraków Avant-garde, which needs to be rejected. Kwiatkowski refers to Peiper's pre-war manifestos, and finally he attacks Przyboś (literally writing that this attack against him is *de facto* a fight for people's hearts, bitterly and ironically summarizing that this is not the way to the future). So how does Kwiatkowski incorporate the two notions into his discussion? The whole paper is organized by one quote from Peiper's *Poezja jako budowa* [Poetry as construction] from the book of poems *Nowe Usta* [New Lips]:

<sup>7</sup> Agata Stankowska, "Wizja przeciw równaniu". *Wokół popaździernikowego sporu o wyobraźnię twórczą* ["Vision against equalization". On the post-October dispute over creative imagination] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2013), 130. Military metaphors are among the most interesting characteristics of Kwiatkowski's discussion. See Sonia Nowacka, "Hiperbola, metafora, amplifikacja. Strategie retoryczne manifestów krytycznoliterackich na przykładzie artykułu Wizja przeciw równaniu Jerzego Kwiatkowskiego" [Hyperbole, metaphor, amplification. Rhetorical strategies of critical-literary manifestos on the example of Jerzy Kwiatkowski's paper Vision against equalization (in press)].

<sup>8</sup> Stankowska also notices a certain originality of Kwiatkowski's program, writing that "«Aesthetics of freed vision», unlike any other aesthetics at the time (i.e. 1958) parallel to poetic dictions («poetic morality», «appeal to tradition», «linguistic poetry»), may have constituted an artistic equivalent of transformations in social consciousness" (Stankowska, 11–29).

Writing about similarities between contemporary new poetry and classicism, Tadeusz Peiper employs a negative definition of this similarity: “There is no doubt that those who creatively oppose romanticism thus approach certain classicist stances, for romanticism opposed classicism, and there must be a similarity between two opposites of the same idea”.

This is how the second antagonist of the dispute is outlined: romanticism. Using Julian Krzyżanowski’s theory of exchange of literary trends and his graph based on two alternating sinusoids, correlatively going up and down – it is clear that the sinusoid of classicism, in this case: avant-garde and post-avant-garde – is on the same level at the moment as it was when Peiper’s anti-romanticist manifesto was written. The difference is that back then the line started to go up, and today – the line starts to go down. The peak has already been reached. Everything indicates that new romanticism should enter the realm of poetry. Is it emerging? Is it already here?<sup>9</sup>

Stankowska, considering the role of this manifesto in literature following the Gomułka political thaw, concluded that it had a significant strategic meaning for renewing the discussion about the inter-war avant-garde, at the same time observing that the decision to revisit the dispute between “romanticism” and “classicism” was a symbolic departure from socialist realism’s poetics.

Announcing *de nomine* a new stage of the fight between romanticists and classicists, Kwiatkowski *de facto* renews the dispute between the followers of constructivist and the followers of surreal variants of creationism, known from the interwar period, in a new historical and aesthetic context. Kwiatkowski sees the latter as the best antidote to socialist realism’s reductions<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, Kwiatkowski actually uses the whole rhetorical machine and renewed dispute for expressing his own political, ideological postulates, for discussing possible alternatives to socialist aesthetics.

As has been said, Wyka agreed with Kwiatkowski’s basic conclusions, although he criticized him for using Krzyżanowski’s sinusoid, instead proposing “spiral movement”, referring to texts by Karol Irzykowski, and (earlier) Jean-Baptiste Vico. However, Kwiatkowski seems to be convinced of this tradition of thinking about literary trends. In the fourth part of his text (out of five) he refers to Maurycy Mochnacki, stating that they are still up to date, based on “the rule of alternating literary trends, assuming the existence of a dialectal law of thesis and antithesis in history of art”<sup>11</sup>. The belief in such dialecticality of trends and developments was characteristic for Kwiatkowski’s text, however, the notion of dialectics in the context of romanticism was later used also by Barańczak, slightly redirecting his understanding of the two notions towards his own vision of literature.

<sup>9</sup> Stankowska, 73–74.

<sup>10</sup> Stankowska, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Stankowska, 88.

### 3. Romanticism as distrust

Barańczak used these notions in a similar way in 1967, which was both when he debuted as a poet and published his program paper *Nieufni i zadufani*<sup>12</sup>. Barańczak rejected Kwiatkowski’s interpretation of romanticist and classicist traditions *expressis verbis*, claiming that:

Kwiatkowski’s concessions for naïve (anarchic) romanticism clash with rather narrowly understood positivist proposals of the present book, which are limited to “dialectic romanticism”<sup>13</sup>.

In order to reject poetics which were earlier written over romanticism and classicism, Barańczak needs to nuance his understanding even further. He also refers to the sinusoid in intellectual and aesthetic trends, but he does not argue with the concept of alternating trends – he only observes that the pace of these alternations becomes faster in the 20th century:

Trustfulness. It is a ghostly symptom of classicizing (understood in a certain way) of 1960s young poetry, conceptualizing its wave of classicist trends in literature, which come in cycles<sup>14</sup>.

Barańczak elaborates on this in a footnote:

[...] I need to stress in advance that the basic understanding does not overlap with, or rather has little to do with how R. Przybylski, J.M. Rymkewicz and others understand this word. I would classify Zbigniew Herbert, whom Przybylski considers to be among major representatives of classicism in Polish poetry, as a typical dialectic romanticist (due to such characteristics as cognitive skepticism, irony, or a critical approach to tradition)<sup>15</sup>.

This passage reveals several issues: the fluidity of what is hidden behind the discussed notions, and the “distrust” category, crucial for Barańczak, which he identifies with dialectic

<sup>12</sup>See Dariusz Pawelec, “Spór nie tylko o poezję. O narodzinach świadomości pokoleniowej Nowej Fali” [A dispute about more than poetry. On the emergence of New Wave’s generational consciousness], in: *Powinna być nieufnością? Nowofalowy spór o poezję* [It should be distrust. New wave dispute about poetry], edited by Sylwia Panek (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2020), 13-54; Dariusz Pawelec, *Poezja Stanisława Barańczaka. Reguły i konteksty* [Stanisław Barańczak’s poetry. Rules and contexts] (Katowice: „Śląsk”, 1992).

<sup>13</sup>Stanisław Barańczak, *Nieufni i zadufani: romantyzm i klasycyzm w młodej poezji lat sześćdziesiątych* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo, 1971), 12–13.

<sup>14</sup>Barańczak, *Nieufni i zadufani*, 13.

<sup>15</sup>Barańczak, *Nieufni i zadufani*, 13.

romanticism<sup>16</sup>. Barańczak tries to show that romanticism is erroneously associated with sentimentalism, that it contains dialectical thinking, distrust (for the subject of poetry, for reality), which is why – among other things – Barańczak sees linguistic poetry as dialectic. Eventually Barańczak details his own classification of trends, distinguishing two versions of classicism and romanticism each:

1. Dogmatic classicism, which takes idealizing order as reality (thanks to referring to e.g., metaphysics, seen as a specific literary period, like in classicism),
2. Skeptical or “huge” classicism, consciously imposing idealizing order on reality, as a postulate rather than a factual situation,
3. Anarchic (naïve) romanticism, which peters out in unmasking contradictions, accepting chaos as a necessary state of literary and non-literary reality,
4. Dialectic romanticism, unmasking antinomies of existing order of things from the perspective of their possible synthesis.

Let us be clear: the present book first of all accepts the indisputable superiority of classical over naïve skepticism, and secondly – of dialectic romanticism over skeptical classicism. And it is dialectic romanticism – as a specific form of cognitive thinking – that will be treated as the main positive protagonist of this book<sup>17</sup>.

Barańczak tries to legitimize his position with historiosophy – he shows that “dialectic romanticism” is not only inevitable, but also correct, and undermining that postulate equals negating the sense of literature in general. He uses a moralizing tone:

It is at this moment when we must not forget that literature teaches a specific way of thinking, that it impacts non-literary reality. If we agree about that – and if someone did not, they would deny literature its *raison d'être* – we also need to notice a bigger value of literature that teaches critical thinking, which is not subjugated by mass hypnoses, equally considering all contradictory arguments<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> The way Barańczak understood dialectics is a separate, yet noteworthy issue – positioning his notion apparatus within the Marxist system was an ambiguous decision. As Andrzej Skrendo observed: “Barańczak admits to his Marxism in only one of his books, the first one – in *Nieufni i zadufani*, where Marxism constitutes the supply base for “dialectic romanticism”. Forming this concept, Barańczak doubtlessly wanted to set a trap for those who favored the official cultural politics of People’s Poland: if you are dialecticians – he told them – you will also use dialectics against yourselves. Which, of course, was impossible” (Andrzej Skrendo, “Stanisław Barańczak: widma poezji” [Stanisław Barańczak: specters of poetry], *Teksty Drugie 2* [2014]: 297). Later Barańczak distanced himself from Marxism, which he mostly associated with the politics of People’s Poland’s government. However, on the stage of creating the concept of “dialectic romanticism” it is clear that Barańczak was not interested in Marxist dialectics – he treated it only as another rhetorical tool, which did not point out to the intellectual context of poetry postulated by him, but rather (implicitly) constituted a tool for criticizing the order of power. Thus it could be said that in terms of rhetoric there is a difference between what Barańczak suggests, and what he ultimately puts into practice.

<sup>17</sup> Barańczak, *Nieufni i zadufani*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Barańczak, *Nieufni i zadufani*, 19.

Barańczak uses sophism, persuasive context, deliberately using *petition principi*; he also uses *antisagoge* for showing not only hypothetical situations, but also their negative moral consequences (“and if someone did not, they would deny literature its *raison d’être*). The style is also noteworthy – cool, seemingly objective, academic, and at the same time clearly focused on persuasion and proving that the author is right (also morally). In spite of many similarities to Kwiatkowski’s text, Barańczak’s argumentation is based on different arguments – for both authors the stake is political, but in Barańczak’s text it has a directly axiological, extratextual dimension. Ultimately Barańczak appreciates didactic literature, which is also ethical as it shapes specific attitudes towards the extraliterary world. It is not about a struggle between different poetics, but about writers’ attitudes to the government and political situation, which can be seen clearly in the subchapter suggestively entitled *Piekło łatwizny* [No-brainer hell]. When describing the structures of a literary field, he uses metaphors based on irony, antagonism, and exaggeration (*amplification*). For Barańczak, all “facilitations” which act “on behalf of any interest, except for the well understood interest of literature and society, constitute hell and its circles”<sup>19</sup>.

Thus, Barańczak talks about a socio-literary situation, and especially institutional publishing pathways and cooperation between authors and the government, rather than just about poetics. Then he boldly states that being an outsider is often the only way not to lose respect for oneself. According to Barańczak, acceptance of “existing order” leads to schlock and the downfall of literature. Continuing the metaphor on which he based a part of his discussion, he presents subsequent circles of “No-brainer hell”, finally stating that:

No-brainers inspire gullibility. They cause atrophy of vigilant thinking, shape a young poet’s worldview and style in the spirit of passively accepting the world and everything that they are asked to believe in<sup>20</sup>.

It is stated repeatedly throughout the whole text that literature teaches or educates society. It is also significant that Barańczak focuses on the extraliterary world far more than Kwiatkowski did, understanding “distrust” as a tool which is only partially political, a tool for shaping specific, critical attitudes; this notion carries a postulate of oppositional resistance against the government. This is the criterion which Barańczak uses for determining poetics, and he motivates it directly with the social factor:

[...] it is obvious that literature needs to create or co-create certain myths of a “higher order”, integrating all social groups with such values as internationalism, humanistic anthropocentrism, social ethics, specific political ideology and vision of culture. However, the point is that classicism creating such “huge myths” is unable to do it convincingly, if conditions of a specific historical moment make it impossible. And I daresay that such conditions exist at the moment; it is at this very moment that we cannot forget that literature TEACHES a certain way of thinking<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>19</sup>Barańczak, *Nieufni i zadufani*, 34.

<sup>20</sup>Barańczak, *Nieufni i zadufani*, 39.

<sup>21</sup>Barańczak, *Nieufni i zadufani*, 17.

Following the first publication of his program in 1967, Barańczak expressed the same ideas in later publications and speeches, e.g., in his 1970 manifesto *Parę przypuszczeń na temat poezji współczesnej* [Several assumptions about modern poetry] where he declared that poetry “should be distrust”.

Just as Kwiatkowski’s text resulted from social loosening following the 1956 political thaw, Barańczak’s program texts correlated with the events of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The next analyzed manifesto also emerged in the context of socio-political events and debates about post-transformation poetry.

#### 4. Romanticism as barbarism

The motif of dichotomy in literature and presenting romanticism as a positive tradition continued to appear in the critical-literary discourse after the 1989 political transformation, in debates surrounding “bruLion” [note-paper] poetry.

What is important is that Karol Maliszewski’s text referring to this dichotomy is significantly convergent with and similar to the construction of Barańczak’s text. Maliszewski details (also visually, in the form of paragraphs with a list of characteristics which comprise each category) how he conceptualizes classicism and romanticism (in this case, barbarian poetics), pointing out to similarities (however, he is not as focused on morality as Barańczak), referring to the distrust category (although he understands it differently from Barańczak):

Classicizing: Yes (to this world), moderation, trustfulness, “primacy of forms”, faith in history (including history of literature), antirealism and objectivism, primacy of “old age”: finding oneself in culturally attested forms, obvious authorities, “tradition suggests”, illusion of striving towards perfection (following a model), highlighting commonality, i.e. evolution of a timeless community, balance based on legit values, watching being (descriptiveness), pulchritude, rhythmism, and lightening anthropological horizon: metaphysically positive. Faith in encore-reality, based on mediated data. Linguistic passeism – treating language as a medium preserving timelessly-symbolic consistency.

Barbarising: No (to this world), no moderation, distrust, “primacy of content”, conviction that history (including history of literature) is fiction – it is a history of different expressions, subsequent confessions, presentation of various entities, beings; realism and sensualism, primacy of freshness and newness (discoveries), ambiguous authorities, exposing individuality, present, participating in being (testimony), despair accompanying seeking for and testing values, turpism, crippled rhythm, distrustful rhyme (or at least far or incomplete)<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>22</sup>Karol Maliszewski, “Nasi klasycyści, nasi barbarzyńcy” [Our classicists, our barbarians], in: *Barbarzyńcy, klasycyści i inni. Spory o młodą poezję w latach 90.* [Barbarians, classicists, and others. Disputes about young poetry in 1990s], edited by Marcin Jaworski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2018), 170.

Of course, repeating the division of literature using those two categories is conscious; Maliszewski explains his choice with problems with defining and "complexity of postmodern world":

I believe that handy tools which come in pairs such as romanticism-classicism, classicism-realism, avant-garde-classicism, etc. have lost their semantic expressiveness, because the liveliest matter of modern poetry is a tangled mixture which does not subjugate to rigorous positioning in such characterized "places" of interpretation, poles of dichotomy<sup>23</sup>.

On the one hand he points out to the ineffectiveness of the categories he selected, and on the other – he reaches for a discursive mechanism well known to criticism. Also, the *credo* from the last paragraph refers to another program text by Barańczak, a continuation of *Nieufni i zadufani* entitled *Parę przypuszczeń na temat poezji współczesnej* (1970).

Maliszewski:

#### **Credo**

I prefer barbarians. They are closer to bloodstream. And they do not need much to be happy. A bit of despair in a country with no rules. They watch questions related to solidarity through thick windows of bookshops, smeared with bird shit<sup>24</sup>.

Barańczak:

1. It should be distrust.
  
6. This is where it needs to start. From distrust, which will pave the way for what we all need. I mean – this is nothing new, agreed, but we have almost forgotten what we should care about – I mean, of course, the truth<sup>25</sup>.

Thanks to the seemingly similar structural basis of the two manifestos the program differences become clearer. Maliszewski expresses his *credo* in a personal way (strong "I", personal, first-person narration), stressing privacy, expressing every-day life, experience, individuality, freedom of expression. Even though Barańczak also uses first-person narration, he directly addresses some undefined community, a collective subject (first person plural), probably fellow citizens. His words resemble an appeal – he diagnoses a problem (crisis of values, truth, acceptance of existing order) and offers a solution, i.e., poetry serving ethics, poetics of distrust (which he calls dialectic romanticism).

<sup>23</sup>Maliszewski, 163.

<sup>24</sup>Maliszewski, 176.

<sup>25</sup>Stanisław Barańczak, *Etyka i poetyka* [Ethics and poetics] (Kraków: Znak, 2009), 394.

Maliszewski understands his positive (romanticist) program as a resignation from engagement, disenchantment with previous literary programs (including Barańczak's). And so instead of communality, there is individual experience ("in a country with no rules"), instead of society – individuals with their individuality, instead of the truth category – "despair accompanying seeking for and testing values".

What is also interesting is that just as Barańczak criticized Kwiatkowski's program in the 1960s, Maliszewski criticizes Barańczak in the final lines of his text ("They watch questions related to solidarity through thick windows of bookshops, smeared with bird shit"). Maliszewski consciously takes advantage of Barańczak's notions for the purpose of his own program, at the same time taking them over on a higher level – not just the dichotomized poetic field, but also Barańczak's category of distrust. One could say that even though indeed the program postulates underwent development, revisions and transformations in the second half of the 20th century, critical tools and gestures are unusually schematic. Romanticism and classicism functioned more as metaphors of poetic field clear for other critics, a rhetorically productive figure, yet at the same time leading to discussions which arbitrarily simplified the situation in this field.

## 5. Later career of notions

Have new tools for description emerged? In my opinion that discussion, although it had a rhetorical character *ad hoc*, and despite the fact that there are (justified) doubts regarding its contradictions-based argumentation, which stimulated the debate (at the same time raising the status of described poetry due to showing new phenomena in a broader perspective of a historical-literary process), proved unproductive in the long run – or it may even seem almost inevitable (Maliszewski's *casus*), necessary.

Although these categories still functioned in the discourse after 2000 (e.g., classicism in program declarations of poets such as Wencel and Klejnocki), there has been no major debate which would creatively engage the discussed notions; moreover, there are hardly any critics who treat this attitude seriously (after all, even Maliszewski stressed that he took up the topic even though those categories were insufficient). One could even say that so far, the importance of that historical-literary dichotomy has lost its (nonetheless impressive) impetus, and those categories have become unclear and blurred on the one hand, and on the other – obvious to such an extent that it is impossible to use them for an effective debate about new poetic phenomena. Of course, those notions never left the dictionaries of critics and poets dictionary – they are still in use, but Maliszewski's seems to be the last major program declaration in which they were supposed to reevaluate the situation of modern literature. Instead, references to the "incomprehensible poetry" category or issues related to representation or autonomy of a given work are more common. However, it is clear – especially in recent discussions – that the organizing character (which relies on historical-literary categories) is less important than ontology of a work of art (issues of autonomy, politics), the metacritical character (theoretical discussion) – i.e., referring to issues of choice and ontology of literature, and finally the theoretical (or anti-theoretical) dispute about styles of literature and critical attitude to a given



work. Additionally, the character of both criticism and critical debate has changed since 1990s – some critics are no longer interested in classifications and programs, resigning from extensive papers and reviews in favor of recommendations of books advertised by publishers (such reviews are for consumers, not readers). The traditional, professionalized critical-literary discourse (which exists in modern literary press and academic publications), which remains close to academia, resigns from classifying literature in terms of historical categories, turning towards analyses of smaller parts of the literary field or metacriticism<sup>26</sup>. On the one hand capitalist commodification of literature (and literary discourse) is not indifferent to criticism, and on the other – categories, evaluations and notions are affected by theoretical systems rooted in modern humanities. Although there have been no new, significant continuations within the romanticists/classicists dispute category since 2000, those notions are still used in artistic criticism and programs; interestingly, classicism seems to be referred to more often and willingly<sup>27</sup> (both by non-ironically declared “classicists” such as Przemysław Dakowicz, and by young authors who creatively use some elements of classicism, such as Radosław Jurczak)<sup>28</sup>. However, an analysis of the paths those notions took through poetry criticism of the second half of the 20th century shows the mechanism behind literary criticism, a certain critical-literary determinism resulting from its rhetoric, the *ad hoc* character and conflict between different concepts, which result from attempts at establishing dominance in the literary field, especially at critical moments which are accompanied by a sense that some epoch is ending (social, artistic, historical), and so new, dominating forms of poetic expressions should be codified, described, and established within them.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>26</sup>Professionalized critical-literary discourse is not indifferent to tools offered by modern humanities, so it is not surprising that instead of historical-literary categories, post-humanistic, post-secular, or eco-critical categories which are used for classifications. However, this shift from philology and literary traditions has consequences which deserve to be discussed in a separate paper.

<sup>27</sup>This would mean that it is difficult to find poets who are openly “non-normative”, whereas program neoclassicism typically contains romanticist historical ideas and postulates. Analyses of the history of usage of those notions reveal an interesting regularity – classicism in poetry functions independently of the “romanticism” category (in a way containing it within itself), whereas literary criticism uses both notions in a dichotomy, typically presenting the romanticist tradition as the positive one. However, due to a clear tendency to decentralize literary phenomena instead of centralizing and polarizing them, this dichotomy seems to be no longer productive and is clearly being superseded by new humanities discourses. See Andrzej Kaliszewski, *Nostalgia stylu: neoklasycyzm liryki polskiej XX wieku w krytyce, badaniach i poetykach immanentnych (w kontekście tradycji poetologicznej klasycyzmu)* [Style nostalgia: neoclassicism is Polish poetry in 20th century in criticism, studies and immanent poetics (in the context of classicist poetological tradition)] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2007).

<sup>28</sup>For a critical analysis of modern classicism, see e.g. Zbigniew Jazienicki, “Gorset starego oposa” [Corset of an old opossum], *Wizje*, 12.01.2020, <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/jazienicki-dakowicz/>. Jakub Skurtys referred to the inspiration with Miłosz’s diction and classicism postulated by Jurczak in his review of *Zakłady Holenderskie* [Dutch books] (Jakub Skurtys, “Przyszłość jest chmurą, przeszłość jest chwytem” [The future is a cloud, the past is a catch], *biBLioteka* [2020], <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/recenzje/przyszlosc-jest-chmura-przyszlosc-jest-chwytem/>).

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# KEYWORDS

## VISIONS AND EQUALIZATION

*dialectic romanticism*

### **ABSTRACT:**

The paper analyzes various ways of using historical-literary notions employed *ad hoc* by literary criticism in subsequent discourses over the second half of the 20th century. Three critical program texts which initiated debates about the role of poetry and dominating poetics after 1956 are analyzed. Similarities in terms of structures and strategies of poetry critics who referred to the romanticism/classicism dichotomy are identified, at the same time revealing significant program differences expressed using the same notions.

*post-1989 poetry*

## classicists and barbarians

### literary criticism

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# Extended Solidarity: A Feminist Reading of Anna Świrszczyńska's *Czarne Słowa*

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The poet must have a strong sense of connection with people, feel that they are a member of a great human community. They must be the throat of those who cannot speak.<sup>1</sup>

Anna Świrszczyńska

## Introduction: The Gender Effect

Discourse which takes into account the analysis of class antagonisms has disappeared from the conceptual map of literary criticism and from the conceptual map of feminist literary criticism. In the case of the latter, we are not so much concerned with the presence or absence of the category of social class as with the fact that the tools which have been developed by feminist critics since the 1970s are sometimes abused, insofar as analysis is reduced to thematic concerns only or to the ahistorical category of gender.

Feminist literary criticism is based on the assumption that not only gender but also all human creations, including literature, are socially constructed. The main goal of feminist literary criticism is to identify the mechanisms which make gender oppression an integral part of

<sup>1</sup> Anna Świrszczyńska, "Izba tortur, czyli moja teoria poezji" [Torture chamber, or my theory of poetry], *Kultura* 8 (1973): 3.

reproducing social inequalities in any given socio-economic system. As a practice of reading and interpretation, as emphasized by Krystyna Kłosińska, feminist literary criticism does not have a single “conceptual focus” but functions as “an all-encompassing position.”<sup>2</sup> This means that feminist criticism is not limited to reading literary texts from a gender perspective; indeed, it effectively functions as a political intervention. It aims to transform old cultural methods of constructing and strengthening social hierarchies, taking into account the question of gender. For this reason, feminist critical terms should transgress the dominant cultural analysis focused on the categories of exclusion and identity. Instead, they should pertain to all forms of social relations, primarily taking into account the material determinants of gender oppression.

This article attempts to reflect on how focusing on one identity category alone produces the so-called gender effect that Cora Kaplan calls “Pandora’s box of feminist criticism.”<sup>3</sup> I define the gender effect in a twofold manner: on the one hand, it brings to light the marginalized experience, and, on the other hand, it contextualizes it in a unifying narrative, focused on the category of identity which does not reflect the complexity of social relations. I believe that *Czarne słowa* [Black Words] (1967) – in my opinion, one of the most important collections of poems by Anna Świrszczyńska, which is a testament to not only the significance of her poetic program but also the complex political context of the 1960s – fell victim to the gender effect.<sup>4</sup>

*Czarne słowa* is undoubtedly one of the most enigmatic and, at the same time, least discussed books of poetry by Świrszczyńska. Critics usually read it through the prism of her 1972 *Jestem baba* [I am a Woman] collection. *Jestem baba* became a synecdoche for Świrszczyńska’s entire oeuvre and the interpretations that followed mainly concerned gender oppression. As a result, the questions of gender were emphasized in *Czarne słowa* or, respectively, critics mainly argued that the poems with the female “I” paved the way for Świrszczyńska’s later collections.

In my readings of *Jestem baba*, I showed how gender, as an inalienable analytical category, is transformed into a static identity construct, most often referring to the undifferentiated universal category of Woman and thus obscuring the category of social class.<sup>5</sup> While in the first half of the 1990s women scholars of Świrszczyńska used the recovered category of gender to challenge the balance of power in the literary field, especially in the context of the crisis in the field of social reproduction caused by the political transformation and the growing influence

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Krystyna Kłosińska, “Feministyczna krytyka literacka wobec pisania kobiet i jej pułapki” [Feminist literary critique of women’s writing and its pitfalls], *Fa-Art* 3 (2012): 3–13.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Cora Kaplan, “Pandora’s Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism”, in: *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), 148.

<sup>4</sup> This article does not provide a detailed interpretation of Anna Świrszczyńska’s *Czarne Słowa* [Black Words], as it focuses on the analysis of selected reading strategies in the reception of her work. I discuss the poetess’s book in more detail in the monograph *Wybuch wyobraźni. Poezja Anny Świrszczyńskiej wobec reprodukcji życia społecznego* [Explosive imagination. Reproduction of social life in the poetry of Anna Świrszczyńska] (in print).

<sup>5</sup> Katarzyna Szopa, “Poetka rewolucji. Anna Świrszczyńska i socjalistyczny projekt równości kobiet” [Poetess of the revolution. Anna Świrszczyńska and the socialist project of women’s equality], *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne* 2 (2018): 59–79; “Roses or Bread? Anti-Communist Narration in Feminist Readings of Anna Świrszczyńska’s Poetry”, *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 1 (2019): 72–92; “Babski przełom. Konstelacja tomu «Jestem baba» Anny Świrszczyńskiej” [Women’s breakthrough. The constellation of Anna Świrszczyńska’s *Jestem Baba* [I am a woman] collection], in: *Konstelacje krytyczne. T. 1: Teorie i praktyki* [Critical constellations. Vol. 1: Theories and Practices], ed. Dorota Kozicka, Monika Świerkosz, Katarzyna Trzeciak (Kraków: Universitas, 2020), 179–204.

of the Catholic Church with its conservative reproductive policy, later it became a dominant analytical category which obscured a much more nuanced picture of social relations found in Świrszczyńska's works. In this way, Świrszczyńska joined the ranks of poetesses associated with the apology of motherhood and female sexuality, and the critical focus of her poetry, especially as regards exposing and critiquing the order which reproduces social inequalities, disappeared from the critical and academic horizon. The category of "femininity" became dominant in criticism, obscuring a complex field of social tensions and conflicts.

This tendency, of course, did not only affect the reading of Świrszczyńska's poetry. This model of analysis became dominant in feminist theories as neoliberal ideology gained ground and, in this form, also infiltrated (not necessarily and not only feminist) Polish research. As Nancy Fraser writes:

Rejecting "economism" and politicizing "the personal", feminists broadened the political agenda to challenge status hierarchies premised on cultural constructions of gender difference. The result should have been to expand the struggle for justice to encompass both culture and economics. But the actual result was a one-sided focus on "gender identity" at the expense of bread and butter issues. Worse still, the feminist turn to identity politics dovetailed all too neatly with a rising neoliberalism that wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social equality. In effect, we absolutised the critique of cultural sexism at precisely the moment when circumstances required redoubled attention to the critique of political economy.<sup>6</sup>

I believe that if we adopt an interpretative optics which focuses solely on the category of gender, we fail to notice Świrszczyńska's well-thought-out ethical program rooted in left-wing and feminist emancipation policies of the 1960s and 1970s. I call this program extended solidarity and I define it as a way of creating a new kind of social bonds which are to transform the public into the common.<sup>7</sup>

## Universal Femininity

Many critics found *Czarne słowa* problematic, evidenced by the gaps in the history of its reception: when it was first published, the collection received only three short reviews and after 1989 it was read on the margins of Świrszczyńska's other works.

Critics often read *Czarne słowa* as a prelude to *Jestem baba*, marginalizing its original focus. Świrszczyńska's "black" poems were to pave the way for *Jestem baba*, as they heralded, as Włodzimierz Próchnicki wrote, "a different vision of womanhood; she is not an abstract cultural construct but someone who has worked all her life, given birth, screamed in pain and

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Fraser, "How feminism became capitalism's handmaiden - and how to reclaim it", *The Guardian* (14 Oct. 2013) (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/14/feminism-capitalist-handmaiden-neoliberal>).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ewa Majewska, "«Solidarność» i solidarność w perspektywie feministycznej. Od post-mieszcząńskiej sfery publicznej do solidarności globalnej" [*Solidarity» and feminist solidarity: From the post-bourgeois public sphere to global solidarity*], *Etyka* 48 (2014): 44.



pleasure, aged over time.”<sup>8</sup> The story of African women was read in terms of a stylization strategy. Stanisław Balbus concluded that the “sophisticated primitivism” of *Czarne słowa* “was not so much a manifestation of the author’s interest in exotic cultures as a way of presenting eroticism in a very bold manner. Stylization was meant to ‘tame’ the subject matter, to defy conventions.”<sup>9</sup> As a result, the African woman described by Świrszczyńska actually represented the Polish woman (Próchnicki wrote: “There is no difference between these women from Polish towns and villages and their African sisters described in *Czarne słowa*”<sup>10</sup>). However, as we read on, the latter also disappears, and the complex social situation presented in Świrszczyńska’s poetry gives way to dehistoricized “femininity.”

Some Świrszczyńska scholars further developed such interpretative frameworks after 1989. Almost all monographers argued that exotic stylizations in Świrszczyńska’s “black” collection were meant to make the themes that the poetess found important more attractive.<sup>11</sup> For Małgorzata Baranowska, African stylizations referred to “an abstract non-specific people;” the poems were meant to be “the key to one’s private reality;” respectively, she considered the black woman to be a “test woman” and the “first version” of a woman later developed in *Jestem baba*.<sup>12</sup> Renata Stawowy read this volume through the prism of the wrongdoings that women suffered “at the hands of men and conservative society.”<sup>13</sup> She argued that *Czarne słowa* “describes the life of a community organized in accordance with the old rules. The division of social roles is more rigid than in European civilization and the laws are crueler.”<sup>14</sup> Agnieszka Stapkiewicz also found in *Czarne słowa* universal femininity: “[f]ocusing on an African woman allowed the poetess to show the primal nature of childbirth (the female body touching the ground) but also to create a universal image of childbearing.”<sup>15</sup> Critics focused on the subordinate role of women and emphasized their limited agency and passivity. Stawowy argues:

Women in *Czarne słowa* perform the roles traditionally assigned to them: they give birth to children and take care of them, they prepare food. They do not complain; they accept everything life throws at them. They are defenseless against the laws of nature and against men who decide about their lives and deaths. There is no place for constructive rebellion. They can only, like the protagonist of *Kołysanka* [Lullaby], dream of death as a way out of the miseries of life, or at best ask questions that manifest the awakening of the female consciousness.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Włodzimierz Próchnicki, “Wejść w siebie. O poezji Anny Świrszczyńskiej” [Reflect on oneself: Anna Świrszczyńska’s poetry], *Życie Literackie* 10 (1986): 9.

<sup>9</sup> Stanisław Balbus, “Kobieta mówi o swoim życiu” [A woman talks about her life], *Twórczość* 8 (1972): 108.

<sup>10</sup> Próchnicki, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Renata Inbrant, *From Her Point of View: Woman’s Anti-World in the Poetry of Anna Świrszczyńska*, (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2007), 182–183; Agnieszka Stapkiewicz, *Ciało, kobiecość i śmiech w poezji Anny Świrszczyńskiej* [The body, femininity and laughter Anna Świrszczyńska’s poetry] (Kraków: Universitas, 2014), 33.

<sup>12</sup> Małgorzata Baranowska, “Pod czarną gwiazdą” [Under a black star], *Twórczość* 6 (1986): 77.

<sup>13</sup> Renata Stawowy, “Gdzie jestem ja sama”. *O poezji Anny Świrszczyńskiej* [‘Where I actually am.’ Anna Świrszczyńska’s poetry] (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 156.

<sup>14</sup> Stawowy, 156.

<sup>15</sup> Stapkiewicz, 170.

<sup>16</sup> Stawowy, 157.

Almost no one commented on the themes of combat and ritual dances of tribal warriors. Critics focused on oppressive relations between the sexes, motherhood and childbirth, as well as on the vision of women as a force of nature.<sup>17</sup> The questions closely related to the problem of the exploitation of reproductive labor described by the poet were reduced to universal experiences and read as a prelude to *Jestem baba*; the anti-colonial message of *Czarne słowa* was completely ignored.

Interestingly, this critical narrative has not changed in recent years. *Czarne słowa* is still read as an expression of universal femininity. Scholars still argue about the anti-colonial themes present in the book. While Jacek Dehnel emphasized that *Czarne słowa* “should be embedded in the postcolonial discourse,”<sup>18</sup> in one of the latest interpretations Ewa Janion stated that “poetic images [in *Czarne słowa*] focus on pre-colonial indigenous beliefs, and colonialism itself is not visible in the collection.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Piotr Mitzner not only ruled out the possibility of reading *Czarne słowa* through the prism of the history of colonialism but also suggested that the book should be critiqued from the perspective of postcolonial studies. Although in his reading Mitzner noticed the co-existence of indigenous and Christian beliefs, characteristic of colonized tribes, he nevertheless saw Świrszczyńska’s black poetry in terms of stylization only, insofar as it was pure “metaphysics, faith and magic.”<sup>20</sup>

Actually, the challenge posed by *Czarne słowa* stems from the fact that this book, contrary to what one might think, especially after reading *Jestem baba*, challenges the myth of male domination. Even if African women fall victim to men, the latter are not merely oppressors. More often than not they are shown as brave warriors, resisting some seemingly undefined external and destructive forces. This is evidenced by the poem *To jest walka ostatnia* [This is the last fight] which describes the tragic choices faced by the people living in the village: they have to choose between death by suicide or slavery. Yet Janion writes that this poem may be read in terms of “adhering to the fundamental principle of the patriarchal order in which men control the lives of women and children.”<sup>21</sup>

*Czarne słowa* was so difficult to interpret mainly because it presents a much more complex picture of reality which goes beyond the framework of gender relations. There is no clear polarization here, like the one we find in *Jestem baba*, which would make it possible to read the book only in terms of gender oppression. That is why, unlike previous scholars, I do not read

<sup>17</sup>As exemplified by two essays by Wioletta Bojda: *Kubistyczna Świrszczyńska* and *Tajemnice monstualnego ciała* (cf. Wioletta Bojda, “Kubistyczna Świrszczyńska” [Cubist Świrszczyńska], *Opcje* 1-2 [1996]: 18; Wioletta Bojda, “Tajemnice monstualnego ciała” [Secrets of the monstrous body], *Kresy* 3-4 [1996]: 77). Bojda reduced the complex image of social relations in *Czarne słowa* to the nature-culture dichotomy, associating African community with unformed matter.

<sup>18</sup>Jacek Dehnel, “Trzecia Świrszczyńska” [Third Świrszczyńska], *Dwutygodnik* 247 (2018), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/8026-trzecia-swirszczyńska.html?print=1>.

<sup>19</sup>Ewa Janion, “Mit, obrzęd i duchowość Afryki w «Czarnych słowach» Anny Świrszczyńskiej” [The myth, rite and spirituality of Africa in Anna Świrszczyńska’s *Czarne słowa*], in: *Boginie, bohaterki, syreny, pajęczycy. Polskie pisarki współczesne wobec mitów* [Goddesses, heroines, mermaids, spiders. Polish contemporary writers and myths], ed. Alessandro Amenta, Krystyna Jaworska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2020), 30.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Piotr Mitzner, “Maska afrykańska” [African mask], in: Anna Świrszczyńska, *Nienasycenie. Wiersze* [Insatiable: Poems], prefaced and edited by Eliza Kącka (Kraków: Universitas, 2021), 79–83.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Janion, 41.

*Czarne słowa* in terms of stylization whose goal is to make universal problems of human existence more attractive. I also do not read African stylizations as stories of universal femininity. The black woman is by no means, as Renata Ingbrant suggested, “a repressed aspect of the self – a source of universal, authentic femininity.”<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, Świrszczyńska writes about actual experiences: the slave labor of women grinding cassava; children and the elderly suffering from famine;<sup>23</sup> tribal warriors desperately struggling for freedom; communal beliefs and rituals; and the dramas and joys of individuals. The thesis that the poet used stylization in order to talk about universal problems is difficult to accept. I believe that Świrszczyńska scholars adopted such an interpretative perspective because they focused only on women’s oppression. However, such a generalizing interpretative key, with emphasis put on gender-based violence, obscures a broader and more complex picture of social relations found in *Czarne słowa*.

What has been completely ignored in *Czarne słowa* is the anti-colonial message – a radical critique of imperialist and capitalist policies. Świrszczyńska shows the lives of African women but she does not focus on the question of identity; rather, she emphasizes how the life of a rural community is organized. Therefore, reading Świrszczyńska either from a feminist or a postcolonial perspective would be another form of reductionism.<sup>24</sup> *Czarne słowa* is first and foremost a story of colonial violence, which shows how patriarchal and racial violence functions in colonial capitalism. This collection clearly shows the inextricable relationship between gender, race, and class. For this reason, I do not read it as an affirmation of identity but as an expression of the poetess’s solidarity with the disadvantaged, the successive generations of slaves “shackled in chains.” It demands a more comprehensive reading that will take into account different social relations as well as divisions and various forms of oppression which they nourish.

Contrary to what other interpreters of *Czarne słowa* have argued, I believe that the poetess presents the reader with a vision of a community that resists European invasion. This is evidenced by the genesis of this book. An inspiration for “black” poems may be found in Świrszczyńska’s unpublished play *Śmierć w Kongo* [Death in the Congo] (1963), which the poetess described back in 1962 as “perhaps the first contemporary Polish play about colonialism – the most important problem of our times.”<sup>25</sup> The play clearly alludes to the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the hero of the anti-capitalist and anti-colonial revolution who actively fought for the Congo’s independence.

<sup>22</sup>Ingbrant, 183.

<sup>23</sup>Famine is not brought by nature but by colonial policy. As Przemysław Wielgosz writes, in the pre-colonial period there were old economic systems which had strategies in place in the event of natural disasters; they were destroyed by imperial policies. Extensive storage systems and networks mean to help redistribute grain prevented famine. They fell victim to capitalist and market systems, which led to a humanitarian catastrophe. Cf. Przemysław Wielgosz, *Gra w rasy. Jak kapitalizm dzieli, by rządzić* [A game of races. How capitalism divides to rule] (Kraków: Karakter, 2021), 195.

<sup>24</sup>To read *Czarne słowa* only from a postcolonial perspective would be to duplicate the reading focused on identity categories. For example, Terry Eagleton wrote about reducing the postcolonial perspective to the form of culturalism, pointing in his discussion on the history of colonialism to the effects of shifting the focus from class conflict to cultural conflict. Cf. Terry Eagleton, “Postcolonialism and ‘postcolonialism’”, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 1,1 (1998): 24-26.

<sup>25</sup>Anna Świrszczyńska, “10 minut z Anną Świrszczyńską” [10 minutes with Anna Świrszczyńska], *Dziennik Polski* 247 (1962): 3.

## Materialist Feminist Criticism

I was inspired to write this article by my students—women and men—with whom we discussed Nancy K. Miller’s “Arachnologies” during our classes in the theory of interpretation. My students pointed out that Miller’s essay may be read in a simplified way, insofar as the emphasis may be placed on “searching for femininity in the text” and the metaphor of weaving. What was not mentioned in the stories of Arachne, Athena and Ariadne described by Miller was, in fact, their class. Athena is a goddess, and Ariadne is a princess. Arachne, however, comes from a poor working-class family. The adoption of this optics changes how we look at the tapestries woven by Arachne and Athena. The working-class woman and the ruling-class woman compete in a weaving contest and as such they effectively compete to show different visions of the world. The focus of Arachne’s feminocentric protest, therefore, is not on “women” in general but on women who are raped, women who are poor, and women who are oppressed by gods. As we know, Athena punished Arachne for showing her vision of the world by turning her into a worker, telling her to spin her web but not in order to show her oeuvre.

Equally important, but less commented on, is the difference between Arachne and Ariadne, who in John Hillis Miller’s deconstructionist (and, paradoxically, not only male-centered but also bourgeois) interpretation transforms into the undifferentiated Arachne. Miller asks: “[...] does it follow that no significant difference inhabits the two stories?” and further points out that if, politically speaking, we cannot articulate the difference between the two stories, we will not be able to identify and understand material differences between the two women and, furthermore, differences that are fundamental to feminism.<sup>26</sup> For Miller, material differences between women concern primarily class differences, which are essential for feminism. Excessive focus on the ahistorical category of gender obscures and naturalizes social inequalities between women.

This mechanism was first described by Marxist literary critics back in the 1970s and the 1980s; for example, the aforementioned Cora Kaplan argued that in 19th-century literature the categories of class and gender intersect.<sup>27</sup> In her opinion, feminist critics focus too much on gender, especially as regards social differences between women and men, and thus marginalize other forms of violence and social inequalities. I believe that this is what happens to the peasant woman and the African woman from Świrszczyńska’s poems. The dehistoricized category of gender obscures the complexity of social hierarchies and does not allow us to show how and why those women suffered. Effectively, working-class women are brutally silenced in history.

A form of feminist criticism, which, in my opinion, allows us to overcome these constraints, puts the emphasis on social reproduction. It concerns the entire sphere of social relations and the production of life, including paid and unpaid labor as well as institutional and non-

<sup>26</sup>Nancy K. Miller, “Arachnologies: The woman, the text and the critic”, in: *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988).

<sup>27</sup>Kaplan, 167.

institutional hierarchical social relations. This perspective allows us not only to go beyond the discussion of chronology and the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism but also to look at the mechanisms and methods of creating these hierarchies and inequalities. As Susan Ferguson explains, the current dominant capitalist system was not shaped solely by white, well-fed, heterosexual male workers; its development depends largely on those forms of oppression and exploitation that divide and subordinate bodies according to gender, race, ethnicity, etc.<sup>28</sup> This approach goes beyond intersectionality, which integrates such variables as gender, class, race, and sexuality, but often reduces them to static identity categories.<sup>29</sup> There is more to materialist feminist literary criticism: it attempts to identify and analyze the intersections between gender, class and race in order to better understand the nuances of social divisions. We must therefore understand the complex relationship between materialistic and cultural analysis.<sup>30</sup>

Let us take a look at two poems by Świrszczyńska dealing with the exploitation of women's labor. The first poem is *Pieśń kobiet o manioku* [Women sing about cassava], which opens *Czarne słowa*:

Od świtu do nocy  
kobiety, my tłuczemy maniok na mąkę.

From dawn to dusk  
women, we grind cassava into flour.

Nasze ręce tłuką maniok,  
nasze brzuchy tłuką maniok,  
nasze głowy tłuką maniok.

Our hands grind cassava,  
our bellies grind cassava,  
our heads grind cassava.

Nasze cienie tłuką maniok,  
nasze duchy po śmierci tłuką maniok.

Our shadows grind cassava  
our ghosts grind cassava after we die.

Dlaczego my, kobiety, nawet po śmierci musimy  
tłuc maniok na mąkę?

Why do we, women, have to grind cassava into  
flour even after we die?

(*Pieśń kobiet o manioku*)<sup><?></sup>

(*Women sing about cassava*)

<sup>28</sup>Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour and Social Reproduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 115. Similarly, Eagleton asks whether we really need to convince anyone that what happens when 'ethnically marginalized' groups around the world stand up against Western-dependent states is a matter of class struggle. Or should we, Eagleton further asks, naively believe that class conflict only affects Yorkshire miners. Eagleton, 25.

<sup>29</sup>Social reproduction scholars criticize intersectional feminism because its perspective is often limited to a set of identity categories abstracted from the broader historical and social context and thus fails to explain the sources of these forms of oppression in capitalist socioeconomic system. Social reproduction scholars argue that the unnamed force that lies at the heart of all social interactions is class. More on the critique of intersectionality cf. Martha E. Gimenez, *Marx, Women and Capitalist Social Reproduction: Marxist Feminist Essays* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020), 82–109.

<sup>30</sup>For example, the Marxist literary critic Michèle Barrett called for such a reading. Cf. Michèle Barrett, "Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender", in: *Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*, ed. Judith Newton, Deborah Rosenfelt (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), 65–85.

The other poem is *Chłopka* [Peasant woman] from the collection *Jestem baba*:

Dźwiga na plecach  
dom, ogród, pole,  
krowy, świnię, cielęta, dzieci.

She is carrying  
the house, the garden, the field,  
cows, pigs, calves, children on her back.

Jej grzbiet dziwi się,  
że nie pęknie.  
Jej ręce dziwią się,  
że nie odpadną.  
Ona się nie dziwi.

Her back is surprised  
that it does not break.  
Her hands are surprised  
that they do not fall off.  
She is not surprised.

Podpiera ją jak krwawy kij  
umarła harowaczka  
jej umarłej matki.  
Prababkę  
bili batem.

Like a bloody stick, she is supported by  
the dead toil  
of her dead mother.  
Her great-grandmother  
was whipped.

Ten bat  
błyszczący nad nią w chmurze  
zamiast słońca.

This whip  
glares above her in a cloud  
instead of the sun.

(*Chłopka*)<sup><?></sup>

(*Peasant woman*)

If we read these poems as stylizations which speak of or focus on universal femininity, the essential difference between a black woman and a Polish peasant woman disappears. Consequently, socio-economic factors which give rise to such forms of systemic violence as racism and sexism in the colonial and serfdom systems disappear from our critical horizon.<sup>31</sup>

Because if we assume that the lives of Polish peasant women and African women are identical, two important issues disappear from the horizon of our analyses. The first is the complex trajectory of gender oppression and racism – both types of violence have survived until today and emerged as a result of capitalist accumulation. The second issue that disappears under the pressure of the de-historicized category of gender is not only the mechanism of racialization of colonized peoples or patriarchal violence and the resulting social inequalities but above all the fact that they are part and parcel of class struggles. What is at stake, whether it is a feminist or an anti-colonial conflict, is regaining control over the reproductive process.

<sup>31</sup>The situation of a Polish peasant woman described by Świrszczyńska concerns the times of the Polish People's Republic, and thus the life of a rural community in state socialism. Despite the change in economic relations and the abolition of serfdom, the fear of being whipped persists in the consciousness of Polish peasants. Pierre Bourdieu explains the mechanisms of symbolic violence in *Masculine Domination*. He argues that certain dispositions for submission may be deeply embedded in the body and function long after the disappearance of the social conditions which gave rise to them. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004), 39.

If we want to avoid simplifications, and not simply focus on the category of femininity, we must expand the very concept of social class. In the feminist optics of social reproduction, it no longer concerns only the paid worker, but all exploited groups involved in social reproduction, whether the work they do is paid for by capital or not.<sup>32</sup> Contemporary capitalist societies, as Fraser writes, rely on three different forms of labor: exploited labor, dispossessed labor, and domestic labor. Thus, anti-colonial and feminist struggles should be concerned as class struggles.

What do *Pieśń kobiet o manioku* and *Chłopka* tell us in this context? Is there really no difference between the African woman and the Polish peasant woman? While at first glance they seem to be encumbered with the same murderous, endless tasks, laboring from dawn to dusk, what prevents us from seeing their social positions as identical is precisely the perspective of social reproduction. *Chłopka* tells about the devaluation of the reproductive work that rural women performed not only under the conditions of the serfdom economy but also under the conditions of state socialism. The latter, despite the fact that the communist party proclaimed gender equality, reproduced historical forms of violence and preserved (especially in rural areas<sup>33</sup>) patriarchal social relations in order to increase control over the reproductive process.<sup>34</sup> The devaluation of women's work made it possible to shift the costs of successive crises onto women as well as to efficiently control social anger in the communist economy of shortage. The myth of the Polish landed gentry, which was reproduced in the People's Republic of Poland, also played an important role in obscuring class inequalities and shaping the vision of a classless society. Polish peasantry disappeared in this myth and, along with it, the untold story of harm and violence, the media of which were the gendered and racialized bodies of peasant women.

Respectively, in *Pieśni kobiet o manioku*, we see women's slave labor which, metaphorically, continues even after their death. If we listen closely, we can hear that the women complain (in their song) about one of the basic features of capitalist modernity, namely its tendency to kill living labor – to turn workers into “zombies” in order to seize their labor-power and subordinate them to the interests of capital. The bodies of African slaves are carriers of undifferentiated power, reduced to pure physicality. Such a vision is not consistent with the division of labor typical of ancient agrarian-communist forms of land ownership, where economy was governed by strict and fixed rules. In primitive communist societies, there was

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Tithi Bhattacharya, “How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class”, in: *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 89.

<sup>33</sup>On the situation of women in the Polish countryside in the post-war period, see: Małgorzata Fidelis, “Równouprawnienie czy konserwatywna nowoczesność? Kobiety pracujące” [Equal rights or conservative modernity? Working women], in: *Kobiety w Polsce 1945–1989. Nowoczesność, równouprawnienie, komunizm* [Women in Poland 1945–1989. Modernity, equality, communism], ed. Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz et al. (Kraków: Universitas, 2020), 138–140.

<sup>34</sup>Therefore, gender relations described by Świrszczyńska should not be seen only in terms of, as Kacper Pobłocki suggests, the patriarchy which developed under serfdom. Cf. K. Pobłocki, *Chamstwo* [Rabble] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2021), 332. Although he rightly notices in *Jestem baba* new forms of serfdom-related violence, Pobłocki seems to completely ignore the fact that the monogamous family in the form that survived until today and which was shown in *Jestem baba* was shaped by capitalist modes of production, and later also functioned in proletarian families. Świrszczyńska's criticism is directed mainly at the bourgeois model of family life, which was based on relegating women to the private sphere and on the complete devaluation of reproductive work.

a strict division and organization of labor. Rosa Luxemburg argued that “[...] what appears to us today as a religious system was in age-old times a system of organized social production with a far-reaching division of labor.”<sup>35</sup> European civilization destroyed such communities. Luxemburg emphasizes that all colonized peoples fought to protect their communities against European capitalism:

The intrusion of European civilization was a disaster in every sense for primitive social relations. The European conquerors are the first who are not merely after subjugation and economic exploitation, but seize the very means of production, by ripping the land from under the feet of the native population. In this way, European capitalism deprives the primitive social order of its foundation. What emerges is something that is worse than all oppression and exploitation, total anarchy and that specifically European phenomenon of the uncertainty of social existence. The subjugated peoples, separated from their means of production, are regarded by European capitalism as mere laborers; if they are useful for this end, they are made into slaves, and if they are not, they are exterminated.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, I believe that *Czarne słowa* does not show pre-colonial communities. Neither does Świrszczyńska describe ahistorical or mythical primitive peoples, but instead tells of the catastrophe described by Luxemburg. The clash between the ancient forms of primitive communism and European civilization was in fact a clash between systems which were based, respectively, on a strict division of labor and anarchy.<sup>37</sup> In Europe, capitalist anarchy involved transforming communities into free private producers exchanging goods. In the case of colonized peoples, however, communally owned land was not transformed into private property but “ripped from under their feet.” Traditional social relations were also transformed, and indigenous peoples were turned into wage slaves – into women who grind cassava.<sup>38</sup>

Świrszczyńska differentiates between the position of women and the nature of their oppressions not by means of identity categories such as gender or, in the case of *Czarne słowa*, race, but through analyzing labor relations. In this way, the poetess draws our attention to at least three areas of struggle: anti-colonial, anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist. The images of the hard-working peasant woman and African women-turned-zombies demonstrate that we need to redefine not only relations between sexes but also social relations as such, as they rely on the exploitation of human labor. The analysis of the conditions in which reproductive labor takes place allows us to better understand the place of the gendered and racialized subjects in social hierarchies. In this context, the two poems, *Chłopka* and *Pieśń kobiet o manioku*, by no means present the same situation or the universal history of women’s oppression but point to the differentiated position of women in two separate systems of production: one is colo-

<sup>35</sup>Rosa Luxemburg, “Introduction to political economy”, in: *The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Hudis (London: Verso, 2013), 134.

<sup>36</sup>Luxemburg, 195.

<sup>37</sup>Luxemburg writes that when free competition rules economic relations, there is no plan and no organization of any kind. Hence, capital, which governs the working class, does not take the form of despotism but anarchy. Cf. Luxemburg, 116.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Luxemburg, 219.



nial, and the other is state socialist. In both, patriarchal relations are perpetuated to exercise greater control over social reproduction.

Świrszczyńska, and this is, in my opinion, what makes her poetry unique, embraces society as a whole, with its gender, racial, and heterosexist divisions which create inequalities for the exploited class. Therefore, both the African woman and the Polish peasant woman shall complain about and resist further exploitation of their bodies and labor. It seems that Świrszczyńska perceives the resistance of the subjugated and, in the 1960s, of the feminist, anti-colonial and workers' movements in particular as part and parcel of class struggle. As Tithi Bhattacharya writes, "[e]very social and political movement 'tending' in the direction of gains for the working class as a whole, or of challenge to the power of capital as a whole, must be considered an aspect of class struggle."<sup>39</sup> It seems that the poetess understood the need to support the colonized peoples in their struggle to break the chains of exploitation, and the need to ally with those who were not allowed to create history. In this sense, and only in this sense, the lives of the Polish peasant woman and the African woman are similar.

## Conclusion

Świrszczyńska is a poetess who combines the dream of women's emancipation with the vision of social justice. This vision goes beyond identity politics and moves towards expanded solidarity, which requires us to renegotiate the rules which define our community. The emancipation project emerging from Świrszczyńska's works combines economy, culture, and social and discursive practice. Therefore, the dream of a better world found in her poetry is closely related to the history of anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-patriarchal class struggles.

In my opinion, the need for extended solidarity, so important in Świrszczyńska's works, behind which lies the unspeakable but very real dream of a better world, a world devoid of violence, exploitation, suffering and unfair divisions, reveals not only the poetess's ethical principles but above all her class consciousness. Świrszczyńska's interest in anti-colonial struggles in the era of decolonization is neither strange nor surprising. It stems from the role played by the Eastern bloc in the process of decolonization and the poetess's extraordinary sensitivity to suffering, which has its roots in social inequalities perpetuated over time. African slaves, beggars, peasant women, the sick, the old, the abandoned, and inmates in psychiatric hospitals – Świrszczyńska first and foremost expresses her solidarity with them. They are also her allies in the fight for a better world.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

<sup>39</sup>Bhattacharya, 85–86.

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# KEYWORDS

*Anna Świrszczyńska*

## FEMINIST CRITICISM

**ABSTRACT:**

This article discusses selected reading strategies of Anna Świrszczyńska's poetry, and *Czarne Słowa* [Black words] (1967) in particular, a collection which, in my reading, presents the intersections between gender, race and class. The ahistorical category of gender, which is dominant in the reading of Świrszczyńska's poetry, is what obscures the complex image of social relations that emerges from her works. Employing feminist theories of social reproduction, I argue that the situation of women presented in *Czarne Słowa* not only differs from the one shown in *Jestem baba* [I am a woman] but also reveals Świrszczyńska's ethical project, to which I refer as extended solidarity.

women's poetry

## SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

### Marxist feminism

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# “That’s also an Allegory:”

## Literary Criticism’s Struggles with Modern Allegorism

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Although as academics and literary scholars we all know what allegory is, it turns out that our definitions may be very different, and sometimes even contradictory. Allegory is one of the fundamental aesthetic categories and, at the same time, it is, as defined by Mieke Bal in her famous work, a traveling concept.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the ages, it has traveled between different artistic domains – as a figure of language, a concept, a genealogical term, and a visual notion – and has been rooted in theology, philosophy, rhetoric, and poetics. Allegory and allegorism gave rise to at least two revelatory movements in the twentieth-century theory of interpretation: one is connected with the new rhetoric and the other was inspired by deconstruction, especially Paul de Man’s *Allegories of Reading*. Respectively, de Man’s tropological intuition was rooted in two other, slightly older, philosophical approaches that laid the groundwork for a modern approach to allegory which today coincide with de Man’s project: the relationship between symbol and allegory in Hans Georg Gadamer’s<sup>2</sup> and Paul Ricoeur’s<sup>3</sup> hermeneutics and Walter Benjamin’s reclamation of Baroque allegory from the depths of the messianic tradition (I shall comment on it in more detail later on in the text).

<sup>1</sup> See: Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Mars (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 61-69.

<sup>3</sup> Damian Michalski, “Paula Ricoeura hermeneutyka symboli. Próba prezentacji” [Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of symbols: An overview], *Kwartalnik Filozoficzny* vol. XL, no. 3 (2012): 91–114; Marek Sołtysiak, “Alegoria w tradycji hermeneutycznej. Gadamerowska rehabilitacja alegorii” [Allegory in the hermeneutic tradition. Gadamer’s rehabilitation of allegory], *Logos i Ethos* 2 (2016): 75–101.

It can be said that the rhetorical turn loosened the structuralist definition of allegory and its close ties with representation (and thus the inherent question of mimesis) and shook the dictionaries of literary theory, "borrowing" the concept from iconology and the history of visual arts. However, it was the other, post-structural, turn that turned out to be particularly important for Polish poetic critique of the 2000s and academic philosophers/critics, inspired mainly by Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, whose works were at the time mistranslated into Polish. It was then that allegory and allegorism were redefined in Polish poetry as innovative categories which "open" the poem, point to the dynamic nature of language, and challenge referentiality and representation. Whatever lent itself to this new allegorism suggested a reading that would be far from naïve; it was meant to be intellectual, in-depth, self-reflexive, and at the same time impervious to classical allegoresis and closed and final interpretations.

This tendency was first signaled in Polish literary studies in Ryszard Nycz's now classic essay published in *Teksty Drugie* in 1994 entitled "Tropy 'ja'..." [The figures of the "I"...].<sup>4</sup> Nycz did not discuss the correspondences between the image and the concept but focused instead on the structure of the subject, rooted in linguistic analogies to specific figures, including symbol, allegory, irony and syllepsis. The critic loosely referred to de Man's early texts and his understanding of figurative language. For Nycz, the unstable and allegorical modern "I," forced to constantly reconstruct or enhance itself in keeping with some transcendent pattern, corresponded with the allegorical nature of 20th-century literature, which, as the critic argued, was located in a new horizontal system.<sup>5</sup>

It is impossible to underestimate the importance of Nycz's observations not only for literary criticism at the turn of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries but also for Polish literary studies in general. Nycz gave the go-ahead for a fragmentary allegorical reading – such a practice was deemed natural and encoded in the very nature of modern literature. The critic thus turned into a Benjaminian collector of the fragments of the past. It can be said that it was then that the way for searching for philosophical "truth" in Franz Kafka's, Marcel Proust's or Robert Walser's works was paved; it opposed the rigid religious allegoresis (still found in the works of more conservative hermeneutical critics). Michał Paweł Markowski and his student Grzegorz Jankowicz both followed this path.<sup>6</sup>

In a way, the third stage of this strange conceptual path could be discussed in the context of recent years, especially as regards two critics who challenged conventional academic literary research methods. They were mainly inspired by Tomáš Šalamun's modern neo-avant-garde poetry and aesthetic concepts developed by the writers associated with the "Cyc Gada" poetic zine. These critics are Rafał Wawrzyńczyk and Adam Wiedemann, but we should also men-

<sup>4</sup> Ryszard Nycz, "Tropy 'ja': koncepcje podmiotowości w literaturze polskiej ostatniego stulecia" [The figures of the 'I': Notions of subjectivity in twentieth-century Polish literature], *Teksty Drugie* 26, 2 (1994): 7–27.

<sup>5</sup> Nycz refers the reader to two books: Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory. Defining the Genre* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1979); Lynette Hunter, *Modern Allegory and Fantasy: Rhetorical Stances of Contemporary Writing* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989). Quote after the book version: Ryszard Nycz, *Język modernizmu. Prolegomena historycznoliterackie* [The language of modernism. Historical and literary prolegomena] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Leopoldinum Fundacji dla Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1997), 102.

<sup>6</sup> His "prosaic" counterpart in literary criticism would be Adam Lipszyc, a leading Polish expert on Benjamin, especially in his critical study on world literature. Cf. Adam Lipszyc, *Rewizja procesu Józefiny K. i inne lektury od zera* [Revision of Josephine K.'s trial and other revised readings] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2011).

tion Dawid Kujawa and his book *Pocałunki ludu* [Kisses of the People], which was based on an allegorical structure.<sup>7</sup> In the works of all these critics, the concept of allegory is redefined and extended; it becomes a geometric means of managing meaning (it is “broadband,” “open,” “deep,” “rigid,” or “transversal”).

Wawrzyńczyk stated in the poem quoted in the title of my essay, “Słuchajcie, tak naprawdę / to nie wiem nawet, co znaczy alegoria” [Listen, I don’t/ actually even know what allegory means],<sup>8</sup> and I propose not to read this declaration ironically. My goal, however, is not to present the reader with the history of the concept, as it has already been done many times and much more thoroughly,<sup>9</sup> but to investigate its critical uses. Without further theoretical ado that would exceed the scope of this essay, I would like to refer to a few dictionary definitions.

Let’s start with the simplest one, that is, the one that has been simplified for the purposes of didactics. In *Słownik terminów literackich* [Dictionary of Literary Terms], Stanisław Sierotwiński defines allegory as an image that has a figurative meaning but, unlike a symbol, its meaning is unambiguous (e.g., as used in fairy tales), or as a stylistic procedure involving the use of such images, popular in, for example, medieval religious and didactic literature.<sup>10</sup> It is clear that in both understandings the image is subject to a specific interpretation or at least it triggers structured associations. Such an understanding of allegory is closely related to the visual arts, with its focus on iconographic mimesis, insofar as the visible is secondarily translated into the verbal. A slightly more complicated version of this definition may be found in *Zarys teorii literatury* [The Outline of Literary Theory], a textbook on structuralist thought suited to meet the needs of university students. Allegory is defined there as a situation where “a linguistic sign [...] constantly replaces a given concept,”<sup>11</sup> unlike in the case of symbol, “a correspondence is established between them.”<sup>12</sup> This correspondence is the most interesting aspect of this definition, as it points to the existence of an “allegorical system,” the knowledge of which is obligatory in a given culture, and depends, of course, on the social context, the continuity of tradition and the recognizability of iconographic patterns. It can be said that this defining element, which points to the unambiguous nature of allegory, in fact reflects socially preserved interpretative processes.

<sup>7</sup> Dawid Kujawa, *Pocałunki ludu. Poezja i krytyka po roku 2010* [Kisses of the people. Poetry and criticism after 2010] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Rafał Wawrzyńczyk, “Wiersz «Ucieczka»” [The poem «Escape»], <https://poez-ja.tumblr.com/post/152906736988/wiersz-ucieczka-rafa%C5%82-wawrzy%C5%84czyk>.

<sup>9</sup> See: Rob Copeland, *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010); Theresa M. Kelley, *Reinventing Allegory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jeremy Tambling, *Allegory* (London: Routledge, 2010); Kathleen Kerr-Koch, *Romancing Fascism. Modernity and Allegory in Benjamin, de Man, Shelley* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2014); Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London, New York: Verso, 2020); *Alegoria* [Allegory], ed. Janina Abramowska (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2003); *Teoria literatury żywa: alegoria* [Living theory of literature: allegory], ed. Kamila Najdek, Krzysztof Tkaczyk (Warsaw: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Stanisław Sierotwiński, *Słownik terminów literackich. Teoria i nauki pomocnicze literatury* [Dictionary of Literary Terms. Theory and auxiliary sciences of literature], 4th edition (Wrocław–Warsaw–Kraków–Gdańsk–Łódź: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1986), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Michał Głowiński, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, Janusz Sławiński, *Zarys teorii literatury* [The Outline of Literary Theory] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1991), 124.

<sup>12</sup> Głowiński, Okopień-Sławińska, Sławiński, 124.



The need to rehabilitate the concept of allegory, and its subsequent growing popularity, has been discussed openly since the 1950s. In 1980, the American art critic Craig Owens published one of his most famous essays, in which he attempted to reevaluate modernism and describe the differences between modernist and postmodern art and philosophy, using the category of "the allegorical impulse;" he tried to rehabilitate a figure that had been (in his opinion) forgotten, disdained, and outdated.<sup>13</sup> Two opposing but ultimately complementing forces – the rehabilitation of rhetoric as a figurative element of language (including adapting the category of performativity for literary purposes) and shifting the allegorical focus from mimesis to linguistic productivity – gave rise to at least three modern definitions of allegory: 1) the classic definition, connected with an image inscribed in culture or a code associated with it, 2) the rhetorical definition, related to figurative and rhetorical language, and 3) the philosophical and literary definition, rooted in the figurativeness of language, its apparent or supposed referentiality.

The most important change in the contemporary understanding of allegory was framed by Paul de Man's two important works, namely the collection of essays *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* published in 1971 and *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* published in 1979. Though in the 1970s both works were not particularly important for Polish literary scholars, they were a testament to a heated discussion held among American critics. I decided not to discuss de Man's approach to allegory, which was indirectly based on Walter Benjamin's aesthetic theory, in detail. It is only worth noting that thanks to de Man allegory became allegorical and lost its mimetic character, associated with correspondence, whether natural or conventional, and social recognition. For de Man, allegorism was a philosophical feature of language, it was always figurative and not referential, and therefore it defied straightforward interpretations. The allegorical sign refers to a non-existing referent, to the sphere of "non-being." The scholar argued that allegorization involved moving away from representation, away from the referent, and thus transformed into a strictly textual figure of language, an autotelic circle of ever weaker reflections.

This "new" approach found in the translated texts of Western critics, together with the overtly academic nature of Polish literary criticism in the 2000s, directly inspired many writers and poets (Andrzej Sosnowski, Adam Wiedemann, and Tadeusz Pióra, among others, found allegory important). The last, at least so far, interesting discussion around this concept took place when *Ilustrowany słownik terminów literackich* [Illustrated dictionary of literary terms] was published. While the dictionary was "illustrated" (it was in fact originally designed as *The Historical Dictionary of Literary Terms* and ultimately received the telling subtitle "history, anecdote, etymology"),<sup>14</sup> it was, in fact, conceived as a truly post-structural antithesis of the dictionary. We can describe it as a conceptual monograph in which different authors interpret and redefine literary concepts in their extensive entries. "Allegory" was (re)defined by Piotr Bogalecki, who decided to focus on its social and mediating nature. As Bogalecki writes, the

<sup>13</sup>Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism", *October* 12 (1980): 67–86.

<sup>14</sup>*Ilustrowany słownik terminów literackich: historia, anegdota, etymologia* [Illustrated dictionary of literary terms: history, anecdote, etymology], ed. Zbigniew Kadhubek, Beata Mytych, Aleksander Nawarecki (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2019).

etymology of the word “allegory” should not be associated with representation and mimesis. Instead, we should refer to *allēgoréo*, or *allos* (different, other), and *agoreuo* (to speak, to deliver a speech). Thus, allegory turns out to be closely related to performance: it is a speech delivered in the agora, in a public square where the audience must first gather. This, in turn, refers us (through the act of gathering and collecting) to Benjamin. “And although it is impossible,” Bogalecki writes, “to downplay the social functions of images, *ἀλληγορία* (*allegoría*) does not refer to powerful totems or holy images but to the political community established in and through the act of linguistic performance.”<sup>15</sup> “The other in the agora – this is the original site of allegory,”<sup>16</sup> the Polish scholar writes in his new extrapolation, creating a skillful allegory in itself and substituting it for a dictionary entry.

## Allegory as a theme and a conceptual network

The most classic philological approach to allegory may be found in Alina Świeściak’s essay on melancholy in contemporary poetry,<sup>17</sup> which is in fact an extended version of her reviews of different collections of poems (similar questions, and sometimes even entire paragraphs, may be found in her academic book of literary criticism *Lekcje nieobecności* [Lessons of absence] from 2010). Allegorical poetry, be it in terms of formal features employed or poetic intentions (e.g., atemporality typical of the allegorical mode), must be discussed in such a book. However, Świeściak seems to criticize allegory, as both “allegorical” poets discussed by her, Tomasz Różycki and Dariusz Suska, appear to be boring, repetitive, monotonous, and conservative (these are just some of the epithets used by Świeściak). They are trapped in their imaginations, which over time transform into mannerism. They write from within the land of the Same, longing for the lost modernist whole.

For Świeściak, both poets express existential melancholy, which to some extent corresponds to Nycz’s notion of the modern allegorical subject. Świeściak primarily refers to Benjamin; she is well versed in Benjamin’s entire philosophical system and the fundamental role allegory plays in the process of reconstructing history. And yet, the critic also writes as if “next to” Benjamin, without messianic hope. As announced in the title, she is interested in the disturbed relationship between the melancholic and the object (commercialism and desire in the Frankfurt-School spirit) and the role of allegory in the process of detemporalization and derealization. Benjamin’s words, “[i]f the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind,”<sup>18</sup> aptly describe how she uses allegory in her essays – not as a tool for seeking truth or revealing (reconstructing) remnants of meaning but as an analytical category which defines and tames different poetic actions and meanings.

Fragments or echoes of Benjamin’s metaphors appear very often in close readings: for ex-

<sup>15</sup>Piotr Bogalecki, “Alegoria” [Allegory], in: *Ilustrowany słownik*, 45.

<sup>16</sup>Bogalecki, 47.

<sup>17</sup>Alina Świeściak, *Melancholia w poezji polskiej po 1989 roku* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2010).

<sup>18</sup>Świeściak, 242.

ample, the vision of history as ruins, and the vision of the poet as a collector of "suspicious, igneous places which defy all precise classifications."<sup>19</sup> From the very beginning, allegory is unequivocally linked with artificiality, non-being or "second life," and the fossilization of the relationship between the "I" and the "world." However, it does not seem to be followed by the fossilization of meaning in the poem, since in (in this case Różycki's) poetry, we find "a constant movement of meanings – *signifiés* and *signifiants* pretend to be united but they do not share a stable fulcrum point."<sup>20</sup> Respectively:

symbolist identification with the world [...] is combined here with a sense of alienation, the cause of which seems to be the problematization of the function of the object. Thus, allegory appears artificial; it suspends the "natural" relationship between the subject and the object.<sup>21</sup>

"Allegorical instability" suggested by Świeściak in the title of one of the subsections therefore oscillates between the effects of identification and alienation, temporality and atemporality, or, in other words, between the romantic theory of the symbol and Benjamin's allegory with its "absolute artificiality."

Such an understanding of allegory seems to guide Świeściak's discussion of Dariusz Suska's poetry from the very beginning. The author of *Nasi drodzy zakopani* [Our Dear Buried] envisions the world as "allegorical, as fossils dissected from time;"<sup>22</sup> words and things appear as traces (but they are used ironically, unlike in Benjamin's theory); he uses "homelessness" and allegory as a means of "distancing oneself from historicity;"<sup>23</sup> and introduces an interesting (though undeveloped notion of) "alienation through allegory"<sup>24</sup> and suspension in the melancholic "in-between:" beyond the useful and not yet in the mythical. The poet is also described as possessing the "allegorical awareness of eternal anamorphosis;"<sup>25</sup> he uses the figure of a child as "a future allegorist." The main problem is that its potential is drained as subsequent collections of poetry are published; ultimately, in Suska's poetry, allegory, as a structure which supports his poetic world, breaks down.

I am not concerned with how these conclusions translate into the reception of Różycki's or Suska's works, because most of them seem to be justified and consistent with many other critical analyzes, and sometimes even appear innovative. The move from allegorical fascination to allegorical exhaustion is also natural. I am, however, interested in the concept of allegory which is used by Świeściak; it is supposedly Benjaminian (although de Man is also marginally present with his "Rhetoric of Temporality"), and thus has little to do with representation, but it still values immanent symbol more than allegory's "pure conventionality." In Różycki's poetry, allegorism brings insomnia, emptiness, disinheritance and surface rhetoric, and in Suska's works, the constant processing of death tropes.

<sup>19</sup>Świeściak, 237

<sup>20</sup>Świeściak, 247.

<sup>21</sup>Świeściak, 241.

<sup>22</sup>Świeściak, 255.

<sup>23</sup>Świeściak, 260.

<sup>24</sup>Świeściak, 257.

<sup>25</sup>Świeściak, 260.

For Świeściak, allegory plays a strictly de-illusory role and stands in opposition to the symbolic, to the definable – it reveals the incompatibility between language and things, the sourcelessness of language, and the status of objects as remnants, refuse or ruins.<sup>26</sup> This notwithstanding, Świeściak also uses it to create a semantic field; it is a “source” of metaphors employed in the analysis of the poems and it also ensures their critical cutting edge, rooted in Benjamin’s critique of modernity. The most interesting extrapolation of the theory of allegory that Świeściak compares with Benjamin’s project, who consistently uses the term “allegorical attitude”<sup>27</sup> in his discussion of Charles Baudelaire’s poetry, is the “allegorical drift.” It looks a bit as if John Ashbery’s *flow* and Benjamin’s *flâneur*, filtered through Sosnowski’s melancholic poems, suddenly merged into a figure that no longer describes a volitional act of imagination or a primal poetic scene but a passive submission to a convention that ensures the work’s auratic character and protects it against accusations of stylistic ease and intellectual emptiness.

### Allegorism as an interpretative strategy

A different form of allegory as a tool was used by the critic Grzegorz Jankowicz. It did not so much serve as a semantic map or a conceptual trigger as defined the methodological framework, that is a way of organizing meaning and moving from literature to philosophy and back to ambiguous signs, as if the critic “fought” with texts for truth, and not only aesthetic experience. Jankowicz, especially as a young and prolific critic, could not like poetry – poetry must refer, generally, to some philosophical or social concept, and poetry is but its imperfect interpretation. Thus, the literary work fulfills an allegorical function in his methodological framework: it is a parable or an example illustrating the reflections of modernist or post-structural philosophers translated and promoted by the critic (first Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot and then Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière).

At this point, let me turn to an essay which refers to the analyzed category in its title, namely *Alegoria (Dycki)* [Allegory (Dycki)] originally published in *Studium* in 2005.<sup>28</sup> We should pay attention to Jankowicz’s reading strategies, if only because he reviewed and promoted Sosnowski and Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, i.e., in whose works allegorism is employed in two completely different ways, the modern Benjaminian way and the iconic Baroque way. In addition to numerous reviews, Jankowicz edited the first collection of essays devoted to Dycki, where he also published his essay, as well as one of the numerous collections of poems by Dycki, for which he wrote an insightful afterword.

What is, however, the most interesting and poignant in all Jankowicz’s essays devoted to Dycki and his works is the poetic nature of his reviews and the fact that he problematizes

<sup>26</sup>Świeściak, 255.

<sup>27</sup>See: Mateusz Palka, “Obraz zastygłego niepokoju: intencja alegoryczna Charlesa Baudelaire’a według Waltera Benjaminia” [Image of Arrested Unrest: Charles Baudelaire’s Allegoric Intent According to Walter Benjamin], *Nowa Krytyka* 40 (2018): 167–200.

<sup>28</sup>Grzegorz Jankowicz, “Alegoria (Dycki)” [Allegory (Dycki)], *Studium* 5 (2005): 129–134. See also: Grzegorz Jankowicz, “Poezja to nekrologi” [Poetry is obituaries], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 41 (2009).

the very notion of the sign. Jankowicz's early essays are first and foremost meta-texts, commentaries on the work of a poetry critic. *Alegoria (Dycki)* is an essay written in the spirit of Baroque painterly allegories – it is iconic, based on a visual game with the unsaid and the implied. Jankowicz extracts the figure of "parenthesizing," a suspension of movement, directly from Dycki's poems but at the same time he presents his reflections in a compositional parenthesis. "There is no entrance, no exit," he writes, commenting on one of the poems, "there is basically no movement, and if there is, then only around the circular field of the same signs, figures of closure and finitude."<sup>29</sup> A few years later, when Dycki was awarded the Nike Literary Award, Jankowicz wrote in *Tygodnik Powszechny*:

Each return of the same word, each repetition of a proper noun, each repetition of a rhythm or a note – all this paradoxically destroys the ligaments connecting language with the world. This is because repetition, which usually strengthens the foundations (whatever they are), in Dycki's works points to the experience of death.<sup>30</sup>

Jankowicz then places Dycki in a textual maze, emphasizing key moments of breaking with reality (similarly to Sosnowski's works) and the omnipotence of language, coercing the subject into endless iterations. However, when reading *Alegoria (Dycki)*, one can form the impression that, even more than the poems, the critic diagnoses his own text, his own ability to write about poetry, and comes to the conclusion that it is doomed to failure. This failure – planned, metaphorically inscribed in the essay – involves transferring the deconstructive method (in)to the fabric of the text; it is thus an attempt to show how solid metaphysical categories break down and give way to a wandering movement of interpretation. Jankowicz refers to early Derrida but most of all to de Man, unable (or unwilling) to overcome the pitfalls of textualism. Jankowicz's Dycki is thus an allegorical poet; he is unreal, imprisoned in a visual-rhetorical figure that cannot be reduced to anything else (e.g., parentheses or the split subject from the equally allegorical essay *Śmierć w pierwszej, drugiej i trzeciej osobie* [Death in the first, second and third person]<sup>31</sup>). He struggles, trying to express the impossible, but is always stopped by parentheses – the omnipotent language defined in the spirit of Derrida's *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*:

It is an extraordinary image: the poet tries to present the beginning and the end at all costs, he turns his eyes away from reality, he almost completely ignores the present, the moment, closes himself in the parentheses of the poem, but nevertheless does not stop time. He does not stop time, because the circle of the story and the square of life are not identical, they do not overlap.<sup>32</sup>

One can, and even should, argue with Jankowicz: argue against closure, against the failure of poetry (its futility) and the failure of a critical gesture that repeats itself, insofar as it is always

<sup>29</sup>Jankowicz, "Alegoria (Dycki)", 129.

<sup>30</sup>Jankowicz, "Poezja".

<sup>31</sup>Jankowicz, "Śmierć w pierwszej, drugiej i trzeciej osobie" [Death in the first, second and third person], in: *Jesień już Panie a ja nie mam domu*, Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki i krytycy [It's already autumn and I have no home', Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki and critics], ed. Grzegorz Jankowicz (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2001), 51–68.

<sup>32</sup>Jankowicz, "Alegoria (Dycki)", 130.

just a rhetorical twist. Jankowicz's textual perspective leads him to a conclusion consistent with de Man's reflections: "a poem about death cannot be written [...], although reality can be killed by/in a poem. [...] Tkaczyszyn-Dycki's poetry is not, as some critics argue, a survival strategy but an allegorical prefiguration of death."<sup>33</sup>

The critic's subsequent reflection on how language "is detached from the world and multiplies itself or arrests the poet in textual phobias (repetitions, rhetoric)"<sup>34</sup> is of little use. It seems that Jankowicz noticed this as well, because, drawing on the works of Agamben, he shifted the center of gravity of his allegorical reflection from iteration to a life-sustaining residue, from poetry defined as Blanchot's domain of death and entropy to poetry defined as a transfer of energy and material exchange (which is already seen in the afterword to *Podaj dalej* [Pass it on]), or a "black box," which, as he writes in the final essay in the collection *Blizny. Eseje* [Scars. Essays] devoted to Sosnowski's poetry, "takes the side of life."<sup>35</sup> However, Sosnowski and Jankowicz would not be themselves if they did not add, in line with Benjamin's theory, that in fact they refer to "traces of lost life," insofar as "poetry appears [...] where and when life no longer exists"<sup>36</sup> and it is in fact a record of a catastrophe that happened to us and contemporary literature.

This late essay on Sosnowski's work engages in a critical dialogue with another, written a decade earlier, in which Benjamin, de Man, Derrida, Blanchot and Agamben try to answer the question "can a poem be redeemed?"<sup>37</sup> This essay opens with an allegory which may be described as a "negative of essence;" it is a story about a poet as a photographer borrowed from Benjamin's reflections on Baudelaire. In the poet's camera there is a "roll of film made of the matter of time – the film of time on which the essence of things is captured (if this verb may be used at all) in the form of a negative."<sup>38</sup> This story leads the critic to the titular, though somewhat reformulated, question: can a contemporary poem, a poem from the age of the decline of language, be redeemed,<sup>39</sup> or "introduced into the economic circulation of communication" (probably Jankowicz implies an act akin to Agamben's profanation, because the author of *Profanations*, especially the essay "Creation and Salvation," features prominently in his work). Somewhere between successive scenes of creation and redemption, Paul de Man's irony and reflections on the materiality of language, Sosnowski finally appears: "We know what happens when the work of creation is mixed up with the work of destruction: words turn into splinters and the poem breaks down. Only *Wild Water Kingdom* foreshadows this spectacular destruction. As already has been mentioned, the text is an allegory of a downfall, but the final downfall is suspended in it and postponed."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Jankowicz "Alegoria (Dycki)", 134.

<sup>34</sup>Dawid Kujawa raises a similar objection, although in the context of the essays on Sosnowski from *Lekcja żywego języka* [Lessons of a living language]. Cf. Kujawa, 93–106.

<sup>35</sup>Grzegorz Jankowicz, *Blizny. Eseje* [Scars. Essays] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Ossolineum, 2019), 245.

<sup>36</sup>Jankowicz, *Blizny*, 247.

<sup>37</sup>Jankowicz, "Czy wiersz może być zbawiony?" [Can a poem be redeemed?], in: *Wiersze na głos. Szkice o twórczości Andrzeja Sosnowskiego* [Poems aloud. Essays on Andrzej Sosnowski's works], ed. Piotr Śliwiński (Poznań: WBPiCAK, 2010), 70–85.

<sup>38</sup>Jankowicz, "Czy wiersz", 71.

<sup>39</sup>In Polish, the verb "odkupić" means, depending on the context, both "redeem" and "buy back" or "repurchase." Translator's note.

<sup>40</sup>Jankowicz, "Czy wiersz", 78.

While the discussion about Dycki is centered on the Baroque allegory, reflections on Sosnowski are mainly guided by de Man's notion of his irony. Concluding remarks, not necessarily closely related to the earlier analytical gestures, seem to be the most important for us. I will quote them in their entirety because, although Jankowicz states earlier that he does not intend to absolutize any philosophical contexts used by Sosnowski (and he stays true to his word), he ultimately turns Sosnowski's poetry into a parable about the postmodern artist's philosophical situation, trapped between de Man's totality of death and Benjamin's messianic hope, and his attitude to the poem turns into a meta-literary trope, a libidinal story about writing as a creative and redemptive act:

I would say this: for Sosnowski, the poem is a paradoxical entity that can be endlessly destroyed. And if it is possible to destroy it again and again, dividing and differentiating it time after time, it means that there is no essence of the poem, no essence of poetry. The poem is empty inside – it is filled with an indestructible void. And if it is possible to divide it (to divide the poem, language, word, sound), it means that after each division, after each destruction, there is something left, a splinter, a spark that ignites the next page. What is left is the surplus creative energy (which in Sosnowski's poetry is immediately transformed into destructive energy) – this surplus creative energy survived destruction and now returns to the poem to open new creative, that is writerly, possibilities.<sup>41</sup>

Whatever the planned outcome was, Sosnowski's poems were neither the goal nor the object. From the very beginning, they were but a pretext shoved into an allegorical frame, placed between twentieth-century philosophical languages like a lens which focuses the rays of rhetorical potential. Whether as a "black box" which records a great catastrophe or as a casket containing an indestructible void, poetry is "pinned" by various "discourses of truth" which determine its attractiveness as an example.

## Broadband allegory and sensual chains of meanings

What Polish critics took from Benjamin's and de Man's theories of allegory were appearances, lifelessness and immobilization as philosophical concepts, and the intensified movement of dereferentialization. At this point, let us turn to a scholar and commentator who is the most eminent expert on Benjamin in Poland. Adam Lipszyc both confirms the Thanatic aspect of Benjamin's allegory and extends it:

only in desperate gestures can [allegory] refer from one object to another, guided by arbitrary conventions; it can produce **endless, horizontal sequences in which everything can mean something else**. [...] It is also a sign on "time," in a double sense: because it is characteristic of the gloomy modern times, and because allegorical sequences arise to the rhythm of constantly failing moments, which will never stop, producing symbolic illumination.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Jankowicz, "Czy wiersz", 85.

<sup>42</sup>Adam Lipszyc, "Alegorie habilitacji, czyli obraz świata w skrócie" [Allegories of habilitation, or a brief image of the world], in: Walter Benjamin, *Źródło dramatu żałobnego w Niemczech* [The Origin of German Tragic Drama], trans. Andrzej Kopacki (Warsaw: Sic!, 2013), 340–341 (emphasis – J.S.).

For Lipszyc, allegory is, in other words, not a figure of language but a figure of metonymic imagination. Devoid of historical claims of a heuristic tool, it favors the movement of accumulation and addition. Poetry is effectively a catalog in which no attempt is made to establish hierarchical evaluations – only vertical and horizontal lines of tensions and clusters of intensity are signaled. We might further argue that Benjamin's allegory, deprived of the messianic core and freed from anti-modernist resentments, is a figure of ontological compression, de-hierarchization, which gives rise to a horizontal chain of signifiers. Such an approach leads us to Šalamun's poetry and Wawrzyńczyk's literary criticism, or at least to what he would like to establish, even if he is not able to name it, as the most promising contemporary lyrical model.

Wawrzyńczyk is not a prolific critic, but he is still an influential one. His publications in "Studium" and the cult online zine "Cyc Gada" are deemed legendary. For some time, he wrote reviews for "Dwutygodnik;" then, he mainly reviewed literary works on his official Facebook site, and edited collections of poems (e.g., by Krzysztof Jaworski and Jarosław Markiewicz). He also "organized the field" in other ways. Always original, he distanced himself from academic games played by other critics of contemporary poetry.

Allegory is important in Wawrzyńczyk's informal yet refined project because it is, in a way, a form of patricide. A group of poets born in the late 1970s and the early 1980s came into conflict with "Literatura na Świecie" [World Literature] and the vision of the American tradition presented in the magazine, although they acknowledged the influence of John Ashbery, whom Bohdan Zadura, Sosnowski and Jankowicz also praised. The group wanted to show a "different" Ashbery than the one associated with the poetic idiom of the 1990s and French poststructuralism (and French Theory was very popular in Poland). Respectively, "Cyc Gada" found another, complementary, role model, rooted in the European neo-avant-garde and praised by Miłosz Biedrzycki, namely Tomáš Šalamun. Šalamun became increasingly popular in Poland in the early 2000s; this experience turned out to be formative for at least some leading contemporary poets (for example for Szczepan Kopyt). In an attempt to venerate this group of poets, and at the same time to point out the problems with reading them (and to annoy other critics), Wawrzyńczyk wrote in his review of Grzegorz Hetman's *Pół ciastka* [Half a cookie]:

And all of them – Janicki who is misunderstood to this day, the overlooked Szwarz, the non-existent Tomanek, the truly non-existent Grobelski, and, finally, the lonely Hetman – do more or less the same: slowly and methodically, they dissect the larger-than-life bodies of their "fathers" (Sosnowski, Świetlicki, Ashbery, and Šalamun). [...] Modern allegory – as a dynamic figure which inspires imagination and mediates between the low style and the specter of mature modernism – was (and still is) at the very center of these problems.<sup>43</sup>

Not only does Wawrzyńczyk repeatedly employ the concept of allegory as one of the most important typological and evaluative categories but also seems to look for its sources elsewhere – not in de Man's post-structural patronage or Benjamin's messianic matrix. This is how he compares Šalamun and Ashbery (bearing in mind that he finds the dissection of Šalamun's works more entertaining and demanding than Polish criticism's reflections on Ashbery's poetry):

<sup>43</sup>Rafał Wawrzyńczyk, "Uwaga, alegoryzowane" [Attention, allegorized], *Dwutygodnik* 304 (2021), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/9469-uwaga-alegoryzowane.html>.



Both Ashbery and Šalamun knew that poetical power lies under vertical, allegorical structures, and that it is no longer possible to extract it directly, as it was done in the 19th century, for example by installing a meaningful figure at the end of a sonnet. Ashbery diluted allegories to the point that they became pure, almost meaningful images; Šalamun twisted and turned his allegories and broke their limbs until they formed a fierce glow of meaning in the open field.<sup>44</sup>

What is particularly interesting in this project is the susceptibility of the concept of "allegory" to different semantic marriages and extrapolations, including micro-allegories; allegorism as a vertical structure; twisting allegories so that they turn into clean, meaningless images; breaking their teeth; and even "allegorical-metonymic complex structures" which are a kind of multidimensional construct-poem in which meaning is distributed both vertically and horizontally. What draws our attention in this extremely vivid, even poetic, description, is a kind of indifference to actual references to philosophy; instead, our attention is drawn to "ways of reading," "interpretative mechanisms," and "strategies of meaning." Wawrzyńczyk appears to be a critic who neither looks for conceptual matrices into which he can thrust the poem (like Świeściak) nor subordinates it to a philosophical story about reaching the truth in one way or another (like Jankowicz). Rather, he is interested in how the poem works at the level of poetics and how the chains of meanings are organized in it, which leads him to, at times questionable, generalizations and critical literary evaluations. Indeed, Wawrzyńczyk does not seem to refer to the tradition of descriptive poetics. In fact, he uses certain notions intuitively, pragmatically – they are tested in the text, forcing readers to adapt to his dictionary.

In this context, we can refer to the already mentioned *Wiersz "Ucieczka"* [The Poem "Escape"], published on Tumblr poetry blogs at the advent of the Internet:

Słuchajcie, tak naprawdę  
to nie wiem nawet, co znaczy alegoria.  
Używam tego słowa  
do oznaczenia pewnego związku  
między obiektem opisywanym a sposobem

opisu:

alegorią nazywam związek sztywny.  
Tzn. "miłość" nazywamy "więzieniem" co  
pociąga za sobą "zdrada" = "podkop do  
sąsiedniej celi".

Tak,  
w moim przypadku słowo alegoria  
jest alegorią czegoś.  
I nie ma ucieczki. (Tu też jest alegoria.)<sup><?></sup>

Listen, I don't  
actually even know what allegory means.  
I use that word  
to denote a certain relationship  
between the described object and the manner

of description:

allegory is what I call a rigid relationship.  
I.e., we call "love" a "prison" and that  
entails "betrayal" = "digging a tunnel to the  
neighboring cell."

Yes,  
in my case, the word allegory  
is an allegory of something.  
And there is no escape. (That's also an allegory.)

<sup>44</sup>Wawrzyńczyk, "Gwoździe" [Nails], *Mały Format* 5 (2018), <http://malyformat.com/2018/05/gwozdzie-uwagi-o-poezji-tomaza-salamuna/>.

Already at first glance, we can see the intended, artificially sustained, rhetoric of this text: from addressing the readers / listeners and attracting their attention (it can be said that this is the allegorical level that Bogalecki reminds us of in connection with the agora), through admitting ignorance (as if the lyrical “I” was trying to explain the theory of the subject-critic existing outside the poem), and, finally, to attempting to formulate a precise definition. It quickly turns out that this “rigid relationship,” another semantic equivalent of allegory, leads us astray; it “entails” misleading tropes and associations that are more and more meaningless. For while “love is a prison” is a classic trope, any movement of the imagination that renders this trope concrete gives rise to almost surreal images. This approach is closer to the works of Šalamun than that of Benjamin’s or Sosnowski’s – allegory is not a decoy which evokes and reorganizes the theoretical potential of twentieth-century philosophical discourses but a pretext for confusing horizontal and vertical orders, metaphor and metonymy, the level of definition (hence “in my case the word allegory”) and its practical application (“and that/ entails”). Metalanguage comes into contact with individual *parole* but not in the manner found in Sosnowski’s or Dycki’s works; thus, this poem would be of little use for Jankowicz as an acknowledged expert in philosophy. Even the final observation in parenthesis reads like an ironic comment aimed to ridicule the above-discussed essay *Alegoria* (Dycki).

Among many of Wawrzyńczyk’s critical texts in which a “different” approach to allegory comes to the fore we should focus on a guest lecture delivered at the Krakow School of Poetry entitled *Zawsze lubię kury. O alegoryczności w późnej poezji Tomaža Šalamuna* [I have always liked hens. Allegorism in Tomaž Šalamun’s late poetry], in which the critic tried to clarify his approach to allegorism.<sup>45</sup> Using numerous examples from the Slovenian poet’s works, Wawrzyńczyk introduces a, nevertheless quite schematic, division into “vertical” and “horizontal” poetic situations, which could also be better described as vertical and horizontal ways of organizing meaning. The vertical is associated with the figurative nature of language, including the tropes of allegory and metaphor; the horizontal is associated with “direct speech” (as Wawrzyńczyk puts it), for example, with narration. Paradoxically, the critic discusses the theory of allegory at a fairly basic level, drawing on structuralist interpretations. Wawrzyńczyk refers to the Polish translation of Gayatri Spivak’s essay to show that although allegory establishes a “hard bond” between sign and meaning (as opposed to the “soft” bond found in the metaphor), it also reveals a natural gap between them. It should be noted that in comparison with the sophisticated constructions of Benjamin, Derrida, or de Man, Spivak’s essay is quite conservative, even crude. However, this does not stop Wawrzyńczyk from enriching it with his own sensual reflections on these “bonds” or “bridges” supporting them (i.e., intuitive seeing and sensing the process of signification, of musical rather than textual provenance). In each of the subsequent literary examples discussed by the critic, starting with Mickiewicz, through Ashbery, and ending with Šalamun, the allegorical mechanism becomes more and more complex and thus more open, and at the same time deliberately deprived of one of its elements (the referent).

<sup>45</sup>Wawrzyńczyk, “Zawsze lubię kury. O alegoryczności w późnej poezji Tomaža Šalamuna” [I’ve always liked chickens. Allegorism in Tomaž Šalamun’s late poetry] [lecture], [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tc\\_G\\_mOxaPU&t=2654s&ab\\_channel=DawidMateusz](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tc_G_mOxaPU&t=2654s&ab_channel=DawidMateusz).

It seems that Wawrzyńczyk is primarily interested in the relationship between the plane of representation and the hypothesis of depth in the poem, and therefore the potential ability of individual figures to evoke extra-textual meanings (which translates into the aforementioned "power of poetry"). It is important, however, only insofar as allegorism becomes neither the matrix of the story (as in Świeściak's interpretations of Suska's or Różycki's works) nor its goal (as in Jankowicz's essay on Sosnowski's works). This can be illustrated by the history of twentieth-century painting, which Wawrzyńczyk also sometimes refers to: allegory in the poem indicates a moment when the plane is questioned; consequently, depth is explored, and two-dimensionality is abandoned. This, in turn, translates into the problem of representation. While the critic poses it indirectly, he has been actually interested in it, as an evaluative element, from the very beginning. Allegory blurs the image reflected on the surface of the water – it disturbs the lyrical situation, and the plane of representation appears wrinkled.

It is difficult to say to what extent this proposal – quite conventional, spontaneous, and as if devoid of philosophical contexts – resembles the Baroque Leibnizian fold from Gilles Deleuze's essay and to what extent it actually simulates conceptual similarity. It does not change the fact that the problem of allegory formulated in such a way – not as a philosophical tool or an auratic warranty of metaphysical meaning but as a mechanism of vertical distribution of meaning in relation to the horizontal expansion of the lyrical world – safeguards against the messianic promises of Benjamin's philosophy of history and the traps of textual Thanatal irony of the "eternal return." This form of allegorism resembles sculptural rather than strictly literary concepts, but perhaps that is why it best corresponds to poetry which academic philosophical critics hardly ever discuss. Nothing spectacular happens in such poems; no conceptual treatises are encoded in them (as in Ashbery's poems). While they do not play an intellectual game with the reader, many of their words may be read as loaded with additional meanings. This notwithstanding, it is not very clear where to look for their foundation and how to reconstruct their "allegorical structures." Referring to the catastrophic nature of Benjamin's theory of allegory, one could say that we are dealing with the tip of the iceberg (Deleuze refers to a similar concept, a cone, in his essay on Gottfried Leibniz), the foundations of which we cannot see. In such a poem, the reader is no longer a collector but the Titanic, waiting for a spectacular collision. That's also an allegory.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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# KEYWORDS

## LITERARY CRITICISM

### *allegory*

**ABSTRACT:**

The author analyses the concept of allegory, a classical poetic figure, as a kind of a “travelling concept,” a notion that informs contemporary literary criticism. He argues that the growing interest in allegorical styles of reading in the modern humanities stems from two important sources: the works of Walter Benjamin, who reclaimed the Baroque allegory for contemporary poetics, and Paul de Man, who redefined it as an inherent quality of literature and the universal mode of textual interpretation. The author then examines different ways of employing this modern understanding of allegory (as a topic, style or stylization, and as a way of reading) by three contemporary writers and critics Grzegorz Jankowicz, Alina Świeściak and Rafał Wawrzyńczyk.

*poetics*

## METACRITICISM

### allegorism in poetry

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# The Classless Left. On a Certain Tradition of Politically Engaged Criticism from the Turn of the Century\*

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How to discuss a notion which does not exist?

This seems to be the fundamental issue with considerations regarding the class category in the Polish critical-literary discourse of the 1990s and the 21st century. Reading critical works from that period, including those which are explicitly engaged and leftist, it seems clear that the notion of class is rarely discussed – even when the problems with and abuses of capitalism, late capitalism, or neoliberalism are rightfully highlighted. And even when it does appear, it is reduced to the question of identity, next to gender, sexual orientation, religion etc.<sup>1</sup>

However, how can we confirm these intuitions, and how can we identify the reasons and processes behind this state of affairs? On the one hand, we do not have hard, statistical evidence regarding a dictionary of Polish literary criticism, and on the other – the very explanation why a given notion is no longer used will inevitably be speculation: how to explain an empty space where we are dealing with a plethora of vivid idioms based on a variety of stylistic, philosophical, political choices?

<sup>1</sup> The irreducibility of class to a type of identity is obviously an important, broadly discussed topic in the tradition of socialist/leftist philosophy of politics and literary criticism, see e.g. Walter Benn Michaels, *Kształt znaczącego* [The Shape of the Signifier], translated into Polish by Jan Burzyński (Kraków: Ha!art, 2006).



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Obviously, the problem with erasing class from various public discourses of present-day Poland is well-known – and it is simultaneously a major topic itself. 1990's Poland saw a mass escape from the idea of class, although its beginnings probably date further back<sup>2</sup>. One could even risk a statement that the history of People's Poland, at least from 1949, is a history of the advancing process of abandoning the notion of class, or diluting its meaning – in the name of various, more universal subjects, which were supposed to prove that Polish society was classless, whereas in fact they largely concealed class antagonism<sup>3</sup>. One could even suggest that a similar process, but in slightly changed forms, constituted a fundamental problem of 20th-century socialisms in general: how to accept the class character of political conflicts within a society that has been building socialism for ages? Paradoxically, the history of escaping from class might prove far simpler in capitalist countries: it would gain momentum with the collapse of the Keynesian consensus in the early 1970s, it would be closely connected with capital's fight against the political position of trade unions, and it would accelerate with the growing popularity of the Thatcher-Reagan ideology<sup>4</sup>. The fact that the socialist left eventually – and enthusiastically – agreed to reduce the significance of the class category also played its role<sup>5</sup>.

I mention this – putting forward a number of potentially controversial theses, which in no way can in and of themselves constitute a foundation of a literary studies article – in order to highlight the inevitable entanglement of further considerations in a broader, historical context. The erasure of class is not an autonomous phenomenon in the critical-literary discourse, and probably external phenomena are largely responsible for the critics having ultimately abandoned the category of class. Pressure from the broader Polish public discourse must have been accompanied by pressure from within, i.e. academia absorbing a number of theories and intellectual projects from Western humanities, which – though ostensibly associated with left radicalism – nonetheless encouraged thinking in allegedly post-class terms. There are good reasons to assume that abandoning the category of class by “engaged” literary critics was just one form of the process taking place within “engaged” humanities in general.

However, even if we are to accept that leftist critics (and this paper focuses on one selected tradition of leftist literary criticism) responded only to pressures which were external to and independent from them in their escape from class – they internalized and absorbed methods of that escape rather than drew its trajectory – they still had to follow some imagined logic of non-class or post-class vision of the world: adapt it to their own critical projects, justify

<sup>2</sup> See especially: “Rzeczpospolita klas. Z Kazimierzem M. Słomczyńskim rozmawiają Staś Chankowski, Stanisław Zakroczyński” [People's republic of classes. An interview with M. Słomczyński by Staś Chankowski and Stanisław Zakroczyński], *Magazyn Kontakt*, 27.01.2015, <https://magazynkontakt.pl/prof-slomczynski-rzeczpospolita-klas/>; Piotr Żuk, “O aktualności pojęcia «klasa społeczna» w społeczeństwie i analizach socjologicznych” [On the timeliness of the notion of a «social class» in society and sociological analyses], *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny* 3 (2008); Jacek Tittenbrun, “Death of Class?”, *Przegląd Socjologiczny* 2 (2014); Katarzyna Janicka, Kazimierz Słomczyński, “Struktura społeczna w Polsce: klasowy wymiar nierówności” [Polish social structure: class dimension of inequalities], *Przegląd Socjologiczny* 63 (2014).

<sup>3</sup> On this issue, see Paweł Kaczmariski, Marta Koronkiewicz, “Literatura ludowa jako projekt” [Folk literature as a project], *Mały Format* 7-9 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/10/literatura-ludowa/>.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Bill Mitchell, Thomas Fazi, *Reclaiming the State* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> See a classical discussion in e.g. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class* (London–New York: Verso, 1986).

in terms of ideology, harmonize it with their aesthetic diagnoses and demands. The present paper is an attempt at reconstructing this logic – an analysis of the structure and implications of a certain critical-literary standpoint rather than a cross-sectional review of all factors and processes which may have influenced the critics' erasure of class.

Or we could put it slightly differently. Different types of metacritical reflection can be conventionally and provisionally divided into approaches focused on the *historical* reconstruction on the one hand, and those mostly interested in a *structural* analysis on the other. The former describe the development of a critical-literary tendency over time; the latter disassemble the network of theses and assumptions of a critical-literary standpoint or debate, revealing how they are mutually conditioned, how they imply one another etc. To some extent, it would be justifiable to describe the difference between those two approaches using a classical structuralist differentiation into a diachronic and synchronic order. One would also have to stress that in practice both types of reflection will inevitably permeate each other and merge – rather than some fundamental, methodological differences, what divides these two approaches is a certain shift of emphasis. Nonetheless, the difference between them – even if purely analytical – allows us to articulate better the aims of specific metacritical studies. Thus the aim of the present paper is to provide something along the lines of a structural analysis: a recreation of the imagined logic governing the post-class vision of the world – as it was proposed by selected critics – rather than a cross-sectional discussion of each event and statement that contributed to the gradual erasure of class from the critical-literary discourse.

The stake of this effort – an attempt at understanding, how (and why) the critical-literary left abandoned the idea of class – is not political; non-exclusively, and not even predominantly. Obviously niche discussions of literary critics have no significant impact on class awareness of any segment of society. Meanwhile, the major consequence of abandoning the concept of class is forgetting – or rather conscious unlearning – of notions, tools and analyses which allow us to understand important works of Marxist literary studies, both historical and contemporary. Erasure of class terminology may be at least partially responsible for the fact that Fredric Jameson is virtually absent from Polish literary studies (his latest texts having never even been translated), and authors such as Nicholas Brown or Roberto Schwarz remain absent entirely; not to mention that Raymond Williams's seminal *Marxism and literature* is available in Polish only in an absurdly poorly translated, literally illegible version<sup>6</sup>. Many similar works are rendered incomprehensible without a proper understanding (which does not necessarily mean embracing) of the Marxist conception of class and class antagonism. The fact that these are either misunderstood or absent impoverishes not only the "left-leaning" part of Polish literary studies (whatever one may understand by that), but Polish literary studies in general. Ignorance of basic terms of the Marxist tradition renders reading works like *The Political Unconscious* by Fredric Jameson<sup>7</sup> pointless. In turn, ignorance of concepts such as the political unconscious makes the vast resources of western literary studies inaccessible to us, including some of their most exciting new fields – even those that more orthodox Marxists may disap-

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxizm i literatura* [Marxism and literature], translated into Polish by Antoni Chojnacki, Edward Kasperski (Warszawa: PWN, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Methuen, 1981).

prove of. Without understanding what class is, it is impossible to capture the Marxist category of alienation – and its criticism within the so-called “new materialisms”<sup>8</sup>. The erasure of class can further limit our access to important historical works of Polish literary criticism as well: from the early writings of Stanisław Brzozowski, to Ignacy Fik, to various debates initiated by the journal “Kuźnica”, and more.

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Naturally, a metacritical analysis of a notion that no longer exists requires a clear delimitation, and a careful narrowing down, of the possible source material. It is unsurprising that we will not find references to class struggle in short book reviews in “Polityka” [Politics], or in the foreword to an anthology of explicitly right-wing poetry. The absence of such references in the critical-literary discourse of the liberal center or conservative right is somewhat obvious, a given – and as such it should not be seen as a symptom of some broader phenomenon or historical shift.

My considerations are thus limited to one tradition of leftist literary criticism, associated mostly with names such as Maria Janion, Kinga Dunin and Igor Stokfiszewski. Alongside Przemysław Czapliński (whose works, due to their vastness and theoretical variety, requires a separate analysis) they laid the programmatic foundations for the literary criticism of the “Krytyka Polityczna” [Political criticism] circle (the influence was direct in the case of Dunin and Stokfiszewski). It was (as we shall see) openly non-Marxist criticism in terms of its methodological or political assumptions, based primarily on politics of anti-discrimination and new social theories which stemmed from western liberalism (e.g. Rorty), rather than on elements of socialist tradition.

However, it was this circle that at the turn of the century defined the default meaning of “the left” in Polish literary criticism – “leftist criticism” referred to (at least in the modern rather than historical context) the ideas more or less accurately associated with “Krytyka Polityczna”; this seemed to be the case especially with those critics who saw themselves as non-leftist. This led to interesting reevaluations and various thought-provoking – not to say: confusing – metacritical analyses. For example, a paper by Magdalena Hoły-Łuczaj *Czy “zwrot polityczny” to “zwrot marksistowski”? Projekt “Krytyki Politycznej” a marksistowska tradycja literaturoznawcza*<sup>9</sup> [Is “the political turn” a “Marxist turn”? “Krytyka Polityczna’s” project and Marxist literary studies tradition], published in a specialist, academic journal, should be read today as a surprising testament of the period. Hoły-Łuczaj argues that on closer inspection the works of literary criticism associated with “Krytyka Polityczna” reveal their Marxist provenance, although it is never openly admitted. At the same time, she understands Marxism very broadly – and in such a way that those who identify with the historical-materialist tradition would not necessarily subscribe to her understanding of the term. The issue with Hoły-Łuczaj’s definitions becomes clear as soon as she introduces the notion of the “political turn”:

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Jason Edwards, “The Materialism of Historical Materialism”, in: *New Materialisms*, edited by Diana Coole, Samantha Frost (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Magdalena Hoły-Łuczaj, “Czy «zwrot polityczny» to «zwrot marksistowski»? Projekt «Krytyki Politycznej» a marksistowska tradycja literaturoznawcza”, *Literaturoznawstwo* 6-7 (2012-2013).

Following the political turn, literature and literary criticism are supposed to focus not on the analysis of “experiences”, emotions and fantasies of individuals, but orient themselves towards the supra-individual sphere, a way of thinking, and as a result – understanding ourselves better. Hence from the onset the political turn takes a stance which is almost identical to Marxist anthropology<sup>10</sup>.

In other words, what is Marxist about the “political turn”, is the general turn towards politics (as a “supra-individual sphere”); it is easy to notice that in this situation any “political turn” has to be Marxist simply by definition. Moreover, “engagement” as such is also Marxist by definition:

Thus the political turn “took place via art, which again started to show alternative codices of values and started to participate in the shaping [highlight by MHŁ] a new map of the individual and universal”. This statement directs us towards the leading assumption of “Krytyka Polityczna’s” project, according to which engagement – well-known to us from the Marxist paradigm – constitutes the central issue in the discussion about literature.<sup>11</sup>

...and so is the idea of conflict as a foundation of politics:

The idea of conflict as “the only social constant” is another assumption shared by “Krytyka Polityczna” and the Marxist paradigm<sup>12</sup>.

Obviously, a gradual yet drastic loosening and expansion of the understanding of “Marxism” is taking place here. This definitional slippery slope – on which Hoły-Łuczaj steps, assuming that Marxism is some sort of sensitivity, or a way of adding value to certain “categories” rather than a specific academic orientation, method, or historical theory - leads her to considering “reality” as an inherently Marxist term:

The demand for literature to orient itself towards reality seems to be among top reasons for which “Krytyka Polityczna’s” project can be considered convergent with the Marxist paradigm. The expectations of this environment regarding modern literature focus on the relationship with reality, i.e. the need to refer to it, to notice the ideological discourses governing it, and critical responses to them. The realism proposed by “Krytyka Polityczna” is basically the same as one of the major categories of Marxist literary studies<sup>13</sup>.

Although many Marxists would likely agree with Hoły-Łuczaj’s acknowledgement of reality’s inherent leftist bias, she herself focuses on identifying all categories which potentially might connect “Krytyka Polityczna” with Marxism, rather than on verifying whether there is actually any meaningful connection. After all, realism - although indeed important for Marxists - has been claimed as their own by many political and academic orientations.

However, the point here is not to complain about the methodological hodge-podge in Hoły-Łuczaj’s paper, where even a meeting between Sławomir Sierakowski and Bertolt Brecht is pos-

<sup>10</sup>Hoły-Łuczaj, 18.

<sup>11</sup>Hoły-Łuczaj, 18.

<sup>12</sup>Hoły-Łuczaj, 19.

<sup>13</sup>Hoły-Łuczaj, 21.

sible under the umbrella of “heterodox Marxism”<sup>14</sup>. Rather, that paper seems to be a telling testament of the epoch. Published in 2013, it stemmed from a moment when the “political turn” – now made tangible by Stokfiszewski’s book of the same title, as well as a guide to engaged literature by “Krytyka Polityczna”<sup>15</sup> – presented itself as a major, default form of the left-leaning literary criticism in Poland, virtually unchallenged in terms of visibility, systemic character, and institutional support. It would seem that in a post-socialist state such a status must have given at least a *s u s p i c i o n* of Marxist provenance of the whole enterprise, its hidden or implicitly (and not necessarily overt even to authors themselves) communist character. Hoły-Łuczaj’s paper was thus an attempt at verifying those suspicions, burdened mostly not even by bias, but by her poor knowledge of the Marxist tradition. From the perspective of our discussion, what is significant is precisely the fact that Hoły-Łuczaj *f a i l s* – what her paper proves (against her original intention) is that classifying the new, critical-literary left from the turn of the century as “Marxist” requires an absurd extension of the definition. If the connection between the two traditions is based on such general categories as “orientation towards reality”, then it is clear there is no actual convergence of intuition, method, or interpretation.

Hoły-Łuczaj is so determined to prove that there are connections between Marxism and the “political turn”, that ultimately she does not even draw conclusions from her own, correct observation regarding the place of the category of class in texts by leftist critics:

However, for “Krytyka Polityczna”, “classes” in their strict – Marxist – meaning are not the subject of the conflict. The representatives of “Krytyka Polityczna” refer to conflicts between different social groups, whose identities are defined by rather than economic factors. In this sense, “Krytyka Polityczna” takes a typically post-Marxist position<sup>16</sup>.

It is worth noting that Hoły-Łuczaj’s reconstruction of the Marxist understanding of “class”<sup>17</sup> is erroneous, and later in her paper she openly admits that she is not interested in the differentiation (previously introduced by herself) between post-Marxism, neo-Marxism, and Marxism as such; nonetheless, she correctly identifies the key characteristic of the critical-literary project of “Krytyka Polityczna”: its rejection of the category of class (or at least depriving it of its central, analytical function that it has in Marxism).

Perhaps treating Hoły-Łuczaj’s text as symptomatic of a broader phenomenon – which one could as a forceful “extension” of leftist criticism from the turn of the century so that it encompasses Marxist traditions – would be unjustifiable if her ideas were not shared by so many people, as evidenced by the reactions to Stokfiszewski’s famous polemics. And it is not just a case of the “ArtPapier” reviewer, who established Stokfiszewski’s alleged Marxism *e x c l u s i v e l y* on

<sup>14</sup>Hoły-Łuczaj, 21.

<sup>15</sup>See Igor Stokfiszewski, *Zwrot polityczny* [Political turn] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009); *Polityka literatury. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej* [Politics of literature. A guide by Krytyka Polityczna], edited by K. Dunin et al. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009).

<sup>16</sup>Hoły-Łuczaj, 19.

<sup>17</sup>She derives social difference from “the way of dividing profits”, and class antagonism – not from exploitation, but from abstract “inequality” and the fact that “the privileged class is trying to uphold it” (Hoły-Łuczaj, 13); in general, Hoły-Łuczaj proposes a rather typical, liberal – and erroneous – reading of Marxist class theory.

the basis of his general appreciation of the social role of conflict<sup>18</sup>; Karol Maliszewski, an influential critic of modern poetry wrote, unironically compared Stokfiszewski to György Lukács:

I do not claim that poetry does not benefit from immersion in earthly life and its capricious shapes; it stems from earthly life, striving towards eternity. But without exaggerating, without turning a poem into a journalistic commentary, put together for the sake of socially-oriented critics. Prose might be content with that, but for poetry it is just a basic level. The realism of small things, topography, experience, or a social characteristic (according to individual wishes, these can be politically engaged, and not necessarily in Broniewski's style) serve as a stepping stone, they create a transfer space, among many other – also metaphysical. I do not understand why this young critic only cares about the first level, limited to producing political postcards. Is this a return to Lukács, or maybe socialist realism à rebours (capitalist realism)? How can one talk to poets, while suggesting a selection of topics for them to use?<sup>19</sup>

A bit earlier Maliszewski also mentions that in new poetry “what escapes qualifications, especially Marxist ones, is the most alluring” – suggesting that Stokfiszewski sides with those “qualifications”. Realism and a certain authoritative attitude, which Maliszewski associates with the figure of a people's commissar, are supposed to form a bridge between Stokfiszewski and Marxism. This loose approach to definitions allows Maliszewski to identify Stokfiszewski's perspective as “mercantile and media-oriented” – apparently there is no contradiction between Marxism, reduced now to general demand for realism and a certain stylistic manner, and free market “mercantilism”. Maliszewski's and Hoły-Łuczaj's generalizations thus prove the same thing: there is no link between Marxism and the “political turn” which would go beyond style or rhetoric.

Joanna Orska's paper, *O «lewicowej» strategii współczesnej krytyki literackiej wobec wolnego rynku mediów*<sup>20</sup> [On the “leftist” strategy of contemporary literary criticism regarding the free market of media] offers a far more interesting and detailed picture of the relationship between these two. Although Orska identifies different representatives of the “leftist strategy” than Hoły-Łuczaj (Orska's list includes Przemysław Czapliński and Agata Bielik-Robson; today the latter distances herself from the left, but in 2007, when Orska's paper was published, she was associated with “Krytyka Polityczna” – whereas Kinga Dunin is treated as opposed to them due to her criticism of the “dominating media discourse”), she nonetheless ultimately associates the “left” literary criticism with the same, general program approach – simple realism, the need to impact reality, explicit engagement, etc. The difference between Orska and Hoły-Łuczaj or Maliszewski lies in Orska's nuanced insight – by decomposing the “leftist strategy” into prime factors: focus on the political effectiveness of literature, attachment to political correctness, populist rhetoric, romantic egalitarianism – but also (and crucially) in the fact that Orska aptly highlights the differences between the new left and the Marxist tradition, rather than blurs it. All this is not explicit in her article – Marx appears here only once – but her observations are based on Theodor Adorno's writings on the cultural industry, the devastating effect of the logic

<sup>18</sup>Ryszard Knapek, “Ustanowienie uniwersalizmu” [Establishment of universalism], *ArtPapier* 5 (2010), <http://artpapier.com/index.php?page=artykul&wydanie=102&artykul=2370>.

<sup>19</sup>Karol Maliszewski, “Czkawka po Lukácsu” [An aftertaste after Lukács], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 13.03.2007 [online version].

<sup>20</sup>Joanna Orska, “O «lewicowej» strategii współczesnej krytyki literackiej wobec wolnego rynku mediów”, in: *Dyskursy krytyczne u progu XXI wieku* [Political discourses of early 21st century], edited by Dorota Kozicka, Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski (Kraków: Universitas 2007).

of the market on art, and the resulting alienation. The general tone of the paper is clear: it is not so much an attack on the left from the non-left, as it is a critique of a certain type of romantic left - its fascination with the market, its obsession (disguised as populism) with simplicity and accessibility – using selected tools borrowed from western Marxism.

Orska consciously and consistently proves what Hoły-Łuczaj and Maliszewski proved unintentionally with their own *i n c o n s i s t e n c y*: the critical-literary left from the early 21st century, the “political turn” left, had little to do with any diagnoses or tools characteristic of historical materialism.

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It is difficult to examine a non-existing notion based on the interpretations of texts in which it could appear, even though it does not. Ultimately the fact that the category of class appears in such program works as *Czytając Polskę* [Reading Poland] only occasionally, next to considerations about the language of Stalinism<sup>21</sup>, is in itself an interesting observation – but it is hard to clearly see what its implications are. Perhaps we can draw more conclusions from the fact that in *Zwrot polityczny* class – apart from several references to the lifestyle of the “middle class” – appears exclusively in a longer quote from Nancy Fraser, where the aim is to draw analogies between anti-discriminatory social struggles of sexual minorities, and class struggle<sup>22</sup>. However, even this observation is limited: we can see that Stokfiszewski requires the notion of class first and foremost in order to describe the mechanisms of identity/cultural exclusion, whereas Dunin – in order to clarify the difference between the public discourse in Poland during the socialist period and post-1989; however, this does not explain why class seems to serve these purposes *e x c l u s i v e l y*.

Thus, what seems more productive is to turn towards texts that outline general foundations of their authors’ worldview, explaining how they understand such makeshift totalities as culture or society; program articles which lay down a general, theoretical *b a c k g r o u n d* of the actual critical-literary work, and reveal a general worldview of a critic – as well as reasons behind perceiving the category of class as unnecessary or peripheral for considering those totalities.

In early the 1990s Maria Janion wrote about the relationship between economy and culture:

Ideas rule the world, and democracy needs the richness and greatness of ideas. The intelligentsia elites will thus serve the ideological role even more than before, they will work on creating a market of ideas. However, we must not forget that ideas must refer to economy. The wheels of the mechanics of economy can spin and function only when they are supported by some culture, by its style. If a given culture rejects them – they stop working, or they malfunction<sup>23</sup>.

Present-day readers won’t find anything particularly controversial here. It is an obviously and openly idealistic vision, and the mention of “a market of ideas” may seem somewhat embarrassing

<sup>21</sup>Kinga Dunin, *Czytając Polskę*, Warszawa: WAB 2004 [epub; chapter “PRL. W szponach systemu” [PRL. In the claws of the system].

<sup>22</sup>Stokfiszewski, *Zwrot polityczny* [epub; subchapter 2. in chapter “Inne rytuały” [Other rituals].

<sup>23</sup>Maria Janion, “Szanse kultur alternatywnych” [Chances of alternative cultures], *Res Publica* 3 (1991): 108.

today, but Janion starts from an attempt at reasonably balancing the relationship between culture and economy – in such a way as to make them mutually supportive, creating feedback. However, her conclusions are far from obvious:

If this is how we present this problem – economy taking root in culture, the two forced to cooperate, then we need to rethink the extent to which Polish culture – symbolic-romantic – can accept free market. If this is impossible, then we also need to rethink where a conflict between this culture and free market may lead us, and whether it would not result in social disintegration and economic inconsistency. We need to consider whether this conflict is inevitable, or whether we should simply come up with a concept of culture which would meet the economic challenge better, which would be something – I don't know – supportive of the new economics<sup>24</sup>.

The feedback suggestion disappears: we should invent the new Polish culture in such a way as to support the new Polish “economics”. Specifically – free market economics, which to Janion seems to be something obvious and given. The only significant antagonism appears between “economics” and culture – but we do not get any suggestion of fundamental conflicts (e.g. class culture) within cultural, social etc. life.

This shift or harmonisation is not involuntary however, it has a specific aim – designation of a new dedicated space for romanticism and those who study it, or, more generally, cultural studies as such, culture activists, and social movements in general. This space becomes known as “alternative cultures”:

We also need to think about what Marcin Król wrote about in “Res Publica” – the middle class culture. Practicing the so-called tragic irony does not benefit the creation and development of the middle class. This is not to say that this irony, after its historical functioning stops, cannot become an aesthetic value for the middle class. [...] Perhaps there is even some chance for the romantic culture to become one of alternative cultures. [...] The chance of romanticism as an alternative culture can lie in the fact that it contains unusually rich existential issues<sup>25</sup>.

Thus we are encouraged to give up on the economy – which has a given, obvious, unambiguous form – and maintain a culture – which also needs to be constructed around one, consistent “idea”, defined (if we want to avoid social disintegration) by the “new economics” – only in order to find an area in which the more profound truth of the romantic culture (or any other alternative culture) could directly impact the mentality or ethos of the new, crucial class. On the one hand, in *Szanse kultur alternatywnych* we can find a mood of resignation, characteristic of Janion's 1990s texts<sup>26</sup>; Janion seems to have given up on the possibility of a deeper political change. On the other hand, her surrender is supposed to secure for culture as a field a particular kind of autonomy – one that would provide culture with political relevance. This relevance would supposedly stem not from the participation of cultural critics and activists in the fundamental conflicts of the new, capitalist reality, but from their ability to resist “economics” as such.

<sup>24</sup>Janion, “Szanse kultur alternatywnych”, 109.

<sup>25</sup>Janion, “Szanse kultur alternatywnych”, 109.

<sup>26</sup>See e.g. Maria Janion, *Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś?* [Will you know what you have lived through?] (Warszawa: Sic!, 1996).



It would seem that this observation says a lot about how the possibility of escaping from politics in the new, free-market reality was perceived in 1990s: Janion quite evidently does not believe in the general possibility of depoliticizing romantic culture; she does understand that being apolitical is a political choice, but she seems to distinguish two separate levels of political action: the level of “economics” (about which nothing can be directly done), and the level of “alternative culture”, at which admittedly nothing can be done directly, but which is nonetheless very political, as it shapes not only the broadly understood “values”, but also whole “new” classes. We would thus be seeing not the unconditional surrender on behalf of the left, but rather a tactical retreat and an intentional change of front.

However, this change of front entails a profound shift in what one might call the foundations of the political imaginarium (in fact, that shift was foreshadowed in Janion’s earlier texts). The market of ideas, on which alternative and non-alternative cultures will be competing, requires a new, market-based subject – the mythical “middle class” which transcends the previous class oppositions. The class conflict thus disappears completely, replaced with the idea of natural social stratification. Another conflict from Janion’s vision which could potentially be problematized in terms of dialectic contradictions – one between economy and culture – is meanwhile reduced to a technicality. As far as adjusting culture to the “new economics” efficiently goes, technocrats (i.e. people able to recognize the essence of the new economics and design a new culture for it) on both sides should be entrusted with key roles. What is left? A vision based on a contradiction between the center and the periphery, between culture and alternative cultures. While in a capitalist conflict between classes exploitation (extraction of surplus value from labour) and strike (refusal to work which makes the said extraction impossible) are two basic, characteristic forms of violence, in a world based on a conflict between center and periphery exclusion is a key issue. Exploitation assumes the existence of classes (the dominating class exploits the working class), exclusion assumes the existence of identity (not every identity has the right to be truly, fully oneself, to be seen and heard). Classes can obviously coexist with identities, mechanisms of exploitation exist next to mechanisms of exclusion – however, they are driven by different logics. In simple terms, accepting the primacy of class antagonism over mechanisms of identity exclusion distinguishes the Marxist perspective from the liberal-progressive one.

Curiously, when in a 2009 interview for “Gazeta Wyborcza” [Election gazette] Janion discussed the influential series “Transgresje” [Transgressions] which she edited in 1970s and 1980s, she commented on this exact issue:

We wanted the understanding humanities to use social categories, including class or gender, although perhaps class was not such an important category in “Transgressions”. The category of the excluded, also due to social reasons, was more important there<sup>27</sup>.

Of course, Janion was not the only person responsible for the shift towards the center-periphery opposition as a basis of literary scholars’ political imagination; however, it seems that her role may have been quite significant. In any case, over the next decade or so this opposition was

<sup>27</sup>“Studenci to nie jest niższy personel. Z Marią Janion rozmawiają Kazimiera Szczuka i Sławomir Sierakowski” [Students are not lower-level staff. An interview with Maria Janion by Kazimiera Szczuka and Sławomir Sierakowski], *Gazeta Wyborcza* 226 (2009): 20-21.

to dominate the vision of the world of many important literary critics, especially on the left – this is how Czapliński conceptualized reality in *Powrót centrali*<sup>28</sup> [The return of the central], this is what Dunin did in *Czytając Polskę* and in her earlier *Karoca z dyni*<sup>29</sup> [Pumpkin carriage], outlining her concept of the “Dominant Discourse” (abbreviated as DyDo) or “Dominant Media Discourse” (DDM). The latter was aptly criticized by Krzysztof Uniłowski<sup>30</sup>, who pointed out that DDM conceals more than it reveals: who creates the dominating discourse? On whose behalf and for whose benefit? How is it upheld, and by whom? We do not know; today we could suggest that due to how the problem is presented, in fact we c a n n o t k n o w, for in a vision of the world based on the center-periphery opposition, the center itself seems to be given and uniform, just like in Janion’s works. It becomes an almost metaphysical force (Dunin literally personifies it as a “prince”<sup>31</sup>), whose impact is equally menacing and n a t u r a l; DyDo does what he does not for anyone’s benefit, but because it lies in his nature. All niches and margins, in fact anyone affected by censorship and exclusion; anyone who would prefer varied, innovative, dynamic culture; anyone who dislikes the “dominating media” message, would be DyDo’s opponent. Presenting this issue in such a way does not leave any room for class antagonism – this is a vision of the world based on collective resistance against one, abstract “power” for whom censorship is not a tool for gaining some material interest – this power is defined by censorship.

In *Karoca z dyni* the part where Dunin develops the concept of “prince DyDo” is preceded by a less known, but perhaps more telling chapter, in which she approvingly comments on *The Future of Capitalism* by Lester Thurow<sup>32</sup> and *The Global Trap* by Hans-Peter Martin and Harald Schumann<sup>33</sup>. Dunin, clearly fascinated, borrows a vision of society from the latter; in that vision only 20% of the working-age population is enough to sustain global economy, which renders the remaining 80% redundant. Why is this vision not completely apocalyptic, why does it not assume the extermination of the redundant population? According to Dunin, because capital requires consumers – which is why the redundant should be given some money for expenditures.

According Dunin it is access to consumers rather than to workforce that constitutes the basic condition for sustaining the capitalist economy. The entirety of politics is thus about redistribution – such a way of dividing value produced by the small, undefined group of the “productive” so as nobody lives in poverty, and the world does not fall into resentment and fascism. Access to some abstract machine which generates wealth – and e x c l u s i o n from participating in that wealth rather than e x p l o i t a t i o n of those who produce it - is the key political issue here. Of course, Dunin is mostly interested in the exclusion of women, but not only women – for example, she derives an abstract concept of “global exclusion” from the “logic of capitalism”.

<sup>28</sup>Przemysław Czapliński, *Powrót centrali. Literatura w nowej rzeczywistości* [The return of the central. Literature in a new reality] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007).

<sup>29</sup>Dunin, *Czytając Polskę*; Kinga Dunin, *Karoca z dyni* (Warszawa: Sic!, 2000).

<sup>30</sup>Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Chcieliśmy rynku...” [We wanted a market...], *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2002).

<sup>31</sup>Kinga Dunin, “Kopciuszek, księżę DyDo i wolność” [Cinderella, prince DyDo and freedom], in Dunin: *Karoca z dyni*.

<sup>32</sup>Lester Thurow, *Przyszłość kapitalizmu. Jak dzisiejsze siły ekonomiczne kształtują świat jutra* [The Future of Capitalism: How Today’s Economic Forces Shape Tomorrow’s World], translated into Polish by Lech Czyżewski (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1999).

<sup>33</sup>Hans-Peter Martin, Harald Schumann, *Pułapka globalizacji. Atak na demokrację i dobrobyt* [The Global Trap: Globalization and the Assault on Prosperity and Democracy], translated into Polish by Marek Zybura (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1999).

However, nowhere can we find workers treated as workers; the world consists of consumers and “voices” struggling to be heard. Value and wealth result from abstract operations of a unified, anthropomorphic “center” rather than from the labour of one class or another.

It is thus not surprising that Dunin looks favorably upon soft eurocrats such as Hans-Peter Martin and Harald Schumann. Edward Palmer Thompson, a major socialist eurosceptic wrote that the common European market is a huge stomach for the bourgeoisie: although it has room for different divisions, regulations, interventions, only one process takes place in it: consumption, digestion<sup>34</sup>. Dunin, similarly to Schumann, cares about equal access to this digestion.

At the same time Dunin goes one step further than Janion in her acceptance of capitalism as the only possible mode of production; in early 1990’s texts by Janion capitalism is presented as a fact against which it is pointless to argue (if only for tactical reasons), whereas Dunin generalizes capitalism to a broadly understood “dictate of economy”. Thus, capitalism is where people think about economy either exclusively or too much, for the laws of economy are the laws of capitalism. In other words, capitalist ideology is not “a certain way of thinking about economy”, but rather “a certain way of thinking: about economy”. What can balance it? First and foremost, focusing on values of groups or discourses which have been historically excluded from the market. This is where Dunin discovers a role for new literature and its criticism.

Dunin actually puts forward the same vision of the world as Janion, but in a militant or radicalized version. At its basis there is the opposition of economy and culture – capitalism and values – which is potentially dialectic, but deprived of a dialectic character by the assumption that the laws of capitalism are the same as the laws of economy in general, and thus remain fundamentally unchangeable. Dunin, unlike Janion, does not argue for aligning values with the market, to the contrary – she emphasises the conflict between them. The center-periphery is another opposition, this time non-dialectic in principle – minority discourses, marginalized or excluded, struggle for access to the “center”. Similarly to Janion, here this struggle is in fact purely symbolic or cultural in the sense that production in capitalism is supposed to take place in the mythical, inaccessible center (the “productive” 20%), with just the redistribution of its fruits as the stake. However, while in Janion’s vision “alternative cultures” are supposed to compete for the mentality of the newly formed middle class on the “market of ideas”, Dunin does not really believe in that market; she does not design space for minorities, she calls for it and expects them to demand their own visibility – not based on their own market “attractiveness”, but on non-economic, basically ethical legitimation. To put it simply: women’s voices should be heard better not because it is important for the well-being of the middle class, but because it is just.

Stokfiszewski elaborates on this in *Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury*<sup>35</sup> [Pragmatic criticism of culture], which may be seen as a kind of theoretical or philosophical background for his slightly later, better known polemics about the state of new poetry<sup>36</sup>. Dunin constitutes the most

<sup>34</sup>“E.P. Thompson on Europe, from 1975”, <https://kmflett.wordpress.com/2019/09/09/e-p-thompson-on-europe-from-1975/>.

<sup>35</sup>Igor Stokfiszewski, “Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury” [Pragmatic criticism of culture], *Ha!art* 21 (2005).

<sup>36</sup>Igor Stokfiszewski, “Poezja uników” [Poetry of dodges], *Gazeta Wyborcza* 33 (2007); Igor Stokfiszewski, “Poezja a demokracja” [Poetry versus democracy], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 10 (2007).

important point of reference for Stokfiszewski. The left's escape from economy to culture here is an "obvious", default tactic, justified with western theories:

It is rather obvious that for the left the emphasis has shifted from economy to culture, which can be summarized with Nancy Fraser's "redistribution or recognition" dilemma. A large group of leftist intellectualists (including Fraser) believes that cultural acceptance of communities functioning outside the margin of the dominating consensus will find recognition also in matters of economy as soon as equal members will enter that margin<sup>37</sup>.

The choice is thus clear – recognition followed by redistribution; economic transformation fuelled by the power of minority identities rather than the working-class majority. In Janion "culture" was supposed to adjust to "economics" due to various necessities of the Polish "transition to democracy" (mediating its social influence in the formation of a new class); in Dunin social justice required cultural voices of the excluded to resist the "dictate" of economy; and Stokfiszewski develops the same intuition even further (perhaps even somewhat dialectally?): the goal is not simple adjustment or simple resistance, the goal is to fight for recognition which would then lead to redistribution.

Also, institutions which belong to the center-periphery opposition are transformed. In Stokfiszewski's program article exclusion of identities and marginal cultural voices is the basic problem – just like in Janion's and Dunin's texts; however, here we are dealing with a certain reduction, elimination of mediation – it is the very idea of majority, the very majority thinking that is responsible for the constant exclusion rather than some mythical "central" (like prince DyDo):

Triumphant return of the "truth". This is probably the most adequate way of defining what our culture has been struggling with for the past few years, and what results from the need to define identity and community. In this case, "truth" is nothing else than ideology. Ideology of the cultural majority, which in the name of stabilization and good mood forces it as the "truth" upon minority, which would also like to build a community, but on different fundamentals<sup>38</sup>.

Such a presentation of the problem excludes the category of class even more directly than Janion and Dunin did it. Stokfiszewski openly rejects the possibility to imagine a universal class, which is just as significant in the Marxist concept of class as its very relational and antagonistic nature. Universal subjects either do not exist at all, or – what is perhaps closer to what Stokfiszewski believes in – these are all minority subjects in principle – for every inclusion of the excluded benefits the whole community. Either way, without the possibility of a universal class the vision of class antagonism as historically progressive is obviously impossible. In order to strive towards social progress, a given class needs to function as an excluded, minority identity rather than the working, exploited majority, whose interest is in principle aligned with the interest of the whole community.

<sup>37</sup>Stokfiszewski, "Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury", 22.

<sup>38</sup>Stokfiszewski, "Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury", 19.

If the demands put forward by Dunin in *Karoca z dyni* constitute (in a way) a radicalized version of Janion's ideas from *Szane kultur alternatywnych*, Stokfiszewski's *Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury* would be – so to say – a more self-conscious version of the same theses. For example, it seems that Stokfiszewski understands that capitalism is not a natural, trans-historical necessity – he just assumes that leftist politics is more effective at level of culture (he even assumes that his strategy of “recognition before redistribution” may not work, so he proposes that we should act as if it works, and if it does not, we should revisit it in a few years). Stokfiszewski also understands that different abstract figures of a “central” are not functional in the long term – he thus openly states that the problem lies in the very notions of “majority” or “truth”. Nonetheless his general vision is the same as Janion's or Dunin's: it is no use questioning economic “laws” ruling the world, it is better – easier – to handle culture; in this area the left is supposed to fight for minorities which demand to be part of some broader community, and when they become included – they generally benefit said community as well. In this strategy, there is room for new literature and a job for engaged criticism. The assumption that class struggle has to give way to cultural recognition is thus ultimately not an autonomous, theoretical demand resulting from e.g., reading Fraser's texts, but a natural consequence of Stokfiszewski's strive towards clarifying intuitions which are already present in a certain critical-literary tradition to which he belongs.

In Stokfiszewski, a certain tradition of “leftist” criticism thus finds a moment of self-awareness, self-reflection; it is forced to play open cards with itself and with us. We do not necessarily need to assume that this moment exhausts that line. However, one could suggest that Stokfiszewski brought an end to a grace period of sorts; a version of nominally engaged and leftist literary criticism in which the world consists of identities rather than classes on a basic level, has been led to its natural consequences; and Stokfiszewski explicitly articulates the difference between the two approaches – in this sense he creates space for disagreement, dispute, or a possible invention of a different leftist “strategy”. This would explain why it was only when the discussion about *Zwrot polityczny* quieted down, that – especially in poetry criticism – did voices demanding (more or less explicitly) the return to class emerge<sup>39</sup>.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Zuzanna Sala, “O tym jak szlachcic rabację wywołał” [On how a nobleman started a slaughter], <https://www.praktykateoretyczna.pl/artykuly/o-tym-jak-szlachcic-rabacje-wywolal/>; Zuzanna Sala, “Eternit i wiśnie, czyli o zadupiach w poezji polskiej” [Asbestos and cherries, i.e. on the backwoods of Polish poetry], *Czas Kultury. Dwutygodnik 2* (2021), <https://czaskultury.pl/artikul/eternit-i-wisnie-czyli-o-zadupiach-w-poezji-polskiej/>; Paweł Kaczmarski, “Trzy opowieści o awansie klasowym” [Three stories about social advancement], *Mały Format 6* (2019), <http://malyformat.com/2019/06/opowiesci-o-awansie-klasowym/>; Łukasz Żurek, “Drugi modernizm” [Second modernism], *Dwutygodnik 2* (2018), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artikul/7643-drugi-modernizm.html>; Jakub Skurtys, “Bywa rewolucyjna. Podsumowanie roku 2019 w poezji” [It is sometimes revolutionary. A summary of 2019 in poetry], *Mały Format 12* (2019), <http://malyformat.com/2020/02/bywa-rewolucyjna-podsumowanie-roku-2019-poezji/>.

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# KEYWORDS

Marxism

*class*

**ABSTRACT:**

The paper identifies (selected) reasons and strategies of removing the notion of class from Polish critical-literary discourse after 1989, especially a certain tradition of non-Marxist leftist criticism defined by Maria Janion, Kinga Dunin and Igor Stokfiszewski. The paper shows how a general vision of the world and politics implicitly outlined in the works of those critics excludes the possibility to meaningfully use the notion of class.



## THE LEFT

## political transformation

## LITERARY CRITICISM

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# Critical Variants of Materiality. Polish Literary Criticism from Post-structuralism to New Materialisms

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## Shared matter

Trends in theory (critical reflection) and themes in modern art have been in sync roughly since the 1970s, when, according to Hal Foster, they started to share at least three research fields: the structure of the sign, the constitution of the subject, and the siting of the institution<sup>1</sup>. When Foster was writing about a new form of relations emerging between art and criticism in the 1990s, he stressed their significance for the valuation of artistic practices, reflected in the interest of critical reflection, and new conceptualizations and theoretical strategies resulting from it<sup>2</sup>. The situation of the Anglo-American world of art described by Foster – with a few nec-

<sup>1</sup> Hal Foster, *Powrót Realnego. Awangarda u schyłku XX wieku*, translated into Polish by Mateusz Borowski, Małgorzata Sugiera (Kraków: Universitas, 2010), 15. English version: *The Return of the Real: The Avante-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Agnieszka Rejniak-Majewska, “«Puste miejsce po kulturowych mandarynach». Krytyka sztuki i język teorii” [«Vacancy left behind cultural Mandarines». Art criticism and language of theory], *Kultura Współczesna* 4 (2010): 42.

essary differences and reservations<sup>3</sup> – can say a lot also about the current, twenty-first-century interference of themes of literature and critical-literary orientation. In order to properly put the analogy in motion, it is enough to replace post-structural studies with post-humanistic, non-anthropocentric, and new-materialistic fields of research in humanities, which resonate in artistic activities, theoretical conceptualizations, and critical reflections. These fields, together with transdisciplinary and artistic articulations, function in the broadest, shared horizon of modernity, marked by climate crisis and attempts at redefining ontological differences in the human and non-human community resulting from it. According to Karen Barad, one of the leading representatives of “new materialism”, “new possibilities, which with any luck will have the potential to help us see our way through to a world that is more viable, not for some, but for the entangled wellbeing of all”<sup>4</sup> are the stakes of such efforts. In order to meet these expectations, new materialism in humanities focuses on revising the notion of “materiality” and critical ethos; the latter requires a turn towards affirmative, engaged criticism able to overcome negativity and suspiciousness, which – according to Barad<sup>5</sup> – dominate in the modern critical tradition. Simply speaking, resignification of the notion of “materiality” related to the vitalistic, dynamic ontology of matter, is combined with reevaluating critical theory, required for reinforcing connections in the shared world in an emphatic way rather than for hard-hitting reductionism in bonds between entities<sup>6</sup>. Thus, post-criticism derives from (among other things)<sup>7</sup> new-materialist ethics, which is opposed to the humanist critical approach, characterized with the use of such obviously ethically-charged metaphors as “reductionist”, “distancing”, or “big-headed”<sup>8</sup>. Post-humanist materiality outlines new critical postulates, including procedures for

<sup>3</sup> Foster was describing the moment when the late modernism crisis in painting and sculpture resulted in replacing high art with mostly structural theory. Today shared themes in art and theory include especially the climate catastrophe and dimensions of the Anthropocene, as well as producing knowledge. Also the change in the scope of transdisciplinary research in artistic practices, combining philosophy of science and knowledge of art, positioning artistic research within the framework of new-materialist ways of thinking, is significant. According to Dorota Golańska: “From the perspective of new materialism, both the creative act, the existence of a work of art, and the aesthetic experience connected with dealing with art, have both material and meaning components – the materiality of art produces and brings to life discursive meanings, which in turn allows to give sense to matter. The notion background of such an approach is based on such a processual understanding of art, especially in terms of the notion of «thinking/feeling», referring to intellectual-material aspects of art and creative encounters with it” – “O praktykach i procesie. Nowomaterialistyczne spojrzenie na sploty sztuki, nauki i wiedzy” [On practices and process. New-materialist perspective on the contexture of art, science and knowledge], in: *Feministyczne nowe materializmy: usytuowane kartografie* [Feminist new materialisms: situated cartographies], edited by Olga Cielemecka, Monika Rogowska-Stangret (Lublin: E-naukowiec, 2018): 213, <https://e-naukowiec.eu/feministyczne-nowe-materializmy-usytuowane-kartografie-pod-redakcja-olgi-cielemeckiej-i-moniki-rogowskiej-stangret/>.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Barad, “Erasers and erasures: Pinch’s unfortunate «uncertainty principle»”, *Social Studies of Science* 41, 3 (2011): 450.

<sup>5</sup> And not only her, as evidenced by Rita Felski’s post-critical approach; in her last books she postulated transgressing the limitations of traditional (i.e. suspicious and negative) ethos of criticism, which she sees especially in symptomatic reading, criticism of ideology, Foucault’s historicism, as well as in searching for traces of transgression or resistance in texts – Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3. In her latest book Felski develops a project of criticism based on “engagement in art” – its non-reducible, phenomenological nature manifesting itself considering the complexity and variety of aesthetic experience – Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern”, *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 241.

<sup>7</sup> For Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski, editors of a volume on post-criticism, research in affects is also an important inspiration, in which they see acts of resistance to “omnipresent pessimism of academic thought” or “chronic negativity of criticism” – Elizabeth S. Anker, Rita Felski, “Introduction”, in: *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 8.

<sup>8</sup> In his polemics with new-materialist ontology and ethics, Paul Rekret refers to specific authors of these metaphorical terms of modern criticism – “A critique of newmaterialism: Ethics and ontology”, *Subjectivity* (2016), DOI: 10.1057/s41286-016-0001-y.

reading texts<sup>9</sup>, currently crossing paths with literature focused on reflection upon the Anthropocene, i.e., incorporating structures and topics of debates regarding the climate disaster. As a result – what I would like to show in the present text – a contiguity of dictionaries of criticism and literature emerges, which stems from post-humanist theories which easily permeate discussions about literature beyond academia. I will focus on practical consequences for literary criticism rather than argue with new-materialist criticism or literary theory<sup>10</sup>. This is because vitalist materiality produces a certain type of critical commentary, influencing the scope of its central property: valuation.

## Criticism versus materiality of language

Opposing the post-structuralist tradition which established “language power” as the basic tool of cultural representations, is one of the key orientations in new materialism. According to Barad’s classical (and disputable<sup>11</sup>) statement: “the linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every «thing» – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation”<sup>12</sup>. Barad argues that materiality as a “matter of language” has limited figurations: it seems passive and unchangeable, and it has potential for change only as a derivative of discursive forms. Barad’s observation can be paraphrased as an accusation of post-structuralist “linguisticsfication” of matter, as a result gaining only specific meanings. However, if we take a closer look at specific, critical applications of materiality in its post-structuralist sense, Barad’s diagnosis turns out to be incorrect.

In the Polish criticism of poetry of the 1990s, “materiality” (in the *French Theory* sense) was a useful concept defining self-referring dimensions of language; its material shape rather than the communicated meaning<sup>13</sup>. Materiality turned some poems (e.g., by Andrzej Sosnowski) into autonomous entities, or even living organisms<sup>14</sup>, which went beyond referential stability. In discussions focused on post-structuralist philosophy of language materiality of poetry

<sup>9</sup> Among others, “diffractive reading” proposed by Karen Barad, who borrowed a notion from physics for defining a desired reading practice based on “reading through” (rather than reading “against” which she sees in reflective reading). This type of reading entails connecting authors, theories, disciplines and dictionaries in such a way as to make them redefine or transform one another argumentatively, according to entanglement in refraction – see e.g. Kei Merten, “Introduction. Diffraction, Reading, and (New) Materialism”, in: *Diffractive Reading. New Materialism, Theory, Critique*, edited by Merten Kai (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021): 1–27.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Paweł Kaczmarski: “Materialism As Intentionalism: on the Possibility of a *New Materialist* Literary Criticism”, *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 4, 4 (2019): 191–235.

<sup>11</sup> See Dennis Bruining, “Interrogating the Founding Gestures of the New Materialism”, *Cultural Studies Review* 22, 2 (September 2016): 21–40, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v22i2.4461>.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter”, *Signs: Journal of Woman in Culture and Society* 28, 3 (2003): 801.

<sup>13</sup> Specific examples of such an understanding of materiality (on the example of discussions about Andrzej Sosnowski’s poetry) are provided and discussed by Marta Koronkiewicz – “Materiality as Resistance and Protection: The Case of Andrzej Sosnowski”, translated into English by Paweł Kaczmarski, *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 34, 4 (2019): 152–153.

<sup>14</sup> Agata Bielik-Robson, “A poem should not mean but live. Oznaki życia w późnej poezji Andrzeja Sosnowskiego” [Traces of life in Andrzej Sosnowski’s late poetry], in: *Wiersze na głos. Szkice o twórczości Andrzeja Sosnowskiego* [Poems to read out loud. On Andrzej Sosnowski’s works], edited by P. Śliwiński (Poznań: WBPiCAK, 2011).

ultimately led to accepting its dynamic, metamorphous properties opposed to the hegemony of sense and the legibility of dogma stemming from it. As a result (as demonstrated by Marta Koronkiewicz) “materiality” of language defined in such a way clearly influenced the type of critical commentary based on individual confessions to not understanding poems and on generalizing their program status: texts striving towards being incomprehensible<sup>15</sup>. Even if such ideas are solipsistic (and, as demonstrated by Koronkiewicz, divergent from Sosnowski’s reflection on the materiality of poetic language), they reveal the paradoxical dimension of post-structuralist materiality of language: its self-referentiality, “inner-linguisticity”<sup>16</sup>, and sophistication of readers’ affects – the incomprehension from which criticism derives its own, individual usages of poems. Materiality, referring to linguistic expression, thus served interpretations resulting from the recognition of dereferentialization of words; it became a center of reading in the paradigm of negative representation: in the conditions of accepting that a word does not adhere to an object. However, as demonstrated recently by Dawid Kujawa, in these conditions the materiality of linguistic signs is subject to the hermeneutic procedure of explaining the process of dereferentialization<sup>17</sup>. Kujawa lists influential poetic criticism projects, such as “reductionist deconstructionism” by Grzegorz Jankowicz, responsible for (among other things) the myth of Andrzej Sosnowski as a post-political poet. Negative representation was the center of this myth, i.e., material existence of signs of poetic language deprived of connection with social life and circulating in a closed circuit outside the world. Jankowicz uses the metaphor of a worn coin whose circulation fuels the inflation of linguistic signs. In this critical model, the materiality of words highlights the autonomy of poems, their independence from both transcendence and power. This interest in materiality pointing towards the autonomous dimension of poetic material overlaps with the modernist tradition of material subversion of materials (artistic and linguistic). In post-1989 criticism this tradition returns to the question of the need to describe literature outside of “presentism and etism” (as Przemysław Czapliński put it), on which works from the years 1965-1989 were based. Said tradition set off the work of probing the literary representation in terms of making text independent from “semantic servitude”<sup>18</sup> – not only in poetry, but also in prose criticism.

The materiality of prose language played a fundamental role in Czapliński’s seminal, non-epic model of modern prose proposed in the 1990s. “Text density” characterizing non-epic prose, suggested literary a character manifesting itself in “semantic particles”<sup>19</sup>, and creating autonomous plots comprising “lexical events”. The anti-mimetic dimension of literature read by Czapliński reveals itself via a detailed analysis of linguistic structures, unveiling the internal logics of a text subjugated to the principle of linguistic rather than event entailment. The focus on literary material proposed by him highlights the properties of prose as a collection of autonomous linguistic tropes which it continuously reproduces. The structuralist dismantling of non-epic prose

<sup>15</sup>Koronkiewicz, 153.

<sup>16</sup>Ewa Nofikow, “Między językami, między głosami. O *poems* Andrzeja Sosnowskiego” [Between languages, between voices. On Andrzej Sosnowski’s *poems*], *Biblioteka Postscriptum Polonistycznego* 3 (2013): 93.

<sup>17</sup>Dawid Kujawa, *Pocałunki ludu. Poezja i krytyka po roku 2000* [People’s kisses. Poetry and criticism after 2000] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2021). EPUB.

<sup>18</sup>Przemysław Czapliński, “Nieepicki model prozy w literaturze najnowszej” [Non-epic model of prose in modern literature], *Teksty Drugie* 41, 5 (1996): 72.

<sup>19</sup>Czapliński, “Nieepicki model prozy w literaturze najnowszej”, 73.

establishes the visibility of creative means as the basic filter for literary criticism which extracts literature from representational regime and allows us to highlight its anti-illusiveness.

Both in post-structuralist criticism of poetry and in Czapliński's structuralist proposal references to text materiality led literature from entanglement in non-literary rules of communication, simultaneously valuing works in which material sovereignty created a barrier for instrumentalization of senses. It is significant that the turn towards non-referential literature in criticism took place at times of ideological crises (ethical-moralistic in Czapliński, free-market in Sosnowski's critics), seeing the materiality of pure language as an antidote to monopolizing meanings and senses. Disruptions in representation and dereferentialization of language were thus articulations of artistic and literary-critical self-awareness – signs of the discreteness of discursive practices from marketing and opinion-forming messages. The strategy of a molecular focus on literary language matter allowed us to problematize the issue of mimesis and the subservience of literature to extra-linguistic reality. Criticism which traces textual disruptions in communication employed articulations and metaphors of materiality in order to appreciate works which cancel both traditional (i.e., legitimized by the canon of practice), and consumptional (characteristic for mass production) styles of reception. Materiality crystallized as a critical category for establishing the hierarchy and value of those texts which question the uninterrupted transfer between graphic sign and its designate; they reject naïve representationalism and thus favor testing the limits of communication.

## Materializations of identity

Reducing articulations of postmodern materiality to the dimension of reflection upon representation and aesthetic autonomy would be a meta-critical oversimplification. In Polish literary criticism there is a context of using the "materiality" notion alternative to the "quasi-deconstructive" (Kujawa) optics. It manifests itself especially in interpretations of prose accentuating its identity-related parameters. In texts by, among others, Kinga Dunin (*Czytając Polskę* [Reading Poland], 2004), Błażej Warkocki (*Homo niewiadomo. Polska proza wobec odmienności* [Homo I don't know. Polish prose and otherness], 2007) and Przemysław Czapliński (*Polska do wymiany. Późna nowoczesność i nasze wielkie narracje* [Poland needs replacing. Late modernity and our grand narratives], 2009) strategies of producing identity, textual procedures of socialization, and representations of identity diversion are a significant interpretation key and a tool for categorizing literature. These critics are interested in narratives surrounding producing gender and gendered subjectivity, made present in the represented world of the analyzed texts and defined according to theoretical formulae proposed by Judith Butler. Her conceptualization of gender (as socio-cultural norms materialized in the body) provided some Polish critics from the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century with an interpretative framework according to which literature was read from the perspective of an emancipatory task: "Emancipatory task – initiating new stories and new language – formulated, practiced and introduced to the narrative universe undermined the legitimacy of the grand narrative"<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>20</sup>Przemysław Czapliński, *Polska do wymiany. Późna nowoczesność i nasze wielkie narracje* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B, 2009), 302.

For Przemysław Czapliński, author of those words, literature which makes procedures of giving identity a discourse, among others by showing non-normative bodies, has a subversive character, because it becomes an ally in constructing other bonds<sup>21</sup>. Such an attitude to literature reveals a literary-critical dimension of materiality (significant for the present paper), which is close to Butler's ideas of materiality as a matter of language – not as a metaphorical question or the problem of referentiality, but as an issue of language referring to materiality (body) through the denotation process. For example, reading Mariusz Sieniewicz's prose, Czapliński treated fiction as a tool for probing the illusion of a universal identity, demonstrating how signs of otherness creating the other materialize on a normalized, male body, of an outcast who will be rejected by his community in order for that community to strengthen its social borders. The tension between the body's universalism as a sub-species matter of existence and institutional procedures of emerging borders helped Czapliński demonstrate the transformations in late modern identity narratives. Thus, contemporary literature gains a performative function – Czapliński subjected it to a conceptualization focused on the intersection of matter and meanings, in order to highlight the potential of fictional narratives for new rules of participation in the socio-political life.

Also, Dunin's and Warkocki's books, which were published before *Polska do wymiany*, originated in the idea that literature is a tool for probing existing and emerging social orders, and its analysis can become an analysis of establishing and stabilization of relations, including especially identity-shaping mechanisms in reference to social conventions and repetitive practices of perpetuating meanings. *Czytając Polskę* and *Homo niewiadomo* stem from constructivism; Dunin is interested in society as a fiction derivative of interpretation, Warkocki – in ways of constructing otherness. It is significant that both critics explain their constructivist approach with references to materiality (of the body – Warkocki<sup>22</sup>, of reality – Dunin<sup>23</sup>); they draw conclusions regarding the status of interpretative work of literary texts based on these references. For Dunin interpretations of literature need to take into consideration “strong entanglement of literary discourses in other discourses and colloquial thinking”<sup>24</sup>; which is why she is interested in “the congruence [of texts] with social reality understood as a process, a constant struggle over what this new reality is”<sup>25</sup> rather than their uniqueness. As a result, she leaves out the literariness of the texts she interprets, symptomatically relegated to the sphere of “language games”, which Dunin opposes with literature's engagement in the process of learning about and creating society. Warkocki's approach is less antagonizing – he is interested in tracing misfits and symbolic conditions of their existence in texts, which results

<sup>21</sup>Czapliński, *Polska do wymiany. Późna nowoczesność i nasze wielkie narracje*, 368.

<sup>22</sup>In the introduction to his book Warkocki devotes a lot of space to considerations regarding Butler's and Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's concept of gender, pointing out to the special role of the body as matter on which cultural rules of gender are imprinted. In his analyses and interpretations of prose the issue of corporality (as a theme in the discussed works) allows Warkocki to go towards procedures for social construction of identity – *Homo niewiadomo. Polska proza wobec odmienności* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2007), 17–44.

<sup>23</sup>“By using literature I do not wish to join the endless process of reading a text, but the endless process of learning about and creating society” – Kinga Dunin, *Czytając Polskę. Literatura polska po roku 1989 wobec dylematów nowoczesności* [Reading Poland. Polish literature after 1989 and the dilemmas of modernity] (Warszawa: SAGA Egmont, 2021. EPUB 3.0), 28.

<sup>24</sup>Dunin, 29.

<sup>25</sup>Warkocki, 44.

in a series of interpretations which are “close and loyal to the text”<sup>26</sup>, focused on identity dilemmas, revealing ways of producing otherness. Warkocki thus favors reading and writing practices, as the category which interests him – “otherness” – does not exist as something immanent; it has no stable or coherent definition. Reaching to literature and activities related to it is thus a necessary condition for noticing the constructional dimension of identity which – as Warkocki seems to argue – cannot be uncovered without referring to interpretative work. Thus, this literary-critical project can be treated as a reflection on the role of the symbolic dimension in the process of materializing subjectivity which becomes visible thanks to interpretative procedures required by literature rather than in literature itself.

Formulating a (general) conclusion regarding the transformation in the way of understanding materiality through criticism from the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it can be conceptualized as a methodological shift – from linguistic self-referentiality of poetic matter to social materialization of discourses: from quasi-deconstructionism to critical social theories focused on unmasking universalism via making “other narratives” (Czapliński) visible, pointing to the need to rebuild the natural order (hitherto phantasms). Including the posthumanist provenience, i.e., stemming from new-materialist ontology and modifying the type of critical comments, especially in popular prose reviews<sup>27</sup>, is a sign of the next transformation in the literary-critical discourse of materiality.

## Materiality as a literary theme

Trends in today’s non-anthropocentric humanities resonate not only in methodological proposals; they are also reflected in artistic practices, including literature. New genres (such as climate fiction), are emerging and old ones, such as weird and science fiction, are being revised with current themes of more-than-human communities. The fact that literature, criticism and humanist methodologies share themes and problems results in literary-critical texts focused on the literary represented world, multiplication of cultural interpretative associations and intertexts, and finally – highlighting the paradigmatic dimension of text as a voice engaged in the current debate regarding the planetary future of the world.

“I knew I wanted to write a book about the Anthropocene and climate catastrophe even before I knew I wanted to write “Samosiejki” [Self-sown]”, says Dominika Słowik<sup>28</sup>.

Słowik is close to Timothy Morton, author of “dark ecology”, who refers to childish imagination in his texts due to its non-anthropocentric character (as children, we all talked to non-humans, did we not?). According to Morton, being truly human – based on community, solidarity, and symbio-

<sup>26</sup>Warkocki, 43.

<sup>27</sup>In modern poetry criticism, new materialism and posthumanism do not lead to such far-reaching reduction in the interest in medium and representation. To the contrary – critical books by Anna Kałuża, Kacper Bartczak, as well as papers by Dawid Kujawa and Jakub Skurtys testify to the benefits of incorporating these perspectives in work on poetry. In the case of prose a reductionist approach is more common, in which criticism focuses on the thematic conceptualization, and treating literary representation as an extension of discussions of the world in crisis.

<sup>28</sup>Natalia Szostak, *Dominika Słowik: Nie jestem typem aktywistki. Moją bronią jest literatura* [I am not an activist. Literature is my weapon], “Wysokie Obcasy” 2021, <https://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/7,157211,27736785,dominika-slowik-nie-jestem-typem-aktywistki-moja-bronia-jest.html>.



sis – is only possible thanks to connecting with the non-human. Noticing it is in turn easier if we allow ourselves to return to the “childhood dream” – lifting the lid of black boxes. This is the spirit in which I read the environmental message of “Samosiejki”<sup>29</sup>.

I treat these statements – an author’s declaration regarding the origins of her latest novel, and an excerpt from its review – as symptomatic for the dialogue between literature and criticism. I see the reviewer’s reaction as significant; the attempt at translating elements of the literary world into the language of philosophy, or showing how a literary theme approaches a specific field in humanistic knowledge. What the critic is doing here does not differ from literary scholars who have been trying to combine the new materialism philosophy with eco-centric reading practices. They share an illustrative approach to literary works whose attractiveness reveals itself in the possibility to treat them as realizations of theories, notions, or posthumanist trends<sup>30</sup>. The review cited above offers more such illustrative-associative examples, including the titular “black boxes”, referring to Bruno Latour’s concept, which is also used in the discussion of Dominika Słowik’s novel<sup>31</sup>. This style of reading and organizing a review (explaining the represented world through theoretical-conceptual contexts) results in a discursive paraphrase of literature and the comment which stems from it – contemplative-descriptive rather than diagnostic-valuating. However, this shift is unsurprising when we consider new-materialist revisions of criticism, clearly dissociating themselves from the violence of negative criticism and postulating “affirmative engagement”<sup>32</sup>. However, the problem is that a critical comment respecting this postulate easily falls into the catalogue of literary motifs whose validity is supposed to highlight the connection with both current issues, and questions raised by posthumanist science. “Materiality” then becomes a thematic category of prose, automatically setting off new-materialist notions through which a text can be treated as a voice in an engaged, more-than-literary discussion. However, it seems that suspending representation and shifting the weight of critical reflection from language to plot and non-literary contexts is the price for treating the literary voice in such a way. This shift can be observed in the cited review, which opens with an extensive description of an association set off by the reviewed book:

In aerial photos it looks like a skeleton of a giant fish grown into the ground. A huge dune rather than a mountain. Forty years ago the Yucca massif near Las Vegas was considered the safest isolator for the quickly accumulating pile of radioactive waste. The waste was buried in holes resembling anthills, which were several kilometers deep, and experts claimed it was not supposed to be a threat for the planet for at least 10 thousand years. In early 1980s people were brainstorming ideas how to warn future inhabitants of Nevada about the toxic landfill – people who likely will speak a language which does not even exist yet<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>29</sup>Monika Ochędowska, *Czarne skrzynki* [Black boxes], “Dwutygodnik” 319 (2021), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/9757-czarne-skrzynki.html>.

<sup>30</sup>Paweł Kaczmarski discusses this property on the example of an anthology of texts about new-materialist reading (*Material Ecocriticism*, 2014), demonstrating how developing “poetics of matter” transformed into instrumentalization of literature as an illustration of philosophical notions – Kaczmarski, 198.

<sup>31</sup>Monika Ochędowska cites Latour’s notion in order to read actions of the novel’s protagonists, in which she accentuates mostly specific cognitive disproportions and sensitivity to more-than-human reality.

<sup>32</sup>This is how Karen Barad writes about her “diffractive reading”, proposing to replace what she sees as reductionist suspicious criticism with affirmative-conjoined criticism – see Barad, “Erasers and Erasures”, 450.

<sup>33</sup>Ochędowska.

This association has a significant cognitive value, just as the philosophical contexts referred to in the review. However, it is significant that abundance leaves no room left for considerations regarding literary representation, neutralized so that textual plots are treated as part of the material, empirical reality affected by the climate crisis. Anthropocentric plots and a new-materialist critical approach share the same goal: they are striving towards making the connection between literature and reality of the world visible through transforming readers' imagination – a connection which is best highlighted by shared images.

The problematic dimensions of this union are perhaps best visible in criticism of translated prose, where compromises regarding linguistic analysis and representation considerations<sup>34</sup> lead to embedding texts in global, universalized reception with the conceptual instrumentarium of posthumanist discourses as a tool. This instrumentarium encourages us to consider the representational rather than the linguistic dimension of a text, with figurations of communities in the center:

The stake is to design and implement a different vision of human community – one that would be supportive of non-humans. It can resemble a beehive or a herd of horses, but it necessarily must connect to some loss – a key term in Lunde's dictionary. And it is not about the economic sense of lack or a psychological state of longing which results from absence, but about the ability to experience loss in an ethical sense. Each protagonist described by Lunde at some point needs to learn how to lose – do something against their individual will, sacrifice a part of oneself in order to give life to others. Perhaps this is our main problem: we cannot and do not lose anything. This is why it is hard for us to imagine even one small world for whose realization we would have to sacrifice our lives<sup>35</sup>.

The excerpt cited above concludes the review, or rather, an interpretative essay about Maja Lunde's bestselling tetralogy. Lunde's ecological prose is discussed from the perspective of the anthropocentric imagination, via a reconstruction of the represented worlds of her novels. Obviously, it is difficult to argue with the ethical perspective on the plot, which may serve as exercises in attitude to the world for readers. However, the ethical perspective, so characteristic for climate fiction<sup>36</sup>, pushes questions of the value of literary representation further away. The weight of the issue, its significance for the problems of today and tomorrow, staves off the question of the construction of the represented world – its simplifications, one-dimensionality of characters – and narrative moralizing, whereas it was Lunde's decisions regarding

<sup>34</sup>Olga Szmidt discusses the problem of leaving out the linguistic status of translated literature in popular reviews – "Eksplorowanie ruchomych piasków. Krytyka przekładu i krytyka literacka wobec petryfikacji współczesnej literatury światowej" [Exploring quicksand. Criticism of translations and literary criticism versus the petrification of contemporary literature], *Przekładaniec* 42 (2021): 40–63, DOI:10.4467/16891864PC.21.017.14328.

<sup>35</sup>Andrzej Marzec, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/9378-saga-o-ludziach-poznego-antropocenu.html>.

<sup>36</sup>Following Adeline Johns-Putra conceptualization: "fiction concerned with anthropogenic climate change or global warming". *Climate fiction* is "a topic found in many genres" rather than a genre, since climate change themes appear in many different literary genres – "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Studies: From Cli-fi, Climate Change Theater and Ecopoetry to Ecocriticism and Climate Change Criticism", *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews. Climate Change* 7, 2 (2016): 267.

literary representation that are believed to be behind the book's international success<sup>37</sup>. The turn towards language – to its intentional simplicity – and the representational convention (its adequacy to the narrative scheme of climate fiction) is necessary for highlighting literary mechanisms which set off reader's empathy, which is elevated on the impression of a universal, over-literary message for a world headed to its end. In other words, the weight of the message of the novel is tied to formal decisions – the more they support neutralization, transparency (both of the medium and linguistic material), the more they force us to focus on the marginalized aspect. In climate fiction this task is not only necessary, but also simply interesting; one of the trends from this category, operating with a futuristic frame of the represented world<sup>38</sup>, is often based on realism tautology<sup>39</sup>, via which it encourages a reasonable thematic reading, successfully hiding the representation convention and its rules.

Tendencies in criticism oriented towards posthumanism, focused on searching for connections between different co-existing entities, work towards cognitive and popularizing goals; they are undeniably attractive as when we read about literature, we also read about how it is connected with current international issues. New-materialist criticism of representation as a linguistic sign of distance and materiality mediation in discourse seems to be problematic for critical-literary practices which move away from the effort to recognize the rules behind persuasiveness of stories about the Anthropocene; techniques for their universalization; mechanisms which facilitate their reception. The return to these dimensions of representation becomes increasingly important depending on the extent to which the Anthropocene presents itself as a digestible, more and more familiar notion which is being commonly exploited and capitalized. Reducing materiality to a thematic category does not “only” result in resigning from searching for and noticing formal experiments in prose, or indifference to the significance of literary forms. Ultimately it leads to equating literature with other objects (empirical objects outside of art), which is in fact in radical opposition to the goals of engaged criticism (and reviews), in which literature is supposed to provide ethical education.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>37</sup>Ion-Alin Ungureanu conducted an extensive comparative analysis of the first installment of Maja Lunde's tetralogy, both in terms of international and local reception (in Norway, English-speaking countries, and in Romania) – *A reception study of Maja Lunde's Bees in Norway, the English-speaking countries and Romania*, <https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/84649/1/A-reception-study-of-Maja-Lunde-s-The-History-of-Bees-in-Norway--the-English-speaking-countries-and-Romania.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup>I.e. set in the future in which climate change is presented beyond moral or psychological implications of individual behaviors, as a result of the downfall of human society. The second trend in *cli-fi* presents modernity or near future in which climate change is an ethical, political and economic challenge for individuals. Identifying readers with characters who are emotionally engaged in climate change is a common convention within this trend – see Ungureanu, 5.

<sup>39</sup>Catherine Belsey explains that it is a fallacy to claim that a literary form is a reflection of reality: “If by *the world* we understand the world we experience, the world differentiated by language, then the claim that realism reflects the world means that realism reflects the world constructed in language” – Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practices* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 43.

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# KEYWORDS

## POSTHUMANISM

### materiality

### *poststructuralism*

**ABSTRACT:**

The paper reviews the meanings attached to the notion of “materiality” by literary criticism since 1990s. These meanings depend on several essential philosophical tendencies: poststructuralism, critical social theories, and posthumanism, which has a significant influence on critical-literary conceptualizations of “materiality”. The paper analyzes specific examples, mostly from critical-literary texts about contemporary Polish prose in order to show how “materiality” affects different types of critical commentary, including especially the possibilities and limitations of review.

review

## NEW MATERIALISM

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# Justifying Tenderness – the History and Modernity of a Literary-Critical Concept

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1.

Olga Tokarczuk's Nobel-Prize speech and her volume of essays published soon after, shed light on "tenderness" as both a key concept in literary criticism<sup>1</sup> and a fashionable word, which might well compete for the 'word-of-the-year' award. It became part of journalistic and political discourse, coexisting with current interests of the humanities and in the renewed interest in affectiveness and eco-critical contexts, which are highlighted by the Nobel-laureate. Given how the Nobel-Prize speech propelled this word's international career, it has been

<sup>1</sup> Olga Tokarczuk, *Czuły narrator* [*The tender narrator*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2020).



pointed out somewhat begrudgingly that Tokarczuk failed to acknowledge its local contexts of usage. Therefore, any attempt at describing the current status of “tenderness” as a literary-critical concept must take note of this complication.

## 2.

The literary-critical origins of tenderness can be found in the esthetics of Enlightenment’s sentimentalism. As demonstrated in a well-known essay by Teresa Kostkiewiczowa<sup>2</sup>, the uses of this word in Polish were influenced by the philosophical writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau. “Tenderness of the heart” started to be used for describing the benefits of one’s return to nature. It thus became a disposition of the subjects, co-created by literature. A tender human being was thus able to find a new measure of all things in the emotional sphere. This emotional turn, however, avoided rashness. Rather, the dominant emotions of the tender protagonist were, as Kostkiewiczowa declared, “longing, sorrow, melancholic contemplation and a peculiar passivity towards the world”.<sup>3</sup> The literature of sentimentalism was thus reluctant towards any formal or linguistic innovation and supported stylistic norm and simplicity of expression. From today’s perspective this might seem like avoiding the problem of the artificiality of language altogether and hypersensitivity to the meaning of linguistic borrowings, but one should remember that the program of “tender” literary language was at the time an innovation, as well as a critical response to the ornamentation of classicism and Rococo, and the related mannerism of forms of expression. It was for these reasons that the leading poet of Polish sentimentalism, Franciszek Karpiński, asserted that “[t]he concept of things, a tender heart and beautiful patterns, these are more-than-sufficient sources of speech”<sup>4</sup>. In contrast to British sentimentalists, Polish thinkers dispensed with the category of genius in their discussions of originality, because they believed the gift of artistic creativity could be bestowed on any person whose feelings are honest and strong. This self-restraint limited the literature of sentimentalism to a fairly narrow range of themes and images, which led to its typification (common themes included love, friendship, nature, God) and to a banalization of sorts.

In its literary-critical applications, “tenderness” [Pol. *czułość*] renounced some of the senses familiar to the then speakers of Polish. Samuel Bogumił Linde’s *Słownik języka polskiego* [A dictionary of the Polish language] lists a range of meanings of *czułość*, including “the power of feeling, affection”, as well as “emotion”, “being moved”, “vigilance” and “sleeplessness”<sup>5</sup>. Sometimes the term ‘tenderness’ was used in reference to a special sharpening of the senses, the ability to react to danger, and a sober and unemotional testing of occurrences. This may explain why Linde recalled the definition developed by the Vilnius rationalist philosopher,

<sup>2</sup> Teresa Kostkiewiczowa. *Klasycyzm – sentymentalizm – rokoko. Szkice o prądach literackich polskiego Oświecenia* [Classicism – sentimentalism – rococo. Sketches on literary movements of Polish Enlightenment] (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Kostkiewiczowa, 280.

<sup>4</sup> Kostkiewiczowa, 229.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Bogumił Linde, *Słownik języka polskiego*, t. I [A dictionary of the Polish language. Vol. I] (Warszawa: Drukarnia Księży Pijarów, 1807): 384–385.

Jędrzej Śniadecki, who wrote in his *Teoria jestestw organicznych* [*A theory of organic beings*] that tenderness is “the power residing in the nerves, whose every touch triggers emotion”<sup>6</sup>. The scholar reaffirmed the senses of ‘tenderness’ still relevant in modern Polish, where the word *czułość* is equivalent to English ‘sensitivity’ and used in such contexts as sensitivity of the photographic paper or sensitivity of an apparatus.

The sentimentalist definition of tenderness was expanded in the Romanticism, which added to its complexity and multivalence. The most familiar examples of this shift can be found in the works of Adam Mickiewicz, whose ballad *Romantyczność* [*Romanticism*] argues for the need to confront “feeling and faith” with the scientific approach. In his *Wielka improwizacja* [*The great improvisation*] Mickiewicz’s protagonist Konrad confronts God in the name of emotion, declaring: “I am tender, I am strong and I am rational”. Arguing with God, Konrad deliberates whether or not “under your [i.e. God’s] governance tenderness is anarchy”<sup>7</sup>. Even though the Polish word *czułość* has maintained its connection to sentimentalism, the authors of Polish Romanticism were able to redefine it and imbue it with powerful tensions of meaning. This becomes visible not only in Mickiewicz’s lofty words but also in Cyprian Kamil Norwid’s poem *Czułość* [*Tenderness*]:

Czułość – bywa jak pełen wojen krzyk;  
I jak szemrzących źródeł prąd,  
I jako wtór pogrzebny...

\*

I jak plecionka długa z włosów blond,  
Na której wdowiec nosić zwykł  
Zegarek srebrny – – –<sup>8</sup>

[literal translation]

Tenderness – can be like a scream filled with wars;  
And like a simmering current of streams  
And like a funerary accompaniment...

\*

And like a long braid of blonde hair  
On which a widower used to carry  
A silver watch - - -

<sup>6</sup> Linde, 385.

<sup>7</sup> Adam Mickiewicz, *Dziady drezdeńskie (cz. III)* [*The Dziady of Dresden, part III*] (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo, 2021), 61.

<sup>8</sup> Cyprian Kamil Norwid, *Vade-mecum* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo, 1999), 100.

In a recent reading of the poem Edward Balcerzan notes:

The immense scale of this phenomenon's presence separates the poet from its definition, even a metaphorical one. The same distancing is effected by its 'extravaganza of meanings', which manifests itself in contradictory emotional behaviours, i.e. in the loud and the silent, in the gigantic and the minuscule, in the common and the singular, as well as in the honest and make-believe one<sup>9</sup>.

It was probably that which prevented „tenderness” from losing relevance as a literary-critical concept and why it retained its power of inspiration and the ability to stimulate a critical dialogue with the sentimental heritage. In effect, it became a crucial term for contemporary Polish literature, as exemplified by Tadeusz Różewicz's 1963 commentary to Norwid's poem, quoted above. As noted by Arkadiusz Bałajewski<sup>10</sup>, for Różewicz “the bright mystery”<sup>11</sup>, as he refers to tenderness, provided him with a justification for continuing his poetic work after the Holocaust. He sees Norwid not only as an avant-garde author but also as the “father” of all avant-garde. Różewicz was not the only author in pursuit of his fascination with tenderness, as the concept was also key to the poetics of Stanisław Grochowiak, one of the most important representatives of Generation '56. In her monograph *Czułe punkty Grochowiaka*<sup>12</sup> [*Grochowiak's tender spots*] Beata Mytych-Forajter's provided evidence for the ongoing impact of “tenderness” and its participation in literary-critical discourses, whereas Balcerzan mentioned how this concept was central to the author of *Rozbieranie do snu* [*Bed-time undressing*].

Tenderness also gradually became one of the interpretative principles in modern literatures of Central-Eastern Europe; a concept, which controlled the flow of ideas from those regions to Poland. A piece of evidence in support of this claim is the peculiar popularity of Bohumil Hrabal's<sup>13</sup> *The tender barbarian* in Poland. The title of the book gave its name to an important publishing house and a bookstore, which prints Polish, Central-European and international authors. Its creators' declarative fascination with Hrabal's work underlies the fact that “the tender barbarian” has become an umbrella term for a category of Polish and international literatures read in this country. Originally, Hrabal applied this term to his friend, the avant-garde explosionist painter Vladimír Boudník. Polish recipients welcomed the original synthesis of tenderness and an uncompromising formal innovation, whereas Boudník's life attitude, which allowed him to find exciting wonders in the most usual aspects of life in communist Prague, seemed intriguing and familiar at the same time, as it was close to the ways in which tenderness was incorporated into Polish literary projects. One should also add that Polish Bohemists entitled their collection of new interpretations of

<sup>9</sup> Edward Balcerzan, „Z archiwum czułości” [„From the archive of tenderness”], *eleWator* 2 (2020): 197.

<sup>10</sup> Arkadiusz Bałajewski, *Obecność romantyzmu* [*The presence of Romanticism*] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2015), 175–176.

<sup>11</sup> Bałajewski, 175.

<sup>12</sup> Beata Mytych-Forajter, *Czułe punkty Grochowiaka. Szkice i interpretacje* [*Grochowiak's tender points. Sketches and interpretations*] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Bohumil Hrabal, *Czuły barbarzyńca: teksty pedagogiczne* [*The tender barbarian: pedagogical texts*] (Izabelin: Świat Literacki, 1997).

Czech literature *Czuli barbarzyńcy*<sup>14</sup>, [*Tender barbarians*]. Another recently published edited volume, *Modernizm(y) słowiański(e) w anturazhu czułości*<sup>15</sup> [*Slavic modernism(s) in the entourage of tenderness*] tries to extrapolate this category onto other modern literary cultures of Central-Eastern Europe.

### 3.

The now active uses of “tenderness” in Polish literary criticism are related to the above-outlined history of the term. They constitute a relatively broad collection of references, which sometimes results in innovative approaches and are testament to the fact that this expression is well-liked in Polish literature and its criticism.

The Enlightenment-sentimental genesis of tenderness is well-remembered, as argued in Grzegorz Zając’s monograph *Czuły weredyk. Twórczość poetycka Juliana Ursyna Niemcewicza*<sup>16</sup> [*The tender soothsayer. Poetic art of Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz*]. This concept is also well established in religious writings and their commentaries<sup>17</sup>. Of course, on the one hand, we are referring here to a highly specialized kind of circulation, which adds theological contexts to tenderness. On the other hand though, religious literary criticism activates traditions of Polish metaphysical literary criticism. This principle of relating literary works to metaphysics was highly influential in the 80s and 90s, leading to the establishment of a whole range of still productive links between tenderness and literature. Undoubtedly, this can be attributed to the initiatives of authors who put tenderness centre stage and call for the recipients’ participation in problematising it through critical commentaries.

A good example of this manner of stimulating a critical reception seem to be the works of Julia Hartwig, who authored a well-known book of poetry entitled *Czułość* (1992) [*Tenderness*]. This term was picked up by Jerzy Illg, who argued in his obituary for Hartwig (entitled *Pozostanie czułość*<sup>18</sup> [*Tenderness will remain*]) that tenderness was a key category for understanding her works. The same category was also utilized by Agata Stankowska, who saw “tenderness for existence” as the interpretative principle of Hartwig’s poetry<sup>19</sup>. No different was the case with critical studies of Zbigniew Herbert’s work, influenced by his later poem *Czułość* [*Tenderness*], which began with a well-known incipit „Cóż ja z tobą czułości

<sup>14</sup>*Czuli barbarzyńcy 2013: o kulturze czeskiej 2013* [*Tender barbarians: on Czech culture 2013*], ed. by Dorota Siwor (Bielsko-Biała: Kolegium Nauczycielskie, 2013).

<sup>15</sup>*Modernizm(y) słowiański(e) w anturazhu czułości* [*Slavic modernism(s) in the entourage of tenderness*], ed. by Izabella Malej, Agnieszka Matusiak, Anna Paszkiewicz (Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut – Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Oświatowe, 2021).

<sup>16</sup>Grzegorz Zając, *Czuły weredyk: twórczość poetycka Juliana Ursyna Niemcewicza* [*The tender soothsayer: poetic works of Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2015).

<sup>17</sup>Jerzy Szymik, *Czułość, siła i drżenie: 50 wierszy z lat 2005–2009. Missa de spe i litanie do Matki Bożej Pszowskiej* [*Tenderness, strength and shiver: 50 poems from 2005–2009. Missa de spe and the Litany of the Blessed Mother of Pszow*] (Katowice: Księgarnia św. Jacka, 2009).

<sup>18</sup>Jerzy Illg, „Pozostanie czułość” [„Tenderness will remain”], *Znak* 9 (2017): 122–123.

<sup>19</sup>Agata Stankowska, „Czułość wobec istnienia: wokół postawy klasycznej Julii Hartwig” [„Tenderness vis-a-vis existence: on the classical stance of Julia Hartwig”], in: *Pochwała istnienia: studia o twórczości Julii Hartwig* [*In praise of existence: studies on the works of Julia Hartwig*], ed. by Barbara Kulesza-Gulczyńska, Elżbieta Winiecka (Poznań: Bogucki Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2015), 43–52.

w końcu począć mam...”. [“What shall I do with you, oh tenderness...”]. Moreover, a volume of essays on Herbert’s works is entitled *Czułość dla minotaura*<sup>20</sup> [*Tenderness for the Minotaur*]. It was also noted that this expression was likewise favoured by Czesław Miłosz, and at least since the publication of his *Piesek przydrożny* [*The road-side dog*] it has been part of the vocabulary of literary critical commentaries on his works. Andrzej Franaszek therefore argued in a recent essay<sup>21</sup> for the central role of this concept in the works of Miłosz and a few other contemporary poets. Similar motivations are behind the focus on tenderness in the analyses of the poetry of Adrianna Szymańska, Józef Baran and others. To the same category belongs the first edited volume on Janusz Szuber’s poetry (he likewise authored a poem entitled *Czułość* [*Tenderness*]). It was suggested in *Poeta czułej pamięci*<sup>22</sup> [*A poet of tender memory*] that tenderness should be one of the main issues addressed by literary-critical discussions of Szuber’s works. This seems understandable, even if predictable, given the close links between Szuber’s poetry and that of Miłosz’s and Herbert’s. By the same token, transfers of some well-entrenched concepts from one critical circle to another emphasise uniformity in this area of contemporary Polish poetry. In a similar fashion, critical commentaries on the poetry of the New Wave generation also make references to the uses of the term ‘tenderness’. Even though Szuber belonged to this generation metrically, he debuted relatively late, i.e. in the 90s, which is why any “tenderness”-related affinities between his poems and those of his colleagues from Generation-’68 appeared later. Yet again, the context of these affinities was the metaphysical tradition of Polish literary criticism. Possibly, Jerzy Franczak’s reading of Julian Kornhauser’s poetry, entitled *Czujność, czułość*<sup>23</sup> [*Vigilance, tenderness*], is related to that metaphysical background. It is possible to discern in Franczak an echo of the earlier “distrust” of the New-Wave criticism, but here it is combined with the tenderness-oriented disposition, adding complexity to his stance.

A separate issue seems to be the context of applying “tenderness” within the scope of hermeneutic criticism. It maintains multivalent relationships with metaphysical and religious criticism, but it has a vocabulary of its own and specific philosophical genealogies. It is no accident that Maciej Urbanowski, in his discussion of a selection of Kazimierz Nowosielski’s poems, writes about “tenderness and shine”<sup>24</sup>, because the poet himself is an active literary critic and an author of auto-commentaries, based on original applications of the language of hermeneutics and an emphasis on tenderness.<sup>25</sup> A more powerful reaction was provoked by Adrian Gleń’s 2014 monograph, grounded in the tradition of a hermeneutic literary criticism. Provocatively entitled *Czułość*<sup>26</sup>, the monograph begins with a commentary on the contro-

<sup>20</sup>*Czułość dla Minotaura* [*Tenderness for the Minotaur*], ed. by Józef Maria Ruszar, Magdalena Cicha (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Archidiecezji Lubelskiej „Gaudium”, 2005).

<sup>21</sup>Andrzej Franaszek, „Czułość” [„Tenderness”], *Znak* 6 (2021): 62–69.

<sup>22</sup>*Poeta czułej pamięci: studia i szkice o twórczości Janusza Szubera* [*A poet of tender memory: studies and sketches on the works of Janusz Szuber*], ed. by Jolanta Pasterska, Magdalena Rabizo-Birek (Rzeszów: Biblioteka „Frazy”, 2008).

<sup>23</sup>Jerzy Franczak, „Czujność, czułość” [„Tenderness, vigilance”, *Wielogłos* 4 (2016): 69–79.

<sup>24</sup>Maciej Urbanowski, „Czułość i blask: poezja Kazimierza Nowosielskiego” [„Tenderness and shine: the poetry of Kazimierz Nowosielski”], *Zeszyty Karmelitańskie* 3 (2011): 111–115.

<sup>25</sup>Kazimierz Nowosielski, *Czułość i ślad: o tym, co kto pokochał* [*Tenderness and trace: about who loved what*] (Kraków: Instytut Literatury, 2021).

<sup>26</sup>Adrian Gleń, *Czułość: studia i eseje o literaturze najnowszej* [*Tenderness: studies and essays on contemporary literature*] (Sopot: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Sopotu, 2014).

versy caused by his earlier publication. As argued by Krzysztof Hoffman, that publication demonstrated excessive professionalization of the language of literary criticism, because, as he wrote, “securing hermeneutic positions is not that different from the language of classical literary studies”<sup>27</sup>. Hoffman also questioned the value of the proposition which, to his mind, was based on the belief in the existence of some kind of *über*-readers, devoting themselves to reading with an “old-fashioned fervour”<sup>28</sup>. In his rejoinder, Gleń acknowledged the need for a meaningful de-professionalisation of the language of criticism, but he defended fervour, which he understood to be “an individual’s engagement in reading; a kind of relentlessness in search of interpretative ideas, the joy of reading, insatiability”. He went on to say that despite numerous reservations for hermeneutics, it “legitimizes and rehabilitates the category of impression; it enables the process of identification”<sup>29</sup>. He makes this stance even more poignant in the conclusion:

Why do I make tenderness the title of all the essays and sketches in this book? [...] because I find it missing from the accounts of modern poetry [...] tenderness brings hope for a change, for a long and good existence in reading. It is an empowerment of reading, a kind of intimacy between language and text which binds the author, the work and the critic in one body. Tenderness is a promise of closeness<sup>30</sup>.

In his review of Gleń’s work, Wojciech Kudyba sees its affinities with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger’s philosophy, which was so important for hermeneutic criticism: “in Gleń’s critical idiolect «tenderness» becomes synonymous with Heidegger’s «concern» [...] It [...] is a vigilant being-with-the-text, keeping watch over the poem’s being”<sup>31</sup>.

What is striking in both critics’ line of argumentation is their customary reference to the heavily exploited contexts of Heidegger’s philosophy, which also used to lend support to some of the ideas of metaphysical criticism. But it seems that, positioned in this context, tenderness does not benefit from the achievements of modern affective criticism, including the most recent Polish studies on the role of empathy in the reception of literature<sup>32</sup>. Moreover, it does not reach out to modern, non-Heideggerean philosophy of presence, as presented by Alva Noë or Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. In this context the perverse nature of Gleń’s proposal is somewhat mitigated and becomes similar to Adam Zagajewski’s classicising, thus hardly innovative, and unconvincing “defenses of fervour”, familiar from the turn of the previous century.

Attention should also be paid to the multiplicity and variety of the remaining usages of “tenderness”, which testify to its popularity in Polish literary criticism. The issue of tenderness

<sup>27</sup>Gleń, 9.

<sup>28</sup>Gleń, 8.

<sup>29</sup>Gleń, 9.

<sup>30</sup>Gleń, 10.

<sup>31</sup>Wojciech Kudyba, [a fragment of a review article], in: Gleń, fourth page of the cover.

<sup>32</sup>Jarosław Płuciennik, *Literackie identyfikacje i oddźwięki: poetyka a empatia* [Literary identifications and resonances: poetics and empathy] (Kraków: Universitas, 2004); Anna Łebkowska, *Empatia: o literackich narracjach przełomu XX i XXI wieku* [Empathy: on literary narratives of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries] (Kraków: Universitas, 2008).

returned in the reviews of Mariusz Grzebalski's 2013 award-winning collection of poems, entitled *W innych okolicznościach* [*Under different circumstances*]<sup>33</sup>, even though Grzebalski's poetry is quite distant from the tradition of metaphysical writing. It is, in fact, closer to the model of poetic speech of the "bruLion" generation. In his essay on issues of literary translation criticism, Jerzy Jarniewicz asked *Can a translator afford tenderness?*<sup>34</sup>, focusing on the manners of translating terms of affection. In her discussion of the documents of earlier Jewish culture Monika Sznajderman considered their "greater tenderness"<sup>35</sup>. Ewa Tatar in "Kresy" combined tenderness with post-feminism in art and in the expression of lesbian love<sup>36</sup>. In conversation with Marta Koronkiewicz and Paweł Kaczmarski, in turn, the well-known eco-critical poet Małgorzata Lebda declared her "tenderness for the Earth"<sup>37</sup>.

4.

We have thus approached the contexts for Olga Tokarczuk's "tender narrator". As has been demonstrated, she reached for a category familiar from feminist and eco-critical criticism, and successfully triggered a major discussion on modern literature. This category is eagerly utilized by ideologically different strands of literary criticism, which allowed the writer to communicate with recipients from varied backgrounds. I have already mentioned that the writer is sometimes accused of ignoring the Polish or Central-European origin of tenderness. It is somewhat surprising, however, that commentaries on her Nobel-Prize speech do not mention a different approach to the concept, i.e., one which reaches to the philosophical background of James Hillman's<sup>38</sup> "psychology of depth". It is to that background that the Polish Nobel-laureate makes reference when she says that "tenderness is an art of personifying"<sup>39</sup> and "[c]reating stories means constantly bringing things to life, giving an existence to all the tiny pieces of the world that are represented by human experiences". Similarly, she argues that "[t]enderness personalises everything" and "[i]t is thanks to tenderness that the teapot starts to talk"<sup>40</sup>. It ought to be remembered that since the 70s Hillman has been developing a version of a Jungian psychoanalysis based on the neoplatonic certainty that the "I" is the soul, whose every experience and observation changes everything into a "naively"

<sup>33</sup>Krzysztof Lisowski, „Nieuchronność i czułość” [„Inevitability and tenderness”] *Książki* 5 (2014): 20–21; Iwona Smolka, „Uważność i czułość” [„Mindfulness and tenderness”], *Nowa Dekada Krakowska* 3/4 (2014): 18–21.

<sup>34</sup>Jerzy Jarniewicz, „Czy tłumacz może pozwolić sobie na czułość?: spieszczania a ekwiwalencja emocjonalna w przekładzie literackim” [„Can a translator afford tenderness? Terms of affection and emotional equivalence in literary translation”], *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka* 23 (2014): 293–304.

<sup>35</sup>„Większa czułość. Monika Sznajderman z rozmowie z Agnieszką Rzoncą”, [„A greater tenderness Monika Sznajderman in conversation with Agnieszka Rzonca”] *Znak* 6 (2017): 30–35.

<sup>36</sup>Ewa Tatar, „Przesłuchując miłość lesbijską: czy czułość, zmysłowość, szaleństwo i miłość lesbijska dają szansę sztuce na przepisania narracji «kobietych»” [„Interviewing lesbian love: do love, sensuality, madness and lesbian love give art a chance to rewrite „female” narratives”], *Kresy* 8 (2008): 182–198.

<sup>37</sup>„Czułość do ziemi. Z Małgorzatą Lebda rozmawiają Marta Koronkiewicz i Paweł Kaczmarski” [„Tenderness for the earth. Marta Koronkiewicz and Paweł Kaczmarski in conversation with Małgorzata Lebda”] *Odra* 5 (2017): 156–157.

<sup>38</sup>James Hillman, *Re-wizja psychologii* [*Revisoning psychology*], transl. by Jerzy Korpanty (Warszawa: MT Biznes, 2016); James Hillman, *Uzdrowiające fikcje: poetyka psychoterapii: Freud, Jung, Adler* [*Healing fiction*], transl. by Jerzy Korpanty (Warszawa: MT Biznes, Laurum, 2016).

<sup>39</sup>Tokarczuk, 287.

<sup>40</sup>Tokarczuk, 288.

personified being, so as to “psychologise” or “spiritualise” the entire experienced world. This is why the relationship between the soul and the experienced fragment of the world is based on the relationship between Amor and Psyche; the “I-soul” exists thanks to the reflex of love which turns every object into active beings. Hence Tokarczuk’s definition, which declares that “[t]enderness is the most modest form of love”<sup>41</sup>, whose effect will be, among other things, a speaking – personalised – teapot and many other, somewhat fairy-tale like metamorphoses of subjectified reality.

Tokarczuk’s definition of tenderness, based on Hillman, on closer inspection reveals its Platonic provenance. It is only once this identification has been completed that one can begin to look for any links with traditions of sentimentalism or Romanticism. For Polish literary criticism this is a novel approach, although in her Nobel-Prize speech Tokarczuk drew on an immediate connection with the very current issue of eco-critical literature. Perhaps even more surprising was the term “tender narrator”, which links the issue of tenderness with problems of modern culture and with such areas of literary studies as narratology studies and poetics. Musing on the possibility of bringing to life a tender “fourth-person narrator”, Tokarczuk juxtaposes them with the first-person narrator, marred by cognitive, artistic and cultural limitations. Useful knowledge of different types of the narrative may well be evidence of the delayed-in-time impact of Polish structuralism, which was quick to introduce its vocabulary to all types of schools in Poland and lent terminology to literary criticism. Tokarczuk’s prose would thus be continuously analysed in terms of its usage of the concept of the “narrator” and other constructs of the structuralist school of literary studies. The unexpected combination of the narrator as a “professional” term, with the non-literary, everyday word “tender” procured terminological freshness and raised the interest of the critical and literary environment. It also ensured the “memorability” of the term in common, non-literary usages.

## 5.

Proof of the above can be seen in the reception of the terms “tenderness” and “tender narrator” in global circulation, which followed Tokarczuk’s Nobel-Prize speech. In a conversation with Tokarczuk’s translators in the „Los Angeles Review of Books”<sup>42</sup>, one can see how quickly these new concepts were being mapped onto new cultural and topical spaces. Olga Bagińska-Shinzato, Tokarczuk’s translator into Portuguese, is convinced that tenderness helps the writer describe Polish issues “poetically”, and thus make them universal. She emphasizes the basic nature of this emotion, which helps the reader’s imagination feel more at ease in worlds which, like the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the 18<sup>th</sup> c., can be very distant from the experience of her readers. (This is probably an allusion to a favourable review of *The Books of Jacob*). Bagińska-Shinzato states that “Olga’s texts are like images, tender studies in

<sup>41</sup>Tokarczuk.

<sup>42</sup>„Fullfilling the Mission: A Conversation with Olga Tokarczuk’s Translators (by Jennifer Croft)”, *Los Angeles Review of Books*. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/fulfilling-the-mission-a-conversation-with-olga-tokarczuku-translators/> (accessed 18.06.2022).



the human soul, body and mind”<sup>43</sup>. The Korean translator, Sungeun Choi, likewise acknowledges the “poeticism” of Tokarczuk’s word, as it describes regular people, stating that “Olga’s works are full of tenderness for the world and others (not only people but also animals and plants)”<sup>44</sup>, thanks to which she is able to combine the local with the supralocal. In her view, the prose of the author of *Flights* challenges the dominant concepts of world literature and proposes a new way of introducing a global dimension to literature. This view is shared both by her Czech translator, Petr Vidlák, and by the German Lothar Quinkenstein, who perceive tenderness as a factor allowing literature access to what is local and finding a new way of transgressing that locality.

In his discussion of the English edition of *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* [*Drive your plow over the bones of the dead*] Tarun K. Saint highlights formal innovation, which stems from the application of the tender narrator’s perspective<sup>45</sup>. In contrast to the unreliable narrator, typical of criminal novels, Tokarczuk opts for a tender narrative, which brings about the fourth-person narrator. It is thanks to that narrator that the “hyper-empathetic” protagonist of the novel, the eco-activist Janina Duszejka, is a likeable person, despite the funny and ironic aspects of her actions. According to Saint, the tender, fourth-person narrator, is driven by their desire to establish stronger bonds with the ecosphere and hints at subsequent correspondences between the life of an individual, the social world and nature. The critic also believes that the title of the novel, which is a quotation from William Blake, triggers an image of the Holocaust; the genocide of Polish Jews, which haunts Polish culture. This is why tenderness helps one go beyond the history of “extreme violence”. Finally, tenderness becomes a mode of talking about the world in the era of the Anthropocene; “a crucial avenue of resistance in the age of relentless climate change [...] pandemics, rising authoritarianism and consequent fragmentation of human connectedness in the name of the public good”<sup>46</sup>. This brings the critic to the complimentary conclusion that “the murder mystery will never be the same as a result of Tokarczuk’s deployment of the tender narrator in this distinctive novel.”<sup>47</sup>.

This concept has also entered international literary studies. The German scholar Georgina Nugent-Folan suggested looking for the presence of the tender narrator not only in modern literature but also in writings before Tokarczuk<sup>48</sup>. Inspired by quotations from Tokarczuk’s Nobel-Prize speech, she presented a more precise definition of the tender narrator, in which she points to the concept’s intelligibility (its non-hermetic-ness), stimulating a holistic and universal perspective, its rooting in nature, its fragmentary manifestation

<sup>43</sup> „Fullfilling the Mission”.

<sup>44</sup> „Fullfilling the Mission”.

<sup>45</sup>Tarun K. Saint, *Reinventing Literary Form: Olga Tokarczuk’s ‘Tender Narrator’ in Our Times*, <https://thewire.in/books/reinventing-literary-form-olga-tokarczukuks-tender-narrator-in-our-times> (accessed 18.06.2022).

<sup>46</sup>Tarun K. Saint, *Reinventing*.

<sup>47</sup>Tarun K. Saint.

<sup>48</sup>Georgina Nugent-Folan, *Olga Tokarczuk’s Tender Narrator & the Tender, Furiuos Narrators* – wykład online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-2gHD-u1Kw&t=1260s> (dostęp 18.06.2022).

which leads to constellation-like compositions, the interchanges of micro- and macroscales in search of infinite similarities between phenomena, developing a new kind of realism, etc. The critic notes attempts at the fourth-person narrative in the works of Samuel Beckett, whose *The unnamable* introduces a protagonist for whom there is no pronoun capable of naming their dispersed existence in what is being uttered. She also offers criticism of the 1<sup>st</sup>-person narrative and searches for other ways of naming the sender. Another example analysed by Nugent-Folan are the works of the Korean poet Kim Hyesoon, who was wondering in her commentary to her autobiography which perspective would be adopted by the narrator-death, symbolising the absence of the described individual. Hyesoon too underlines that the 1<sup>st</sup>-person narrative is incapable of capturing that perspective, which is why she declares that all individual deaths taken together create a distinct, all-embracing perspective. Wondering about the possible level of the narrative in this scenario, the poet envisages a “sixth- or seventh-person narrator”. A different example still is for the Munich scholar the prose of the Korean novelist Han Hang. In her work *Human Acts* she describes people participating in South-Korean democratic protests in 1980, which were concluded with a massacre in the city of Gwangju. The story recalls the perspective of a killed boy, Kang Dong-ho, some of his other friends who were also murdered at that time, his only surviving friend and Kang Dong-ho’s mother. The writer was trying to find a dimension in which the Gwangju victims still exist after death and become a relevant reference point for everybody who speaks after their death. Together, they create a universal and collective perspective which still proves to be active in the public life of South Korea. As can be seen, Nugent-Folan was able to find evidence of narrators similar to the tender, fourth-person narrator in works which were culturally distant from one another, thus joining other critical voices, which declared that this concept allows Tokarczuk to open new possibilities for studies in world literature.

A few additional remarks on the Nobel-Prize speech were put forward by Li Yinan, who analysed the reception of Polish literature in China<sup>49</sup>. She focused on the reception of works by Polish Nobel-laureates, in particular on Tokarczuk’s works, which were published in China in the last twenty years, and emphasized how well-received the category of tenderness and the “tender narrator” were. In this geographically distant reception, the critic is searching for a clear national distinguishing factor, which could make Tokarczuk’s prose stand out on the biggest publishing market in the world. This probably explains peculiar statements, like the following:

This well-balanced emotional diagnosis becomes the general message of literature, whereas the words uttered by the Polish writer become emblematic of the new national position of Polish writers, who cannot remain indifferent to the way the world is turning and to the manner in which automatization progresses uncontrollably<sup>50</sup>.

<sup>49</sup>Li Yinan, „Czuła narracja: nowe oblicze literatury polskiej w oczach Chińczyków” [„The tender narrative: the new face of Polish literature in the eyes of the Chinese”], *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka* 40 (2021): 21–51.

<sup>50</sup>Li Yinan, 25.

The category of tenderness seems to be of particular importance for Chinese critics. Zhao Gang writes that:

Tenderness is the author's relationship to the world. It is an instinctive sympathy for all the "non-I's". It is thanks to this delicate brush that she describes thousands of objects in the world, so that people, events, objects, surroundings, etc. are covered in a layer of a soft, spiritual light, which resonates with the most subtle part of the reader's heart<sup>51</sup>.

It was for this reason that Li Yinan entitled her article *The tender narrative: the new face of Polish literature in the eyes of the Chinese*.

6.

Thanks to the Nobel-Prize speech by Olga Tokarczuk, "tenderness" and the "tender narrator" have become probably the only contemporary Polish literary critical concepts to have entered international circulation. Even though these concepts originated in literary cultures of Central-Eastern Europe and play an important role in the history of Polish contemporary literary criticism, the writer proposed a fairly innovative definition of "tenderness" in literature, which, alongside the "tender narrator" concept, have been bestowed with new interpretative possibilities. Neither sentimentalism nor Romanticism resonate with international audiences; nor are references to metaphysical publications or hermeneutic interpretations discernible in them. Rather, the notion of "tenderness" is associated with eco-critical contexts and becomes incorporated into debates on the concepts of world literature. The above-mentioned Li Yinan's article testifies to the fact that "tenderness" and "the tender narrator" have become hyper-categories of international circulation, through which the entire Polish literature is now interpreted. Faced with this unexpected and paradoxical situation, Polish literary criticism will have to explain its own tenderness and the tenderness of Polish literature. One benefit of this will be the opportunity to talk about Polish and Central European history of the concept.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

<sup>51</sup>Li Yinan, 48.

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# KEYWORDS

TENDERNESS

OLGA TOKARCZUK

**ABSTRACT:**

This paper outlines the history and modern usages of the concept of “tenderness” in Polish literary criticism. It introduces the genealogy and origins in the esthetics of sentimentalism, along with its romantic modifications and its place in Polish literature and modern criticism. Modern usages of tenderness in national literary criticism have been discussed, followed by the analysis of the notions of “tenderness” and “the tender narrator” from Olga Tokarczuk’s Nobel Prize speech. The final part focuses on selected examples of international reception, which combines tenderness with eco-criticism and issues of world literature.

*literary criticism*

**tender narrator**

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# No Critique.

## The Pleasure of Reading and Literary Criticism in Poland

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(...) we might remind ourselves that criticism is as inevitable as breathing, and that we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it, for criticizing our own minds in their work of criticism.

T.S. Eliot, *Tradition and individual talent*

“The pleasure of the text: like Bacon’s simulator, it can say: *never apologize, never explain.*”<sup>1</sup>

“In place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art.”<sup>2</sup>

“If you read to merely understand you should be condemned for blasphemy. You read to experience – it is a deeper, more comprehensive type of understanding.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *The pleasure of the text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, “Against interpretation”, in: *Against interpretation and other essays* (New York: Dell, 1969), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Olga Tokarczuk, *Czuły narrator* [Tender narrator] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2020), 104.



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I deliberately start by quoting Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and Olga Tokarczuk, that is writers and critics who have never or have only marginally engaged in literary criticism. Of course, they have written critical or metacritical texts but, importantly, they often criticize in them professional critics who tend to instrumentalize or judge texts too harshly; they also often criticize sophisticated and unemotional academics who rely on philosophical and theoretical texts, showing little understanding for what they read. If we were to draw a diagram illustrating the number of more or less expressive references to the category of readerly pleasure, it would turn out that they may be most often found in essays, impressions, ephemeral sketches and notes, and, last but not least, in texts whose authors praise literature as experience and argue that sharing their reading experiences with the reader is an important form of literary criticism. In his reviews, Karol Maliszewski refers to emotions more than, for example, Henryk Bereza; respectively, Bereza refers to emotions more in the (draft) reviews of books published posthumously in *Wypiski ostatnie* [Final comments] than in his “proper criticism” published in professional journals.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I will investigate the category of readerly pleasure (and its variants) in Polish literary criticism. I reconstruct two theories of reading that since the 1960s have become important, if not the most important, points of reference in the perception (and reproduction) of the category of readerly pleasure in Poland, namely those by Roland Barthes and Jan Błoński. Although both theories, often understood in an intuitive way, may appear to be similar, the purpose of this article is not to point out the similarities and differences in the reading practices of both authors but rather to discuss two *a l t e r n a t i v e* traditions that have a profound, yet almost undefinable, impact on contemporary literary criticism. I will not discuss the meaning of the titular category for Polish affective criticism – it is a broad topic that should be discussed in a separate essay. Of course, I am aware that some interpretative essays by, among others, Katarzyna Bojarska, Agnieszka Daukszy, Monika Glosowitz or Ryszard Nycz, that is authors (the list is not complete) whose research may be considered representative of the affective turn in Poland, cannot be clearly distinguished from the wider corpus of literary criticism texts. Therefore, I decided not to comment on the works of literary critics who focus on affective research, mainly because Polish affective research rarely refers to Barthes’s concept of readerly pleasure. Łukasz Żurek notes:

[...] in numerous reconstructions of its [affective research – K.P.] genealogy, no one mentions Roland Barthes’s famous essay *From Work to Text* from 1971. Perhaps it is because this is a classic text, too closely related to poststructuralism – a school from which affective research wants to distance itself. Barthes still enjoys some popularity, but he is cited almost exclusively as the author who coined the terms *punctum* and *neutre*. And no one refers to *Text* (the one that is capitalized) (*The Pleasure of the Text*, which names the key emotion in its title, is also not mentioned).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Henryk Bereza, *Wypiski ostatnie. 2004–2012* [Final comments: 2004–2012] vol. 1–2 (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Łukasz Żurek, “Autonomia znaczenia, nie afektu. Nicholas Brown o dziele sztuki, formie towarowej oraz interpretacji” [Autonomy of meaning, not affect. Nicholas Brown on a work of art, the commodity form and interpretation], paper delivered at the online symposium “Rhetoric of affects V. Affect in theoretical-literary discourse” 30 Nov. 2020. I quote the electronic version of the paper, courtesy of the author.

Regardless of why Barthes's work is not discussed by Polish "affective" literary critics, the reluctance to refer to the category of pleasure should come as no surprise. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, published in 1973, which, together with the essay "From Work to Text," was one of the milestones in the development of his concept of reading, dating back to 1957 and *Mythologies* and culminating in 1977 in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Barthes wrote:

If I agree to judge a text according to pleasure, I cannot go on to say: this one is good, that bad. No awards, no "critique," for this always implies a tactical aim, a social usage, and frequently an extenuating image-reservoir. I cannot apportion, image that the text is perfectible, ready to enter into a play of normative predicates: it is too much *this*, not enough that; the text (...) can wring from me only this judgment, in no way adjectival: *that's it!* And further still: *that's it for me!*<sup>6</sup>

Indexes in books of literary criticism show that Barthes's name appears in them mostly in the context of readerly pleasure/bliss, especially as regards the justification of subjective judgments. It is as if revealing an emotional approach to the text required each time legitimation in the form of invoking one of the greats of postmodern philosophy. Perhaps this is because Barthes argues that if we enjoy what we read, we are unable to think critically: "No awards, no 'critique.'" Reading for pleasure is for him a practice that resembles erotic pleasure or ritual ecstasy, and not hermeneutics. And wasn't Barthes's famous manifesto meant to be just that – a ritual, a flirtation, a sacrificial offering? The pleasure of not so much reading as of *t e x t*?<sup>7</sup> It comes as no surprise that pleasure as an affect experienced by a person who professionally analyzes literature was meant to be hidden and considered shameful. Jan Błoński and, three decades later, Michał Paweł Markowski<sup>8</sup> opposed this trend. The question of pleasure became the subject of debate at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The quoted passage, although rhetorically efficient, is far from precise, even in Barthes's emotional universe. It is hardly surprising; after all, *The Pleasure of the Text* is composed of fragments, often incompatible passages; it is a manifesto of "emotional" writing – *écriture*. And yet the author of *Mythologies* makes a significant distinction in his works, which allows us to place him in the greater context of French post-war philosophy and critics such as Jacques Lacan, Georges Bataille and Julia Kristeva. Referring to psychoanalysis, Barthes distinguishes between "pleasure" (*plaisir*) and "bliss" (*jouissance*); the latter, for Lacan, concerned primarily transgressive experiences (and therefore exceeded the principle of pleasure; Lacan wrote that "jouissance is suffering"<sup>9</sup>) and, generally speaking, it was not subject to subjective control.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 9–11. For more on the understanding of the term "Text" in Barthes's philosophy, see: Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text", in: *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 56–64. "The difference is as follows: the work is a fragment of substance, it occupies a portion of the spaces of books (for example, in a library). The Text is a methodological field. The opposition may recall (though not reproduce term for term) a distinction proposed by Lacan: "reality" is shown [*se montre*], the "real" is proved [*se demontre*] (...). the Text is experienced only in an activity, in a production" (p. 56–57)

<sup>8</sup> Cf.: Jan Błoński, "Wstęp" [Introduction], in idem: *Romans z tekstem* [Love affair with the text] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1981); Michał Paweł Markowski, "Pochwała subiektywizmu" [In praise of subjectivism], *Europa* 84 (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book vii. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–60*, translated with notes by Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), 184.

<sup>10</sup> See: Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 93–94; David Macey, *Lacan in Contexts* (London: Verso, 1998), 200–205.

The pleasure (*plaisir*) of reading may be subject to discursivization, insofar as one asks themselves and the text critical questions, even the most basic ones, such as: “Why do I like what I like?” Barthes does it in many of his texts. For example, in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* published in French in 1971, he analyzes the Marquis de Sade’s works and in order to name the structure of *The 120 days of Sodom*, he formulates a precise semi-semiotic and semi-formalistic concept of “a grammar of sites and operations,” which he calls the pornogram.<sup>11</sup> Respectively, in his 1971 essay “From Work to Text,” Barthes argued that Text (written with a capital letter) “is not coexistence of meaning, but passage, traversal; hence, it depends not on an interpretation, however liberal, but on an explosion, on dissemination,” which means that it is dynamic and its essence has not been codified in the form of “meaning;”<sup>12</sup> “it can be Text only in its difference (which does not mean its individuality); its reading is semelfactive (which renders any inductive-deductive science of texts illusory: no ‘grammar’ of the text).”<sup>13</sup> It seems unlikely that, within the framework of Barthes’s understanding of meaning, he could consider *The 120 days of Sodom* a work with a “codified” stable meaning, both in terms of the meaning of the work itself and its cultural significance. This (terminological?) inaccuracy perhaps stems from referring to an earlier observation or an in-depth reflection on the meaning of a literary work, or its unique form, which, according to Barthes, Text is. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, one can also find quasi-theoretical reflections. In one such fragment, Barthes argues that “breaks” and “collisions” are universal principles which govern how literature affects the reader:

Sade: the pleasure of reading him clearly proceeds from certain breaks (or certain collisions); antipathetic codes (the noble and the trivial, for example) come into contact; pompous and ridiculous neologisms are created; pornographic messages are embodied in sentences so pure they might be used as grammatical models. As textual theory has it: the language is redistributed. Now, *such redistribution is always achieved by cutting*. Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and *another edge*, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. These two edges, *the compromise they bring about*, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so.<sup>14</sup>

Other scholars share this sentiment. In Poland, similar observations were made by, for example, Adam Ważyk, who argued that juxtaposition, the emanation of creative delineation and the blurring of the “edges,” determines whether a given work belongs to the canon of 20th-century art and whether it is a source of readerly pleasure.<sup>15</sup> Ważyk usually defined the

<sup>11</sup>Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 35–158.

<sup>12</sup>See: Barthes, “From Work to Text”, 59.

<sup>13</sup>Barthes, “From Work to Text”, 60.

<sup>14</sup>Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 5–6.

<sup>15</sup>Adam Ważyk, *Eseje literackie* [Literary essays] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1982), 277.

latter as an adventure, as a surprise or a revelation; Edward Balcerzan also wrote about this experience in *Przygody człowieka książkowego* [The Adventures of a Book Man], a manifesto praising literature.<sup>16</sup> It should be added that the feeling that one unravels a mystery, comes into contact with the unknown, is often recalled in critical texts which try to capture the essence of readerly pleasure. It is true for Ważyk and Balcerzan, as well as, for example, Tadeusz Żeleński (Boy), Kazimierz Wyka, Jan Błoński, Maria Janion, Henryk Berezka, Karol Maliszewski, Krzysztof Uniłowski, Dariusz Nowacki, Marek Bieńczyk and the aforementioned Olga Tokarczuk.

Contrary to the Lacanian understanding of *jouissance*, Barthesian bliss is not a state of inertia. Barthes explains that readerly pleasure (must and will) mean that the reader loses an important point of reference in the text, which is crucial in hermeneutics. However, the reader is not (solely) responsible for this loss of control – the text, its semantics, structure, coherence, openness, and above all its “subversiveness” or “difference,” also play(s) a role in the process:

(...) the Text does not stop at (good) literature; it cannot be caught up in a hierarchy, or even in a simple distribution of genres. What constitutes it is on the contrary (or precisely) its force of subversion with regard to the old classifications.<sup>17</sup>

The division into *plaisir* and *jouissance* gives rise to another distinction: readerly texts and writerly texts (or texts that are re-written in the process of reading). The first category comprises works that require understanding: following the clues, exploring meanings, and verifying one’s judgments by questioning their accuracy. Such a reading may be a source of satisfaction that comes from solving a puzzle. Writerly texts, in turn, are works which involve both readerly ecstasy and agency, insofar as the reader compulsively adds meanings to the text: this form of reading indeed prevails after “the death of the author.”<sup>18</sup> Writerly texts, according to Barthes, are texts with an open structure or texts that are hermetic and elusive and yet, enjoyable, for example, insofar as emphasis is put on sophisticated language (style, composition, prosody, imagery, and the like).<sup>19</sup> Barthes, in (one of his many) definitions, argues that Text written with a capital letter is a prototype of a writerly text and work, by contrast, is a readerly text:

The text is approached and experienced in relation to the sign. The work closes upon a signified. We can attribute two modes of signification to this signified: either it is claimed to be apparent, and

<sup>16</sup>Edward Balcerzan, *Przygody człowieka książkowego (ogólne i szczególne)* [(The General and Specific) Adventures of a Book Man] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo PEN, 1990), 104.

<sup>17</sup>Barthes, “From Work to Text”, 58.

<sup>18</sup>Łukasz Żurek commented on it in the context of Nicholas Brown’s *Autonomy. The Social Ontology of Art. Under Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019). See: Żurek.

<sup>19</sup>Naturally, Polish critics have also praised “unreadable” works. At the beginning of the 21st century, among others, Tymoteusz Karpowicz, Andrzej Sosnowski and Adam Wiedemann fell victim to such interpretative practices. See: Karol Poręba, “Podsumowanie. Wstęp do Karpowicza” [Summary. Introduction to Karpowicz], *Czasopismo Zakładu Narodowego im. Ossolińskich* vol. 32 (2021); Marta Koronkiewicz, *I jest moc odległego życia w tej elegii. Uwagi o wierszach Andrzeja Sosnowskiego* [The force of a distant life is in this elegy. Notes on Andrzej Sosnowski’s poems] (Wrocław: Fundacja na Rzecz Kultury i Edukacji im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2019); Rafał Grupiński, Izolda Kiec, *Niebawem spadnie błoto czyli Kilka uwag o literaturze nieprzyjemnej* [Soon mud will fall, or a few remarks on unpleasant literature] (Poznań: Obserwator 1997).

the work is then the object of a science of the letter, which is philology; or else this signified is said to be secret and final, and must be sought for, and then the work depends upon a hermeneutics, an interpretation (Marxist, psychoanalytic, thematic, etc.); in short, the work itself functions as a general sign, and it is natural that it should represent an institutional category of the civilization of the Sign. The Text, on the contrary, practices the infinite postponement of the signified, the Text is dilatory; its field is that of the signifier; the signifier must not be imagined as “the first part of the meaning,” its material vestibule, but rather, on the contrary, as its *aftermath*; similarly, the signifier’s *infinitude* does not refer to some notion of the ineffable (of an unnamable signified) but to a notion of play (...).<sup>20</sup>

The fundamental difference between Barthes’s modes of reception lies, therefore, in the intensity of the experience and the inversion of the cause-and-effect relationship. Readerly texts reward the reader during and after interpretation; the reader experiences pleasure. Writerly texts inspire the reader to commit an ecstatic “rape of the text,” which, seemingly, makes them feel in control of it; the reader experiences bliss.

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“Not admirers but rapists are usually more celebrated,” Błoński wrote in his essay “Romans z Tekstem” [Love affair with the text],<sup>21</sup> which was first published in 1974,<sup>22</sup> that is only a year after the publication of *The Pleasure of the Text* by Éditions de Seuil.<sup>23</sup> While the metaphor used by Błoński is uncomfortable, the history of Polish literary criticism in the last thirty years clearly shows that rhetorical dexterity and skillful exploitation of middle-class snobbery may mask the shortcomings of interpretation; and for Błoński interpretation was a tender and insightful communion with the text.<sup>24</sup>

Although I consider Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text* a book that is of little use in literary criticism, like his other texts devoted to the pleasure of reading, I outlined the most important theses put forward by the French philosopher in order to (apart from the reasons already indicated) emphasize the difference which, I believe, allows us to reevaluate the category of affect in literary criticism (even considering all the similarities between Barthes’s and Błoński’s theories). This difference lies, as was the case with readerly and writerly texts discussed above, in the understanding of the cause-and-effect relationship. For Błoński, but the same is also true for the majority of Polish critics I have cited earlier, admiration precedes interpretation, and even legitimizes it. It was clear for Jerzy Stempowski. And years later it was clear for

<sup>20</sup>Barthes, “From Work to Text”, 58–59.

<sup>21</sup>Błoński, “Wstęp” 20.

<sup>22</sup>Jan Błoński, “Romans z tekstem” [Love affair with the text], *Teksty. Teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja* 3 (1974): 1–8.

<sup>23</sup>It begs the question as to whether Błoński could have known Barthes’s latest book at the time. Of course, he must have read Barthes’s earlier works but in “Romans z tekstem” there is no trace of *The Pleasure of the Text*.

<sup>24</sup>In this context, it is not surprising that the concept of immersion has become so important a category in the study of literature, film, TV series as well as video and board games. Cf., e.g., Tokarczuk, 93–113.

Jerzy Sosnowski who said: “Write only when you feel you have to.”<sup>25</sup> Of course, the opinion shared by both authors, that reading and reviewing bad books is a waste of time and that the lack of interest from a literary press or other media is a clear sign as to the value of a given book, may appear radical. And yet Błoński actually shares with us a very simple observation: to interpret and review a literary work, you need affect, either positive or negative. Indifference, to a certain extent projected by Barthes in the case of the reception of readerly texts and contrasted with the strong emotions (“explosion,” “dissemination”) that writerly texts arouse, is not, Błoński argues, a sufficient impulse to start a love affair with the text, which for him was closely associated with the process of reliable interpretation.<sup>26</sup>

Błoński begins his famous essay by praising Paul Celan’s poem: he is in awe of unique poetic images, mystery, and seemingly well-known yet unusual motifs, such as the figure of the king which Błoński associated with God; the critic praises the captivating melic rhythm.<sup>27</sup> Only later is the following ritualistic, somewhat ethereal, sentence uttered: “Now I know I must explore it. Before my eye turns to nothingness [...] – it must turn to the poem, it must explore its mystery.”<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting, however, that *Romans z tekstem* is not an apology of “incomprehensible poetry.” Błoński tries to distinguish between desirable and undesirable experimentation, “the rubble of weirdness which one does not even want to think about” and “the banality that muddies the mind.”<sup>29</sup> As such, he creates not only a manifesto of readerly pleasure and subjectivism but also explicates his own axiology and lays the foundations of his critical and literary project. Błoński’s sketches, essays, and reviews are truly subjective, and the act of taking notes goes hand in hand with the reading process. The aesthetic experience initiates the process of interpretation and understanding, which is an attempt at entering into a dialogue with the author who, according to Błoński and contrary to Barthes, never dies and exists mainly in the text; respectively, the real author becomes for Błoński a text to be read. It can be seen, for example, in the preserved fragments of his diary.<sup>30</sup> The declarations made in the manifesto *Romans z tekstem* were earnest: Błoński’s writings are filled with erotic imagery and passion. And this passion is based on the principle of reciprocity and dialogue. Thus, Błoński’s critical literary method may be defined as a meeting or, referring to Ważyk and Balcerzan, as an adventure.

<sup>25</sup>Jarosław Klejnocki, Jerzy Sosnowski, *Chwilowe zawieszenie broni. O twórczości tzw. pokolenia “bruLionu” (1986–1996)* [Temporary ceasefire. The works of the so-called ‘bruLion’ generation (1986-1996)] (Warsaw: Sic!, 1996), 154.

<sup>26</sup>Błoński, “Wstęp”.

<sup>27</sup>Consult the works of Henri Meschonnic and Adam Dziadek (the latter translated Barthes’s works into Polish). See: Adam Dziadek, *Rytm i podmiot w liryce Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza i Aleksandra Wata* [Rhythm and subject in Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz’s and Aleksander Wat’s poetry] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1999); Adam Dziadek, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej* [Somatic Criticism Project] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich, 2014).

<sup>28</sup>Błoński, “Wstęp”, 6.

<sup>29</sup>Błoński, “Wstęp”, 7.

<sup>30</sup>See, e.g., Jan Błoński, *Błoński przekorny. Dzienniki, wywiady* [Unruly Błoński: Journals, interviews], edited by Marian Zaczyński (Kraków: Znak, 2011), 101–106. For more on the subject see: Krzysztof Biedrzycki, “Doczytywanie Błońskiego: krytyk intymny (O książkach Jana Błońskiego *Gospodarstwo krytyka. Pisma rozproszone* i *Błoński przekorny. Dzienniki. Wywiady* w wyborze i opracowaniu Mariana Zaczyńskiego)” [Reading Błoński: An intimate critic (Jan Błoński’s Books *Gospodarstwo krytyka. Pisma rozproszone* and *Błoński przekorny. Dzienniki. Wywiady* edited by Marian Zaczyński)], *Wielogłos. Pismo Wydziału Polonistyki UJ 1* (2011): 165–166. In this context, it should be noted that Błoński was not particularly interested in authorial intent, although he discussed and questioned the meanings he interpreted.

The example of Błoński may seem blatant and in this sense isolated, but if we read, for example, Stanisław Barańczak's quasi-journalistic popularizing sketches in *Przed i po* [Before and after], and especially fragments in which the author reveals his (different) feelings and experiences concerning books, poems or even their fragments, we can see that as a critic he disliked bombast and boast, that he was suspicious of the classicist diction; he found that referring to the Romantic tradition was too easy; as a reader, he did not like poetry which addressed the general public from the general perspective. He rejected universal, unambiguous, arrogant, paternalistic judgments. Respectively, he valued a feel for language and realism in poetry; he was attracted to the concise and the concrete; he valued the variety of tropes and "suspending" notions in-between two extremes. Above all, he enjoyed texts which awakened and inspired curiosity, openness, and independent thinking.<sup>31</sup> This is probably why, having rejected to some extent the notions of mass or popular culture, Barańczak proposed that they should be replaced with different names, in keeping with the values listed above, namely the categories of "incapacitating culture" and its (praised and celebrated) opposite.<sup>32</sup>

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I intentionally use terms such as "manifesto" and "project" in the context of books and works that praise the pleasure of reading. Although literary criticism is never entirely objective, the interpreter's emotional response to a literary work, whether positive or negative, almost always, as I tried to show in my discussion of Błoński and (for example) Barańczak, demonstrates individual aesthetic preferences.<sup>33</sup> A significant exception to this rule, worthy of exploring in a separate article,<sup>34</sup> are texts that could be read as a kind of a hoax, that is texts which refer to the axiological framework of a commodity, for example, based on a centric language subjugated to market needs, i.e., the needs of the middle-class reader who aspires to becoming the intellectual/elite reader. Such judgments may often be found, for example, in reviews published in popular weeklies, on the radio, on television and in other mainstream media, as well as in more and more popular culture and lifestyle magazines.

Contemporary critical discussion about literature and its tasks wants to distance itself from universalizing and communicating gestures.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps that is why, instead of constructing

<sup>31</sup>Stanisław Barańczak, *Przed i po. Szkice o poezji krajowej przełomu lat siedemdziesiątych i osiemdziesiątych* [Before and after: Essays on Polish poetry at the turn of the 1970s and the 1980s] (London: Aneks, 1988). See also: Balcerzan, 132.

<sup>32</sup>See: Stanisław Barańczak, *Odbiorca ubezwłasnowolniony. Teksty o kulturze masowej i popularnej* [Recipient incapacitated: Essays on mass and popular culture], ed. Adam Poprawa (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Ossolineum, 2017).

<sup>33</sup>Interestingly, it is difficult to find similar critical projects (unless they are purely theoretical and literary) in the works associated with the affective turn in Poland.

<sup>34</sup>In Poland, a great contribution to such a study could be, for example, Łukasz Żurek's paper cited earlier (see: Żurek; Brown).

<sup>35</sup>See, e.g., Dawid Kujawa, "Czułość i nieczułość w jednym stały domu. Odpowiedź Pawłowi Kaczmarskiemu" [Sensitivity and insensitivity: A response to Paweł Kaczmarski], *Mały Format* 1–3 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/04/kujawa-kaczmarski-polemika/>.

critical literary projects, critics often resort to *ad hoc* subjectivism. Perhaps they should shamelessly show how they “flirt” with texts, why they do it and what, in their opinion, the result is. Perhaps, contrary to the maxim “De gustibus non est disputandum,” critics should discuss manifestos thus created. Tracking experiential traces in critical texts allows us to map critics’ beliefs about the role of literature and its place in social reality. It also allows us to notice the more or less deliberate, or conscious, personal and contingent nature of individual critical gestures and voices.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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# KEYWORDS

JAN BŁOŃSKI

**metacriticism**

*literary criticism*

**ABSTRACT:**

The article is devoted to the category of readerly pleasure and its variants in Polish critical and literary discourse. The author discusses the category of readerly pleasure developed by Roland Barthes, primarily in his famous essays “From Work to Text” and The Pleasure of the Text; he also reconstructs Jan Błoński’s views expressed in the programmatic essay *Romans z tekstem* [Love affair with the text]. The author argues that since the 1960s these approaches have become default points of reference in the perception of the category of pleasure in Polish literary criticism, even though they are often understood in an intuitive way.

## Roland Barthes

### THE PLEASURE OF READING

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# (Lev Vygotsky's) Psychology of Literature: Beyond Critical Impressionism and Quantitative Empiricism

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The scope of the discipline

Psychology of literature is the uglier sister of sociology of literature, associated with critical impressionism, biographism, and a naïve understanding of literary communication. Evoking this term is linked to a history of debates on whether its existence is justified. The scope of this discipline includes a range of research methods and scholarly approaches; once this much is understood, the question “which one to choose: sociology of literature or psychology of literature” begins to sound more like Boy’s satirical alternative of “should one wash the teeth or the hands?”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, „Czy myć zęby czy ręce?” [“Should one wash the teeth or the hands?”], *Wiadomości Literackie* 41 (13 X) = 621 (1935): 3.

As demonstrated by John Fizer in his *Psychoaesthetics*<sup>2</sup>, psychology became an independent discipline ca. mid-19<sup>th</sup> c. and until the end of that century it tried somehow to compensate for its insecurities as a new branch of science, assuring everyone that, in fact, it is the foundation of all humanities. Literary studies – depending on the cultural-geographic context – would either absorb these inspirations or resist them in a variety of ways. It was this strive for panpsychologism that was supposed to evoke a critical reaction, especially powerful from the quarters of phenomenology. To demonstrate this, Roman Ingarden acknowledged the justified methods and perspectives on a literary studies-based consideration of the psychology of a work, but criticized the tendency to dissipate non-psychological phenomena within psychological categories and treat the literary work as a psychological document.<sup>3</sup>

In order to determine the possible range of approaches to literary texts, enabled by a psychological perspective (in a broad sense of the term), one might recall the summary of different routes of psychoanalytical criticism, summarized by Kuba Mikurda in his *Nie-całość* [*Non-completeness*]:

The first one, whose weak points are discernible soon enough [...] was proposed by Freud himself [...] it sees the text a springboard for psychoanalysing the author. The second one comprises a psychoanalytical interpretation of the protagonist's actions and motivations [...] The third one focuses on the recipient and mechanisms thanks to which the text engages and influences its recipient (an example can be the recipient's identification with the protagonist [...]). Finally, the fourth one is the psychoanalysis of the text itself, which conceives of the text as an analysed person, searching for symptoms of the subconscious in overt textual content and formal means.<sup>4</sup>

Once this typology has been outlined, the author tries to resolve the dispute between Slavoj Žižek and Alenka Zupančič on whether the Lacanian interpretation of the tragedy applies the second of the strategies (a psychoanalytical interpretation of the protagonist's actions and motivations), or the fourth one (the analysis of the text itself). Viewed more broadly, however, possible interpretative perspectives offered by psychoanalysis may actually suggest that more important than identifying specific interpretative actions is establishing what it is that the psychoanalysis of a text is supposed to be. Also, if this practice is to be understood as the most nuanced approach to a literary work that psychoanalysis has to offer, is there not a problem with its founding anthropomorphising formula, which assumes that a text should be treated as a human being (even more so, as a patient)?

<sup>2</sup> John Fizer, *Psychologizm i psychoestetyka: historyczno-krytyczna analiza związków* [*Psychologism and psychoaesthetics: a historical-critical analysis of relationships*] ed. by Alicja Kuczyńska, transl. by Janusz Stawiński (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1991), 26.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Roman Witold Ingarden, „O psychologii i psychologizmie w naukach o literaturze” [„On psychology and psychologism in literary studies”], in his: *Studia z estetyki* [*Studies on aesthetics*], vol. 3 (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1970), 45–55.

<sup>4</sup> Kuba Mikurda, *Nie-całość: Žižek, Dolar, Zupančič* [*Non-completeness: Žižek, Dolar, Zupančič*] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2015), 85–86. I am quoting Mikurda here due to the concise and precise nature of his list. One should remember, however, that similar interpretative possibilities of psychoanalysis were pointed to in the majority of textbooks or overviews of the topic, e.g., Michał Paweł Markowski, „Psychoanaliza” [“Psychoanalysis”], in: *Teorie literatury XX wieku: podręcznik* [*Literary theories of the 20th c. A textbook*], ed. by Anna Burzyńska, Michał Paweł Markowski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2009), 47–78. Also, Lena Magnone, „Psychoanaliza w badaniach literackich: na marginesach książki «Parabazy wpływu» Jana Potkańskiego” [„Psychoanalysis in literary studies: on the margins of Jan Potkański's «Parabases of influence»], *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 2 (2010): 51–60.

Before we address this problem, let us take a closer look at three remaining interpretative pathways, listed by Mikurda. What the author of *Nie-całość* singles out as a Freudian idea of psychoanalysing an author through their work has its roots in the “psychographic school”, present in literary studies since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> c. It considered the text as a source of knowledge about its creator’s psyche, interpreted as the entirety of “spiritual interior”, which comprises not only personal traits or emotions, but also philosophy and worldview. It was this reading a work as a “psychological document” that Ingarden took exception to. The least controversial psychographic interpretations seem to be those which, following Edward Porębowicz’s conception, draw psychological conclusions solely on the basis of the formal structure of the work (i.e., they take the form to be a “normal way of operating, imagining and feeling”<sup>5</sup>). It seems that the most recent attempt at pursuing this interpretative path in Polish literary studies has been articles inspired by Charles Mauron’s psychocriticism<sup>6</sup>, such as Inga Iwasiów’s *Przeniesienia*<sup>7</sup> [*Transpositions*] or Katarzyna Mulet’s *Analiza psychokrytyczna poezji Stanisława Barańczaka*<sup>8</sup> [*A psychocritical analysis of Stanisław Barańczak’s poetry*].

What Mikurda called the second form of a psychoanalytical interpretation, i.e., the interpretation of a character’s actions and motivations, even though justified in the context of psychological novels or other works centered on nuanced images of protagonists, remains ambiguous. In the psychoanalytical format it often manifests itself in presenting literary characters as “personifications of terms taken from a psychoanalytical dictionary”,<sup>9</sup> and in other approaches it either seems to violate the boundary between a literary character and a living person or it limits the psychological potential of a work to empathetic compassion towards the protagonists, following the Lippsonian theory of empathy<sup>10</sup>.

In Polish literary studies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries there was a constant back and forth between psychologism and ergocentrism. As demonstrated by Tomasz Bilczewski in a chapter from *Wiek teorii* [*A century of theories*], the first decades of the previous century were mostly text-centric; especially in literary studies of the post-war period the favoured approach was to free creation and interpretation from a moral or utilitarian framework<sup>11</sup>. The development of native structuralism put an end to challenging any form of direct relationship between

<sup>5</sup> See Ryszard Pawlukiewicz, *Psychologiczne ujęcie problematyki badawczej w polskiej nauce o literaturze do roku 1939* [*Psychological perspectives on analytical approaches to Polish literary studies since 1939*] (Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 1987), 85.

<sup>6</sup> See Charles Mauron, „Wstęp do psychokrytyki” [„Introduction to psychocriticism”], in: *Współczesna teoria badań literackich za granicą: antologia* vol. 2 [*Contemporary theory of literary studies abroad: anthology, vol. 2*], ed. by Henryk Markiewicz, transl. by Wanda Błońska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1976), 366–394.

<sup>7</sup> See Inga Iwasiów, „Przeniesienia” [„Transpositions”], in: *Psychologia literatury: zaproszenie do interpretacji* [*Psychology of literature: an invitation to interpretation*], ed. by Joanna Karpowicz (Warszawa: Eneteia, 1999), 15–25.

<sup>8</sup> See Katarzyna Mulet, „Analiza psychokrytyczna poezji Stanisława Barańczaka” [„Psychocritical analysis of Stanisław Barańczak’s poetry”], *Przestrzeń Teorii* 16 (2011): 157–177, <https://doi.org/10.14746/pt.2011.16.9>.

<sup>9</sup> Mikurda, 85.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Jarosław Płuciennik, *Literackie identyfikacje i oddźwięki: poetyka a empatia* [*Literary identifications and resonances: poetics and empathy*] (Kraków: Universitas, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Tomasz Bilczewski, „Subiekt – obiekt – abiekt: «pajęczno wiotka tkanina»”, [„Subject - object - abject: „a spiderly tender fabric”], in: *Wiek teorii: sto lat nowoczesnego literaturoznawstwa polskiego* [*A century of theories: a hundred years of modern Polish literary studies*], ed. by Danuta Ulicka (Warszawa: IBL, 2020), 175.

the work and its creator, as this theoretical approach was ideologically consonant with the implicit anti-psychologism of Marxism in literary studies<sup>12</sup>.

### Art as a social technique of feeling

When juxtaposed with this necessarily cursory historical-methodological overview, Lev Vygotsky's concept of the psychology of art (more specifically, of literature) appears to be a highly interesting proposition. In his 1925 book<sup>13</sup>, published posthumously in 1965 and translated into Polish in 1980, Vygotsky introduces an original idea of considering the psychological potential of a work by means of its formal analysis. He applies the then-available psychological knowledge to conceptualise the text of culture as a stimulus, whose structure can be studied in order to predict the structure of the recipient's reaction to it. As argued by Vygotsky, following Georgi Plekhanov, while the sociology of art is interested in the analysis of artistic trends on the level of classes and societies, the psychology of art analyses aesthetic mechanisms and their purposefulness<sup>14</sup>. One can thus avoid naïvely diagnosing the author, treating literary protagonists as if they were actual living people<sup>15</sup> or empirically testing readers' reactions (a trend propagated later as bibliopsychology<sup>16</sup>).

In order to understand the exceptionality of this proposal, it is worth introducing its author. Vygotsky was an experimental psychologist, the founder and leader of the famous Moscow "Troika" (with Alexiei Leontiev and Alexander Luria). It was that group that established cultural-historical psychology, which remains the biggest inspiration for a class-oriented critical psychology (or even, as some would have it, for "Marxist psychology"<sup>17</sup>). Even though Vygotsky is the best known due to his influence on the development of "pedology" (the science of the upbringing), and *The psychology of art* as an early work was, in a sense, secondary to his

<sup>12</sup>By implied anti-psychologism of Marxism I mean the tradition of reducing the problem of awareness to ideological categories, which often leads to juxtaposing psychology, focused on an individual, with sociology (and ideological criticism), oriented towards social mechanisms. This is a source of violent reaction of some Marxist critics of the interwar period towards both psychologism and psychoanalysis (see, e.g., Ignacy Fik's „Literatura choromaniaków” [“The literature of hypochondriacs”], in: „Chamuły”, „gnidy”, „przemilczacze”. *Antologia dwudziestowiecznego pamfletu polskiego* [„Boors”, „scum”, „silent ones”. *The anthology of a 20th-century Polish pamphlet*], ed. by Dorota Kozicka [Kraków: Universitas, 2011], 392–400). I realise the extent of complications brought about by the awareness of marrying Marxist criticism with hermeneutics, Lacan's psychoanalysis or other critical theories. My main point of interest remains, however, the practice of interpreting the basic Marxist understanding of the role of an individual psyche.

<sup>13</sup>Lev Semyonovich Vygotski, *Psychologia sztuki* [*The psychology of art*], ed. by Stanisław Balbus, transl. by Maria Zagórska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1980).

<sup>14</sup>Vygotski, 51.

<sup>15</sup>The roots of this interpretative method can be found in Freud's lecture methods, see Zofia Mitosek, „Nieświadomość i język (psychoanaliza)” [“Unconsciousness and language (psychoanalysis)”, in *Teorie badań literackich* [*Theories of literary studies*] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2012), 191. “While reading *Gradiva*, Hoffman's short stories (in his study on the fantastic), Shakespeare's dramas (e.g. *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear* or *Hamlet*), Freud studies the psychology of protagonists. He treats them as if they were living people”.

<sup>16</sup>The concept of „bibliopsychology” was coined by Nicolai Rubakin. More on it can be found in, e.g., Boris Vladimirovic Birjukov and Jefim S. Geller, „Wykorzystanie cybernetyki w badaniach nad kulturą artystyczną” [“The application of cybernetics in studies on artistic culture”] in: *Cybernetyka w naukach humanistycznych* [*Cybernetics in humanities*], transl. by Jan Sarna (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich Wydawnictwo, 1983), 323–418.

<sup>17</sup>This term is consistently used, e.g., by Silvana Calvo Tuleski. See her *Vygotsky and Leontiev: the Construction of a Marxist Psychology* (New York: Nova Publishers, 2015).

most important studies, is perhaps more familiar to psychologists than to literary scholars<sup>18</sup>, it still remains an insightful interpretative work, founded on formalist diagnoses.

In his project of the psychology of literature Vygotsky is searching for a space which allows one to move away from subjectivism and introspection, while simultaneously accepting consciousness as a correlate of a socially grounded individual. The concept of subjectivity, which is basic to this approach, was fully reflected in Vygotsky's and Leontiev's later works. The core assumption of a cultural-historical psychology is that every human activity is culturally pre-structured<sup>19</sup>. Far from constituting a case of sociological reductivism, this position is inspired by Marx's sixth Thesis on Feuerbach: "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations<sup>20</sup>". The subject then is not juxtaposed with society (or with power structures) but complementary to it: what is social, is not the external element of subjectivity but its integral part. Vygotsky's "new psychology" project was inherently critical of what he referred to, following the Marxist tradition, as idealist psychology. His was a psychology that would not only transcend the Cartesian opposition of psyche and body, but also the bourgeoisie boundary between the individual and society<sup>21</sup>.

All these proposals and observations related to human psychology have an influence on Vygotsky's thoughts on literature and art. First and foremost, they drive him towards what Stanisław Balbus calls "sociological poetics" or "the formal-sociological method", which tries to combine formalism with social-historical context".<sup>22</sup> Its consequence is a close reading of literary texts, supported by cross-disciplinary knowledge of research and disputes current in psychology and literary studies. Obviously, a number of them have become obsolete or were reformulated over the century since the publication of Vygotsky's work. The method itself and its adjacent intuitions, however, seem equally important for modern thinking about the psychological potential of a work.

## Reactologies and strategies

The principal, reactological assumption of *The psychology of art* is that a work of art should be read as a consciously organized "system of stimuli, whose objective, subjectively tangible structure

<sup>18</sup>A number of scholars, interested in critical psychology, referred to this book during an international online conference „Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and German Critical Psychology – Revitalizing a dialogue” in September 2021. Vygotsky's works, including the interdisciplinary, literary rather than psychologically oriented *Psychology of art* were of particular importance for scholars from North America, Scandinavia, and Germany.

<sup>19</sup>Thomas Slunecko, Martin Wieser, „Cultural-Historical Psychology”, in: *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, ed. by Thomas Teo (New York: Springer, 2014), 352.

<sup>20</sup>Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach", in: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, trans. by W. Lough (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 13–15..

<sup>21</sup>These proposals are particularly interesting in Vygotsky's articles and reviews. For example, when arguing against the position of the German Psychological Society (1933), which adopted the new ideological line of Nazi Germany, he recognized in fascist psychology a logical continuation of idealist thinking. See Lev Semyonovich Vygotski, „Fascism in Psychoneurology”, in: *The Vygotsky Reader*, ed. by Jaan Valsiner, René van der Veer (Oxford: Blackwell Publ., 1994), 327–337.

<sup>22</sup>Stanisław Balbus, „Wygotski i jego teoria kultury: psychologia, język, sztuka” [“Vygotsky and his theory of culture: psychology, language, art”], in: Lev Semyonovich Vygotski, *Psychologia sztuki [Psychology of art]* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1980), 11.



allows one to grasp and objectively (i.e. independently of subjective introspection) describe the structure of aesthetic reaction, which is an adequate reaction to the stimulus”.<sup>23</sup> It is worth pointing out that similar assumptions concerning the operating principles of a literary work accompany the “textual strategies” approach. One of the first Polish literary scholars to use this term was Kazimierz Bartoszyński, in his paper *Zagadnienia komunikacji literackiej w utworach narracyjnych* [*Issues of literary communication in narrative works*]. The strategy (as a method communication between the issuer and the recipient) was supposed to constitute the narrative and the issuer’s attitude to the setting. It was then a narrow understanding of the term, focused on establishing narrative principles imposed by the setting, but it was clearly focused on a communicative purpose<sup>24</sup>.

Edward Balcerzan in his *Poezja polska 1939–1965: strategie liryczne* [*Polish poetry 1939-1965: lyrical strategies*] proposed a broader definition of the term. Following Tadeusz Kotarbiński, he recalled its military roots and defined strategy as a series of steps necessary for achieving a goal<sup>25</sup>. Expanding on his understanding of communicative relations in the text, Balcerzan wrote: “Every lyrical strategy is an action directed towards the recipient. Each one of them has something to offer and hopes for a particular behaviour from the reader”<sup>26</sup>. Interestingly enough, Balcerzan’s peculiar dualistic approach led him to come up with a dubious opposition of strategy and style. For this scholar style is an inherent ingredient of a poetic personality, an element of expression bound with the author’s internal imperative rather than with what the author wants to achieve through their creation. Strategies, in turn, are for Balcerzan tools of poetic programs, non-literary motivations creeping into texts, usually for historical reasons.

The problematic nature of this binary division is, however, mitigated in subsequent transformations of this concept, nowadays used in a different meaning than the one sanctioned by the structuralist paradigm. Tomasz Kunz, in his monograph *Strategie negatywne w poezji Tadeusza Różewicza. Od poetyki tekstu do poetyki lektury* [*Negative strategies in Tadeusz Różewicz’s poetry. From poetics of text to poetics of reading*] follows Umberto Eco<sup>27</sup> and his considerations of the model reader. In this understanding “textual strategy” is to be a “conscious and purposeful textual operation”<sup>28</sup>, directed towards achieving a specific effect of readership. This procedure is often revealed through formal analysis, which implies a specific, model structure of relations, i.e., precisely what Vygotsky believes to be the manifestation of a literary work’s psychological potential. Even though in his recent book *Więcej niż słowa. Literatura jako forma istnienia* [*More than words.*

<sup>23</sup>Balbus, 17.

<sup>24</sup>Bartoszyński distinguishes among three strategies: **elipsis** – when the issuer and recipient share a knowledge of the world and it is possible to imply a possibly large number of cultural texts; **excess** – when the recipient’s knowledge of the ways in which the setting operates is much more limited, so that the issuer produces statements which are obvious from the point of view of the world; they perform a kind of exposition; **researcher** – when both the issuer and recipient share only limited knowledge of the world; the issuer then tries to “research” and categorise as much of that world as possible. See Kazimierz Bartoszyński, „Zagadnienia komunikacji literackiej w utworach narracyjnych” [„Issues of literary communication in narrative works”], in: *Problemy socjologii literatury* [*Issues of the sociology of literature*], ed. by Janusz Sławiński (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1971), 127–148.

<sup>25</sup>Edward Balcerzan, *Poezja polska w latach 1939–1965. Część 1: strategie liryczne* [*Polish poetry in 1939-1965. Part 1: lyrical strategies*] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1982), 6.

<sup>26</sup>Balcerzan, 248.

<sup>27</sup>See Umberto Eco, „Czytelnik modelowy” [„The model reader”], transl. by Piotr Salwa, *Pamiętnik Literacki* LXXVIII, z. 2 (1987): 287–305.

<sup>28</sup>Tomasz Kunz, *Strategie negatywne w poezji Tadeusza Różewicza: od poetyki tekstu do poetyki lektury* [*Negative strategies in Tadeusz Różewicz’s poetry. From poetics of text to poetics of reading*] (Kraków: Universitas, 2005), 10.

*Literature as a form of existence*] Kunz stresses the processual development of the elements of a literary text he is most interested in, and which he considers in a specific language-centred perspective of literary communication, he consistently maintains his “strategies”-based approach. In other words, in his later studies he is less interested in the structure of a readership reaction than in the creative process, but he retains the notion of “conscious and purposeful textual operations”.

Similar elements can be discerned among other scholars who investigate this term. Piotr Marecki, writing on subversive strategies in Polish prose of the 21<sup>st</sup> c<sup>29</sup>, also focuses on aesthetic and formal tendencies of selected authors, in an attempt to demonstrate their receptive potential. Tomasz Cieślak utilizes the category of “poetic strategies” to demonstrate textual mechanisms characteristic of Maciej Robert’s diction<sup>30</sup>. Although more examples could be provided, one should be careful when applying this term, as by “textual strategies” some scholars actually mean the themes raised by authors (this is what, e.g., Anna Kronenberg does, while categorizing “the strategies of reclaiming voice and body in the literary activity of Polish women living in Great Britain and Ireland”<sup>31</sup>).

One might think that, a similar category to Vygotsky’s “stimulus” or the above-mentioned “textual strategies”, is Dawid Kujawa’s “text as a plan”, which he applies in his description of Natalia Malek’s poetry. However, just as the Silesian critic has defined conceptual frames in the poetry of the author of *Karapaks* [*Carapace*] and the “mechanisms which spur the author to action”, Kujawa relieves her of the responsibility for the reactivity of her text. “Text as a plan” for Kujawa is not an authorial textual strategy, a pre-designed stimulus, but a space created by the author to allow the occurrence of what the critic calls “creating the seeds of new ways of speaking, new «manners of existence» [...] or new «lifestyles» [...], from which we can draw handfuls, looking for a way out of the modern production regime”<sup>32</sup>. The interpretative goal, then, or an attempt to answer the question “how were specific elements of the text construed in order to achieve some kind of a readership effect?” will be similar to Vygotsky’s *Psychology of art*. The basic difference will rest, however, on a radically different ontology of the literary text, or maybe on putting the interpretative emphasis on the receptive specification, rather than on the authorial message.

## The poem as a stimulus in programs and discussions

The manner of thinking about the text, recognized in Vygotsky’s project of the psychology of literature, could become an ally of a number of critics, who participate in important literary-critical discussions, including disputes concerning incomprehensibility after 1989.

<sup>29</sup>Piotr Marecki, „Strategie subwersywne w polskiej literaturze XXI wieku” [*Subversive strategies in Polish literature of the 21st century*], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2012): 313–324.

<sup>30</sup>Tomasz Cieślak, „Między obserwacją a wspomnieniem: strategie poetyckie Macieja Roberta” [„Between observation and memory: Maciej Robert’s poetic strategies”], *Czytanie Literatry. Łódzkie Studia Literaturoznawcze* 5 (2016): 233–242.

<sup>31</sup>Anna Kronenberg, „Migracje kobiet: strategie odzyskiwania głosu i ciała w twórczości literackiej Polek mieszkających w Wielkiej Brytanii i Irlandii” [„Women’s migrations: strategies of reclaiming voice and body in the literary activity of Polish women living in Great Britain and Ireland”], *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2016): 98–115.

<sup>32</sup>Dawid Kujawa, *Pocałunki ludu. Poezja i krytyka po roku 2000* [*The kisses of the people. Poetry and criticism after 2000*] (Kraków: korporacja Ha!art, 2021), 218.

It is worth recalling Bohdan Zadura's well-known text *Daj mu tam, gdzie go nie ma* [*Give it to them where they are not*], in which he writes about poetic communication:

I really like it as a description of the relationship between poetry and its recipient. "Give it to them where they are not" could be the title of a poetic program [...] To treat poetry like a game is to avoid a lot of nasty dilemmas; to treat it like a game is to take its recipient seriously. To treat that recipient as a partner. It is, indeed, a peculiar game, where the victory of the reader is the victory of the poet<sup>33</sup>.

The table tennis metaphor, proposed by the author of *Starzy znajomi* [*Old acquaintances*] is not only based (as emphasized in the ensuing discussions<sup>34</sup>) on the implied effort of the recipient ("Give it to them where they are not – chase them around the corners, let them run, let them move"<sup>35</sup>), but also on understanding the structure of readership reaction as intertwined with the structure of the text. Therefore, for Zadura, the ability to predict and plan this structure skillfully is key to artistic success. Formal games and authorial strategies only work when there is a chance they will be understood. This does not mean, however, that the goal has to be unambiguous, coherent, clearly visible or instrumental.

An interesting concept is the juxtaposition of Vygotsky's reasoning with texts of probably the best-known defender of comprehensible poetry, Czesław Miłosz. His two most important public addresses concerning this issue were his 1989 lecture *Z poezją polską przeciw światu* [*With Polish poetry against the world*] and the speech *Przeciw poezji niezrozumiałej* [*Against incomprehensible poetry*], delivered a year later. Both share a vision of a coherent space of national poetry, conceptualized as a "homestead". The Nobel-laureate's main problem is the gradual development of cultural individualism, which occurred in post-transformation Poland and was connected with the adoption of styles of consumption from the West. Miłosz is against "such subjectivisation of language that it is no longer a means of interpersonal communication".<sup>36</sup> He is searching for, both in Polish poetic tradition and in Far-Eastern poems, a method of demystifying the opposition between the subject and the object<sup>37</sup>. The need for objectivization, searching for links between literature and reality, as well as opposition to extreme relativism and individualism are probably the most interesting elements of Miłosz's program, emphasized in the debates on incomprehensibility. To a degree, they are in line with Vygotsky's and Leontiev's way of thinking about subjectivity, alluded to in the first part of this paper. What seems problematic are Miłosz's further discursive turns, in which he identifies incomprehensible poetry with a poetry focused on the subjective and comprehensible

<sup>33</sup>Bohdan Zadura, „Daj mu tam, gdzie go nie ma, czyli języki obce poezji” [„Give it to them where they are not, or foreign languages of poetry”], *Polska Poezja Współczesna. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, [Polish Contemporary Poetry. An encyclopedic guide] 8.02.2017, <http://przewodnikpoetycki.amu.edu.pl/daj-mu-tam-gdzie-go-nie-ma-czyli-jezyki-obce-poezji-i/>.

<sup>34</sup>See, among others, Jacek Podsiadło, „Daj mi tam, gdzie mogę dobiec” [“Give it to me where I can run up to”], *Polska Poezja Współczesna. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, 8.02.2017, <https://przewodnikpoetycki.amu.edu.pl/daj-mi-tam-gdzie-moge-dobiec-i/>.

<sup>35</sup>Zadura.

<sup>36</sup>Czesław Miłosz, „Z poezją polską przeciw światu” [„With Polish poetry against the world”], in his: *Eseje* [Essays] (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2000), 340.

<sup>37</sup>Czesław Miłosz, „Przeciw poezji niezrozumiałej”, [„Against incomprehensible poetry”] in: *Kartografowie dziwnych podróży* wypisy z polskiej krytyki literackiej XX wieku [Cartographers of strange journeys: excerpts from 20th-c. Polish literary criticism], ed. by Marta Wyka (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 575.

with that which describes the “likethisness” of objects. These categories do not need to overlap; the author of *Przeciw poezji niezrozumiałej* seems to gloss over what in subsequent stages of the debate on incomprehensibility will plant the seeds for conflict, i.e., entirely clear and unambiguously subjective confessional poetry. It is probably this glossing over which will later allow for a discursive utilisation of Miłosz’s voice. Dorota Kozicka summarises the problem in the following manner:

Interestingly enough, Podsiadło, both in his criticism of “the incomprehensibles” and in his support for a linear structure of the poem and “leading” the readers by giving them readable clues, repeats a whole gamut of critical ideas on the “hermetic” state of poetry, which were voiced in Miłosz’s speech *Przeciw poezji niezrozumiałej*. Those same arguments will be raised ten years later by Andrzej Franaszek – another opponent of hermetic poetry<sup>38</sup>.

Insofar as Vygotsky could have supported Miłosz’s sociological identifications, aimed against a progressing individualization of culture, it would be hard to paint him as an enthusiast of the Nobel-laureate’s programmatic conclusions, i.e., as a defender of “communicativeness” or “comprehensibility”. In principle, this manner of understanding “the psychology of literature” also would not support Andrzej Franaszek’s future theses voiced in the continuation of the literary-critical debate on incomprehensibility. Even though on the face of it the critic from Cracow utilises terms from the affective-psychological dictionary (because he postulates emotive, moving or comforting poetry) he juxtaposes the reactive-emotional potential of the work with “writing about language for the sake of ‘inventiveness’, ironic parody, a game”<sup>39</sup>. “The simple reader”, defended by Miłosz’s biographer, does not exist (or at least not in the form aiming at directness) in the psychology of art, proposed by Vygotsky. That is because every reader (“simple” or professional) receives literature (on the emotional level, inseparable from the intellectual one), precisely by means of those inventions and textual games, which Franaszek shuns.

Similarities between Vygotsky’s conclusions, which allow him to distinguish general categories governing the discipline of his interest, and modern interpretative and critical practices are plentiful. First of all, his conclusions to *The psychology of art* contain an intuition about the supreme function of contradiction, antinomy, disharmony. In his versological analyses of Pushkin’s poems the author of *Thought and speech* finds a space to express his general dislike for the category of meter and supports rhyme. The context for his reflections is the more general debates on the non-naïve treatment of the category of rhyme, from which he posits a thesis that breaks, inaccuracies and deviations from meter are responsible for triggering the most important emotional mechanisms<sup>40</sup>. It is hard not to acknowledge the innovative character of these thesis, which will later materialize in insightful interpretations based on the category of pre-Platonic rhythm, like the analyses of Adam Dziadek, based on the theoretical

<sup>38</sup>Dorota Kozicka, „Poezja w kłinczu (z)rozumienia” [„Poetry in the clinch of understanding”], *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka* 26 (2015): 62.

<sup>39</sup>Andrzej Franaszek, „Poezja jak bluza z kapturem” [„Poetry like a hoodie”], accessed under a changed title „Dlaczego nikt nie lubi nowej poezji?” [„Why does nobody like new poetry?”], *Gazeta Wyborcza* supplement 68, 22.03.2014, [http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,136823,15666202,Dlaczego\\_nikt\\_nie\\_lubi\\_nowej\\_poezji\\_.html](http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,136823,15666202,Dlaczego_nikt_nie_lubi_nowej_poezji_.html).

<sup>40</sup>The most important inspiration for Vygotsky’s reflections here are versological works by Andrei Bely.

works of Stanisław Mleczko and Henry Meschonnic (and the project of somatic criticism<sup>41</sup>) or Marta Koronkiewicz's interpretations of Andrzej Sosnowski's<sup>42</sup> poetry, inspired by similar considerations of rhyme.

## Conclusions

I made Vygotsky's work the central element of this paper, even though neither the author nor the category of "psychology of art" are central to modern critical discourse. I acknowledge a measure of nonchalance implicit in this gesture but it has not been my intention to prove a "primacy" of this theory against the actions of all scholars and critics who have been referred to above. The aim of such distribution of emphases is to recall the observations of that Soviet psychologist-literary scholar from almost a century ago and encourage polemics with a few lingering myths. The first of these is the implicit anti-psychologism of traditional Marxism. Vygotsky is evoked here as a suitable link: his psychological works, where he fights with the myth of a rational, autonomous individual, were supported by his urge for experimentally developed scientific theories and prove that adopting Marxism as a research basis does not automatically lead to sociological reductionism in social sciences or the humanities. Vygotsky's story proves that a nuancing of research premises stands in opposition to the interests of totalitarian authorities. After publishing "On pedagogical perversions of the system of People's Commissariat for Education" in 1936, his works became illegal in the USSR. The other myth concerns the supposed opposition between psychology and sociology, both in the study of literature and beyond. A peculiar understanding of the subject allowed Vygotsky to practice psychology as complementary to rather than in juxtaposition to sociology. He did the same in his remarks on literature and art. Thus, it is possible to reclaim the concept of psychology of literature and discard harmful connotations with panpsychologism, biographism or the interpreters' pretense to becoming diagnosticians of literary characters or authors. This reclaiming also lets us have a non-naïve look at the psychological aspect of the literary work and accept it as something which literary criticism (and more broadly – studies on literature) has always been doing, even if shying away from using the term itself.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

<sup>41</sup>See Adam Dziadek, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej [Somatic criticism project]* (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2014).

<sup>42</sup>See Marta Koronkiewicz, *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: Fundacja na Rzecz Kultury i Edukacji im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2019).

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# KEYWORDS

## PSYCHOLOGY OF LITERATURE

### literary criticism

**ABSTRACT:**

The author discusses the concept of Lev Vygotsky's psychology of literature against the background of various interpretations of the term. Through reconstructing a reactological understanding of the text as a stimulus, she juxtaposes different applications of the category of "strategy" in Polish literary studies and criticism. This makes it possible to reclaim the concept of the psychology of literature and discard the unfavourable connotations with pan-psychologism, biographism or interpreters' pretense for being diagnosticians of literary characters or authors.



*i n c o m p r e h e n s i b i l i t y*

VYGOTSKY

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