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# Critical Traditions

**The strength of literary criticism lies in the simultaneous adaptability of various languages to contemporary challenges and the continuity of critical gestures and procedures.**

**We examine the traditions of literary criticism with the belief that, despite the prevailing regime of novelty, they remain present—both in revisionist and polemical ways—in today’s discourses.**

**Furthermore, it is these traditions that help us avoid dead ends and perceive current debates in a broader perspective.**

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# Critical traditions

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*The functioning of literary criticism in Poland after 1989 has been shaped by numerous parallel phenomena, including: openness to new modes of reading, influenced by cultural theories adopted at the time; a turn towards anti-academic and private reading approaches; market entanglements that led to journalistic rather than strictly literary-critical styles and genres of writing about literature; the emergence of new communication circuits rooted in innovative media forms, such as literary blogs and social media; and a crisis of literacy. These and other changes have prompted, and at times continue to prompt, assertions about a wholly new situation for literature and criticism after 1989, supposedly marked by a complete rupture with the “Old Masters” and with the critical discourses of previous decades.*

*In this issue of Forum of Poetics devoted to critical traditions, we propose revisiting these questions from the perspective of (potential) historical continuity – not for archival purposes but in order to*

*seek potential connections that actualize tradition in the contemporary moment. We believe that the strength of literary criticism lies in the simultaneous fluidity of its languages, which adapt to the challenges of the present, and in the durability of critical gestures and procedures. Despite the dominance of novelty and innovation, the problems and questions that arise during disputes and discussions invite us to consider them in a broader temporal perspective.*

*From the perspective of critical traditions, it seems equally inspiring to trace the ways in which literariness is understood; the historically conditioned expectations of literature and the preferred modes of reading it; the institutions and contexts that stimulate debate around literature; and the influence exerted by critical authorities or personalities, who not only inspired their contemporaries but also left a lasting legacy. That is why we are interested in the many different understandings of tradition: the presence or rejection of authorities (as discussed by Dorota Kozicka, Joanna Orska, Adam Partyka); the revision or renewal of intellectual currents (Michał Koza, Katarzyna Trzeciak, Monika Świerkosz); the extent to which new critical languages are rooted in long-standing disputes about literariness (Paweł Kaczmarek, Zuzanna Sala); and the ideological shifts and intellectual contexts underlying the displacement of specific critical traditions (Agnieszka Waligóra, Łukasz Żurek). The authors of the individual articles examine various traditions present in contemporary critical discourses – those wanted or unwanted, embraced or concealed, and those invoked polemically. They trace the transfers and flows of inspirations that occur between humanistic theories and the practice of literary criticism, rediscovering “old” disputes over the criteria for evaluating works in new conditions and contexts.*

*It is worth emphasizing at the outset that this issue of Forum of Poetics is in fact an invitation to metacritical debates, with the included articles posing questions rather than offering definitive answers. This stems from our conviction that the essence of research on criticism lies not in summaries or hasty syntheses but in nuancing individual critical positions and uncovering the complex mechanisms which governed critical programs and debates. Only by retrospectively and panoramically examining literary criticism can we avoid dead ends and cyclical reappearance of the same (albeit re-clothed) issues in the practice of literary criticism. Critical traditions– including those revised or serving as polemical reference points– remain fundamental tools for addressing the challenges that manifest in contemporary literary life. Meta-criticism, for its part, enables both an in-depth understanding of the theory and history of literary criticism and literature and a forward-looking engagement with the dynamic space of current debates about literary criticism, shaping them and perhaps even modeling their future course.*

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

# Beyond Agon: The Decolonization of the Feminist Tradition in Arleta Galant's and Agnieszka Gajewska's Literary Criticism Projects

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Polish feminist literary criticism – as part of the debate over women's writing after 1989 – built its identity both on the rejection of canonical models of reading and on the search for different, alternative reading communities. Recognizing fundamental tensions between the open (the rebellious) and the closed (the normative) potential of tradition, in my opinion, defines most Polish feminist literary criticism projects of the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> They are also defined by the fact that they try to transcend antagonisms that such binary tensions generate. Cultivating (rather than erasing) ambivalence about the past (defined as pre-existing models of reading literature and generating knowledge about it) determines the dynamics of perceiving and analyzing tradition. It is more often than not a feminist “dance through the minefield”<sup>2</sup> rather than an agon,<sup>3</sup> as evidenced by

<sup>1</sup> Monika Świerkosz, *W przestrzeniach tradycji. Proza Izabeli Filipiak i Olgi Tokarczuk w sporach o literaturę, kanon i feminizm* [Within the realms of tradition: Izabela Filipiak's and Olga Tokarczuk's prose in disputes about literature, canon and feminism] (Warsaw: IBL PAN, 2015). Katarzyna Majbroda wrote about the many different strategies of Polish feminist literary critics and their approaches to the feminist canon and theory in: *Feministyczna krytyka literacka w Polsce po 1989 roku. Tekst, dyskurs, poznanie z odmiennej perspektywy* [Feminist literary criticism in Poland after 1989. Text, discourse, and understanding from a different perspective] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Anette Kolodny, “Dancing through the minefield: Some observations on the theory, practice, and politics of a feminist literary criticism”, *Feminist Studies* 1 (1980): 1–25.

<sup>3</sup> Although the very concept of “agon” may also be defined in a constructive way – as exemplified by Chantal Mouffe and her radical left-wing approach – in this essay I follow feminist revisions of Harold Bloom's model of entering the literary agon, due to its influence on literary criticism. For Bloom, agon – linked to the psychoanalytic mechanism of parricide – involves the need to triumph over a strong opponent, whose defeat (symbolic murder and absorption) paves the way to recognition and greatness. The agonistic relation in the literary field is thus governed by the principle of “either me or you;” difference requires one to locate oneself in the dualistic structure of conflict, the resolution of which gives rise to a community of “strong” writers. See: Harold Bloom, *The anxiety of influence: A theory of poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Cf. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

the critical essays of Arleta Galant and Agnieszka Gajewska. I find them interesting also because of their auto-meta-critical nature, insofar as they dare to ask questions about the role and significance of identity politics for the community of women readers and writers (although not only them).

In this essay, I examine how Polish feminist literary critics coped with and responded to a crisis, methodological exhaustion, and boredom that dominated in the discussion about literature and gender in the 2000s. I also examine how they creatively used the tensions between the “old” and the “new” (also in feminist literary criticism) to transform their reading tools.

Let me begin by discussing the foundations for this discussion, as laid in the 1990s, which I believe allows us to identify specific and recurring tensions.

## Towards tradition – against and according to expectations

Western women’s studies scholars, who have been developing the concept of women’s literary tradition since the 1970s, often talked more about heteroglossia and a “double-voiced discourse” in women’s writing, about its borderline, palimpsest-like, and complex nature, rather than called for a radical break with men’s literary tradition.<sup>4</sup> Given the relatively small number of revisionist and confrontational andro-critical projects (feminist (re)reading of men’s texts) in Poland, it is the different forms of reclaiming and paraphrasing – which, to repeat after Inga Iwasiów, I define as an affectively ambiguous reclaiming of the literary past for the purposes of a feminist reading – that, I believe, dominate in Polish feminist literary criticism.<sup>5</sup> Back in 1996, when asked about the significance of tradition as part of a literary questionnaire in *Teksty Drugie*, Izabela Morska (*née* Filipiak) distanced herself from both the rebel writers associated with *bruLion* and the conservative classicists.<sup>6</sup> She said:

*I wear both my grandmother’s ridiculously delicate blouses and her fitted jackets and my grandfather’s baggy sweaters, collared shirts, I dye my mother’s antique aprons in uneven, galactic streaks, and I worry about what will happen when all these clothes eventually wear out...*

<sup>4</sup> Świerkosz, 19–63. The theory of the borderland nature of women’s literature and its “double-voiced discourse” were developed by Elaine Showalter. The ideas of the “affiliation complex” as well as the palimpsest construction of women’s texts were crucial, in turn, to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s revision of Bloom’s agonistic “anxiety of influence.” Nancy K. Miller wrote interestingly about mimicry, following in the footsteps of Luce Irigaray. Moreover, in French feminist thought (Hélène Cixous) emphasis is also placed on the subversive acts of “stealing” and intercepting male language, which is the point of departure for a woman writer – her flight to the margins

<sup>5</sup> It is affectively ambiguous because it takes place between love for the text and conflict and hurt caused by it. See Inga Iwasiów, *Rewindykacje. Kobieta czytająca dzisiaj* [Revindications. The women-reader today] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2002) and Inga Iwasiów, *Parafrazy i reinterpretacje. Wykłady z teorii i praktyki czytania* [Paraphrases and reinterpretations. Lectures on the theory and practice of reading] (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2004). Ewa Kraskowska also emphasizes that critical tools (both feminist and non-feminist) should be eclectic and in that sense complementary, see Ewa Kraskowska, *Czytelnik jako kobieta. Wokół literatury i teorii* [The reader as a woman. Around literature and theory] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Andrzej Stasiuk wrote at the time, among other things, that “no tradition may be found standing outside the window. / Yes, there is no fucking tradition outside the window” – citing the famous poem “Wiersz wspólny półfinałowy” [Semi-final joint poem] by Marcin Baran, Marcin Świetlicki, and Marcin Sendeci, all of whom were affiliated with *bruLion*; Andrzej Stasiuk, “Ankieta «Tekstów Drugich»” [The questionnaire of *Teksty Drugie*], *Teksty Drugie* 5 (1996): 119. In turn, Krzysztof Koehler (who still wrote for *bruLion* at the time) said: “Tradition, to paraphrase Norwid, is Obligation. Norwid was talking about the Homeland, but what else can Homeland be for a poet. In principle, I would also talk about the Homeland, Memory, Standing in the Shadow, and Following in somebody’s Footsteps, which lie at the heart of national belonging;” Krzysztof Koehler, “Ankieta «Tekstów Drugich»,” *Teksty Drugie* 5 (1996): 117.

Unfortunately, I have the impression that they already have. A dispute is good for a moment, but when we engage in it for a longer period of time, we forget where we really want to be. On the other hand, I also feel a certain reluctance towards using tradition — tradition as a set of topics to which one uncritically refers, thus assuring oneself and others that one writes “great” literature. But also turning at all costs towards modernity, distilled from history, would mean that one is forever trapped in a vicious circle of antitheses. [...] I do not like the word “tradition” and would prefer to replace it with the word “inspiration.” Inspiration is a feeling of delight caused by recognizing a shared tone, discovering a motif that speaks to me. It is a beautiful word that suggests beginning, completion, and its extraordinary lightness.<sup>7</sup>

Morska clearly advocates for compromise, exploration, and at the same time contestation. She is critical of what is normative in tradition but does not negate it entirely. She emphasizes the importance of both roots and growth, wishing to creatively use all that she finds inspirational in the past.<sup>8</sup>

However, and I cannot stress this enough, this nomadic way of thinking about tradition was nevertheless defined by what characterizes most gynocritical herstories of literature, which were written with, as Inga Iwasiów aptly put it, the “optimism of liberal female colonizers.”<sup>9</sup> Expeditions to unknown lands (lost continents of the female tradition, virgin no man’s land, feminist hinterlands, and rooms of one’s own) were of course meant to discover the female self, which in these spatial metaphors functioned as the “promised land.” The female self was meant to be discovered with the approval of the previously forgotten and lonely but now reclaimed (literary) mothers, grandmothers, and sisters. As Iwasiów reminds us, the goal was to gain a “useful tradition.” However, she adds, unlike in the West, where the reclaiming/colonization of the past by feminism resulted in the now classic literary criticism projects, in Poland such endeavors more often than not ended in disappointment – with scholars discovering that Shakespeare had no “brilliant sisters” or that women’s texts stored in the archives were often conservative and unoriginal.<sup>10</sup> Their works (apart from relatively few exceptions) could hardly be read using the tools of feminist literary criticism, with its dominant categories of subversion, anti-phallogocentrism, one’s original voice, female (sub)culture, and female language.

Moreover, the herstorical turn towards the literary past of women writers – with critics either completely ignoring or uniquely reclaiming the times of the Polish People’s Republic – as well as the parallel trend of feminist phantasmatic criticism, which deconstructs the national myth through the analysis of female stories, figures, and symbols (Maria Janion’s legacy), is

<sup>7</sup> Izabela Filipiak, “Ankieta «Tekstów Drugich»”, *Teksty Drugie* 5 (1996): 113–115.

<sup>8</sup> A different more negative or predatory form of this “exploitation” is discussed by Filipiak in her essay “Literatura monstrualna” [Monstrous literature.] It takes the form of a metaphorized image of canonical parasitism: the writer, like mistletoe, feeds on the juices of the canon, poisoning it with her monstrous “works.” Izabela Filipiak, “Literatura monstrualna” [Monstrous literature], *OŚKA* 1 (1999): 1–9.

<sup>9</sup> Inga Iwasiów, *Gender dla średniozaawansowanych. Wykłady szczecińskie* [Gender for intermediate level students. The Szczecin lectures] (Warsaw: WAB, 2004): 32.

<sup>10</sup> Iwasiów, *Gender dla średniozaawansowanych*, 34. Arleta Galant also discusses the feeling of disappointment of (Polish) women’s studies scholars, who most often unsuccessfully search for the “essence” of women’s writing and personal revolt in autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries, in her book *Prywatne, publiczne, autobiograficzne. O dziennikach i esejach Jana Lechonia, Zofii Nałkowskiej i Jerzego Stempowskiego* [The Private, the public, the autobiographical: The diaries and essays of Jan Lechoń, Zofia Nałkowska, and Jerzy Stempowski] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2010), 56.



both methodologically traditional and anti-traditional in the realities of the Polish academia. Dorota Kozicka explains that:

Shortly before Maliszewski began to seek an answer to the question of how to be a Polish writer, Grażyna Borkowska, in her text entitled *Feministyczna utopia* [Feminist utopia], wrote about the “marginal and niche nature of feminist practices in Poland” and suggested that feminism could be tamed by writing about forgotten women – women writers, activists, thinkers.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, when a discussion on politics and engagement – a discussion all the more important because it continued into the 2000s<sup>12</sup> – first began in Polish literary studies in 1989, one of the pioneers of Polish feminist criticism, Grażyna Borkowska, had already managed to, in a sense, announce its end, suggesting that we should return to the study of tradition, herstory, and searching for women’s literary and cultural heritage.<sup>13</sup> It and of itself this trend in feminist literary criticism was (and in my opinion still is) endowed with a great subversive potential. More importantly, it also proved effective, giving rise to many excellent works which challenged the Polish canon. This notwithstanding, it seems that the focus on feminist tradition emphasized by Borkowska could have been, in a sense, a conservative reaction to the conservative Polish academia, which had to “assimilate” feminism before it could embrace it. So Polish feminist critics focused on the past and thus helped “tame” feminism...

What do I think the first feminist literary critics leave behind for their slightly younger sisters? A realization that many blank spots still exist in women’s literary history and an understanding that talking about them either with the help of grand or small colonizing/identity narratives is not possible. Younger feminist literary critics are encouraged to reclaim those histories but without a sense of separatist pride in their heritage, without a desire for a clearly defined identity. They often need to come to terms with the fact that women’s texts are often minor, secondary literature and that they generate both curiosity and disappointment. Younger feminist literary critics must also be prepared to feel interpretive fatigue as a result of the inadequacy or repetitiveness of their reading modes. They should recognize that the concept of “femininity” may become a poetological and identity norm, and that the concept of “sisterhood” may be used to exclude women writers who turned out to be troublesome, unwanted, or even “other” in the female continuum from the point of view of politics/identity/class/ethnicity/aesthetics.<sup>14</sup>

In the late 2000s, there was an impression that feminist literary criticism in Poland – also in the opinion of those scholars who had been laying its methodological foundations since the

<sup>11</sup>Dorota Kozicka, “Od Kopciuszka do... Feministyczne potyczki z krytyką literacką” [From Cinderella to... Feminist struggles with literary criticism], *Women Online Writing* 3 (2014): 48.

<sup>12</sup>Igor Stokfiżewski, “Co to znaczy dzisiaj być polską pisarką?” [What does it mean to be a Polish woman writer today?], *Litera* 1 (2008), reprinted in: Igor Stokfiżewski, *Zwrot polityczny* [The political turn] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009), 169–177.

<sup>13</sup>Grażyna Borkowska, “Feministyczna utopia” [Feminist utopia], *Ex Libris* 21 (1992).

<sup>14</sup>Sporne postaci polskiej krytyki feministycznej po 1989 roku [Disputed figures in Polish feminist criticism after 1989] identifies a number of blank spots. In the Polish context (in 2015, when a seminar under the same title was held), these turned out to be, among others, communist, working class, and Jewish women, provincial and regional women writers, as well as male authors who contested hegemonic masculinity and women authors who wrote “in a masculine” manner. See: *Sporne postaci polskiej krytyki feministycznej po 1989 roku* [Disputed figures in Polish feminist criticism after 1989], ed. Monika Świerkosz (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2016).

1990s – reached saturation, or perhaps even satiety.<sup>15</sup> In my opinion, this, at least partially, gave rise to interesting interdisciplinary shifts. Some scholars took (but did not abandon) their feminist “toolbox” to explore other areas in order to deepen or broaden perspectives.<sup>16</sup>

In what follows, I will examine two literary criticism projects which, in my opinion, want to decolonize women’s studies from the outside in, so as to transform it into a critique of contemporaneity that is focused on the present.<sup>17</sup> In my view, the focus is still placed on the possibilities of pursuing a politics of identity and productively engaging with the notion of “difference”—and not just gendered difference.

### Arleta Galant’s politics of location

The cultural turn in literary women’s studies – which Arleta Galant describes, illuminates, and problematizes in her book<sup>18</sup> – leads towards a strategic defense of the political implications of gender identity and female authorship. This is quite surprising for at least two reasons. First, because it turns out that, despite the fears that the feminist perspective might get lost in an amalgam of class, race, ethnicity, religion, etc., the growing influence of cultural studies on women’s studies is not a threat to female identities but an opportunity to capture their multifaceted materialities. Second, because the political implications of female identity are defended by someone who does not hide her disappointment with the very category of “women’s writing.” Analyzing the writings of young women writers and critics (after 2005), Galant notices that “the term that defined and emancipated the literary achievements of women writers in the 1990s is of little use today; it turns out to be a hollow term with no critical potential.”<sup>19</sup> Gender once again becomes a private issue; it is no longer discussed in literature but in biography.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Such opinions may be found, for example, in a special issue of *Wielogłos*, devoted to summarizing the achievements of Polish feminism in literary studies. Borkowska writes in it about “a darkening of mirrors” (i.e. her abandonment of a narcissistic, autobiographical way of doing literary studies, which focused on the female “I”); Grażyna Borkowska, “Powolne ciemnienie zwierciadeł” [A gradual darkening of mirrors], *Wielogłos 2* (2011): 40–43. Kraskowska, in turn, writes about “harvesttime,” which is productive and satisfying, but not as creative as “sowing time;” Ewa Kraskowska, “Współczesna krytyka literacka: inny stan skupienia” [Contemporary literary criticism: A different state of matter], *Wielogłos 2* (2011): 51–59. Kłosińska, respectively, reflects on the limits of feminist hermeneutics; Krystyna Kłosińska, “Poststriptum” [Poststriptum], *Wielogłos 2* (2011): 37–39. Kłosińska’s monumental *Feministyczna krytyka literacka* [Feminist literary criticism], in my opinion, also ends with a sort of elegy; Krystyna Kłosińska, *Feministyczna krytyka literacka* [Feminist literary criticism] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2010).

<sup>16</sup>Many literary studies scholars now tend to focus on men’s studies and queer studies, posthuman studies, ecocriticism and animal studies, cultural studies/anthropology, disability studies, and social history. Biography and autobiography studies, as well as broadly understood contemporary philosophy, is still a field that may be actively explored and transformed.

<sup>17</sup>Iwasiów, *Gender dla średniozaawansowanych*, 36.

<sup>18</sup>Arleta Galant, *Zwroty krytyczne. Studia i szkice nie tylko o literaturze* [Critical turns. Essays not only about literature] (Kraków: Universitas, 2018). Galant spoke about the fact that some aspects of cultural studies might be beneficial for feminist literary criticism during the 2nd Academic Feminist Congress in 2011. First published in: Arleta Galant, “Feministycznie o historii literatury i zwrocie kulturowym. Przypisy do dwóch projektów” [Feminist literary history and the cultural turn: Footnotes to two projects], *Women Online Writing 3* (2014): 69–79.

<sup>19</sup>Galant, *Zwroty krytyczne*, 29.

<sup>20</sup>Galant interestingly projects these tropes of the exhaustion of the potential of women’s writing in the 21st century onto the broader question of the fading attractiveness of the feminist narrative in literary life and discourse. “...in recent years, when feminism went out of fashion (which it never was) and remained (as usual) a serious ideological work, I came to the conclusion that after 2005, i.e. after the publication of the most important, foundational, books by Polish feminist literary critics, feminist consciousness is more visible in Polish public life than in literature and literary criticism.” Galant, *Zwroty krytyczne* 9.

Moreover, Galant has repeatedly drawn attention to the pitfalls of feminist identity politics, which, in literary women's studies, either make us believe that the experience of gender oppression creates sufficient space for the constitution of an emancipatory community or encourages us to cognitively privilege the victim.

Pointing to the conservative nature of the writings of fellow contemporary women writers and critics, Galant differs significantly in her vision of the 1990s from Przemysław Czapliński, who in "Kobiety i duch tożsamości" [Women and the spirit of identity] famously argued that the revolutionary potential of women's writing at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries was lost. After the initial period of feminist "*Sturm und Drang*," Czapliński writes, women writers gradually retreated to the safe positions of "identity," giving up on their otherness in favor of the gender *status quo*.<sup>21</sup>

Galant, however, argues that neither were the 1990s such a progressive and "feminist" time nor was an "excess of identity (politics)" the main problem in contemporary Polish women's writing. Quite the opposite, Galant claims that the question of identity was not discussed enough. It seems that 21st-century women writers (and what about critics?), Galant writes, fell into an old trap: either gender or humanity, either "identity" or "otherness." They eventually moved beyond gender but in a way that is not reminiscent of Donna Haraway's and Judith Butler's post-gender rebellions. The diluted female "I" emerging from their texts turned out to be not so much a way to overcome gender binarism but rather the effect of relegating this category back into the realm of the private. The complex questions of identity and the links between biography and writing were thus silenced. Galant does not find such an escape into universalism, which may be seen in the works of Małgorzata Rejmer, Marta Syrwid, Janina Bauman, Anda Rottenberg, and Manuela Gretkowska, convincing. And although she understands that gender is not the only "vulnerable component/element of social identity," in her literary criticism project she defends feminism as a framework for critical thinking – a framework that allows one to see gender and describe it in complex entanglements with society, family, economy, class, sex, geopolitics, etc. Feminism defined in this way has never been (and still is not) for her *gender-only feminism* nor a "particular worldview" which stands in opposition to universalism.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, Galant is disappointed by women's writing.<sup>23</sup> And yet she recognizes its feminist potential – how it informs the concept of identity. Still, she reads it through the prism of Adrienne Rich's "politics of location,"<sup>24</sup> in which she sees a chance to combine gender and post-dependent (decolonizing) perspectives:

<sup>21</sup>Przemysław Czapliński, "Kobiety i duch tożsamości" [Women and the spirit of identity], in: Przemysław Czapliński, *Efekt bierności. Literatura w czasie normalnym* [The passivity effect: Literature in normal time] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2004), 97–130.

<sup>22</sup>Galant, *Zwroty krytyczne*, 20. The terms gender-only feminism and multi issue/left feminism were coined and discussed by Ellen C. DuBois in: "Eleanor Flexner and the History of American Feminism", *Gender and History* 1 (1991): 81–90.

<sup>23</sup>And not only by women. She argues that attempts to neutralize any traces of "queerness" may be found in the personal writings of many Polish authors (Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Anda Rottenberg, and Ewa Kuryluk). Respectively, she also observes that certain narrative patterns are regularly repeated.

<sup>24</sup>Galant draws on Adrienne Rich, "Notes toward a politics of location," in: Adrienne Rich, *Blood, bread, and poetry: Selected prose 1979-1985* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 210-231. Rich's essay, first published in 1984, heralds the arrival of the feminist Third Wave. Black women lawyers and sociologists (Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins) pointed to the importance of "intersectionality." Rich, as a powerful and radical figure of second-wave feminism, speaks in this essay from within the feminist community and yet she dares to reflect on her own position and question her practices of critical thinking.

Rich combines the “politics of location” with the “politics of identity” – gender, race, sexuality, social status determine different types of exclusions. In her decolonizing approach, Rich talks about how the “I” is created, how it becomes – unjustly so – the subject that drifts towards the center.<sup>25</sup>

Such a reading of Rich gives rise to an interesting paradox: by looking at what “drifts toward the center” – which in the Polish context usually means the reproduction of the watered-down and supposedly universalized “I” – we are able to map the tensions that ultimately challenge the traditional (and homogeneous) notion of community; such tensions emerge when the private and the public meet. In other words, examining avoidances, defeats, and failures connected with the concept of identity, and there are many in the personal texts by women and other “others,” according to Galant, may reveal when and how “difference” functions. This, in turn, allows us to see more clearly the boundaries (and thus the definitional frameworks and determinants) of the normative center. They usually remain hidden, invisible.

But what can a feminist critic do with her discovery?

The theory of location taught me a lesson: when an intimate text is devoid of excess, any biographical revolts, any subversions, one may – taking into account constructivist theories of the subject and autobiography – call it stereotypical, conventional, anachronistic, conformist, but one may also take a step back and reflect on the public limits of private expression, reflect on culture and identity, reflect on everything that is missing from the list of subversive expectations.<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, the critic responds to the post-2005 “retreat from identity” – which gives rise to conservative texts that hide any traces of otherness (including gender otherness) and repeat the clichés of universalizing narratives – by “taking a step back.” I do not read her ingenious strategy as a defense of those subjectivities that turn out to be insufficiently rebellious but above all as a conscious decision to “make room” for questions about intersectionality and relationality. These questions require one to circle around essentialist labels in order to extract the cultural, historical, and social context behind them. Identity politics filtered through the “politics of location” calls for a cultural turn in gender and autobiographical studies which, after all, has already been greatly influenced by cultural studies. This new cultural turn, however, is not constructivist. Its goal is to deterritorialize. Within its dynamic frameworks, identity is not rejected as an essentialist illusion or a patriarchal cliché, nor is it defined as an emancipatory construct. Instead, one studies when and why identity may/may not inform literary practices. I see this as an attempt to decolonize the gaze, which also involves moving beyond the simple opposition between the hegemonic center and the rebellious, yet subordinate, margins.

However, I also notice in this project a conscious critical restraint. The critic does not wish to criticize authors and texts for their hypocrisy, lies, or “not speaking directly;” she does not want to “prove” that some of them are conservative or “play it safe.” Unlike Czapliński, for example, who unmask the traditionalist “identity” of women’s prose at the turn of the century. Instead of a revisionist critique of the text, Galant calls for a revisionist critique of (one’s) reading practices.

<sup>25</sup>Galant, *Zwroty krytyczne*, 46–47.

<sup>26</sup>Galant, *Zwroty krytyczne*, 52.

I also understand that her conscious decision not to express judgments on the subjectivity inscribed in the text – especially considering the critic’s dreams of subversion and revolution – is an essential element of her strategy of taking a “step back.” A strategy that is (and we are taking a paradoxical step back here as well) an exercise in bias. In a different text, Galant writes:

[L]ocation is not a task or a duty. The entanglements of politics and identity, described by Adrienne Rich [...], offer us clues – when we speak/write, we practice partiality, believing that an impartial compartment in the matrix exists is one of its (matrix’s) tricks. [...] To locate oneself means to layer oneself. To take on autobiographical, methodological, ideological contexts [...] and – necessarily – to speak from the center of locality.<sup>27</sup>

Moving around instead of searching for the “promised land,” “layering” instead of taking root – the spatial metaphors also testify to a change in how feminist reading is practiced and, more broadly, in how feminist literary criticism is produced.

### Agnieszka Gajewska’s communities of the differend

Interestingly, Agnieszka Gajewska in *Czego może odczytać nas feminizm?* [What can feminism un-teach us?],<sup>28</sup> a talk delivered at the 2nd Academic Feminist Congress in 2011, also began with questions about the limits of feminist literary criticism. She explained how during a “meet the author” event a woman reader judged a woman writer and the literary text only in terms of living up to her emancipatory expectations. Gajewska quotes Julia Fiedorczuk’s *Biała Ofelia* [White Ophelia] to criticize the schematic forms of feminist reading practices, which lead to the stabilization of meanings, interpretative predictability, and the reproduction of sterile dichotomies within the closed masculine-feminine system. By combining this satirical image of misreading with the rhetoric of “going to confession,” Gajewska wanted to protest against a model of literary criticism (not only feminist literary criticism, any form of literary criticism) in which the power of the critic is built on the failures (sins) of the literary text. A critique of the text which emphasizes its conservative or traditional aspects is a narcissistic and phallic spectacle of the “I,” in which the reader refers to universal truth, or rather a truth constructed by them as universal. Such a reading puts an end to what, drawing on François Lyotard, Gajewska places at the center of anti-phallogocentric interpretive practices, namely, the differend (in) reading.

Gajewska defines it as “a dispute that is not supposed to lead to a resolution but is supposed to remain a critical movement, it ‘should express doubts and raise doubts, and not create illusions of universal truths, which after all serve to totalize and annihilate the heterogeneous.’”<sup>29</sup> Such

<sup>27</sup>Arleta Galant, “Parafrazy Ingi Iwasiów” [Paraphrases of Inga Iwasiów], in: Inga Iwasiów dla zaawansowanych. Studia, eseje, relacje [Inga Iwasiów for advanced students. Studies, essays, reports], ed. Maciej Duda, Aleksandra Krukowska, Piotr Krupiński (Szczecin–Poznań: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego i Stowarzyszenia Czasu Kultury, 2023), 207.

<sup>28</sup>Agnieszka Gajewska, “Czego może odczytać nas feminizm?” [What can feminism un-teach us?], *Women Online Writing* 3 (2014): 58–67.

<sup>29</sup>Gajewska, “Czego może odczytać nas feminizm?”, 62–63. At this point the critic quotes Lyotard’s translator, Bogdan Banasiak. See: Bogdan Banasiak, “Poróżnienie, albo «zadanie myślenia»” [The differend or ‘the goal of thinking’] in: Jean-François Lyotard, *Poróżnienie* [The Differend], trans. Bogdan Banasiak (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2010), xxxiv.

a form of dispute,<sup>30</sup> unlike agon which refers to the concept of the truth, has a chance to introduce “adoctrinal pragmatism” to feminist literary criticism, governed by the logic of an “inverted confession.” Recurring ethical questions “would refer particularly to critics who read and not to critics who write,” while reading itself “would not be a judgment, would not call for repentance, a confession of sins, but show the traps of literary criticism and judgements, fundamentally based on, as must be pointed out, phallogocentric rhetorical tricks.”<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly, this strategy of the differend – which I would describe as actively searching for difference – involves, among other things, actively abandoning the center of feminist literary criticism, which for many years has been “the woman.” Gajewska questions the seemingly obvious fact that feminist literary criticism should place the female experience, the female text, the female authorship, and the female language at the center. Moreover, she suggests that moving towards the borderlands of masculinity, queerness, otherness, and monstrosity is a move that is not only possible but also necessary in order to decolonize feminist discourse.

Feminist literary criticism focused on female characters, female narratives, and women’s writing is confined to the panopticon of patriarchal clichés. This conflict between the female/male world, often accompanied by the heterosexual/homosexual binary, renders us predictable and easily definable. We cannot move into the ambiguous, the transgressive, the uncanny, and the hermaphroditic. When we do not engage with these monstrous issues, we annihilate otherness, difference and subordinate cultural practices to political requirements that are not – as a result – emancipatory.<sup>32</sup>

So, does Arleta Galant write about the “politics of location” in opposition to the blurring of difference (including gender difference)? Does Agnieszka Gajewska encourage decentralization in order to resist identity politics?

Although both critics, in my opinion, diagnose the problem differently – according to Galant, the problem of Polish literary criticism is the constant blurring or dilution of identity categories, while for Gajewska the problem is their normativization – their literary criticism projects defend the travelling concept of difference and its double effect: difference creates a community of readers (thanks to differentiation) and at the same time protects this community from homogenization (thanks to the differend).

This is clearly visible when we compare the previously quoted fragment from Gajewska’s talk with another one, delivered literally a few months later, during the conference held at the first Gryfia Literary Award (in 2012). Gajewska emphasizes the importance of the “salvific conflict of interpretations,” but from a different (and, as one might think, opposite) perspective. The 2012 talk, entitled *Feministyczna krytyka przyjacielska w 2012 roku* [Feminist friendly criticism

<sup>30</sup>Of course, feminist literary critics may approach dispute/agon differently. Krystyna Kłosińska, in her model of symptomatic reading inspired by Jane Gallop’s theoretical work, encourages the woman-reader to question the text and to read it “against the woman-author.” Krystyna Kłosińska, “Feministyczna krytyka literacka wobec pisania kobiet i jej pułapki” [Feminist literary criticism of women’s writing and its pitfalls], *FA-art 3* (2012): 3–13.

<sup>31</sup>Gajewska, “Czego może odczytać nas feminizm?”, 67.

<sup>32</sup>Gajewska, “Czego może odczytać nas feminizm?”, 62.

in 2012],<sup>33</sup> emphasizes the value of a close, intimate relationship between women in literature (in their respective roles as writers, readers, and critics). Referring to Janice Raymond's *A passion for friends: A philosophy of female friendship*, Gajewska talks about the importance of female friendship which she sees as a remedy for particularly painful experiences – on the one hand, the cultural alienation and victimization of women in a male-centric society and, on the other hand, the inevitable conflicts within the sisterhood.

One might think that Gajewska encourages us this time to connect at the level of identity with (an)other (woman), but it turns out that in “friendly criticism” the herstorical work of reclaiming the visibility of bonds between women and finding support in them during “crises of difference” does not involve giving up one's voice, one's otherness. On the contrary, it allows one to understand one's positioning better:

I share my doubts, I evaluate, I disagree, trying to communicate: I care about what you do, think, write. I do not ignore my female friend-author, I quote, I argue.<sup>34</sup>

This polemical mode is a “different way of explaining and arguing” that requires moving beyond the framework of the “narcissistic spectacle of the ‘I,’” forcing one to “repeat one's obsessions.”<sup>35</sup> As such, despite the assumed distinctness of the “I” and “the other,” “[f]riendly criticism has little in common with the critical literary agon. I do not argue with the author, I search, I wonder why something sounds uncomfortable and foreign, I verify my ethical views, I think about my own critical tools, which I should probably abandon since their obscure the view.”<sup>36</sup>

Although the two quoted texts by Gajewska encourage us to adopt two seemingly different critical attitudes (of the differend and of the reconciliatory respectively), they meet halfway at a point where the critic consciously resists reading literature through her emancipatory, deconstructionist, or any other expectations. Which, of course, does not at all invalidate questions about the politics and ethics of such a reading, nor does it silence the questions about community, familiarity, and otherness.

In my reading, it is in this unusual place that Arleta Galant's project of a post-dependent located reading and Agnieszka Gajewska's model of the friendly differend meet. Both consciously take a “step back” in order to, as Nancy K. Miller put it in *Arachnologies*, overread. I also read it in terms of both critics doing auto-meta-critical work on their respective interpretive tools, in the horizon of which defending one's perspective on the world and the text is but one of the possibilities. The other is refraining from it. Perhaps ultimately it is all about searching for difference also in oneself and not only establishing it between oneself and the outside?

<sup>33</sup>Gajewska, “Feministyczna krytyka przyjacielska w 2012 roku” [Feminist friendly criticism in 2012], *Pogranicza* 2 (2012): 81–85.

<sup>34</sup>Gajewska, “Feministyczna krytyka przyjacielska w 2012 roku”, 83.

<sup>35</sup>Gajewska, “Feministyczna krytyka przyjacielska w 2012 roku”, 85.

<sup>36</sup>Gajewska, “Feministyczna krytyka przyjacielska w 2012 roku”, 84.

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In these flows of meanings between sisterhood – friendship – agon – dispute – the differend, Izabela Filipiak’s comments on how ambivalent feminism is towards tradition – since it may be both traditionalist and anti-traditionalist – echo back. I think that Agnieszka Gajewska’s and Arleta Galant’s literary criticism projects demonstrate that their goal is not so much to reclaim and colonize areas once appropriated by hegemonic masculinity but to find ways to hear the voices of Others (not only gendered Others), sometimes so radically different that they may even be hostile.<sup>37</sup> Looking back remains an important inspiration for both. It helps design practices of resistance to the homogenizing tendencies of all communities, including a community of women. Above all, however, both projects encourage us to move beyond a discursive deadlock in which we are forced to choose between “the spirit of otherness” and “the spirit of identity.”

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

<sup>37</sup>Agnieszka Gajewska developed this project in her presentation *Feministyczna miłość wroga – wezwanie filozoficzne* [Feminist love of the enemy – A philosophical call] delivered during the regional conference “Friendship with the Other. Religions-Relations-Attitudes” of the European Society of Women’s Theology (ESWTR), which took place in Gniezno from 24 to 27 August 2014. I have not been able to find a paper copy of this talk.

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# KEYWORDS

tradition

agon

*Agnieszka Gajewska*

**ABSTRACT:**

The article examines changes in the way feminist literary criticism has been practiced in Poland since 2005 in the context of identity politics, location politics, the female tradition, and the female reading community. The author emphasizes the significance of (not only gender-related) “difference,” defined in a non-essentialist, nomadic, and non-antagonistic way, in two feminist literary criticism projects by Arleta Galant and Agnieszka Gajewska respectively. Both critics revise second-wave feminist critical tools and yet remain within the feminist reading community, seeking new non-antagonistic ways of reading the same and the different.

*feminist literary criticism*

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# Traditions of autonomy. Notes for a comparison\*

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## Introduction

The methodological aim of the following article is quite simple: I want to analyse various models of autonomy current in contemporary Polish literary criticism from the standpoint of the so-called intentionalist reflection on autonomy, developed in the circle of the American journal “Nonsite” by authors such as Walter Benn Michaels<sup>1</sup>, Nicholas Brown<sup>2</sup>, Todd Cronan<sup>3</sup> and others. The aim of such meta-critical analysis is not only to map the field, but also to suggest that Polish literary studies today could benefit from adopting this anglophone tradition. In this suggestion, the following article offers a further step in an ongoing process of cultural translation: the work of ‘the nonsites’ has been described and popularised in recent years in a few different articles published in Polish.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Walter Benn Michaels, *The beauty of a social problem: photography, autonomy, economy* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2015); Walter Benn Michaels, *The shape of the signifier: from 1967 to the end of history*, transl. Jan Burzyński (Krakow: Korporacja Ha!art, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: the social ontology of art under capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Todd Cronan, *Against affective formalism: Matisse, Bergson, modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Todd Cronan, *Red aesthetics: Rodchenko, Brecht, Eisenstein. Cultural studies and Marxism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Łukasz Żurek, “O pojęciu towaru w polskiej krytyce literackiej po 1989 roku” [“On the notion of ‘commodity’ in Polish literary criticism after 1989”], *Forum Poetyki* 28-29 (2022): 44-59, <https://doi.org/10.14746/fp.2022.28-29.36749>; Paweł Kaczmarek, „Afekty, intencje, przypadki. Krytyka badań afektywnych w kręgu czasopisma «Nonsite»”, [„Affects, intentions, cases. A critique of affective research in the circle of the “Nonsite” journal], *Litteraria Copernicana* 2 (2022): 47-60, <https://doi.org/10.12775/LC.2022.020>.

I refer my reader back to these articles, as well as to the original works in English, primarily due to technical constraints: the following article cannot accommodate at once a detailed reconstruction of the intentionalist position and an analysis of local traditions of conceptualising autonomy. A highly abridged version of the former is therefore included below (at the end of the introduction), while the latter are presented in their short version, based on a necessarily arbitrary selection of works by critics with otherwise long and rich careers. (It is worth noting that in the case of at least some of them – Joanna Orska, Anna Kałuża or Przemysław Czapliński – reflections on autonomy remain an open project, still under development. The latter, for example, published a new piece on the history of the concept of autonomy<sup>5</sup> while I was finishing my work on this article, and has recently spoken publicly at length on the subject. Out of necessity, in what follows I will not be referring directly to his recent – undoubtedly important and highly relevant – comments).

An intentionalist understanding of autonomy could be summarised as follows: what makes works of art/literature escape the logic of usage (in the sense that they cannot be reduced to mere objects that they otherwise are, and whose value and status depend entirely on their users) is their own purposiveness, that is, their objective and unchanging meaning. That is the only thing that does not change in the process of the social circulation of art/literature – unlike the price, conditions of reception, the type and quality of the physical carrier, etc. In other words, the work establishes – through form – its own rules, which explain what it is and what its aims are, and which can be influenced by nothing but itself. In a market society, thus understood autonomy translates above all into the impossibility of reducing works of art/literature to commodities; meaning cannot be equated with a capitalist value-form. The market and the consumer can change everything in a work – except its meaning.

This approach to autonomy is characterized, among other things, by its focus on what Brown calls a social ontology of art and literature, that is, social consequences of what the structure of a work looks like by nature, by its very definition. In this context, the “intentionalists” draw on a set of claims on authorial intention<sup>6</sup> (hence their label) – derived, among others, from the works of Michael Fried and Elizabeth Anscombe. Authorial intention is seen here as coterminous with the meaning of a work as – at the risk of oversimplification – the only criterion for determining the boundaries of the latter. One could state that whenever we undertake interpretation – in recognising language as language, the work as work – then, by (logical) necessity, we must also postulate the existence of an author. It would follow from this (an assumption important for intentionalists) that intention is contained within that which is intentional (it is an integral part of the work) and does not remain a mental state of the author or the physical cause of the text; it comes from the author but is contained in the work.

## Autonomy regained? (Uniłowski)

Autonomy occupies a specific place in contemporary Polish literary debate. It is constantly present as a side issue, rarely taking centre stage. It is not even a marginal issue; rather, it seems

<sup>5</sup> Przemysław Czapliński, „Tożsamość, autonomia, solidarność. Kilka uwag o polonistyce XXI wieku” [Identity, autonomy, solidarity. Some remarks on Polish studies in the 21st century], *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2023).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Steven Knapp, Walter Benn Michaels, “Against theory”, *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1982).

to emerge by the way of discussions about other issues (like realism, incomprehensibility, the social duties of the writer...). Occasionally, autonomy becomes the subject of an explicit debate, like in the exchange between Joanna Orska and Anna Kałuża, or in a friendly polemic between Przemysław Czapliński and Dariusz Nowacki (more on both will follow), but this is quite rare. The interest in autonomy itself seems to have two foundations: firstly, it is triggered by a sense of the disappearance of autonomy and can be related to the political transformation in Poland of the 1990s; secondly, it appears as the flip side, or the mirror image, of the notion of engagement, which – particularly in poetry criticism – has dominated recent decades.

Autonomy was undoubtedly an important topic for Krzysztof Uniłowski, although it appears in his texts almost exclusively in the contexts of polemics and commentaries (e.g. in his debates with Joanna Orska, Jerzy Franczak or the “Krytyka Polityczna” milieu<sup>7</sup>). On these occasions, the issue of autonomy is usually intertwined with more general reflections on the history, nature and heritage of modernism. A positive understanding of autonomy itself can be found in two of Uniłowski’s works: the essays *Poza zasadą autonomii* [*Beyond the principle of autonomy*<sup>8</sup>] and *Autonomia odzyskana* [*Autonomy Regained*<sup>9</sup>]. The former is structured around a distinction between two types of autonomy, namely the (post-)Romantic and modernist ones. Uniłowski views the Romantic autonomy as an outmoded and, in a way, suspicious concept. The socio-cultural independence of literature is supposedly motivated by authenticity and the need for individual expression, a “fetishization”<sup>10</sup> of subjectivity. The reason for sustaining it would be to create a space for an unfettered expression of an individual or a group. Autonomy understood in this way “became obsolete” during the period of political transformation, not because literature really lost the independence it had won (no one questioned its “privileges”), but because it ceased to be treated as a “value”, a “guarantee for the changes and transformations of literature”<sup>11</sup>. An alternative to the Romantic tradition of thinking about autonomy would be the modernist tradition (or one of the modernist traditions), which would separate the autonomy of literature from the experience of subjectivity. The categories of “self-creation” and “invention” would play leading roles<sup>12</sup>, while autonomy itself would mean the freedom to constantly reinvent itself, to complicate and differentiate, to oppose any established patterns. The latter is, of course, one of the guiding thoughts of Uniłowski’s entire critical work. It comes as no surprise, then, that not only does he not see autonomy understood in such a positive way in opposition to engagement, but he even posits that engagement is a dialectical condition for autonomy: “It is not the case, after all, that engagement contradicts autonomy. On the

<sup>7</sup> Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Granice nowoczesności: polska proza i wyczerpanie modernizmu* [Limits of modernity: Polish prose and the exhaustion of modernism] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2006), 25-31; Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Prawo krytyki: o nowoczesnym i ponowoczesnym pojmowaniu literatury* [The law of criticism: on modern and post-modern understanding of literature] (Katowice: University of Silesia, FA-art Publishing House, 2013), 170-172; Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Autonomia odzyskana: Stanisław Brzozowski i „Krytyka Polityczna”” [„Autonomy regained: Stanisław Brzozowski and „Krytyka Polityczna”], FA-art 1 (2008): 44-51.

<sup>8</sup> Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Poza zasadą autonomii. Z przygód świadomości krytycznoliterackiej w latach dziewięćdziesiątych i pierwszych” [„Beyond the principle of autonomy. From the adventures of critical-literary consciousness of the nineties and noughties”], in: *Dyskursy krytyczne u progu XXI wieku: między rynkiem a uniwersytetem* [Critical Discourses at the beginning of the 21st century: Between the market and the university], ed. by Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski, Dorota Kozicka (Krakow: Universitas, 2007), 189-205.

<sup>9</sup> Uniłowski, „Autonomia odzyskana”

<sup>10</sup> Uniłowski, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 193.

<sup>11</sup> Uniłowski, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 195.

<sup>12</sup> Uniłowski, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 191.

contrary, commitment confirms autonomy, while autonomy legitimises commitment, which can only be of value if it is founded on a sovereign gesture”<sup>13</sup>.

Similarly, what is brought to the fore in *Autonomia odzyskana* is the relationship between autonomy and self-criticism, distance from the self or literature’s capacity for self-questioning:

However, autonomy cannot be reduced to the cultivation of singularity and the enjoyment of the resulting privileges (for example, literature as an institution within which one can say anything in every possible way). The autonomy of literature involves an effort to earn the right to mark and move difference in relation to itself. This is about ‘internal’ or ‘critical’ difference, about the heterogeneity or double position of the literary work. [...] Since we have already listed the particular complexity and ambiguity among the principles defining modern literature, the autonomy of literature will not be affirmed when we “simply” realise these features, but only when we ask about systemic meta-rules which determine the way in which the texts we call literary are understood and operate.<sup>14</sup>

When reading Uniłowski, however, one gets the impression that he is not so much talking about what the autonomy of literature is or could be, as about its inevitably partial conditions: about what is necessary for literature to be truly autonomous. According to the author of *Prawo krytyki* [*The law of criticism*], the prerequisite for literary autonomy is, therefore, “a critical distance from [...] its own rules”, invention, self-questioning of literary works, etc. However, when we ask what autonomy itself is, what it actually means that literature or a specific work can be autonomous (if they can), Uniłowski offers no answer. We do not know, for example, whether the problem of autonomy is purely institutional or partly ontological; whether autonomy means winning something that, by the nature of the work, remains within it, or merely creating such political space in which a certain kind of artistic risk can be taken.

This is where we run into one of the fundamental problems which make it difficult to compare various models of autonomy developed in the Polish literary-critical tradition with the more concepts with its intentionalist account: reflection on autonomy in Polish literary criticism of recent decades rarely encompasses (at least on the conscious level) the ontology of a literary work, on a more abstract level. Uniłowski, for example, discusses autonomy in terms of ethos, a practical recommendation: literature, like criticism, is only free when it constantly reinvents itself. He puts these considerations in a social-historical context, without reflecting on the nature of the work. Nevertheless, we can also find his critique of the ‘post-Romantic’ quest for autonomy (in which autonomy is not the key issue, but the valorisation of a subjective expression is) convincing from the above-outlined perspective. Similarly poignant seems to be the sense that the ability to critique and revise one’s own rules is the litmus test of true autonomy. If autonomy were to be based on the affirmation of meaning (to return, e.g., to Brown), then this kind of dynamic, in which the logic of the work is determined solely by the work itself, would obviously be a condition for such autonomy. (The ability to create its own rules – its own goals, its own form – would actually be one possible definition of autonomy.) It would be an exaggeration to suggest that Uniłowski makes such a claim. Yet again, his reflections are not so abstract, although one might suggest that this is the direction he seems to have adopted.

<sup>13</sup>Uniłowski, “Poza zasadą autonomii”, 192.

<sup>14</sup>Uniłowski, „Autonomia odzyskana”, 50.

## Autonomy and non-exchangeability (Czapliński, Nowacki)

Przemysław Czapliński moves in a similar direction, although, of course, in different ways. The author of *Powrót centrali* [*The return of the central*] is, of course, one of the key figures of left-wing criticism at the turn of the century, perhaps the most prolific, extraordinarily versatile and particularly influential commentator on multiple political entanglements of modern and contemporary literature. His interests, however, are typically related to the notions of the political and engagement, whilst autonomy appears, in a sense, as their reverse, with a few notable and interesting exceptions. For our purposes, therefore, it is worth focusing primarily on Czapliński's good-natured polemic with Dariusz Nowacki's *Kto im dał skrzydła*<sup>15</sup> [*Who gave them wings*] – a book whose central problem, as Czapliński himself writes in the first sentence of his review, “concerns the disappearance of the autonomy of literature”.

It is worth noting that Nowacki himself does not articulate this central problem directly – *Kto im dał skrzydła* revolves around the more general titular question, i.e. the issue of who and how in the turn-of-the-century Poland determines the visibility and significance of individual writers or literary works. The book is primarily a collection of specific interpretations, linked by Nowacki's general interest in the relationship between literature and marketing, mass media etc., although ultimately it also makes claims, for example, about the difference between modernism and postmodernism, succinctly reconstructed by Czapliński.

Nowacki's initial diagnosis (which Czapliński also subscribes to) is as follows:

The title of the study, while not stylistically elegant, introduces the essence of the issue: the author asks who nowadays endows the artist with their wings. He also provides the answer: it is not the artist themselves. Whoever gives literature its wings, also controls the flight. When the senders of texts are not the givers of meaning, and the givers of meaning are not necessarily the readers of texts, the characteristics of literature must be explained by analysing the communicative situation.<sup>16</sup>

The claim that the “giver” of meanings today is not the one who writes may seem like a clear anti-intentionalist declaration, but it soon becomes apparent that Czapliński does not use this and similar phrases in their strict sense, but as a broad metaphor of sorts. The crux of the matter is that the social functioning of literature – its visibility, its accessibility, but also the very ways in which it is read – is determined by fashions and codes established entirely outside its realm (among and by those who “need not be readers of texts”).

This is a new situation for literature, not because it suddenly lost its autonomy (Czapliński recalls the long tradition of critics and writers proclaiming the ultimate end of autonomy throughout the twentieth century) but because this time the incorporation of individual works into a broader communicative situation appears not to be the result of their conscious choice (as it might have been, for example, in the times of the original avant-garde), but

<sup>15</sup>Dariusz Nowacki, *Kto im dał skrzydła: Uwagi o prozie, dramacie i krytyce (2001-2010)* [Who gave them wings: Remarks on prose, drama and criticism] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Naukowe „Śląsk”, 2011).

<sup>16</sup>Przemysław Czapliński, “Poza zasadą autonomii” [“Beyond the principle of autonomy”], *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* 1 (2013): 215.



something imposed from outside, in the face of which literature remains an essentially passive recipient. The breakthrough of the 2000's thus consisted not so much of the entanglement of the literary work in various social codes and discourses, but in the fact that the degree and type of this entanglement no longer seems to depend on authorial choice or commitment; the 'coders' from the outside are in charge.

In consequence, literature is oriented towards "paraphrasability", aligning with Nowacki's and Czapliński's shared observations. This is a situation in which the "necessary condition for the existence of literature"<sup>17</sup> is that it reduces itself to a form which can be easily paraphrased for the purposes of marketing, high-circulation press, etc. Works that do not submit to the dictate of the paraphrase are at risk of "falling out of the essential area of social communication". This, in turn, leads to a gradual shift away from innovative, exploratory and experimental aesthetics, away from understanding its own social obligations in terms of "confusing the reader", "questioning every stable arrangement", de-automatising language, etc. (as we will see, these are categories, are central to Piotr Śliwiński's understanding of autonomy). For if only what is paraphrasable can survive – that which is written in a way already known to the media – then one must rely on repeating what is known, writing for the reader who is "reassured"<sup>18</sup>.

This is where Czapliński's and Nowacki's paths diverge. That is because the latter seeks and resolves the problem through a direct resistance against media entanglements of literature, as it were (this stance also features in Śliwiński's work, as will be shortly demonstrated). As a rule, he also remains pessimistic about the possibility of literature regaining its social influence. Czapliński, meanwhile discerns an opportunity for writers in a reworking or an internalisation of this ominous "paraphrasability", which is probably the most interesting aspect of his reflections on autonomy from our standpoint.

To emphasise the difference between his own and Nowacki's perspectives (the latter expresses it in his *Kto dał im skrzydła?*, Czapliński points to two possible interpretations of what it actually means for literature to be or need to be 'non-interchangeable'<sup>19</sup>:

"Non-interchangeability" in this [Nowacki's] view is another name for "poetic quality", "aesthetic value" or "literariness". In a duel profiled in this way – between a non-interchangeable literature and the media which enforce a state of paraphrasability – literature not only has to lose; it has to suffer a humiliating defeat after the stage of collaboration with a hegemon that neither values it nor reads it. But what happens if we look at literature differently? What if we assume that "non-interchangeability" has a different meaning today?

In this – different – view, it seems important to take into account, first and foremost, the transformations of autonomy.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Czapliński, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 218.

<sup>18</sup>Czapliński, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 217.

<sup>19</sup>Crucially, the Polish term niewymienialność implies both non-interchangeability and non-exchangeability - that is, a literary work's unique character both in relation to other works, as well as to non-works (both within and without the field, as it were).

<sup>20</sup>Czapliński, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 224.

To take these transformations into account would mean understanding that it is impossible, indeed, undesirable, to return to old understandings of autonomy, an attempt by literature to cut itself off from the other areas of social communication; the entanglement itself is necessary and useful. “Non-interchangeability”, entails not surrendering to that entanglement completely and remaining incompatible within a mass-media circulation:

This non-interchangeability thus occurs where an artwork is simultaneously paraphrasable through media and indigestible, servile to mass communication and useless, cobbled together from recycled materials and not suitable for further recycling. This can be called a de-cycling practice, as it involves taking an order from mass culture and returning the completed work in a form that disrupts the processing cycle.<sup>21</sup>

The basic strategy for achieving such “non-interchangeability” is to expose the very mechanisms that strive to make literature “paraphrasable”: “expos[ing] the non-autonomy of writer and literature”; “drawing the rules of communication into the text”, creating “in the work a momentary meta-language that does not allow existing systems of dependency to remain hidden”<sup>22</sup>. What is meant, then, is something surprisingly consistent with the intentionalist understanding of autonomy in the non-trivial sense; taking the commodity character of the work of art (its “paraphrasable”, “interchangeable” nature) as part of the material to be processed, one which must be subordinated to the logic of the work as a whole and incorporated into it on a formal level. While Czapliński does not use concepts such as commodity or market, the “non-interchangeability” of literature understood in this way can easily be linked to the resistance of the work of art to market exchange (its irreducibility to exchange value).

However, not unlike Krzysztof Uniłowski’s, Czapliński’s reflection breaks off where questions concerning the ontology of the work arise – as the critic himself notes, his perspective does not allow one to determine where literature’s successful resistance to interchangeability/paraphrasability originates, that is, at which point it manages to ‘disrupt’ the rules of media communication:

Its modest victory does not lie in establishing an area independent of mass communication, but in unveiling its rules. Literature becomes a humiliated collaborator of a new hegemon and at the same time an unreliable implementer of the contract. What is peculiar to the literary work no longer concerns the story itself, an individual story, a non-interchangeable aesthetic; rather, the peculiarity can be seen in the disruption of communication.

I would not be able to explain what this disruption caused by literature consists of.<sup>23</sup>

In order to provide such explanation, one would have to consider what it is in the very nature of a literary work that makes Czapliński’s diversion or subversion possible. Insofar as it is clear how literature can be reduced to a “paraphrase” (commodity), it is difficult to

<sup>21</sup>Czapliński, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 225.

<sup>22</sup>Czapliński, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 225-226.

<sup>23</sup>Czapliński, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 227.

say why the hegemonic “media” should leave the door open to the subversive, politically progressive activities.

Perhaps because of this ambiguity, a model of successful resistance are for Czapliński the works of Olga Tokarczuk – the author directly accused by Uniłowski (and, up to a certain point, also by Nowacki) of commodifying the conventions of high modernism<sup>24</sup>. In his interpretation of *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* [*Drive your plough over the bones of the dead*], which concludes the review of *Kto dał im skrzydła*, Czapliński is not really interested in form or convention, but only in the plot of the novel (including the main protagonist’s lexicon).

In a column for “Tygodnik Powszechny”, written a year later,<sup>25</sup> Czapliński repeats his key theses on autonomy, but makes them more politically oriented: “the actions of literature are [...] undertaken not in the name of art for art’s sake, but in the name (inaudible or inexpressibly pronounced) of the weaker participants of social communication”. However, some doubts remain: is literature written in this way effective? How do we measure its effectiveness? What makes these kinds of strategies work (or not)? Why is it specifically the language of the ‘weaker ones’, smuggled into the text, that cannot be taken up by the hegemonic media, and is thus irreducible to a ‘paraphrase’?

In the context of the intentionalist account of autonomy, we could say that the problem with Czapliński’s comments – which are based on otherwise accurate intuitions about the dual nature of the literary work under capitalism (i.e. as a commodity and potentially as something else) – lies in their doubly abstract nature. On the one hand, the author of *Poruszona mapa* [*The moved map*], like Nowacki, avoids notions like “market” and “market society”, resorting in his criticism to the blurry categories of “media”, “codes”, “social communication”, etc., which are difficult to pin down. Secondly, and probably more importantly, like Uniłowski, Czapliński avoids explicitly linking his accurate socio-historical intuitions with the level of the ontology of the work, which concludes his reflections prematurely. One could say that both ultimately focus on the autonomy of the artistic craft rather than the autonomy of the work; an issue we will return to at the end.

## Non-partisan autonomy (Śliwiński)

Piotr Śliwiński’s influential, programmatic essay *Polityczna, niepartyjna*<sup>26</sup> [*Political, non-partisan*], presents the case somewhat differently. The critic develops some of his intuitions from *Przygody z wolnością*<sup>27</sup> [*Adventures with freedom*]; for instance, his claim that Polish literature is unique in being political by default, seems to echo his previous claims about the

<sup>24</sup>See, for example, Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Proza środka, czyli stereotyp literatury nowoczesnej” [„The prose of the middle, or a stereotype of modern literature”], in his *Granice nowoczesności: proza polska i wyczerpanie modernizmu* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2006), 156-199.

<sup>25</sup>Przemysław Czapliński, „W poszukiwaniu suwerenności” [„In search of sovereignty”], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 37 (2014), <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/w-poszukiwaniu-suwerenności-24040>.

<sup>26</sup>Piotr Śliwiński, „Polityczna, niepartyjna” [„Political, non-partisan”], *Polyglot* 1 (2011): 59-66.

<sup>27</sup>Piotr Śliwiński, *Przygody z wolnością: uwagi o poezji współczesnej* [*Adventures with freedom: remarks on modern poetry*] (Kraków: Znak, 2002).

“enslavement to freedom” among the writers of the 90s. However, this time around Śliwiński focuses less on the historical layer; rather, he is more interested in articulating his own positive vision of autonomy. The term itself, however, occurs only once in the essay<sup>28</sup>, while the body of the essay rests on a critique of the notion of engagement.

At first glance, some of Śliwiński’s intuitions could be interpreted as coinciding with those of the “Nonsite” circle. He calls for a view of autonomy that sees it as a politically significant force in its own right; he points out that the affirmation of autonomy can nowadays be, in political or social terms, a more powerful gesture than engagement (realised in the poetics of a call, manifesto, etc.). In the case of literature, “the most interesting aspect of its political character might be its capacity to repel politics”<sup>29</sup>. These remarks are supplemented by an interesting distinction between the uncertain (and therefore suspicious) social impact of literature and its “aesthetic impact, which is evidenced by reading alone”<sup>30</sup>; i.e. that which depends on the use of the work and that which depends on the work itself. Śliwiński is here one, maybe two steps away from describing the difference between experience and interpretation, between the work-as-object and the work as a meaningful totality. Even his recognition that “the literary debate actually takes place outside of literature”<sup>31</sup> and that it has to reckon with the demand for certain declarations, fashions or aesthetics shaped elsewhere, seems to point us towards considerations on the relationships between literature and the market, value, and commodity.

In the end, however, Śliwiński doesn’t seem to reach that point. The external force exerting pressure on the work – that which ultimately threatens its autonomy – simply consists of all those who would like to get rid of this autonomy; all those who would like literature to merely repeat the conclusions developed in other “discourses”. At the turn of the century, the agents of such “ideology” turned out to be – seemingly almost by chance -, the proponents of ‘engagement’, who wanted simple messages rather than ones that would question and challenge them.

One might of course question the validity of this literary-historical diagnosis. It certainly seems unlikely that many proponents of literary engagement would agree with the views ascribed to them by Śliwiński, but this is a side issue, from the perspective we are interested in. The near-tautological structure of Śliwiński’s argument appears to be more important: in order to justify its existence as literature, literature needs to be something other than sociology or journalism. It is difficult to argue with this view, but the resulting vision of autonomy proves to be both simple and abstract in a way which renders it virtually inoperable: the autonomy of literature is realised in its ability not to be something else. One could say that, unlike “nonsites”, Śliwiński views autonomy as ultimately non-dialectic. Indeed, he does acknowledge the dialectical relationship between autonomy and commitment (likewise acknowledged by Uniłowski), but he considers the forces threatening the autonomy of literature to be something entirely external rather than something that, like market society and commodity production, changes the very nature of a literary work, in a way dividing it in two.

<sup>28</sup>Śliwiński, „Polityczna, niepartyjna”, 61.

<sup>29</sup>Śliwiński, „Polityczna, niepartyjna”, 61.

<sup>30</sup>Śliwiński, “Polityczna, niepartyjna”, 65.

<sup>31</sup>Śliwiński, “Polityczna, niepartyjna”, 65.

## Autonomy and purposelessness (Gutorow)

In the context of reflections on autonomy in Polish literary criticism of recent decades, one cannot, of course, fail to mention Jacek Gutorow, especially in the context of his influential works from the beginning of the century. While the author of *Niepodległość głosu* [*The independence of the voice*] refrained from mentioning the concept of autonomy directly, his titular category of independence is a clear allusion to it.

Gutorow's works are perhaps the most explicit example, indeed the embodiment, of critical literary anti-intentionalism of Poland at the turn of the century. The critic openly opposes the reduction of the subject of interpretation to that of authorial intentions, he rejects the vision of the work as a carrier of those intentions<sup>32</sup>, consistently resisting any ontology of the work which suggests the existence of stable pre-established meanings (the very category of meaning is suspicious for Gutorow, who aligns it with "realism" and "common sense", highlighting its alleged naivety<sup>33</sup>). The openness of a work of art, its "ambiguity" (in the sense of not having fixed meanings as these are to be provided each time by the reader) are the programmatic foundation of Gutorow's critical activity. The very idea of the "independence of the voice" relies explicitly on the rejection of the primacy of meaning/intent in favour of "the acoustics", i.e. the assumption that the work is a physical object, inevitably changed in the process of reception: "even the purest voice is subject to inevitable reflections, reverberations, distortions", whereby "the work acquires new dimensions"<sup>34</sup>.

Gutorow's proposals clearly contradict the intentionalist account of autonomy. From the latter standpoint, the author of *Niepodległość głosu* misunderstands what intention is, hastily rejects the category of meaning, confuses the material carrier with the work as such – while functionally abolishing the possibility of interpretation. Moreover, the critic seems to understand intuitively some of the relationships described by Michaels: he realizes that an appreciation of the "acoustics", i.e. the materiality of the work, is in practice an appreciation of the "distortion" of the voice, i.e. the experience of the viewer, but see this as something positive.

From the comparative perspective offered here, however, it is another feature of Gutorow's stance that deserves most attention and which is discernible in his canonical essay, written in response to Jacek Podsiadło as part of the well-known debate on "incomprehensible poetry" in "Tygodnik Powszechny"<sup>35</sup>. In the debate the critic attacks the poet for demanding poems which would be easier to read. According to Gutorow, Podsiadło's demand betrays a theoretical-literary naivety and "totalitarian" (literally "Lukácsian", i.e. communist) inclinations. At the same time, he is keen to make references to Theodor Adorno, whom he treats as a theoretical and philosophical authority, proving that poetry is not necessarily meant to be understood – that its meaning can be completely undetermined, dependent on each reading.

<sup>32</sup>Jacek Gutorow, *Niepodległość głosu: szkice o poezji polskiej po 1968 roku* [The independence of the voice: essays on Polish poetry after 1968] (Krakow: Znak, 2003), 6.

<sup>33</sup>Jacek Gutorow, "„O poezji niezrozumiałej” [„On incomprehensible poetry”], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 35 (2000), <http://www.tygodnik.com.pl/literatura90/gutorow.html>.

<sup>34</sup>Gutorow, *Niepodległość głosu*, 8.

<sup>35</sup>Gutorow "O poezji niezrozumiałej".

Gutorow demonstrates how a certain reading of Adorno (or any other related theorist), one that is based on a simple affirmation of the literal and practical aimlessness of poetry, can lead to a highly specific account of autonomy – one that is openly contradictory to those which, also drawn from Adorno, are offered by authors such as Brown. Gutorow's comments thus show, in a very tangible way, the far-reaching consequences of a seemingly minor shift from a conception of the work as actually purposeless to a conception of the work as organised by its own purposiveness. The former requires rejecting the categories of authorship, intention or even meaning; the latter requires their steadfast defence.

### Autonomy, differently (Orska, Kałuża)

It might seem surprising that this part of the article concludes rather than opens with reference to Joanna Orska and Anna Kałuża. Orska and Kałuża are among the literary scholars who consistently address the issue of autonomy, whereas their position in poetry criticism means that their work is a necessary reference point to virtually every new approach to this problem.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, if we finish, rather than begin, with autonomy in Orska and Kałuża, it is precisely because of this consistency: for almost two decades now both authors have been reflecting on autonomy in a number of books, essays and reviews, both clarifying and revising specific points. A detailed reconstruction of their views (as well as of past debate between them, summarised, for example, by Jakub Skurtys<sup>37</sup>) would necessitate an essay of its own. Here, one could perhaps see the seeds for a future, more expanded commentary.

Let us first note, then, that both Orska and Kałuża are fundamentally opposed to one of the foundational claims of the intentionalist approach to autonomy, that is, the equation of meaning with authorial intention (and the assumption of the immanent character of intention). For both, a work is not exclusively (if at all) constituted by virtue of thus understood meaning. They both assume that the work transcends its author's intention, the realisation of which they consider to be an important achievement of modern (or postmodern) theory. This assertion aligns them with a range of philosophical, theoretical, and sociological inspirations incompatible with the intentionalist account – ranging from Deleuze, Derrida and Agamben in Orska's work, to new materialism, Latour or Krauss in Kałuża's. It bears emphasising that the theoretical model of the work proposed by both scholars remains openly anti-intentionalist: from Orska's poem-as-action (or practice) and poem-as-a-performative (both of which imply poetry as something undetermined, unfinished, in the process of becoming) to Kałuża's text-as-event and "entangled objects" (where what is emphasised is a certain porosity of the work, i.e. the assumption that its constitutive feature is its ability to be penetrated by the outside world).

<sup>36</sup>Admittedly, I have been influenced by both critics' understanding of autonomy.

<sup>37</sup>Jakub Skurtys, „ Czy estetyka zdoła nas z(a)bawić? [“Will aesthetics manage to save/ entertain us?”] (Anna Kałuża “Under the Game”)], artPaper 21 (2015).

In other words, both critics' positions on autonomy (programmatically sympathetic in Orska's case, habitually critical in Kałuża's) on many levels seems to openly contradict the intentionalist account, so it seems that the former should be seen as alternative to and incompatible with the latter. Given that the intentionalist approach remains explicitly non-pluralist (that is, it rejects the possibility of being but one of several equally legitimate perspectives), it seems one should perhaps stop at simply acknowledging those fundamental differences.

At this point, however, I would like to suggest that both scholars' understanding of autonomy is subject to a particular rupture, through which some of their ideas and intuitions become, if not openly congruent with the intentionalist approach, then at least close enough to be placed in a productively dialogical relationship with the latter.

In Kałuża's work, such a rupture is to be found whenever she puts emphasis on the objectivity/event-ness of literature/art in order to highlight not so much its entanglement in other registers of reality as to point out the productive distance that a work creates between itself and its audience (who are otherwise already accustomed to aesthetics familiar to them). While Kałuża values above all "open" literary projects, which declaratively or implicitly seek to appreciate the readerly "freedom", it seems that sometimes the aim of this "freedom" is not so much to allow a subjective transformation of the work, as to indicate the necessity of interpretation. This much is suggested, for example, in the important chapter *Poluzowanie więzów* [*Loosening the ties*] in *Pod grą* [*Under the game*], where the stakes of the two strategies described by the critic is to create in the language a distance which forces the reader to consciously change their view, rather than to loosen the author's control over the work.<sup>38</sup>

Orska's work features even more moments of such rupture. A common denominator for her successive observations on autonomy is a clear (and stronger than in Krzysztof Uniłowski) link between the latter and the question of literature's self-determination. A work is autonomous only insofar as it constantly reinvents itself, even at the cost of criticising its own commitment to autonomy. This is the key to interpreting, e.g. the "avant-garde breakthrough"<sup>39</sup>, which was not a one-off historical event but remains a constant horizon of the avant-garde. As aptly summarised by Uniłowski,

For Orska, the "avant-garde breakthrough" is not a one-off event, an incident, but a kind of principle (matrix) of all "radicalisation of the prerogative of autonomy" in modern art. The breakthrough associated with the occurrence of the Great Avant-Gardes is here merely a glaring example of the working of a dialectical logic, within which art asserts its autonomy by carrying out a critique of itself and its limitations. "The 'moment of radicalization' does not signal [...] aesthetic extremism, a unilateral exacerbation of modernist characteristics, and thereby breaking or at least undermining the entire system of binary oppositions that define modernism. "The moment of radicalization" as such is ambivalent. It signifies a transgression, but also a restitution and

<sup>38</sup>Anna Kałuża, *Pod grą: jak dziś znaczą wiersze, poetki i poeci* [Under the game: how poems, poets and poets mean nowadays] (Krakow: Universitas, 2015), 28-33.

<sup>39</sup>Joanna Orska, *Przełom awangardowy w dwudziestowiecznym modernizmie w Polsce* [The avant-garde breakthrough in twentieth-century modernism in Poland] (Krakow: Universitas, 2004).

a reaffirmation of autonomy. With the avant-garde gesture of questioning tradition, art returns to itself, it renews its own myth of a language (code), both primordial and critical.<sup>40</sup>

The emphasis on literature's self-determination, the work's own logic as an overarching principle, affirmed also by its capacity for self-criticism, revision of previous rules etc., leads Orska, for example, to such readings of Adorno in which *purposelessness* is distinguished from *selflessness* (or literally "altruism"); the former is reminiscent of the work's immanent purposiveness, as described by Brown<sup>41</sup>. Orska also defends the interpretive relevance of authorial intentions, at times even suggesting that these intentions should not be regarded as the "exterior" of the work.<sup>42</sup>

Orska's polemical interventions, however, seem even more significant. For it is in this mode that her resistance to the commodification of literature, to its subordination to the logic of the market, is fully revealed. It seems interesting and telling, for example, that in the debate around Igor Stokfiszewski's (in)famous manifestos<sup>43</sup> Orska was the only one to explicitly warn against the dangers of the market: not just the "mainstream", "mass media", or the "mercantile" attitude of critics and journalists, but the market as such. She did that while invoking the metaphor of commercial exchange:

However, I prefer to be on the side of the noble-fooled; to argue that poetry is better off left alone, safely isolated in its niche. I find it difficult to accept that poetry appears on the pages of newspapers simply because it is "religious" or "gay", or written by a gentleman who dresses funny, or is nominated for the Nike award. [...] So what if the curious, collective viewer, eager for exotic flavours, reaches for Pasewicz's or Dehnel's books, if a minute later they reject poetry that demands sensitivity to language? The transaction has been made, and when you leave the checkout, complaints are not taken into account.<sup>44</sup>

The suggestion that poetry should remain something niche, articulated in the same debate also by other participants, such as Karol Maliszewski<sup>45</sup>, is supported by this kind of reflection only by Orska. A threat to the very essence of poetry comes not from particular, ill-willed critics or journalists, but the very manner of interacting with the work, enforced by the market. This mode of operation is antithetical to meaning, as it is oriented entirely towards usage, and as such it not so much destroys poetry (at the level of its production) as it hides its proper shape.

<sup>40</sup>Uniłowski, *Prawo krytyki* [The law of criticism], 171.

<sup>41</sup>See, for example, Brown, 13.

<sup>42</sup>See, for example, Joanna Orska, *Performatywy: składnia/retoryka, gatunki i programy poetyckiego konstruktywizmu* [Performatives: syntax/rhetoric, genres and programmes of poetic constructivism (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Publishing House, 2019), 34.

<sup>43</sup>On this issue, see, for example, Paweł Kaczmarek, "Wielogłos i autonomia. Nieoczywiste sojusze w debacie wokół wystąpienia Igora Stokfiszewskiego", [„Polyphony and autonomy. Non-obvious alliances in the debate around Igor Stokfiszewski's speeches", *Wielogłos* 4 (2021): 9–36, <https://doi.org/10.4467/2084395X.WI.21.028.15291>.

<sup>44</sup>Joanna Orska, „Czkawka” [„Hiccups”] *Tygodnik Powszechny* 16 (2007), <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/czkawka-138211>.

<sup>45</sup>Karol Maliszewski, „Czkawka po Lukaczu” [„Post-Lukacs hiccups”], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 11 (2007), <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/czkawka-po-lukaczu-139474>.



Orska's and Kałuża's reflections on autonomy remain rooted in an in-depth authorial reflection on the ontology of the work. This makes their comparison with the intentionalist proposal particularly interesting, even if, ultimately, the critics' ideas (insofar as they remain rooted in a gesture of rejection of authorial intention and the allegedly 'essentialist' model of meaning) contradict the said proposal.

### (Provisional) conclusions

When comparing Polish traditions or ways of conceptualising the autonomy of literature with the reflection developed in the "Nonsite" circles, one notices that the former are suspended in a double vacuum of sorts. Firstly, they develop outside any explicit criticism of commodity and market society; secondly, they do so outside considerations on the ontology of the work (i.e. concerning, for example, the essential nature of the relationship between interpretation, meaning and authorship). The absence of the former means that statements about the relation of literature to external forces that threaten autonomy remain abstract and mediated by a series of elusive notions such as 'media', 'social communication' etc. This makes it difficult to identify the political stakes of such considerations. Meanwhile, the lack of focus on the ontology of the work caused the otherwise accurate intuitions about the tension between literature and the market – and ways of working through this tension – to remain largely undeveloped. The latter problem could be summarized in the following manner: Polish critics dealing with the problem of autonomy tend to direct their attention towards the autonomy of the creative work, rather than the autonomy of the work of literature itself.

Meanwhile, the accounts of autonomy that are supported by some reflection on the ontology of the work – such as those offered by Joanna Orska, Anna Kałuża and, to a lesser extent perhaps, Jacek Gutorow – are dominated by an anti-intentionalist approach, stemming not (it seems) from any particular theoretical or methodological paradigm, but from an "implied" rejection of the essentialist model of meaning and a lack of in-depth reflection on the very notion of intention. All this makes the broad and coherent approach to autonomy proposed by the "Nonsite" circles – which encompasses both the 'hard' ontology of literature/art and a Marxist reflection on the relationship between the work and the market – a potentially productive contribution to various debates within Polish literary studies. The central claim which needs to be better understood is as follows: that which resists commodification is not what is difficult to sell (what is difficult to see, or to make profit from), but that which is difficult to make into a commodity in the first place – i.e. that which does not change in the course of circulation – in the case of literature, meaning itself.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

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# KEYWORDS

**autonomy**

**ABSTRACT:**

This article offers a comparative analysis of various accounts/models of literary autonomy in the Polish literary criticism of recent decades. The different ways of understanding autonomy are analysed from the standpoint of the so-called intentionalist approach to literary studies.

# CRITICISM

*c o m m i d i t y*

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# Hunger for universalism. Methodological comments regarding Walter Benn Michaels's intentionalism and its Polish reception

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Contemporary criticism is deeply influenced by Enlightenment and Romantic thought, as well as modern philosophy. Although this thesis is not surprising, the relationship between contemporary humanistic thought and philosophical tradition warrants closer examination. Understanding how this relationship translates into literary methodology remains crucial. In this way we can avoid cognitive inaccuracies in terms of definitions we use in studying literary texts and the critical-literary practice.

The question of representationalism, i.e. problems with representing reality in literature (figurativeness), and the question of reference, i.e. how literature refers to “the real world”,

have been among the most significant issues for contemporary literary studies and primarily philosophical questions<sup>1</sup>. Issues related to representation were already hotly debated in the 1990s, but even today they are still returning in discussions surrounding incomprehensible poetry (i.e. devoid of stable references, nonfigurative). The notion of the author's intention, connected to representationalism, analyzed in the context of works by Walter Benn Michaels, has become one of the most heated critical debates of the past few years.

"Against Theory", a famous paper by Michaels and Steven Knapp, in which they equated the author's intention with the meaning of a text, is ideologically detached from the titular theorizing, forcing readers to focus on interpretative practice. The two authors understand theory as an interpretation of certain literary texts through referring to general conceptualizations of interpretation<sup>2</sup>. According to Michaels and Knapp, who actively participate in the discussion about the status of interpretation in literary studies, readers can focus on what is the most important – meanings – thanks to giving up on considerations regarding the character of interpretation, theory, etc. And those meanings are supposed to result from the author's intention – assuming that authors are aware of their intentions, a text means what its author wanted it to mean<sup>3</sup>. On the one hand, the author's intention can therefore mean a motivation for writing – from this perspective, a literary work is something created non-randomly, volitionally, due to the creative subject's intention. A similar understanding of intention was characteristic of literary studies (and philosophical) methodologies preceding Michaels and Knapp's intentionalism, which I shall analyze later in this paper. However, what is significant, although the proponents of this concept take issue with the "causative" understanding of intention<sup>4</sup>, it does not seem to be completely unwarranted – we can be motivated to equate intention with motivation by e.g. Michaels and Knapp's example of sign-resembling markings on a desert beach, which I discuss later in this text. On the other hand, intention can be identical with the meaning of a given work, i.e. a layer of meanings recorded in a text, which is directly supported by Michaels and Knapps.

However, before delving into the foundations of intentionalism, elaborating on topics signaled thus far, and analyzing the consequences of taking similar perspectives for literary studies, I would like to focus on the reception of Michaels's (and Knapp's) works in Poland in texts by contemporary literary critics: Paweł Kaczmarek, Marta Koronkiewicz, Zuzanna

<sup>1</sup> The use of "representationalism", originally a philosophical notion, i.e. rooted in the philosophy of science and epistemology, referring to the way people experience reality, was established in literary studies thanks to important works by Michał Paweł Markowski. In the context of various understandings of the issue in different fields, the terminological choice seems significant – I shall return to this question contextually later in this text. See Michał Paweł Markowski, *Pragnienie obecności. Filozofie reprezentacji od Platona do Kartezjusza* [The desire for presence. Philosophies of representation from Plato to Descartes]. (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 1999); Michał Paweł Markowski, "Reprezentacja i ekonomia" [Representation and economy], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2004): 11–27.

<sup>2</sup> "By «theory» we mean a special project in literary criticism: the attempt to govern interpretation of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general"; Steven Knapp, Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory", in: *Against Theory. Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, edited by William John Thomas Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press Journals, 1985), 11.

<sup>3</sup> "What a text means is what its author intends"; Knapp, Michaels, "Against Theory", 13.

<sup>4</sup> In *Czym nie jest intencja* [What intention is not] (which I analyze later in this text), Paweł Kaczmarek distances himself from such a vision (see footnote 7).

Sala and Łukasz Żurek. Their interest in Michaels's considerations is so strong that the so-called school of intentionalism has been recognized, with Wrocław as its center. However, works by Michaels and their critical reception in texts by the authors listed above gained more recognition only after they were incorporated in a specific, critical-literary polemic. The debate in question, between Paweł Kaczmarski together with Łukasz Żurek, and Dawid Kujawa – a critic representing poststructuralism, and more specifically Deleuzoguattarianism, was published in “Mały Format” in 2021.

The debate began with Kaczmarski criticizing affective criticism, a feature of Deleuzian perspectives. He argued that attributing agency and subjectivity to non-human entities, such as the climate, and focusing on emotions distracts from addressing political and scientific problems<sup>5</sup>. This can be illustrated by positive, pro-ecological attitudes: tenderness for nature, attributing matter with active characteristics, or being against plastic straws will not stop the climate disaster from happening – actual effects can only be achieved by noticing the material conditions which generate pollution and fuel the planet's exploitation by corporations, and by stopping them. Kaczmarski thus opposes new materialist conceptualizations inspired by Gilles Deleuze's ideas, somewhat urging to properly work out the “old” Marxist materialism<sup>6</sup>. At the same time Kaczmarski dissociates himself from what he sees as empty theorizing, i.e. conscious, elaborate establishment of research tools and perspectives instead of actually interpreting texts<sup>7</sup>.

In his first response to those accusations, Kujawa explained the character of affective criticism and criticized the notion of representation<sup>8</sup>. According to him, Kaczmarski does not see the actual character of the negated theoretical orientation and – what is far more significant from this perspective – treating literature instrumentally, as a space for creating a discourse simulating its own compatibility with reality, and so able to change it. He draws similar conclusions from Kaczmarski's pro-intentionalism, as according to Kujawa, intentionalism stabilizes meanings of a text thanks to connecting them with the author's intention.

This relates to Kujawa's broader perspective on literature; he claims that art creates selfless enclaves of freedom in a world completely dominated by capitalism. In this vision, negation of referentiality of texts – setting them free from the primacy of meaning, reasonableness, or connection to the “real” world – leads to producing alternative microcosms, which allow to see the world the way it could be rather than the way it is. It should be noted that this

<sup>5</sup> Paweł Kaczmarski, “Nieczułe narracje. O pewnym modelu zaangażowania w poezji” [Non-tender narratives. On a certain type of engagement in poetry], *Mały Format* 1-3 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/04/nieczule-narracje-o-pewnym-modelu-zaangazowania-poezji/>.

<sup>6</sup> Paweł Kaczmarski, “Materializm jako intencjonalizm. O możliwości «nowomaterialistycznej» krytyki literackiej” [Materialism as intentionalism. On the possibility of «new-materialistic» literary criticism], *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 4 (2019): 191–239.

<sup>7</sup> Paweł Kaczmarski, “Czym nie jest intencja. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie” [What intention is not. A reply to Dawid Kujawa], *Mały Format* 4-6 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/07/czym-intencja-odpowiedzi-dawidowi-kujawie/>.

<sup>8</sup> Dawid Kujawa, “Czułość i nieczułość w jednym stały domu. Odpowiedź Pawłowi Kaczmarskiemu” [Tenderness and non-tenderness coexist. A reply to Paweł Kaczmarski], *Mały Format* 1-3 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/04/kujawa-kaczmarski-polemika/>.



thinking remains rooted in the avant-garde visions, especially in futurism, as well as in the anti-modernity of the modern formation<sup>9</sup>. It also has a strong emancipatory dimension. However, emancipation is not perceived as a critical analysis of reality or overturning the existing situation, but as generating worlds governed by different laws which – due to being somewhat Utopian – can determine volatile destination points or alternative possible worlds.

Those topics were discussed by Kaczmarzski and Żurek, who demonstrated that literature already functions in capitalist modes, and described how it is incorporated in various mechanisms of oppression<sup>10</sup>. Avoiding stabilization of meanings – ironically referred to as “the eternal drift of significance”<sup>11</sup> – is supposed to lead to art’s self-disarming, which can be used in any way in a capital-dominated world – but those ways only make the scope of capital’s domination, rather than users’ freedom spheres, bigger. In his response, Kujawa also referred to the selflessness category, pointing out to the fact that in the Enlightenment, Kantian understanding, a work of art is no “ordinary” product: the fewer clear senses it generates, the fewer applications it has, the harder it is to capture and instrumentalize it<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, representationalist art would have an emancipatory dimension by default, as all forms of referentiality facilitate disambiguation<sup>13</sup>.

A short recapitulation and analysis of the texts comprising this polemic – apart from an attempt at a synthetic presentation of conclusions from exceptionally broad and difficult papers – provides useful material for summarizing the issue of intentionalism. As of June 2023 the last word on this topic belongs to Kaczmarzski, who published a two-part paper in “KONTENT” in which he summarized and elaborated on the issues from his previous texts<sup>14</sup>. However, as can be seen, this dispute goes far beyond intentionalism, including, i.e., the (in)compatibility of a work of art with the reality, or the problem of its emancipatory, anti-capitalist potential.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, this relates to affective criticism, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>10</sup> Łukasz Żurek, “Wiersz i gumowa kaczka. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie” [A poem and a rubber duck. A reply to Dawid Kujawa], *Mały Format* 4-6 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/07/wiersz-i-gumowa-kaczka-odpowiedz-dawidowi-kujawie/>; Paweł Kaczmarzski, “Czym nie jest intencja. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie”.

<sup>11</sup> Żurek.

<sup>12</sup> Dawid Kujawa, “Największy mankament poezji. Ciąg dalszy dyskusji z Pawłem Kaczmarzskim i Łukaszem Żurkiem” [Poetry’s biggest shortcoming. Continuation of the discussion with Paweł Kaczmarzski and Łukasz Żurek], *Mały Format* 7-9 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/10/najwiekszy-mankament-poezji-ciag-dalszy-diskusji-pawlem-kaczmarzskim-lukaszem-zurkiem/>.

<sup>13</sup> Representationalism concerns both the question of figurativeness of art, as well as – in its original meaning, derived from epistemology and philosophy of science, in which it refers to ways of obtaining knowledge about the world – the question of mental representations. The latter issue is significantly rarer in literary studies – de Saussure’s ideas on signs are typically treated as anti-representationalist, whereas de Saussure can be considered a representationalist on the grounds of language philosophy or epistemology. However, this representation is understood in the mental context, in the case of intentionalism it should be understood in this sense. Although this is not the focus of the present paper, this question should be clarified, as a reference to “the sign character of intention” also appears in Kujawa.

<sup>14</sup> Paweł Kaczmarzski, “Lewicy nie ma, albo o sprawczości tekstu (przy okazji Skurtysa o Okrasce)” [There is no left, or on the text’s agency (inspired by Skurtys’s text on Okrasce)], parts 1 and 2, *KONTENT* (2023), [https://kontent.net.pl/dorażny#Lewicy\\_nie\\_ma\\_albo\\_o\\_sprawczoci\\_tekstu\\_przy\\_okazji\\_Skurtysa\\_o\\_Okrasce\\_CZ\\_1](https://kontent.net.pl/dorażny#Lewicy_nie_ma_albo_o_sprawczoci_tekstu_przy_okazji_Skurtysa_o_Okrasce_CZ_1), [https://kontent.net.pl/dorażny#Lewicy\\_nie\\_ma\\_albo\\_o\\_sprawczoci\\_tekstu\\_przy\\_okazji\\_Skurtysa\\_o\\_Okrasce\\_CZ\\_2](https://kontent.net.pl/dorażny#Lewicy_nie_ma_albo_o_sprawczoci_tekstu_przy_okazji_Skurtysa_o_Okrasce_CZ_2).

Significantly, although there are a few very long and detailed critical texts on intentionalism, with long lists of references, the subject has not been exhausted. Of course, both in the Polish and American reception a number of methodological and theoretical issues have been raised. However, intentionalism has not been incorporated into the broadly understood historical-philosophical process, which may demonstrate the potential troublesomeness of this phenomenon and simultaneously prove its attractiveness as a research topic.

The very provenance of the notion of intention seems one of the most significant questions here. Kaczmarek explains how intention should be understood according to Michaels and the scholars that inspired him (Stanley Cavell, among others). However, in the philosophical tradition this notion is most strongly associated with Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, and in literary studies – with phenomenological works by Roman Ingarden and others, who adapted the notion for literary analysis. The term has many meanings and can be understood in very different ways – from purely philosophical to psychological<sup>15</sup>. At the same time, the fact that Michaels and Knapp equated intention with meaning – although they analyzed it in numerous contexts – is begging to be interpreted in reference to Wilhelm Gottlob Frege's philosophy, and more specifically – in reference to his studies into identity in the context of logics<sup>16</sup>.

According to Frege, there are nontrivial identity claims (not  $A=A$ , but  $A=B$ ). The interpretation of similar cases leads to the conclusion that certain claims have the same meaning (they refer to the same object), however, they can have different senses (various ways of providing meaning). Therefore, the author's intention and the meaning of a text would not be two separate values, which we equate with each other in the process of interpretation, but two different terms for the same object. However, in the analyzed case this is both a universalizing statement – every interpretation process of a literary work is simply searching for the author's intention – and, perhaps paradoxically for intentionalists, destabilizing interpretation: if every meaning we can derive from a text is what we recognize as the author's intention, then we can suppose an infinite number of intentions regarding this work. Such a claim clearly contradicts works by Knapp and Michaels<sup>17</sup>.

Curiously, the already mentioned conscious, volitional creation of a piece of work by some agent is the most obvious meaning of intention for literary scholars. Such an understanding has been grounded by Ingarden's phenomenology, which – crucially – did not unequivocally connect the layer of a text's meaning with its author's intention – what Michaels and Knapp did in their radical gesture. However, Ingarden's theory left so-called ambiguous places, i.e. spaces for possible meanings of a text which depend on readers' interpretation. More broadly,

<sup>15</sup>See Danuta Szajnert, "Intencja i interpretacja" [Intention and interpretation], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1 (2000): 7–42.

<sup>16</sup>"The meaning and author's intention are one and the same – always, by definition" (Kaczmarek, "Czym nie jest intencja. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie").

<sup>17</sup>"There's nothing controversial about different texts having different meanings. Controversy arises only when interpreters ascribe different meanings to what they regard as the same text"; Steven Knapp, Walter Benn Michaels, "A Reply to Richard Rorty: What Is Pragmatism?", in: *Against Theory. Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*: 140. Further in the text they claim that controversy arises when there is a disagreement regarding the intention of a specific author regarding a specific text. I shall return to the issue of the questionable novelty of similar claims.

the “classical” literary studies phenomenology treated a literary text as an entity which was in a way open, presenting itself to readers with all the consequences of this individual, specific “presentation” – rather than some whole reduced to a certain essence.

At the same time, the return to the context of phenomenology is essential to methodological criticism of Michaels’s ideas. Although he is typically classified as a pragmatist, his ideas were clearly influenced by Husserl’s phenomenology, though this influence is concealed. Nonetheless, noticing it has serious consequences for the intentionalist thought, especially in the context of the title of the article in question: *Against Theory* – whereas in the case of Edmund Husserl’s ideas theory is one of the most important philosophical and methodological notions. Jürgen Habermas’s early work, *Cognitive Interests*, is useful in studying those questions; he analyzes one of the main problems of European philosophy understood as a certain whole: theory, its definition and provenance, as well as how it is connected to practice – here we return to emancipation, a fundamental question for Polish critics – as well as the so-called pure theory<sup>18</sup>.

As Habermas points out, ancient philosophy proclaimed the independence of wisdom reflection from something we may call “lifeworld”. Dealing with theory was seen as contemplating cosmos – a universe governed by fixed laws guaranteeing its harmony. This type of reflection allows individuals to detach themselves from their particular sensations, passions and experiences, and to gain access to the cosmic order. Therefore, according to classical assumptions of European philosophy, pure theory offers us a chance to emancipate; this emancipation is understood not in the strictly political context, but as the freedom from “lifeworld” governed by random passions and individual interests, in the name of cognitive objectivism.

This vision is inherited by the modern thought, albeit with some changes. The romanticist philosophy and art theory – Habermas offers Friedrich Schelling as an example – rejected the conviction that it is necessary to do theory in the sense that searching for or contemplating the universal order ceased to be obligatory. Instead of obligation, it chose freedom, which obviously had its consequences in the theory of art and objection to classical, normative conceptualizations. However, the freedom proclaimed by idealists, is no liberty – it is proceeding in accordance with intelligent will, and therefore once again it gains an ethical dimension: what contributes to the harmonious functioning of a community is intelligent. According to idealists, practicing free theory or theory in the name of freedom, theory constrained by the demands of practice – understood classically, as handiness or usefulness for “lifeworld” – was supposed to lead to the subject’s self-improvement and their better communication with other subjects, ultimately translating into the reality. This primacy of theory over practice – theory offering us the freedom of self-improvement – was rejected by Karl Marx, according to whom theory is justified only to the extent it directly serves practice, unmediated by individual subjects: as a philosophical system it is completely subordinated to theory transforming the reality.

<sup>18</sup>Jürgen Habermas, “Cognitive Interests”, translated into Polish by Lech Witkowski, *Colloquia Communia* 19 (1985): 158–169.

This outline of classical philosophy, inspired by Habermas, shows that within the European thought, we function in the space of two different realizations of the same goal: emancipation. However, we conceptualize it using various definitions and we reach it via different ways. As a representative of the Frankfurt school, today Habermas belongs to a formation which tried to reconcile two ways of philosophy in terms of defining the roles and status of theory and practice. The Frankfurt school suggested their co-existence: on the one hand, practice impacts theory, as there is no theory that would not be constructed without assumptions located in “lifeworld”; there is no cognition (a reference to the title of his paper) which would not be supported by any, even idealistic (sic!) interest. However, on the other hand, this “lifeworld” cannot be emancipated without referring to theory which would provide us with a cognitive framework.

Towards the end of the text, Habermas focuses on Husserl’s philosophy. According to Habermas, Husserl tried to resuscitate primary, ancient understanding of theory already after Marxist criticism via his famous concept of phenomenology. Husserl believed that the phenomenologist reduction as the main method of fully objective cognition, independent from any external conditions or any contingency, met the criteria of pure theory. It was completely detached from individual cognitive conditions or particular experiences in the process of distilling phenomena from all contingency. Phenomenology is completely detached from practice, it serves the purpose of pure cognition, and in this sense, it offers us a chance for the fullest emancipation from material conditions which blur cognition.

Let us translate those directives – which have never been fulfilled on the grounds of philosophy, as Husserl’s project of phenomenology was unfinished – directly into the interpretative practice of literary studies, ignoring Ingarden’s filter: the process of literary interpretation of a text would lead us to the merit of meaning, i.e. what is obvious, clear, non-contingent. This is what Kaczmarek writes about in *Czym nie jest intencja* [What intention is not]<sup>19</sup>, where he defines interpretation as a selection process of those elements of a text which are not contingent on what can be defined as – changing the poetic term “lifeworld” – the conditions of text consumption, particular experiences of the reader. In the introduction to *The Shape of the Signifier*, the only complete work by Michaels translated into Polish<sup>20</sup>, we read about the process of reading a text, as well about its material dimensions. Michaels writes about removing all contingent elements from literary works so that this text stays the same regardless of how and where it was read – or how it was redistributed. Michaels tries to free the understanding of meanings of a literary work from all material contexts, simultaneously arguing that intention is locked in a stabilized, somewhat universalized form of a specific text. However, for him this text does not have a material dimension, i.e. factors such as the font size and type, paper, etc. do not influence its meaning. This vision of a literary work as something distilled from all contingent, unplanned elements is closely connected with the strictly modernist ideology of form which requires treating texts as complete, essential wholes, independent from not only the reader’s intention, but also from the influence of (subsequent) editions or translations

<sup>19</sup>Kaczmarek, “Czym nie jest intencja. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie”.

<sup>20</sup>Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, translated into Polish by Jan Burzyński (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2011).

(although intentionalism has a certain response to that: subsequent editions may introduce mistakes, and in the case of translation we deal with co-authorship)<sup>21</sup>.

Such an understanding of intention is not necessarily materialistic, as postulated by Kaczmarek<sup>22</sup>. It remains strongly anti-psychologistic – Knapp and Michaels rely on strictly linguistic and philosophical categories. Therefore, for them the historical author is of far less interest than the intention inscribed in their text, which again directs us towards phenomenology. And in terms of the vision of agency, today this methodology approaches structuralism, and the “creative subject” does not refer to a physical person, but rather – conceptualizing the whole in the context of the theory of communicative structuralism – a partially virtual functor of a text, set free from physicality and specificity<sup>23</sup>. According to this concept, a text would be a materialization of intention, yet completely independent from the conditions of circulation or reproduction, and therefore also subjected to phenomenological reproduction<sup>24</sup>.

We should thus observe that the phenomenological treatment of intention, the creative subject and text protects the analyzed concept from accusations of promoting a banalized version of the author’s intention (“what did the author mean?”), and simultaneously – from imputations of representationalism by Kujawa – in the understanding presented here a text does not represent its author’s intention, it is identical with it. And intention does not necessarily mean the “thought” of a historical character, who signed the text. Meaning – intention – rather remains a certain arrival point of an interpretation reducing everything that is contingent.

Therefore, the phenomenological perspective proposed here seems to favor Michaels and Knapp’s concept, although in the face of the low popularity of phenomenology in contemporary Polish studies, this could be surprising (although it need not be in the American context<sup>25</sup>). However, such a concept of intentionalism has even more interesting consequences. Phenomenology is pure theory – and theory refers to what is objective, constant, stable, independent from some individual perceiving subject. In America, Michaels is typically perceived as a pragmatist, and in a way “classical” pragmatism constitutes an alternative tradition to the dictionary of classical European philosophy, replacing epistemological discussions with a reference to

<sup>21</sup>For a discussion about the influence of editing and other material factors on the meaning of texts, see e.g. John Bryant, *The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book and Screen*, translated into Polish by Łukasz Cybulski (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2020).

<sup>22</sup>See Kaczmarek, “Materializm jako intencjonalizm. O możliwości «nowomaterialistycznej» krytyki literackiej”.

<sup>23</sup>This is how those relationships were defined in the famous communication theory by Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska (“Relacje osobowe w literackiej komunikacji” [Personal relations in literary communication], in: *Problemy socjologii literatury* [Problems in the sociology of literature], edited by Janusz Sławiński (Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1971), 109–125.

<sup>24</sup>In this sense, possible applications of the notions of materialism or matter would require a deeper inquiry and differentiation – the applications discussed by me (materiality of a text in the context of intention and its circulation in the social space, materiality of the historical author and non-materiality of the author as a textual subject) seem to be mutually irreducible.

<sup>25</sup>Neophenomenology was criticized by e.g. Rita Felski, who commented on the return to “non-contextual”, formalist reading in contemporary American literary studies. Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, translated into Polish by Agnieszka Budnik i Agnieszka Waligóra (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2022), 67.

common sense. When we refer to common sense, we assume that our audience has the same, natural knowledge of the world and cognitive intuition, thanks to which we do not need to analyze certain questions. A similar reasoning is clear in Michaels and Knapp – however, as we can see, it conceals a very strong theoretical foundation: the two scholars put forward universal theses which cannot be empirically verified.

In *Against Theory* Michaels and Knapp offer an example which is supposed to illustrate how the conviction of a text's coherence results from the knowledge that it was created by some subject: a man lands on a desert beach and notices traces in the sand which comprise something resembling a poem. Significantly, the two authors use a specific poem – *A Slumber did my Spirit Seal* by William Wordsworth<sup>26</sup>. This example can be understood in two ways: a person discovering such traces will not identify them as symbols, and so he will not consider something that resembles a literary text an actual literary text. Instead, he will assume that the random system of traces resembling a text is not a text – according to intentionalists, these would be the consequences of removing the author's figure from sight. On the other hand, recognizing the system of traces as a poem suggests the existence of an author, even if it is a non-human entity like a wave, or someone who replicated the traces.

The phenomenological theory aims to free meaning from the context of reading; accepting the two scholars' assumptions, Wordsworth's poem was written intentionally, and it has a final, established sign form, which should be independent from contingent contexts (such as methods of reproduction). Therefore, referring to the phenomenological reasoning, one could say that it was indeed a poem at Michaels and Knapp's beach – the only unknown would lie in how it was circulated, but this is beyond the scope of our interests, as we have emancipated ourselves from the context of contingent material conditions. A poem will be a poem anywhere – including never seen places. This is the reasoning which seems to be favored by Michaels and Knapp, who at that point consistently argued for the need to refer to any type of subject that could copy those symbols, or considering them as contingent traces. However, it should be noted that the experiment is by definition – i.e. thanks to the assumption that a desert beach exists – impossible to be empirically conducted, and so it remains purely theoretical. This could once again speak to how deeply this concept is rooted in the classical phenomenological thought.

Michaels could be considered a pragmatist only when the traces at the beach are not recognized as a poem, although the same layout found in a book, museum, or building wall would not seem controversial, as such spaces are perceived as possible for displaying works of art consciously, intentionally. In this sense, Michaels's beach traces would be closer to Duchamp's urinal – a utility item in a toilet, and an artistic one in a museum – than to Husserl's classical phenomenology. In the famous pragmatic paper *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Stanley Fish analyzes a series of random words<sup>27</sup>, which are interpreted according to the context in which they function – an academic class, which also includes the context of “a cognitive hierarchy”:

<sup>26</sup>Knapp, Michaels, *Against Theory*, 15–16.

<sup>27</sup>Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, translated into Polish by Andrzej Szahaj, *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2000): 197–211.

the lecturer makes their students interpret a nonsensical system of words, which can be seen as a silent suggestion that it has a certain meaning. However, Michaels and Knapp are against such a vision of pragmatics, asking about the agency behind a text rather than the conditions in which it is read, which constitutes a separate and extremely interesting question – however, Fish is met with criticism in *Against Theory*<sup>28</sup>.

There remains a question about the consequences of dematerializing the author while simultaneously materializing their intention in the form of a text. In *Czym nie jest intencja*, Kaczmarek argues that it is inscribed in a text. However, defining interpretation as constructing a convincing narrative about what we have read in a text does not require a methodological assumption regarding its author's intention, whereas the question regarding the intentional provenance of the texts we deal with, in reference to the other understanding of intentionality, does not necessarily constitute a universal reader's reaction – after all, Michaels and Knapp did not propose an empirical study of reception habits, and we do not know the dominating cognitive reaction to a series of symbols in various spaces; their considerations are purely abstract. We should also stress that Michaels and Knapp operate mostly within the modern anthropocentric culture and its vision of authorship – their question regarding the agency of the sea in terms of writing poetry does not seem to invite a discussion about non-human creative agents – a historically variable notion and culture-dependent rather than universal<sup>29</sup>. This last issue is also present in the Polish reception of those ideas: Kaczmarek mentions unconscious intentions or the fact that e.g. the French Revolution can be ascribed a virtual intention behind texts<sup>30</sup>. In a way, this constitutes a polemical elaboration on the already analyzed, “extracorporeal” yet still strictly human visions of authorship, represented by structural and phenomenological optics; today we could add the question of AI-generated content to this discussion.

Of course, intentionalism can provide answers to those accusations – some of them have already been indicated (e.g. the notion of mistake or co-authorship). However, these answers potentially reveal the susceptibility of the concept to abuse. Intentionalism tries to protect us from searching for meanings where they cannot be found – before constructing meaning and spending time and energy on where and how meanings exist. A “nonsensical” text was intentionally written as such; the ambiguity was intentional; random words which Fish makes his student interpret were intentionally written as random, and their author's intention was to make students think.

Similar conclusions can be as simple as they are basically empty: intentionalist interpretations understood in such a way banalize discussions about literature. We should

<sup>28</sup>Stanley Fish, “Consequences”, in: *Against Theory. Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, 106–131; Richard Rorty, “Philosophy without Principles”, in: *Against Theory. Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*: 132–138; Knapp, Michaels, “A Reply to Richard Rorty: What Is Pragmatism?”, 139–146.

<sup>29</sup>There is no need to refer to the fashionable new materialisms and their non-anthropocentric definitions of the subject – it is enough to consider pre-modern practices such as automated writing rooted in spiritualism.

<sup>30</sup>In *Czym nie jest intencja*. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie Kaczmarek states: Class or ideological biases of an author, their perspective, will often be visible in a text, even if they do not themselves see them. A critic is justified in asking about them – but a Marxist critic should not.

remember that intentionalism analyzed in the context of the philosophy of language can lead to paradoxes – identifying intention with meaning allows us to assume that any identifiable meaning is intentional, which would disassemble the basis of the whole concept. Michaels and Knapp's proposal is governed by serious theoretical assumptions. A statement that the meaning of a text remains identical with the author's intention is universalizing, and fundamentally unverifiable (*vide* the desert beach example), and so purely metaphysical. Therefore, this idea becomes internally contradictory, complementary with the internal contradiction of post-structural interpretations: intentionalism is purely a theory criticizing the focus on theory, whereas post-structural perspectives, extremely open to the variety of interpretations, need to be open also to universalizing interpretations.

Intentionalism was supposed to simplify the interpretation process thanks to removing theoretical-literary considerations, but also – what we can see thanks to passing over the metaphysical assumptions behind the concept – epistemological ones. However, as we can see, upon closer inspection the gains it offers may prove problematic. Ultimately, classifying intentionalism as anti-theoretical introduces an important context. Genuine anti-theorization, as described by Habermas, rejects the idea of a comprehensible, unified order of reality or cognition—leading to consequences different from those suggested by Knapp and Michaels. Anti-theorization exposes us to any individual, particular and experiential interpretations to which intentionalists object. Genuine anti-theoretical interpretations – subjective, dependent on the reader's intention – are mostly peculiar to post-structuralist optics, which negate stable sign references<sup>31</sup>, which brings the classical theory of cognition and literary theory closer together – after all, literary theory also deals with the question of universal rules governing cognition, in this case: interpretation.

The anti-theorization (of literature) results from specific premises: anti-theories which emerged in the face of the crisis of the classical vision of theory which guaranteed the existence of the sphere of objectiveness. Meanwhile, in the face of the impossibility of establishing objective, durable, and stable references of signs, the conviction of the absolute instability and fluidity of their references seems to be the only way to avoid the interception and capitalization of signs. On the other hand, if it is inexhaustible, it cannot succumb to any discourse – it cannot be used as a mechanism of oppression.

Finally, we should observe that the crisis of theory stemmed from within theoretical thinking – we can therefore locate it in a certain gap which appeared in the system of German idealism. Its unsealing provoked the problem of the sublime which appears in Kant, Hegel, and a number of other philosophers. What can be sublime? What cannot be represented – something unquantifiable, uncountable, unfathomable, and therefore impossible to theorize. In this sense, post-structuralism proves to be a different perception of possible emancipation, able to see the shortcomings of theoretical thinking and exploiting the inconsistency which takes place within it in order to defend the basic aim of wisdom reflection: freedom. It is

<sup>31</sup>Such an understanding of anti-theorization is well rooted in Polish studies, e.g. *Anty-teoria literatury* [Anti-theory of literature] by Anna Burzyńska on Derrida's deconstruction (Kraków: Universitas, 2006).



therefore noteworthy that within all the methodologies referred to here – phenomenology, deconstruction, pragmatism – we are still operating in the space of the issue of emancipation, as did Kaczmarek, Żurek, and Kujawa.

In this sense, intentionalism represents the emancipatory pursuits of Western philosophy, becoming a specific form expression of the wish to return to some actual, strong theory following a period of weak thought – a theory which would allow to form strong theses regarding texts, or restitution of the notion of truth following its neoliberal and postmodern failures. Such a wish seems natural and interesting following the experiences of humanities from the second half of the 20th century and early 21st century. Intentionalism as such is not protected from post-structural criticism – also because it is mediated through the already mentioned classical and Enlightenment philosophies, and so it remains inscribed in the rhythm of transformations of Western philosophy. Thanks to its roots, in a way it also remains chronologically earlier than the criticism by, among other, deconstruction – and, as has been demonstrated, in many cases it succumbs to accusations stemming from it. More often than not, it also reveals how paradoxically close it is to the optics it objects.

Ultimately, an analysis of the assumptions of intentionalism leads to a significant question: if intentions are all that matter, why read literature? It would seem (also according to Kaczmarek<sup>32</sup>) that due to the form of expression: perhaps then even intentionalists would ultimately agree that literature is not about meanings, but about constructing them. In those terms, Kaczmarek's perspective seems to be surprisingly convergent with Kujawa's anti-representationalist vision, who points out to the textual form as a generator of alternative worlds. In *Czym nie jest intencja*, Kaczmarek favors the immanence of intention, which comes from the author, but conceptualized in a certain form, it becomes its integral part – intention becomes the foundation of the autonomy of a text. Those surprising similarities in the starting and concluding points of both sides of the polemic seem to provide material for a different discussion, which would consider various difficulties with the use of the notion of intention proposed here.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>32</sup>Kaczmarek mentions the significance of form analysis or ways of formal construction of a text. Paweł Kaczmarek, "Czym nie jest intencja. W odpowiedzi Dawidowi Kujawie".

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# KEYWORDS

## INTENTIONALISM

*Walter Benn Michaels*

**ABSTRACT:**

The paper contributes to the critical discussion about the problem of interpreting literature, studying the traditions used in the process. It analyzes Walter Benn Michaels's intentionalism and its Polish reception in contemporary literary criticism. The polemics between two intentionalists (Paweł Kaczmarski and Łukasz Żurek) with Dawid Kujawa, a representative of post-structural affective criticism, which took place in "Mały Format" in 2021, is summarized. Next, methodological comments regarding the intentionalist project are presented. Although Michaels is typically considered a pragmatist, significant elements of phenomenology can be found in his ideas. Those dependencies are analyzed in the context of the notion of theory, leading to conclusions regarding possible contradictions in the intentionalist thought and its Polish interpretations.

*pragmatism*

## PHENOMENOLOGY

## LITERARY THEORY

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

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# “Should they be remembered?”

## The Reception of Pre-War Left-Wing Literary Criticism in Poland as the Production of Ignorance

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In *Rozmyte Tradycje* [Blurred traditions], originally published in 1984 and later reprinted as the introduction to the book *Żadnych marzeń* [No dreams], Tomasz Burek explained why left-wing or “sociological” literary criticism that had emerged in Poland before WW2 was not discussed during high school Polish lessons in the early 1950s:

We were wading through Plekhanov and Stalin [...] we had no idea that a better left-wing tradition existed, and we knew even less about less vulgar applications of the sociological method in literary criticism and studies. We did not know Brzozowski, Bruno-Bronowicz, Fik, or Stawar. Some representatives of this intellectual trend were briefly mentioned in our textbooks; those references were, however, very general, cautious, and at times critical [...].<sup>1</sup>

The works of “the representatives of this intellectual trend,” such as Stanisław Brzozowski, Ignacy Fik, Andrzej Stawar, and Julian Brun-Bronowicz, constituted for Burek a “better tradition,” that is an antidote to the vulgar sociology of Plekhanov and Stalin. Pre-WW2 left-wing criticism thus provided a historical background which helped one see the limitations of contemporary criticism which relied on *the* official interpretation of Marx’s writings.

<sup>1</sup> Tomasz Burek, “Rozmyte tradycje” [Blurred traditions], in Tomasz Burek: *Żadnych marzeń* [No dreams], 1st edition (London: Polonia, 1987), 11.

It is worth noting that Burek does not list left-wing critics who could prove useful for the anti-communist intellectual in the 1980s. He refers to drastically different, sometimes sharply conflicting, ideological positions of the twentieth century left. He discusses such "problematic" figures as Stanisław Brzozowski and Julian Brun-Bronowicz – the latter, among other things, was the author of *Stefana Żeromskiego tragedia pomyłek* [Stefan Żeromski's tragedy of errors]<sup>2</sup> which was criticized by the communist authorities for its "national-Bolshevik tendencies" – alongside Andrzej Stawar. And Stawar was a fierce critic of both Brzozowski<sup>3</sup> and Brun-Bronowicz.<sup>4</sup> In the mid-1930s, he fell out with the Communist Party of Poland (KPP), and after WW2 his books were banned from publication from 1949 to 1955. According to Burek, Stanisław Brzozowski, Julian Brun-Bronowicz, and Andrzej Stawar gave rise to one of the "blurred traditions." This tradition was blurred not only as a result of, as the critic writes, "the dramatic trajectories of contemporary history," but also as a result of the distorting effects of institutions and mechanisms that "by their very nature keep tradition alive [...], select and implement values, cultivate the art of memory."<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this article, I propose to call the distorting actions of institutions supposedly concerned with protecting and cultivating knowledge about the past (including literary studies), the production of ignorance. In doing so, I draw on agnotology, which "explores the cultural mechanisms of producing, transmitting, and reinforcing both knowledge and ignorance" about cultural reality.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, in the early 1950s, pre-war left-wing literary criticism had a peculiar status not only in high schools – Burek uses the example of high school Polish lessons to draw attention to the intricacies of the post-war cultural policy. One example of the distorting actions of cultural institutions, which explains why intellectuals of Burek's generation "had no [...] idea that a better [...] tradition existed,"<sup>7</sup> is the second volume in the series *Materiały do dziejów postępowej publicystyki* [Materials for the history of progressive journalism] edited by Jadwiga Czachowska. Published in 1952 by The Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the book was a critical collection of selected articles from the magazine *Sygnaly* [Signals], which was one of the leading periodicals of the left-wing Polish intelligentsia in Lviv in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> *Sygnaly* was published (with a short break) for six years, making it one

<sup>2</sup> Jarosław Tomaszewicz, "Prorok narodowej rewolucji" [The prophet of a national revolution], *Nowy Obywatel*, 8 Nov. 2013, <https://nowyobywatel.pl/2013/11/08/prorok-narodowej-rewolucji-2/>.

<sup>3</sup> Paweł Rams, "Andrzeja Stawara Brzozowskiego portret podwójny" [Andrzej Stawar's double portrait of Brzozowski], *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2017): 246–263.

<sup>4</sup> Andrzej Stawar, "Pomyłki «Przedwiośnia» (Z powodu książki J. Bronowicza «Stefana Żeromskiego tragedia pomyłek»)" [Errors of 'The Coming Spring' (J. Bronowicz's book 'Stefana Żeromskiego tragedia pomyłek')], *Dźwignia* 1 (1927): 27–40.

<sup>5</sup> Burek, "Rozmyte tradycje", 10.

<sup>6</sup> Łukasz Żurek, "Między niewiedzą a filologią" [Between ignorance and philology], in Łukasz Żurek: *Filologia lokalna – lokalność filologa: praktyki literacko-naukowe Stefana Szymutki* [Local philology – the locality of the philologist: Literary and scholarly practices of Stefan Szymutko] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2022), 13. On agnotology, see, for example, Robert Proctor, "Agnotology. A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study)", in: *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, ed. Londa Schiebinger (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Burek, "Rozmyte tradycje", 11.

<sup>8</sup> Jadwiga Czachowska, *Sygnaly: 1933–1939* [Signals: 1933–1939] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Zakładu Narodowego im. Ossolińskich, 1952). The first volume edited by Czachowska and Ewa Korzeniowska was not approved for print. It was devoted to the magazine *Nowe Widnokręgi* [New horizons] published in the years 1941–1946. Alicja Szałagan, "Cenzura PRL-owska we wspomnieniach profesor Jadwigi Czachowskiej" [Censorship in the Polish People's Republic in the memories of Professor Jadwiga Czachowska], *Sztuka Edycji* 1 (2015): 91.

of the longest-running left-wing cultural magazines of the 1930s. Given the above, the anthology edited by Czachowska is surprisingly short. It is also surprising that instead of a complete list of articles published in *Sygnaty*, the anthology contained only a “list of the most important texts,” and how “importance” was defined in this context seemed somewhat vague. It is hard not to notice that the texts that were left out were ideologically “problematic” (for example, anything by or about Brzozowski). Years later, in a conversation with Alicja Szałagan, Czachowska recalled that both the anthology and the list of articles published in *Sygnaty* were severely shortened – without consultations – by Samuel Sandler, the secretary of the Institute. A similar fate befell subsequent volumes in the series, devoted to the magazines *Po prostu* [Frankly speaking] and *Oblicze dnia* [The face of the day].<sup>9</sup>

Left-wing literary criticism of the Interwar Period, divided and outspoken, had one common denominator, namely its attitude towards “capitalism, fascism, anti-Semitism [...]” but “everything else was subject to discussion.”<sup>10</sup> The new authorities could not really “use” it to advance their new post-WW2 cultural policies. The left-wing yet non-partisan *Sygnaty* did not fit into the vision of Marxist literary criticism supported by cultural institutions in the early 1950s. Less liberal periodicals such as *Dźwignia* [Lever] and *Miesięcznik Literacki* [Literary monthly] did not fit into it either; they were too much involved in discussions about concepts and phenomena considered outdated after WW2. The problematic nature of pre-war left-wing literary criticism is evidenced by the fact that Czachowska deposited a practically complete typescript of her anthology of texts from *Dźwignia* and *Miesięcznik Literacki* and a complete list of articles published in both magazines in the archive of the Department of Contemporary Literature Documentation at The Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences.<sup>11</sup> The death of some left-wing critics (including Jan Hempel, Henryk Drzewiecki and Stanisław Ryszard Stande) during the Stalinist purges in the USSR also did not help in preserving their literary and journalistic achievements.<sup>12</sup> It is no coincidence that the editors of *Kuźnica* [Wrought] stated in the editorial to the first issue: “[w]e grow out of the same soil out of which the Polish Enlightenment and Jacobinism of Kołłątaj and Staszic, Jeziernski and

<sup>9</sup> Szałagan 90–91. I write more about the history of the anthology and the list of articles published in *Sygnaty* in the article “Znalezione i odkryte. O Bibliografii zawartości pism «Dźwignia» (1927–1928) i «Miesięcznik Literacki» (1929–1931)” [Found and discovered. The list of articles published in “Dźwignia” (1927–1928) and “Miesięcznik Literacki” (1929–1931)], *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 3 (2023): 293–299.

<sup>10</sup> Kazimierz Koźniewski, „Nie ma spokoju na lewicy” [No rest on the left], *Polityka* 8 (1975): 15. It is possible that this characterization of pre-war left-wing criticism obscures more than it clarifies.

<sup>11</sup> See: Jadwiga Czachowska, “Bibliografia zawartości pism «Dźwignia» (1927–1928) i «Miesięcznik Literacki» (1929–1931)” [The list of articles published in “Dźwignia” (1927–1928) and “Miesięcznik Literacki” (1929–1931)]. *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 3 (2023): 237–291.

<sup>12</sup> Unlike Hempel, Drzewiecki, and Stande, Fik was killed by the Gestapo in a mass execution in November 1942. Fik’s literary criticism began to be popularized right after the war, among other reasons, because his death could be used in a left-wing martyrological narrative. See, among others, Ignacy Fik, *Rodowód społeczny literatury polskiej* [The social origins of Polish literature], 2nd edition, (Kraków: Czytelnik, 1946); [Anonim], “Ignacy Fik - człowiek zapomniany” [Ignacy Fik - a forgotten man], *Echo Krakowa* 227 (1946): 7; Józef Sieradzki, “«Za prawdę muszę być gotów oddać Życie»” [‘I must be ready to die for the truth’], *Odrodzenie* 43 (1946): 1–2; Ignacy Fik, “Światopogląd recenzencki” [Reviewer’s worldview], *Odra* 1–2 (1948): 3. On Fik’s activities during the German occupation, see: Marian Stępień, “Ignacy Fik”, in: Marian Stępień, *Kontury w mroku* [Contours in the dark], 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Katowice: WW Oficyna Wydawnicza, 2007), 104–148.



Jasiński grew 150 years ago."<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, the aim was to show that the tradition of progressive intelligentsia is an important part of Polish culture, worth recalling and developing after WW2. On the other hand, by referring to the very broad category of "radical Polish thought," *Kuźnica* also wished to avoid having to react to the context that was chronologically the closest, that is the left-wing literary criticism of the 1920s and the 1930s. Among the "critics who played a fundamental role in the development of radical Polish thought"<sup>14</sup> listed in the editorial, only Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński was active in the Interwar Period and his relations with left-wing literary critics were very complicated.<sup>15</sup>

Considering the problematic nature of pre-war left-wing criticism for post-war cultural policy, it is not surprising that when in 1946 Kazimierz Budzyk reprinted two preserved interpretative treatises by the literary theoretician Dawid Hopensztand<sup>16</sup> – a member of the Warsaw Circle of Polish Philologists at Józef Piłsudski University and the Communist Party of Poland (KPP) – in *Stylistyka teoretyczna w Polsce* [Theoretical stylistics in Poland] as examples of pre-war "sociological stylistics," he did not mention the connections between Hopensztand's analytical "scholarly" articles and his pre-war literary criticism and journalistic writings in *Lewar* [Siphon] and *Dziennik Popularny* [Popular Daily] in the introduction to the anthology. It is also not surprising that Melania Kierczyńska ignored her pre-war literary criticism in her infamous 1951 book *Spór o realizm* (Dispute on realism) – a collection of critical essays from the years 1946–1950. Kierczyńska, who before WW2 used the name "Cukier" or "Zucker", co-founded a circle of Marxist critics affiliated with the Communist Party of Poland (KPP) in the 1930s. And, as the biographical dictionary *Współcześni polscy pisarze i badacze literatury* [Contemporary Polish writers and literary scholars] succinctly informs, she "[p]ublished articles and reviews in left-wing journals associated with the Communist Party of Poland (KPP)."<sup>17</sup> What articles? We do not know.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup>The editorial board of *Kuźnica*, "[Słowo wstępne]" [The editorial], *Kuźnica: pismo społeczno-literackie* 1 (1945): 1. It is also significant that the first issue of the magazine published a fragment of Waław Nałkowski's critique of *Legenda Młodej Polski*. On the adaptation of Nałkowski's ideas by *Kuźnica* see: Andrzej Mencwel, "Forpocza i sumienie" [The avantgarde and conscience], in: Andrzej Mencwel, *Etos lewicy: esej o narodzinach kulturalizmu polskiego* [The ethos of the left: An essay on the birth of Polish culturalism] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009), 28.

<sup>14</sup>The editorial board of *Kuźnica*, "[Słowo wstępne]".

<sup>15</sup>A summary of the disputes between socialists and communists and Boy may be found in: Joanna Krajewska, "Ignacy Fik, Irena Krzywicka: socjalizm a feminizm" [Ignacy Fik, Irena Krzywicka: Socialism and feminism], in: Joanna Krajewska, *Spór o literaturę kobietą w Dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* [The dispute over women's literature in the interwar period] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Nauka i Innowacje, 2014), 324.

<sup>16</sup>Dawid Hopensztand, "Mowa pozornie zależna w kontekście «Czarnych skrzydeł»" [Free indirect speech in the context of 'Czarne Skrzydła'], in: *Stylistyka teoretyczna w Polsce* [Theoretical Stylistics in Poland], ed. Kazimierz Budzyk (Warsaw, Łódź: Książka, 1946); Dawid Hopensztand, „«Satyry» Krasickiego" [Krasicki's 'Satires'], in: *Stylistyka teoretyczna w Polsce*, ed. Kazimierz Budzyk (Warsaw, Łódź: Książka, 1946). Danuta Ulicka writes about Hopensztand in detail in: Danuta Ulicka, „«Archiwum» i archiwum" [Archive' and archive], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2017): 273–302.

<sup>17</sup>*Współcześni polscy pisarze i badacze literatury: słownik biobibliograficzny* [Contemporary Polish writers and literary scholars: Biographical dictionary], ed. Jadwiga Czachowska, Alicja Szałagan, vol. 4 (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1996), 115.

<sup>18</sup>Żanna Kormanowa recalls that the critic had been writing for *Lewar* since the autumn of 1933. Żanna Kormanowa, „Melania Kierczyńska (1888–1962)", in: *Zapisane w pamięci: o Melanii Kierczyńskiej wspomnienia i szkice* [Recorded in memory: Memories and essays], ed. Olga Kierczyńska (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1981), 31. According to Wat, Kierczyńska also published in *Miesięcznik Literacki*, but Czachowska's bibliography does not confirm this, see: Aleksander Wat, *Mój wiek: pamiętnik mówiony*, ed. Lidia Ciołkoszowa, vol. 1 (London: Polonia Book Fund, 1977), 154. The book has been translated into English: Aleksander Wat, *My Century. The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*, trans. Richard Lourie (New York: New York Review of Books, 1988).

Stalin's death, Khrushchev's speech on the cult of personality, and the liberalization of the cultural policy of the Polish United Workers' Party as a result of these events created favorable conditions for reincorporating the works of the most important pre-war left-wing critics into the Polish humanities. In 1957, Stawar, who was then allowed to publish again, published the collection *Szkice literackie* [Literary essays], in which (apart from several texts written after WW2) he reprinted 14 articles and reviews from the years 1924–1938. However, even a cursory review of issues of *Nowa Kultura* [New culture], *Dźwignia*, *Miesięcznik Literacki*, and *Wiadomości Literackie* [Literary news] shows that the critic published much more in the 20th century and that *Szkice literackie* is by no means a representative selection of his pre-war literary criticism.<sup>19</sup> In 1958, Brun-Bronowicz's book about Żeromski was re-published.<sup>20</sup> In 1961, Ignacy Fik's *Wybór pism krytycznych* [Selected critical writings]<sup>21</sup> was published. Two years later, in 1963, Stanisław Baczyński's *Pisma krytyczne* [Critical writings] was published.<sup>22</sup> The second volume of *Teoria badań literackich* [Theory of literary studies] edited by Henryk Markiewicz in 1960, containing reprints of Stande's *O krytykę marksistowską* [Marxist criticism], Stawar's *O pojmowanie literatury* [Understanding literature], and Fik's *Charakter społeczny literatury* [The social character of literature], did not really expand the knowledge of pre-war left-wing criticism, but rather canonized, "anthologized" a certain part of it (the texts by Stawar and Fik reprinted in the anthology had already been published after WW2).<sup>23</sup> All in all, the number of publications was not great.

Later in *Rozmyte tradycje*, Burek treats pre-war left-wing literary criticism as part of "great critical traditions, formed in the nineteenth century:" the tradition of literary criticism "understood as interpretation (exposure – decipherment – unmasking) of social reality."<sup>24</sup> Burek himself, of course, felt it necessary to continue the "Great Discussion" initiated by this tradition, as evidenced by such parts of *Żadnych marzeń* as *Zapomniana literatura polskiego Października* [The forgotten literature of the Polish October] and a much earlier essay *1905, nie 1918* [1905, not 1918].<sup>25</sup> At least as late as in the mid-1980s, the critic still needed pre-war left-wing literary criticism for something, as did Andrzej Mencwel, who in his book *Etos lewicy* [The ethos of the left], written between 1985 and 1987, referred to the overlooked or distorted tradition of left-

<sup>19</sup>Of course, Stawar's publications from the years 1934–1936, critical of the Soviet Union and inspired by the Trotskyist critique of Stalin's "Bonapartism" and the bureaucratization of the Soviet state, could not be published in 1957, see: *Pisma ostatnie Andrzeja Stawara* [Andrzej Stawar's last writings] (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1961).

<sup>20</sup>Julian Brun, *Stefana Żeromskiego tragedia pomyłek* (Warsaw: Spółdzielnia Wydawniczo-Handlowa Książka i Wiedza, 1958).

<sup>21</sup>Ignacy Fik, *Wybór pism krytycznych* [Selected critical writings], ed. Andrzej Chruszczyński (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1961).

<sup>22</sup>Stanisław Baczyński, *Pisma krytyczne* [Critical writings], ed. Andrzej Kijowski (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1963). In addition to Fik, Baczyński, and Stawar, it is also worth mentioning a selection of critical essays by Lech Piwowar, rather loosely associated with the pre-war literary left, see: Lech Piwowar, *Sztuka na gorąco: szkice literackie* [Hot art: Literary essays], ed. Tadeusz Kłak (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Śląsk, 1987).

<sup>23</sup>*Polska krytyka literacka 1918–1939* [Polish literary criticism] also "canonized" certain texts and authors, including Brun-Bronowicz's treatise on Żeromski and articles by Stawar, Fik, and Baczyński, some of which had been already published in the "post-Thaw" anthologies (*Polska krytyka literacka, 1919–1939: materiały* [Polish literary criticism, 1919–1939: Materials], ed. Jan Zygmunt Jakubowski, 1st edition [Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1966]). On the role that the anthology may play in perpetuating popular beliefs about a given trend in the humanities, see: Danuta Ulicka, "Siła antologii" [The power of the anthology], in: *Wiek teorii: sto lat nowoczesnego literaturoznawstwa polskiego* [The age of theory: A hundred years of modern Polish Literary studies], ed. Danuta Ulicka, vol. 2: *Antologia* (part 1) (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2020), 7–25.

<sup>24</sup>Burek, "Rozmyte tradycje", 15.

<sup>25</sup>Tomasz Burek, "1905, nie 1918" [1905, not 1918], in: *Tomasz Burek Dalej aktualne* [Still relevant], 1st edition (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1973).

wing thinkers and activists from the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

Contemporary literary criticism, or more broadly contemporary literary studies, clearly does not need Fik, Stawar or Baczyński, passively producing (and reproducing) ignorance about left-wing literary criticism popularized during the Polish People's Republic. A connection with at least some part of pre-war left-wing literary criticism – similar to that found in Burek's *Rozmyte tradycje* – was not established either in the 1990s or today. In the works on the history of Polish literature of the interwar period published after 1989, one could also find references to pre-war left-wing criticism that were "general, cautious, and at times critical," similarly to the ones read by Burek in the early 1950s.<sup>26</sup> The only novelty in the literature on the subject was the narrowing of the canon of texts associated with the pre-war literary left, which had been stabilized in the 1960s and the 1970s and had not been problematized, verified, or expanded since, to a maximum of four figures (Fik, Stawar, Stande, Baczyński). Pre-war left-wing literary criticism also did not play a role in the discussions on the political nature of literature and poetry and engaged criticism in the first decades of the 21st century,<sup>27</sup> even as a "negative tradition" used for polemical purposes. Socialist realist criticism was referenced in this context instead. It was much more effective as a symbol of the disastrous effects of the "politicization" of literary studies.<sup>28</sup>

Left-wing literary criticism was discussed in anthologies<sup>29</sup> or articles devoted to the aesthetic views of the most important critics,<sup>30</sup> but it was never analyzed in specialist monographs.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Marian

<sup>26</sup>Burek, "Rozmyte tradycje". See, for example, Jerzy Kwiatkowski, *Literatura Dwudziestolecia* [Literature of the interwar period] (Warsaw: IBL PAN, 1990); Lesław Eustachiewicz, *Dwudziestolecie 1919–1939* [The interwar period 1919–1939], 2nd revised edition (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1990); Anna Nasiłowska, *Trzydziestolecie 1914–1944* [Thirty years from 1914 to 1944] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1995); Dariusz Skórczewski, *Spory o krytykę literacką w Dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* [Disputes over literary criticism in the interwar period] (Kraków: Universitas, 2002).

<sup>27</sup>One exception to this rule, which nevertheless proves that the rule exists, is the introduction to Dawid Kujawa's book in which among the three ways of "situating the poet [and, one may assume, also the critic – Ł.Ż.] in social life," Kujawa mentions the "old left-wing tradition" of raising the class consciousness of workers. Kujawa is, however, critical of that tradition. Dawid Kujawa, *Pocałunki ludu: poezja i krytyka po roku 2000* [Kisses of the people: Poetry and criticism after 2000] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2021), 24. "Left-wing tradition" is old, thus not worthy of scholarly attention.

<sup>28</sup>"[...] [Maja] Staško meticulously imitates the style and finesse of the arguments of Melania Kierczyńska, the author of *Spór o Realizm* from 1951, and I congratulate her for carrying the torch of Stalinist socialist realism in the darkness of 'fake news' democracy." Marcin Sendek, "W tym numerze nie pisze się..." [In this issue we do not write about...], *Książki. Magazyn do czytania* [Books. A magazine for reading] 1 (2017): [the digital archive of *Gazeta Wyborcza*].

<sup>29</sup>For example, Andrzej Werner, "Krytyka marksistowska" [Marxist critique], in: *Literatura polska: 1918–1975* [Polish literature: 1918–1975], ed. Alina Brodzka, Halina Zaworska, Stefan Żółkiewski, vol. 1 (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1991), 208–220; Tomasz Burek, "Krytyka literacka i «duch dziejów»" [Literary criticism and *Zeitgeist*], in: *Literatura polska: 1918–1975*, ed. Alina Brodzka, Halina Zaworska, Stefan Żółkiewski, vol. 2 (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1993), 264–342; Michał Mrugalski, "Marxism in Poland", in: *Central and Eastern European Literary Theory and the West*, ed. Michał Mrugalski, Schamma Schahadat, Irina Wutsdorff (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 486–504.

<sup>30</sup>For example, Antonina Sebesta, «Ideologiczne determinanty kultury w twórczości Andrzeja Stawara» [Ideological determinants of culture in the works of Andrzej Stawar], in: *Polska lewica w XX wieku: historia – ludzie – idee* [The Polish Left in the 20th century: History – people – ideas], ed. Tadeusz Słezak, Michał Śliwa (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pedagogicznej, 2004); Wojciech Kajtoch, «Stanisława Baczyńskiego teoria kryminału» [Stanisław Baczyński's theory of crime fiction], *Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis. Literatura i Kultura Popularna* 25 (2019); Marian Stepień, «Obowiązek i prawo oceny: (o Stanisławie Baczyńskim)» [The duty and right to judge: (about Stanisław Baczyński)], *Zdanie* 3/4 (2015): 83–93; Krajewska.

<sup>31</sup>One exception is the complete and comprehensive monograph of The Polish Socialist Party's (PPS) magazine *Robotnik* [Worker], see: Oskar Czarnik, *Ideowe i artystyczne wybory "Robotnika" w latach 1918–1939* [The ideological and artistic choices of "Robotnik" in the years 1918–1939] (Warsaw: Biblioteka Narodowa, 1996). It is also worth mentioning the anthology devoted to the ephemeral magazine *Europa* [Europe], edited by Stanisław Baczyński, see: *Europa 1929–1930: antologia* [Europe 1929–1930: An anthology], ed. Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk (Warsaw: Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, 2012).

Stępień's 1974 monograph entitled *Ze stanowiska lewicy: studium jednego z nurtów polskiej krytyki literackiej lat 1919–1939* [From the position of the left: A study of one of the trends in Polish literary criticism in the years 1919–1939] is still considered *the* book on pre-war left-wing literary criticism.<sup>32</sup> Despite its indisputable merits, which include, above all, the fact that it gave us access to a huge number of articles published in the interwar press, it is impossible not to agree with the reviews which point out that Stępień's monograph is "[...] a reliable collection of critical essays" which was nevertheless "poorly organized."<sup>33</sup> Underneath all the quotes and names, "the contours of the whole are blurred, the problem is blurred."<sup>34</sup> It is also problematic that left-wing literary criticism is treated in Stępień's book as an independent entity, with no connections to other critical trends of the era other than Soviet Marxism. It is not confronted with its ideological enemy, i.e. Polish right-wing criticism.<sup>35</sup> Reading the book today, we realize that Stępień does not mention some pre-war critics because it was not allowed by the censorship. These include, among others, Isaac Deutscher who wrote reviews for *Nasz Przegląd* (Our review), *Nowy Dziennik* [New daily], and *Nowy Przegląd* [New review] and also collaborated with *Miesięcznik Literacki*, in which he polemized with Stawar on Marxist criticism,<sup>36</sup> and Józef Łobodowski, the editor of the ephemeral, left-wing *Barykady* [Barricades] (1932–1933) and *Dźwigary* [Girders] (1934–1935).

Instead of reassessing the facts, interpretations, and distinctions found in Stępień's monograph or presenting the reader with a comprehensive reconstruction of the views of individual critics associated with the socialist or communist left, after 1989 literary scholars focused either on the reception of right-wing criticism<sup>37</sup> or on left-wing critics' political activism. The abolition of state censorship and gaining access to previously unknown archival materials

<sup>32</sup>Marian Stępień, *Ze stanowiska lewicy: studium jednego z nurtów polskiej krytyki literackiej lat 1919–1939* [From the position of the left: A study of one of the trends in Polish literary criticism in the years 1919–1939] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1974). Stępień's much later book, *Polska Lewica Literacka* [Polish literary left] from 1985, essentially repeats the findings of the earlier monograph.

<sup>33</sup>Anna Goreniova, „Lewicowa krytyka dwudziestolecia” [Left-wing literary criticism of the interwar period], *Literatura* 35 (1974): 11.

<sup>34</sup>Krystyna Sierocka, „W oczekiwaniu na ciąg dalszy” [Waiting for the next chapter], *Nowe Książki* 2 (1975): 44–45.

<sup>35</sup>Witold Nawrocki, „Lewica polska a literatura” [The Polish left and literature], *Trybuna Ludu* 286 (1974): 8. Dezydery Barłowski tries to fill this gap in his article “«Faszystowska kołtuneria» versus «kacyki z międzynarodówki». Rzecz o kilku lewicowo-prawicowych sporach wokół polskiej powieści nacjonalistycznej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego” [‘Fascist philistinism’ versus ‘Internationalist caciques’. A story about several disputes between the left and the right over Polish nationalist novels in the interwar period], *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 3 (2023): 109–126.

<sup>36</sup>Isaac Deutscher, „O historyczne pojmowanie literatury” [The historical understanding of literature], *Miesięcznik Literacki* 12 (1930): 543–547.

<sup>37</sup>Maciej Urbanowski, *Nacjonalistyczna krytyka literacka: próba rekonstrukcji i opisu nurtu w II Rzeczypospolitej* [Nationalist literary criticism: An attempt to reconstruct and describe the trend in the Second Polish Republic], 1st edition (Kraków: Wydawnictwo ARCANA, 1997); Maciej Urbanowski, *Prawą stroną literatury polskiej: szkice i portrety* [The right side of Polish literature: Essays and portraits], 2nd revised and extended edition (Łomianki: Wydawnictwo LTW, 2015). It was passively assumed that the basic problem with the reception of pre-war criticism in the Polish People's Republic was the “asymmetry of research on the revolutionary trend and the ‘conservative’ trend [...]” which resulted, among other things, in the fact that in *Obraz literatury polskiej XIX i XX wieku* [Polish literature of the 19th and 20th century] only 4 pages were devoted to Catholic and National Democrat periodicals, and 42 pages to left-wing periodicals (Krzysztof Dybciak, “Refleksje o dwudziestowiecznej krytyce literackiej” [Reflections on twentieth-century literary criticism], in: *Wiedza o literaturze i edukacja: księga referatów Zjazdu Polonistów, Warszawa 1995* [Literary knowledge and education: Proceedings of the Congress of Polish Studies Scholars, Warsaw 1995], ed. Teresa Michałowska, Zbigniew Goliński, Zbigniew Jarosiński (Warsaw: IBL PAN, 1996), 486).

was of much help in this process. Thus, "communist influences" in pre-war literary circles<sup>38</sup> or individual left-wing critics' involvement (most often Stawar's) in pre-war and post-war communist movements were studied.<sup>39</sup> Scholars primarily focused on the critics associated with the Communist Workers' Party of Poland / the Communist Party of Poland (KPP), since the pre-war communist movement was seen as a harbinger of the post-war political order. As one might assume, Aleksander Wat's *Mój wiek/ My Century* played a significant role in shaping the reception of left-wing literary criticism. Specifically, in the first volume, Wat talks about *Miesięcznik Literacki* which he edited.<sup>40</sup> Praising, among other things, articles which described the realities of life of the rural and urban working class in the Second Polish Republic, Wat nevertheless paints a decidedly negative picture of the communist wing of left-wing literary criticism. According to Wat, *Miesięcznik Literacki* was subordinated to party interests, short-sighted, sectarian, anti-intellectual, and at the same time over-intellectualized. Above all, the political and social rhetoric of the magazine was supposed to foreshadow the rhetoric of the Stalinist era:

As for the journalism in *The Literary Monthly*, it was on a fairly high level. And it may have been more sensible than what the Marxist and communist wrote in Poland during the time of Stalinism. Many of those people had of course been inspired by *The Literary Monthly*. Whether they had been inspired by it or not, they discovered it anew and used it as a model. Now their work strikes me as more simplistic than *The Literary Monthly*'s.<sup>41</sup>

Wat's memories, reinforced by the post-transformation anti-communist discourse,<sup>42</sup> define the production of ignorance about the pre-war left-wing literary criticism after 1989. How

<sup>38</sup> For example, Andrzej Chojnowski, "Wpływy komunistyczne na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim w latach 1918–1939" [Communist influence at the University of Warsaw in 1918–1939], in: *Komuniści w międzywojennej Warszawie* [Communists in Warsaw in the 1920s and the 1930s], ed. Elżbieta Kowalczyk (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2014); Konrad Rokicki, "Wpływy komunistyczne w warszawskim środowisku literackim w okresie międzywojennym" [Communist influences in Warsaw literary circles in the interwar period], in: *Komuniści w międzywojennej Warszawie*, ed. Elżbieta Kowalczyk (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Tadeusz Drewnowski, "Ostatni autentyczny marksista" [The last true Marxist], in: Tadeusz Drewnowski, *Porachunki z XX wiekiem: szkice i rozprawy literackie* [Coming to terms with the 20th century: Literary sketches and essays] (Kraków: Universitas, 2006); Antonina Sebesta, "Publicystyka sowietologiczna Andrzeja Stawara" [Andrzej Stawar's sovietological journalism], *Rocznik Naukowo-Dydaktyczny. Prace Ekonomiczno-Społeczne* 8 (1997); Piotr Kendziorek, "Zjawisko stalinizmu w perspektywie krytyki komunistycznej: casus Andrzeja Stawara i pisma «Pod Prąd» (1934–1936)" [The phenomenon of Stalinism in the perspective of communist criticism: The case of Andrzej Stawar and the magazine 'Pod Prąd' (1934–1936)], in: *Komuniści w II Rzeczypospolitej: ludzie, struktury, działalność* [Communists in the Second Polish Republic: People, structures, activities], ed. Marcin Bukała, Mariusz Krzysztofiński (Rzeszów: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej – Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, 2015). In addition, it is worth mentioning Stępień's book *Kontury w mroku*, which sheds light on, among others, the biographies of Hempel, Fik, and Karol Kuryluk (also an active literary critic before WW2), Marian Stępień, *Kontury w mroku*, 1st edition (Katowice: WW Oficyna Wydawnicza, 2007).

<sup>40</sup> Wat, 1: 164–179. The first "legal" edition of the book was published in Poland in 1990, while in the 1980s it was distributed by the underground press.

<sup>41</sup> Wat, 57. Marci Shore concurs, see Marci Shore, *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918–1968* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 370.

<sup>42</sup> On anti-communism in Poland after 1989, see, among others, Agnieszka Mrozik, "Anti-Communism: It's High Time to Diagnose and Counteract", *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 1 (2019): 178–184; Katarzyna Chmielewska, "Marksizm ante portas!" [Marxism ante portas!], in: *Literatura i socjalizm* [Literature and socialism], ed. Katarzyna Chmielewska, Dorota Krawczyńska, Grzegorz Wołowicz (Warsaw: Fundacja Akademia Humanistyczna, IBL PAN, 2012).

does this process work? Let us take a look at Dariusz Skórczewski's *Spory o krytykę literacką w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* [Disputes over literary criticism in the interwar period]. In the chapter on the styles of criticism, right after the discussion of the pre-war far right, we find the following quote: "Ideology was also annexed by literary criticism in Marxist criticism."<sup>43</sup> In a footnote, Skórczewski refers to a chapter from the monograph *Literatura polska 1918–1975* [Polish literature 1918–1975] and notes that he defines "Marxist criticism" as "the most radical faction of left-wing criticism, with a clearly defined ideological orientation."<sup>44</sup> He does not expand on this remark any further. He does not present the views of less radical "factions" of the literary left. Neither does he explain why only "radicals" are defined by their "ideological orientation." He does not specify why "ideology," and "literary criticism" should be discussed separately. Apparently, in his opinion, these issues do not require explanation, just like the concept of "Marxist criticism" itself, which suggests that pre-war left-wing critics were inspired by – unspecified, ahistorical – "historical materialism," "dialectical materialism," or simply "Marxism."

According to Skórczewski, "Marxist critics" and right-wing critics were similar, insofar as both published few theoretical meta-critical essays. To prove his point, Skórczewski refers to the texts of Stande and Stawar which in his opinion were the only essays devoted to the methodology of "Marxist criticism" written in the Interwar Period. Skórczewski does not mention, however, the meta-critical polemical essays of Hempel, Stande, and Deutscher written in response to Stawar's articles.<sup>45</sup> Neither does he acknowledge the latter's response to Karol Irzykowski's *Piła marksistyczna* [Marxist tyrant].<sup>46</sup> Skórczewski also does not mention the meta-critical texts by Jerzy Borejsza, Leon Kaltenbergh, Paweł Hoffman, and Izidor Berman, which did not employ the sharp rhetoric of *Miesięcznik Literacki* but also contributed to the discussion on "Marxist criticism."<sup>47</sup> Skórczewski, for reasons that are not entirely clear,

<sup>43</sup>Dariusz Skórczewski, „O style i kierunki oddziaływania” [About styles and directions of influence], in: Dariusz Skórczewski, *Spory o krytykę literacką w Dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* (Kraków: Universitas, 2002), 151.

<sup>44</sup>Skórczewski, „O style i kierunki oddziaływania”, 151.

<sup>45</sup>Jan Hempel, „O marksistowską krytykę literacką” [Marxist literary criticism], *Miesięcznik Literacki* 11 (1930): 491–495; Stanisław Ryszard Stande, „O marksistowskie pojmowanie literatury” [The Marxist understanding of literature], *Miesięcznik Literacki* 12 (1930): 535–542; Stanisław Ryszard Stande, „Eklektycyzm czy dialektyka?” [Eclecticism or dialectics?], *Miesięcznik Literacki* 15 (1931): 670–675; Deutscher.

<sup>46</sup>Karol Irzykowski, „Piła marksistyczna” [Marxist tyrant], in: Karol Irzykowski, *Słoń wśród porcelany. Studia nad nowszą myślą literacką w Polsce* [Bull in a china shop: Studies on new literary thought in Poland] (Warsaw: Towarzystwo Wydawnicze Rój, 1934); Andrzej Stawar, „W lamusie idealizmu” [In the lehmhaus of idealism], *Miesięcznik Literacki* 4 (1930): 169–178.

<sup>47</sup>Jerzy Borejsza, „O prawo do krytyki” [The right to critique], *Epoka* 16 (1939): 12–14; Jerzy Borejsza, „W sprawie «socjologizmu» w krytyce literackiej” [On „sociologism” in literary criticism], *Wiedza i Życie* 6 (1939): 418–422; Leon Kaltenbergh, „Socjologia literacka” [Literary sociology], *Sygnaly* 21 (1936); Michał Jordan (Paweł Hoffman), „Krytyka literacka, która boi się prawdy” [Literary criticism that is afraid of the truth], *Epoka* 15 (1938); Izidor Berman, „Krytyka czystej formy” [A critique of pure form], *Sygnaly* 63 (1939): 2. Kaltenbergh's text was recently discussed in the online literary magazine *Mały Format* [Small format] by Paweł Bem, see Leon Kaltenbergh, „Socjologia literacka [komentarzem historycznym opatrzył Paweł Bem]” [Literary sociology [with a historical commentary by Paweł Bem]], *Mały Format*, 6 July 2022, <http://malyformat.com/2022/07/socjologia-literacka/>. Katarzyna Trzeciak writes, among others, about Berman's text, „Nierozumiały eksperyment czy społeczna interwencja? Konceptualizowanie literackiej awangardy na łamach lwowskich «Sygnałów»” [Incomprehensible experiment or social intervention? Conceptualizing the literary avant-garde in the Lviv magazine *Sygnaly*], *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 3 (2023): 87–108.

does not consider Fik a Marxist, and therefore does not consider the introductory chapter of *Rodowód społeczny literatury polskiej* [The social origins of Polish literature] a meta-critical essay. He also ignores *Światopogląd recenzencki* [Reviewer's worldview]. A truly bizarre text by Marian Naszkowski<sup>48</sup> – with whom, which Skórczewski also does not mention, Kaltenbergh argued – is discussed in an earlier chapter as an example of the “most vulgar form” of Marxist literary analysis,<sup>49</sup> but it is still not considered a meta-critical essay. Regardless of one's opinion concerning Naszkowski's text, it is an important contribution to the debate on the methodology of Marxist criticism.

Why do we find such omissions and simplifications in this otherwise brilliant monograph? I think that Skórczewski is more interested in confirming what he believes we already “know,” what is not subject to discussion or reevaluation, namely that the pre-war left and right both used literature and literary criticism for ideological purposes. All contemporary studies I have listed show that Polish literary scholars share beliefs about what was written in pre-war left-wing literary journals, and they do not complicate or expand this image. They do not do it because they think it is not worth it. And they believe that it is not worth it because, after all, they all “know” what was written in those magazines. In accordance with the prevailing *doxa*, which defines the contemporary production of ignorance about pre-war left-wing literary criticism, we all “know” that the reviews, articles, and interpretative essays published in, among others, *Miesięcznik Literacki*, *Dźwignia*, *Lewar*, *Sygnaly*, *Nowa Kultura*, *Nasz Wyrz* [Our expression] or *Lewy Tor* [Left track], are prime examples of the ideologization of literature, vulgar sociology, sectarianism, and emerging socialist realist criticism. The following excerpt from a review of Marci Shore's *Caviar and Ashes* is a testament to such widely held opinions:

Who [...] is still interested today [...] in the history of Marxist libels that left-wing writers directed at one another – first in literary journals, then in denunciations submitted to the NKVD, and in self-criticism sessions at party meetings? Who, apart from Andrzej Mencwel and graduate students of Polish studies, still remembers Stawar and Stande? Who can still explain the fundamental differences between their artistic programs? Should they be remembered?<sup>50</sup>

Konstanty Gebert equates the debates held in pre-war literary journals with denunciations written in the Soviet Union and self-criticism sessions held in the Polish People's Republic in the 1950s and thus demonstrates that the critical writings of Stawar and Stande are important for him only as an example of how the ideological foundations for the post-war cultural and political hegemony of communism were laid. The “fundamental differences”

<sup>48</sup>Marian Naszkowski, „Zadania współczesnej krytyki literackiej” [Tasks of contemporary literary criticism], *Sygnaly* 13 (1934).

<sup>49</sup>Dariusz Skórczewski, „O własną tożsamość, czyli między «ars» i «scientia»” [One's identity, or between „ars” and „scientia”], in: Dariusz Skórczewski, *Spory o krytykę literacką w Dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* (Kraków: Universitas, 2002), 127.

<sup>50</sup>Dawid Warszawski [Konstanty Gebert], „Futuryści w kompanii karabinów” [Futurists and rifles], *Gazeta Wyborcza* 105 (2006): 24.

between the aesthetic programs of both critics are interesting to Mencwel and the “graduate students of Polish studies,” that is, Gebert seems to suggest, they are not interesting at all. Of course, Gebert is not a historian of literature, so his review of Shore’s book should be assessed less harshly than the unreliable fragments of Skórczewski’s monograph. Nevertheless, we are talking about a review published in a popular daily newspaper, which also contributes to the perpetuation of clichés and half-truths.

Although Shore should not be blamed for the simplifications present in the reception of her book, it is worth taking a closer look at *Caviar and Ashes* in the context of the production of ignorance about pre-war left-wing literary criticism. Primarily because when the book was published in Poland, for a brief moment pre-war left-wing literary criticism (or at least its most radical, communist representatives) became the *topic* of Polish literary life.<sup>51</sup>

As the subtitle suggests, *Caviar and Ashes* tells the story of “A Warsaw Generation’s Life and Death in Marxism.” The theme of the entire book is Marxism seen as a “seductive force” and its appeal for the twentieth-century European intelligentsia.<sup>52</sup> Shore emphasizes that, unlike Tony Judt’s *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956*, which she believes to be an example of moralizing historiography, she has “greater empathy for those about whom [she] write[s]” and is not interested in judging anyone.<sup>53</sup> She states in the introduction that

[...] perhaps in the end this book’s central contribution to our understanding of Marxism lies in this, in the exploration of Marxism as a lived experience, its messiness [...]. Rather than delineate a paradigm, I have tried to understand what it meant to live Marxism as a European, an East European, a Jewish intellectual in the twentieth century.<sup>54</sup>

The focus on “a lived experience” in all its “messiness” means that historical details play a crucial role in *Caviar and Ashes*. In the words of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, the goal is “[t]o make at least some readers forget, during the reading process, that they are *not* living in”<sup>55</sup> the

<sup>51</sup>The Polish translation of Shore’s book was reviewed in literary and cultural magazines as well as historical journals: Marek Zaleski, „Dzieci nowoczesności” [The children of modernity], *Literatura na Świecie* 9-10 (2009): 388–396; Paweł Śpiewak, „Pokolenie roku 1900” [The 1900 generation], *Literatura na Świecie* 9-10 (2009): 397–401; David Ost, „To, co osobiste i polityczne w międzywojennej Polsce” [The Personal and the political in Interwar Poland], *Res Publica Nowa* 5 (2009): 152–159; Rafał Stobiecki, [Kawior i popiół – recenzja] [Caviar and Ashes - review], *Dzieje Najnowsze* 4 (2009): 172–176; Feliks Netz, „Oczarowanie i rozzarowanie” [Enchantment and disenchantment], *Śląsk* 9 (2009): 73; Jerzy Kraszewski, *Przegląd Socjalistyczny* 3 (2009): 121–126. *Caviar and Ashes* also attracted the attention of the right-wing press: Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, „Apologia i moralna ślepotą” [Apologia and moral blindness], *Najwyższy Czas!* 15-16 (2009): XLV–XLVIII; Bohdan Urbankowski, „Skazani na tango z Mołotowem” [Doomed to tango with Molotov], *Gazeta Polska* 31 (2009): 22–24.

<sup>52</sup>Shore, *Caviar and Ashes*, 8.

<sup>53</sup>Shore, *Caviar and Ashes*, 7.

<sup>54</sup>Shore, *Caviar and Ashes*, 6.

<sup>55</sup>Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In 1926: Living on the Edge of Time* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), X. In the introduction to her book, Shore emphasizes that she is “grateful [to Gumbrecht] for the notion of the quereinschießendes Detail, a detail, perhaps ‘excessive,’ that hits obliquely” (Shore, *Caviar and Ashes*, 6). The connection with *In 1926* is also indicated by the original subtitle: *A Warsaw Generation’s Life and Death in Marxism, 1918–1968* (emphasis mine). It is also worth remembering that Gumbrecht was a member of the doctoral committee at Stanford University that evaluated Shore’s Ph.D. project, which was later published as *Caviar and Ashes*.



Second Polish Republic or in the Polish People's Republic under Stalinism. Shore explained in an interview with Justyna Sobolewska:

I wanted to achieve what is called a suspension of belief in literature, that is, I wanted to make the reader dive into the past. To make this possible, all had to be recreated in detail, including tastes, sounds, coffee, vodka, cigarettes.<sup>56</sup>

*Caviar and Ashes* was hailed for the author's empathetic and understanding attitude towards her characters (by both Polish and English reviewers). Shore did not employ "[...] primitive, anti-communist stereotypes"<sup>57</sup> and showed a lot of respect "for seemingly unnecessary historical details."<sup>58</sup> However, Shore's methodological assumptions also have their negative consequences. The central theme of the book is Marxism as a generational experience (Shore from the very beginning consciously presents it as a soteriological narrative of conversion, disappointment, and repentance)<sup>59</sup> and as such the individual literary and critical disputes in which the people described in *Caviar and Ashes* were engaged are in fact of little importance as disputes. They become important only as signs of ideological growth, characteristic of the generational experience of Marxism. Shore thus constantly reminds the reader of the fact that at one of the parties Deutscher sat Ola Watowa<sup>60</sup> on his lap, but, as David Ost has noted, "[she] avoids discussing Marxist debates in which her characters were engaged [...]"<sup>61</sup> As a result, *Caviar and Ashes*, a great read as it may be, does not really allow us to learn anything important about pre-war left-wing literary criticism.

Shore's attitude towards historical material often results in distorting or ignoring what was actually written in the essays of left-wing critics. This is the case with Witold Wandurski.<sup>62</sup> According to Shore, in his article about the Workers' Theater in Łódź published in *Nowa Kultura*, Wandurski "[o]n one hand [...] acknowledged the theatrical collective's artistic gaps and weaknesses; on the other hand he glorified these gaps and weaknesses as evidence of proletarian authenticity."<sup>63</sup> However, the article itself describes how director Tadeusz Leszczyc tried to help the workers-turned-actors overcome their formal shortcomings, so that his version of Gerhart Hauptmann's *Weavers*, Wandurski emphasizes, would not glorify the "shortcomings and imperfections" of the petty-bourgeois theatre.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>56</sup>Marci Shore, "Poparzeni ogniem rewolucji – rozmowę przeprowadziła Justyna Sobolewska" [Burned by the fire of revolution – interview by Justyna Sobolewska], *Polityka* 20 (2009) [the digital archive of *Polityka*].

<sup>57</sup>Kraszewski, 121. In her review of *Caviar and Ashes*, Irena Grudzińska-Gross emphasized that Shore's non-judgmental way of writing about the past is an antidote to the dominant Polish lustration discourse. The book was published the year President Lech Kaczyński signed an amendment to the so-called lustration act. Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *The Polish Review* 2 (2006): 230–232.

<sup>58</sup>Warszawski.

<sup>59</sup>Shore, *Caviar and Ashes*, 6.

<sup>60</sup>Throughout the book she returns to this excess detail four times, see Shore, *Caviar and Ashes*, 109, 329, 369, 372.

<sup>61</sup>Ost, 153. Ost seemed to approve of this attitude.

<sup>62</sup>For reasons that are not entirely clear, Shore consistently writes about Wandurski's literary criticism in terms of "megalomania," "graphomania," and emphasizes that his texts are too long. Shore, *Caviar and ashes*, 35, 45, 99.

<sup>63</sup>Shore, *Caviar and ashes*, 35.

<sup>64</sup>Witold Wandurski, "Scena Robotnicza w Łodzi" [The Workers' Theater in Łódź], *Nowa Kultura* 4 (1923): 107.

What Shore writes about the article *Upodobania estetyczne proletariatu* [The aesthetic preferences of the proletariat] is equally unfair. In her opinion, the article patronizes the proletariat and shows blind faith in historical determinism.<sup>65</sup> The problem is that Wandurski's article is devoted to the aesthetic education of the proletariat or, to be more precise, lack thereof. It discusses how material conditions determine the working classes' access to culture. Wandurski writes about illiteracy, the poor condition of provincial theaters, and the excessively high prices of cinema tickets. The scathing criticism is not aimed at workers, "who have neither time nor money to engage with New Art" but at the leaders of the workers' movement, who, Wandurski argues, "strangely agree with the opinions of the petty bourgeoisie and even censors" when it comes to avant-garde trends in art.<sup>66</sup> Wandurski writes about historical determinism, which Shore points out, but in the context of the "mutual understanding" between workers and the artistic avant-garde: "[...] in the West and in the East it has already happened. It will happen here too because such is the historical necessity."<sup>67</sup> Regardless of how we assess the historical accuracy of this observation and the hope for an alliance between workers and intellectuals behind it, Wandurski actually writes about something completely different than what Shore claims. Shore seems to be interested in painting a convincing portrait of a hardline communist who relies on the doctrine and not on reality. A book free from primitive anti-communist stereotypes is not the same as a book free from anti-communist stereotypes.

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Any research on left-wing literary criticism in the Interwar Period must start by recognizing how and why it was (or is) considered *not* to be a valuable subject of study for a literary scholar. The history of the reception of left-wing literary criticism in Poland, seen as the production of ignorance, shows that both in the 1950s and in the 1990s left-wing texts and critics did not "fit in" with current cultural policies. The problematic nature of left-wing literary criticism in the Interwar Period stemmed first from the fact that it was improperly or insufficiently Marxist; any references to some of those critics were censored. In turn, since the 1990s, this tradition has proved inconvenient because of its connections with Marxism and the broadly defined intellectual tradition of the Polish left. At the same time, it was after 1989 that emphasis was placed either on the political involvement of left-wing literary criticism or – as was the case with Shore's book – on the biographies of the "enchanted and the disenchanting," thus marginalizing their literary and critical work. Focusing attention on the (political, private, political and private...) biographies of critics inadvertently suggests that it is these biographies, and not specific views on literary criticism, literature, and the place of the poet/writer in social reality, that are currently

<sup>65</sup>Shore, *Caviar and Ashes*, 35-36.

<sup>66</sup>Witold Wandurski, "Upodobania estetyczne proletariatu" [The aesthetic preferences of the proletariat], *Nowa Kultura* 6 (1923): 177.

<sup>67</sup>Wandurski, 178.

worth researching.<sup>68</sup> To put it briefly, we remember that Hempel and Stande died in the Soviet Union but we do not remember what they had to say in their dispute with Stawar.

The mere observation that, despite the changing cultural and political contexts, there was no place for left-wing literary criticism of the Interwar Period in Polish literary studies allows me to answer the question posed in the title of the article. Should they be remembered? Yes. The next step must be to consider whether, in the present day, pre-war left-wing literary criticism may also constitute a “better tradition”<sup>69</sup> for anyone.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

<sup>68</sup>Agnieszka Mrozik writes about a similar process – albeit one marked by gender differences – in the context of studying female Polish communist activists. Often, the excessive focus on the personal results in the marginalization of “women’s views on political, social, and cultural issues, which are not personal statements.” Agnieszka Mrozik, „Zamiast zakończenia. Czy prawdziwe historie komunistek zostaną kiedyś napisane?” [In lieu of an ending: Will the true stories of communist women ever be written?], in: Agnieszka Mrozik, *Architektki PRL-u. Komunistki, literatura i emancypacja kobiet w powojennej Polsce* [Female architects of the Polish People’s Republic: Communists, literature, and women’s emancipation in post-war Poland] (Warsaw: IBL PAN, 2022): 453.

<sup>69</sup>Burek, „Rozmyte tradycje”, 16.

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# KEYWORDS

Andrzej Stawar

AGNOTOLOGY

Marxist criticism

**ABSTRACT:**

The article discusses the reception of pre-war left-wing literary criticism in Poland from the perspective of the “production of ignorance,” inspired by agnotology (sociology of ignorance). The author focuses on the connections between the post-war and the current official cultural policy, noticing gaps, silences, and omissions in the reception of the most important works of left-wing criticism. He also reflects on how specific ways of constructing historical narratives (re)produce ignorance about pre-war left-wing literary criticism in Poland.



# *Ignacy Fik*

*pre-war left-wing  
literary criticism*

**Marci Shore**

**NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

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# Three Mr. Bs...

## Desired and Undesired Traditions in Contemporary Criticism

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The critical personalities of the three titular “Mr. Bs” —Henryk Bereza, Jan Błoński, and Tomasz Burek—and, more precisely, the specificity of their presence or absence in the contemporary literary field, will serve as a lens through which I examine those aspects of literary critical traditions that are tied to the figure of the master. All three critics entered the 1990s with accomplishments and positions that seemingly “naturally” predisposed them – albeit for different reasons and in distinct literary milieus – to become authorities.<sup>1</sup>

I use the term “critical personalities” because I am interested not only in Bereza’s, Błoński’s, and Burek’s texts and critical strategies but, above all, in their position in the field of literature, which

<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of opinion-forming circles in the 1990s, Bereza was not considered such a critic. It should also be mentioned that in the introduction to the anthology *Była sobie krytyka... [Literary criticism...]* its authors and editors mention among others such authorities as Jan Błoński, Tomasz Burek, Jerzy Kwiatkowski, Andrzej Kijowski, Jacek Łukasiewicz, and Kazimierz Wyka. However, they argue that the young critics of the 1990s “matured on their own; they did not look back at the Old Masters” because they were “too monumental and too distant.” Dariusz Nowacki, Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Do Czytelnika” [Preface], in: *Była sobie krytyka... Wybór tekstów z lat dziewięćdziesiątych i pierwszych [Literary criticism...Selected texts from the 1990s and the 2000s]*, prefaced and edited by D. Nowacki, K. Uniłowski (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2003), 9, 10.

I perceive as an interplay of combination of tangible achievements (texts and activities within the literary field); various political, social, and communal conditions; and the shifting interpretations and evaluations of the three critics' personal and professional lives over the years.

I have chosen these three critics not for the titular concept of "Three Mr. Bs" but out of conviction – confirmed by critical texts from the 1990s and early 2000s – that among the active critics of the older generation, they were perceived as the most important and/or the most influential. My aim, however, is not to evaluate the achievements of Bereza, Błoński, and Burek or to assess the prevailing perceptions about them in the literary field today. The story of *how* these three critics have been present in the field in recent decades strikes me as (simply and profoundly) an intriguing perspective from which to examine the problems, entanglements, ruptures, and complexities of literary criticism (and literature). Although, given the constraints of this essay, it must necessarily remain a short story.

### Three Mr. Bs...

Henryk Bereza, Jan Błoński, and Tomasz Burek were influential critics operating in three distinct milieus during the final decades of the Polish People's Republic (PRL): Tomasz Burek in the democratic opposition sphere, Jan Błoński in the academic mainstream, and Henryk Bereza in the young avant-garde circles. These environments intersected and significantly overlapped within the centralized literary life of the Polish People's Republic. Even when, in the second half of the 1970s, a clear division emerged between two literary circuits –underground and official –with censorship restrictions on one side and accusations of superficiality and "socparnasianism" on the other forming substrational barriers, some social and institutional ties were still maintained. Traces of mutual ("inter-circuit") readings and discussions can still be seen in their texts.<sup>2</sup> Some examples include Andrzejewski's *Miazga* [Pulp], which was only published by the underground press, the reception of Tadeusz Konwicki's works (mainly circulated underground at the time),

<sup>2</sup> See: Stanisław Barańczak, "Fasada i tyły" [Façade and the back], Puls 2 (1977), reprinted in: Stanisław Barańczak, *Etyka i poetyka* [Ethics and poetics] (Krakow: Znak, 2009); Michał Głowiński, "Soc-parnasizm" [Socialist parnasianism], *Polityka* 6 (1981): 3, reprinted in: Michał Głowiński, *Rytuał i demagogia. Trzytnaście szkiców o sztuce zdegradowanej* [Ritual and demagogy: Thirteen essays on degraded art] (Warsaw: Open, 1992). The unique realities of the late Polish People's Republic, its political and social circles, and, since the mid-1970s, also the existence of two publishing markets, influenced literature, methods of communication, and the positions of writers and critics. Literary hierarchies and, in Bourdieu's terms, positions in the field of literature were created and determined by the elusive but influential "opinions," or more specifically "literary opinions" (cf., among others, my comments on criticism in the 1970s and the 1980s in: "Czas przyszły niedokonany, konstelacja «Miazgi» Jerzego Andrzejewskiego" [Future imperfect tense, the constellation of Jerzy Andrzejewski's 'Miazga'], in: *Konstelacje krytyczne. Tom I. Teorie i praktyki* [Critical constellations. Volume I. Theories and practices], ed. Dorota Kozicka, Monika Świerkosz, Katarzyna Trzeciak [Krakow: Universitas, 2020]). Łukasz Żurek has also commented on this. Żurek reconstructed the contexts in which Parnicki functioned in the literary field (he analyzed the role he played in the cultural policy of the Polish People's Republic and opinions about him) and described the "critical aura" of the time. It was made up of not only reviews and literary criticism but also a constellation of various other texts (columns, diaries, interviews, letters, etc.) published by both the official and the underground press. "Opinions," as traces of the system of values and conditions of literary life that influenced the reception of Parnicki's works, were also analyzed (see: "«Gnida» z «socparnasistowskiej» «fasady». Teodor Parnicki i aura krytyczna w latach 80. i na początku lat 90. XX wieku" ['A weasel' from the 'façade' of 'Socialist parnasianism.' Teodor Parnicki and the critical aura in the 1980s and the early 1990s], in: Łukasz Żurek, *Filologia lokalna – lokalność filologa. Praktyki literacko-naukowe Stefana Szymutki* [Local philology – The locality of the philologist. Literary and scholarly practices of Stefan Szymutko] Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2022)).

and the reactions of both “official” and “underground” critics to the silencing of new-wave authors and the so-called Polish new prose promoted by Henryk Berezka (“literature of Berezians”).<sup>3</sup>

Such spaces of inevitable interaction between literary scholars and critics from different backgrounds during the PRL era included institutions like the Institute of Literary Studies (IBL) in Warsaw and the journal *Teksty* [Texts], which Jan Błoński became the editor of in 1972. In 1970, Burek joined IBL as an assistant professor.<sup>4</sup> Berezka also briefly began his scholarly career there, through his tenure was short-lived.<sup>5</sup> At the time, having an academic background and combining the competencies of a literary historian or theorist with literary-critical activity was highly regarded. In a text devoted to the “adventures of literary-critical thought,” Marek Zaleski attributes this trend primarily to the growing authority of literary scholarship in the late 1960s,<sup>6</sup> although it is worth noting that such models were also provided by older generation critics, such as Kazimierz Wyka. Zaleski writes about the “appeal of the connoisseur’s discourse” and argues that at the turn of the 1960s and the 1970s, reading *Teksty* published by the Institute of Literary Studies was “equally important (if not more so)” for young students of literature and literary criticism as reading *Twórczość* [Creativity]. Still, it seems that by the late 1970s, the academic grounding of a critical voice was not unequivocally positive. The authority of expertise could (and often was) legitimized within the field of criticism through other means. This is evident, for example, in the debates on the “artistic evolution” of prose, where Berezka’s anti-academic and anti-institutional arguments, championing “genuine” reading, stand out.<sup>7</sup> By the 1990s, when young critics began to challenge the pretensions and limitations of the university establishment, Berezka, as an “anti-academic” critic, became one of their role models.

<sup>3</sup> A campaign against Berezka’s “artistic revolution” was famously initiated by Błoński in his essay “Dwie groteski i pół” [Two and a half grotesques] (*Literatura* 5 [1987]: 12–15); it took place in 1987 and 1988 in the magazine *Literatura* [Literature] published by the official press. But the dispute over the so-called “Polish new prose” dates back to the mid-1970s. The “artistic revolution” itself was proclaimed by Berezka in 1979 (“Dopowiedzenia” [Additions], *Twórczość* 5 [1979]: 161–163), and it was then that the most important texts were published by both the “official” and the “underground” press. Cf., among others, Krzysztof Rutkowski, “Przytomny uczestnik rozmowy” [Conscious conversationalist], *Literatura* 32 (1979): 12; Marian Stala, “Ucieczka od wartości” [Running away from values], *Student* 14 (1979); Bronisław Maj, “Martwe dusze” [Dead souls], *Nowy Wyrz* 7-8 (1980): 15; Andrzej Mencwel, “Co się dzieje” [What’s going on?], *Literatura* 2 (1980): 9, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Fired in 1985, he returned to the Institute of Literary Studies after 1989. Earlier, in 1977, he became a lecturer at the Flying University. In 1978, he co-founded the Society of Scientific Courses. From 1977 to 1981, he co-edited *Zapis* [Record].

<sup>5</sup> According to Berezka, he was “kind of fired” from the Institute of Literary Studies in 1957 after the reorganization and liquidation of the Department of Contemporary Literature. The then director of the Institute, Kazimierz Wyka, invited Berezka for a walk during which he explained to him that he decided to fire him because he already had a certain position in the field of literature and would certainly do well for himself, unlike others who did not have such a position. See: Adam Wiedemann, Piotr Czerski, Końcówki. Henryk Berezka mówi [Endings. Henryk Berezka talks] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2010), 51–53.

<sup>6</sup> And also the changes which took place in the Institute of Literary Studies after 1968, which led to the breakdown of the rigid scholarly framework. Marek Zaleski, “Przygody myśli krytycznoliterackiej” [Adventures of critical literary thought], in: *Sporne sprawy polskiej literatury współczesnej* [Disputed issues in Polish contemporary literature], ed. Alina Brodzka, Lidia Burska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich, 1998), 210.

<sup>7</sup> However, Zaleski also draws attention to the dual roles of the literary scholar and the literary critic and the determination of such critics as Błoński, Burek, Kwiatkowski, and Łukasiewicz to use private language and express private opinions. He also describes young critics from – as he writes – the ephemeral “generation of 1975” and their unique search for critical criteria. From the perspective of the dispute over criticism that had been going on since the “artistic revolution in prose,” the issue of the academic nature vs. the “truthfulness” of literary criticism seems particularly important to me. Berezka’s ingenious criticism of academic critics was discussed by, among others, Zygmunt Ziątek, “Misja odnowienia polskiej prozy. [O krytyce Henryka Berezki]” [The mission to renew Polish prose. (On Henryk Berezka’s criticism)], in: *Sporne postaci polskiej literatury współczesnej. Krytycy* [Disputed figures of Polish contemporary literature. Critics], ed. Alina Brodzka-Wald, Tomasz Żukowski (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich, 2003): 287–318. Cf., especially, Henryk Berezka, “Jołopizm” [Idiotism] (*Twórczość* 11 [1990]), in which he writes about the “idiot savant,” that is a literary scholar.

Above all, however, the place where the paths of various critics crossed was the journal *Twórczość*, with which Bereza had been associated since 1951.<sup>8</sup> Burek collaborated with the magazine regularly since 1961 and Błoński published his texts there as well. His book reviews also appear in the magazine, and his very good friend, whom he had met at Wyka's famous seminar, Andrzej Kijowski, was a regular contributor to *Twórczość*.

The literary-critical biographies of these critics are similar: they all debuted as critics in the literary press (despite an almost generational age difference between the eldest, Bereza, and the youngest, Burek, all three began publishing their texts in the 1950s).<sup>9</sup> Then, gradually, although at different paces, they each published successive critical books.<sup>10</sup> Their writing goes far beyond the framework of the dominant literary criticism of the Polish People's Republic, whose goals and ambitions were rather provisional. All three critics write important and insightful texts (including anthologies) about contemporary Polish literature seen as a phenomenon. Each has in their oeuvre synthesizing or authoritative texts, which became important points of reference for others and brought them recognition in their respective literary circles.

Bereza, as the author of two influential critical concepts/propositions, namely the peasant tradition<sup>11</sup> and the artistic revolution in Polish prose, and as the critic who, since 1977, ran the column "Czytane w maszynopisie" [Read in typescript]<sup>12</sup> in *Twórczość*, actively promoting his vision of literature and the "first language", was regarded as one of the most controversial (but also well-established) critics at the time. Alongside ardent opponents, there were also writers and critics, or even followers, who appreciated his approach to literature.<sup>13</sup>

Błoński, educated at the so-called Krakow School of Literary Criticism led by Kazimierz Wyka, was associated both with the Jagiellonian University in Krakow and the Institute of Literary Studies

<sup>8</sup> Bereza had been publishing in *Twórczość* regularly since 1952. From 1966 to 1978, he was the head of the magazine's literary criticism department. From 1979 to 1988, he was the head of the prose department, and in 1980 he became first deputy editor-in-chief.

<sup>9</sup> Bereza (1926–2012) published his first texts in the early 1950s in the magazine *Wieś* [Country], whose literary section was run by Maria Żmigrodzka and Maria Janion. Błoński (1931–2009) published his first reviews as early as 1949. See: Marian Zaczynski, *Bibliografia Jana Błońskiego* [Jan Błoński's bibliography], in: Marian Zaczynski, *Gospodarstwo krytyka. Teksty rozproszone. Pisma wybrane t. III* [The critic's workshop. Scattered texts. Selected writings, vol. III,], selected and edited by Marian Zaczynski (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie), 310–465. Burek (1938–2017) made his debut in 1957 in *Współczesność* [Modern times] with a review of Molière's *Don Juan* titled "Nie ma Molièra" [There is no Molière].

<sup>10</sup> Bereza's first critical book, *Sztuka Czytania* [The art of reading], was published in 1966. It was a collection of essays devoted to Polish literature and literary criticism written over 15 years. His next book, *Doświadczenia: z lektur prozy obcej* [Experiences: Reading foreign prose] (1967), was based on a similar premise. Among his other books published in the 1970s, the most popular was *Związki naturalne* [Natural relationships] (1972 and 1978). In 1979, *Proza z importu: szkice literackie* (Imported prose: Literary essays) was published. Other books followed: *Taki układ* [Such an arrangement] (1981), *Bieg rzeczy* [The course of things] (1982), and *Sposób myślenia: tom 1 – O prozie polskiej* [Way of thinking: volume 1 – On Polish prose] (1989). In 1956, Błoński published a collection of essays *Poeci i inni* [Poets and others] (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie), and, in 1961, the famous *Zmiana warty* [Changing of the guard] (Warsaw: PIW). Other books follow: *Odmarsz* [Departure] (1978) and *Romans z tekstem* [Love affair with the text] (1982) (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie). In 1971, Burek published a collection of essays entitled *Zamiast powieści* [Instead of a novel]; his next book, *Dalej aktualne* [Still relevant], was published in 1973. He published *Żadnych marzeń* [No dreams] in 1987 (London: Polonia Book Fund).

<sup>11</sup> Henryk Bereza, "Nurt chłopski w prozie" [The peasant tradition in Polish prose], *Tygodnik Kulturalny* 11 (1970).

<sup>12</sup> Bereza wrote the column from 1977 to 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Cf., among others, Bohdan Zadura, "Przyjacieli ludzi wśród książek" [A friend of people among books], *Twórczość* 10 (1979): 129–132; Roch Sulima, "Krytyka heroiczna" [Heroic criticism], *Regiony* 1 (1979): 55–72.

in Warsaw, as well as with the journals *Przekrój* [Cross-section] and later *Tygodnik Powszechny* [The Common Weekly], and with the theatre. As an academic and a brilliant literary critic, he is famous for his analysis of the prose of the “Współczesność” [Now] generation (a generation of Polish artists who made their debut around 1956) and as a propagator and interpreter of the works of Gombrowicz, Miłosz, Witkacy and Mrozek. One of Błoński’s most important and influential essays is *Bieguny poezji* [The poles of poetry] from 1973, in which he categorized postwar Polish poetry into lines of continuing the legacy of either Miłosz or Przyboś, emphasizing the significance of the former.<sup>14</sup>

Burek gained recognition for his collection of essays (and his original methodological models) *Zamiast powieści* [Instead of a novel] (1971) and *Dalej aktualne* [Still relevant] (1973), in which he discussed the current state of Polish prose and avant-garde struggles with the form of the novel. Burek was also an insightful reader and admirer of Stanisław Brzozowski. He was considered a brilliant critic who analyzed Polish literature in the broad context of social, cultural, and historical changes. He was also one of the co-founders and editors of the legendary *Zapis* [Record] journal. Associated with the democratic opposition in Poland, he was one of the first literary critics to write about the decline of criticism and underground literature, calling for works that were socially relevant and at the same time artistically refined.

## The Elders

After 1989, when important changes and reshuffles in the field of literature take place in Poland (related to the liquidation of the underground press, the publication of new magazines, and the creation of new institutions and literary circles), Jan Błoński and Henryk Berezka remained in their literary and social circles. Błoński continued to write for *Tygodnik Powszechny*,<sup>15</sup> with its editorial office in Krakow, and Berezka wrote for *Twórczość*, based in Warsaw. Tomasz Burek, however, completely changed his intellectual environment – he severed ties with the majority of his opposition friends and began to cooperate with *Arcana*, *Dziennik* [Daily], *Życie* [Life], and *Gazeta Polska* [The Polish Newspaper].<sup>16</sup> Thus, once again (as emphasized by, among others, Maciej Urbanowski), he positioned himself in opposition to the mainstream.<sup>17</sup>

Jan Błoński was by far the most influential critic at the time of the transformation. Janusz Sławiński in his enthusiastic 1979 essay, an editorial to the fourth issue of *Teksty*, entitled

<sup>14</sup>Jan Błoński, “Bieguny poezji” [Poles of poetry], in: Jan Błoński, *Odmarsz* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1978). Talk delivered at the Warsaw Poetic Autumn Festival in 1973. First edition published under the title “Aktualność i trwałość” [Current and lasting], *Miesięcznik Literacki* 1 (1974): 39–44.

<sup>15</sup>Cf., among others, collection of Błoński’s short essays published in *Tygodnik Powszechny* from September 2000 to March 2001 – *Mieszanki* [Mixtures] (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001).

<sup>16</sup>Burek also sat on the jury of right-wing awards, namely the Andrzej Kijowski Award and the Józef Mackiewicz Literary Award.

<sup>17</sup>It should be noted, however, that the opposition circles were – and are still considered to be so from the perspective of the 1990s and the 2000s – mainstream and influential, because they created the literary hierarchies of the second half of the 1970s and the 1980s. Cf., among others, Przemysław Czaplinski, *Ślady przełomu. O prozie polskiej 1976–1996* [Traces of a breakthrough: Polish prose 1976–1996] (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997); Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Po roku 1970” [After 1970], in: Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Polska proza innowacyjna w perspektywie postmodernizmu* [Polish innovative prose and postmodernism] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1999).

“Za co powinniśmy kochać Jana Błońskiego?” [Why should we love Jan Błoński?],<sup>18</sup> discusses the anti-institutional qualities of this critic. Błoński’s presence in the literary space was simultaneously accessible to the general public and seen as unorthodox in relation to the communist regime. His combination of academic authority with a free style of critical discourse; his victory in his dispute with Bereza<sup>19</sup>; his role on the jury of the Kościelski Award, which, though it was awarded by a foundation based in Geneva, proved very influential for Polish literature; and his famous and widely discussed essay *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* [Poor Poles look at the ghetto]<sup>20</sup> – these are just some of the circumstances contributing to his authority and influence.

The authors of the textbook on literary criticism *Literatura polska po 1989 roku w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieu* [Polish literature after 1989 in the light of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory] refer to Błoński as *the* critic who at that time “played the most institutional role as someone who hierarchized and ordered literature; he was also an autonomous player who recognized and named specific trends and phenomena in the field of literature.” Błoński is described as the “last anointing critic,” that is a critic who determined the places of debutants in the field of literature.<sup>21</sup> Błoński also writes from this position in his 1990 book *Bezładne rozważania starego krytyka, który zastanawia się, jak napisałby historię prozy polskiej w latach istnienia Polski Ludowej* [Disorderly considerations of an old critic who wonders how he would write a history of Polish prose at the time of the Polish People’s Republic]. In the book, despite the title, although in a rather free, sometimes sarcastic and malicious tone, he orders post-war literature in accordance with his readerly preferences. He writes, among other things, about the “longue durée” of socialist realism and the failure of “thaw” literature (that is literature created after the death of Stalin). In his opinion, the most valuable trend in the Polish prose of the 1960s and the 1970s is the “emigration of the imagination” and the search for lost identity. He is also disappointed in avant-garde literature. The tone of his short description

<sup>18</sup>Janusz Sławiński, “Za co powinniśmy kochać Jana Błońskiego?” [Why should we love Jan Błoński?], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (1979): 1–9, reprinted in: Janusz Sławiński, *Teksty i teksty* [Texts and texts] (Warsaw: PEN, 1990). Błoński is mentioned as one of the “last representatives of a dying breed (at least spiritually) – the private literary and critical initiative.” And Błoński’s literary criticism, as Sławiński further writes, is located “outside the repertoire of forms and modes of expression considered useful in Polish literary life [...]; [Błoński] speaks his mind, challenging the norms.”

<sup>19</sup>Cf. footnote 2.

<sup>20</sup>“Tygodnik Powszechny” 2 (1987).

<sup>21</sup>Michał Sowiński, Katarzyna Trzeciak, “Krytyczne pozycje. Od krytyki konsekrującej do krytyki natywnej” [Critical positions: From consecrating criticism to native criticism], 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 handbook], ed. Grzegorz Jankowicz, Piotr Marecki, Michał Sowiński (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2015), 231. Błoński’s review of Weiser Dawidek [Who was David Weiser] (“Duch opowieści i wąs Stalina” [The spirit of the story and Stalin’s moustache], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 44 [1987]) contributed to the phenomenal popularity of this novel in 1987. Writing about the literary debuts of Paweł Huelle and Magdalena Tulli, Sowiński and Trzeciak rightly note that Błoński’s institutional power as a “make-or-break” critic was based on a combination of two factors: he wrote for a very popular magazine (primarily *Tygodnik Powszechny*) using a critical language that allowed the reviewed text to “speak” (in other words, he tried to respond and react to every text in an original manner). Cf. Jerzy Jarzębski, “Namaszczanie” [Anointing], in: *Jan Błoński ...i literatura XX wieku* [Jan Błoński ...and 20th century literature], ed. Ryszard Nycz, Małgorzata Sugiera (Kraków: Universitas 2002). It is also worth recalling, however, that Błoński tried to promote Myszkowski’s novel in 1992 and failed. Czaplinski writes about it in a slightly different context – showing the painful clash between literary criticism (and the authority previously attributed to it) and popular literature and media reality (*Żwawy trup. Krytyka literacka 1989-2004* [Lively corpse. Literary criticism 1989-2004], in: Przemysław Czaplinski, *Powrót centrali. Literatura w nowej rzeczywistości* [The return of the center: Literature in the new reality] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 2007), 87-132).

of the trend, subtitled *Awangarda Jej Ludowej Mości?* [Its majesty the people's avant-garde?], aligns with his negative assessment, particularly deprecating "Bereza's darlings."<sup>22</sup>

Tomasz Burek enters the 1990s with no lesser authority, being considered one of the most important critics of the democratic opposition. In addition to his earlier analyses of avant-garde prose, his new publications *Rozmyte tradycje* [Blurred traditions] and *Jaka historia literatury jest nam dzisiaj potrzebna?* [What history of literature do we need today?] also garnered significant attention. In the latter, he described four defining features of Polish literature: its political nature, its engagement with the philosophy of history, its religiosity, and its supra-literary nature.<sup>23</sup> Burek's spectacular transition to right-wing criticism, and especially his feuilletons published in *Gazeta Polska* between 1996 and 2000, later republished in *Dziennik kwarantanny* [Quarantine diary] in 2001, contributed to the rejection (or silencing) of his opinions in the Polish literary world. However, he is not so much forgotten or pushed out of the center of the literary field as he becomes the most important authority of right-wing criticism, and his opinions – although they differ from the voices of the contemporary mainstream – carried considerable influence. Importantly, young authors and critics are gradually establishing their own hierarchies, often challenging the pre-transformation divisions and social and political coteries.

The fact that Błoński and Burek were the two strongest points of reference in the 1990s is also reflected in the remarks of other critics, for example Krzysztof Uniłowski, who, assessing the prose of the time wrote: "Meanwhile, the 'literature of the thirty-year-olds' still waits for Jan Błoński or Tomasz Burek to enthusiastically praise its merits. It created a myth according to which it was born *ex nihilo* at the turn of 1989 and 1990."<sup>24</sup> Maciej Urbanowski, emphasizing the importance of Antoni Libera's *Madame*, argued in 2000:

<sup>22</sup>He writes: "Do you notice a distinct avant-garde tendency in prose? Not really. With one exception, where quantity triumphed over quality. I refer to "the prose of *Twórczość*," "the school of Bereza," the new novel or what have you. Its greatest triumph, paradoxically, dates to the turn of the 1970s and the 1980s. The "new novel" was often defined as prose which was written like poetry, that is, prose which focused on its literary quality. What is most striking in these books is the very act of speaking, writing, telling, inventing. Hence the interest in language, or rather languages, because Bereza's favorites like to mix idiolects and sociolects, change styles and even genres of expression, which is supposed to show the authors' social advancement... The problem is that the contrived and semi-grotesque worlds they create are rarely interesting or at least coherent. Having filtered out the linguistic extravagances, the reader quickly recognizes ordinary youthful dreams and common frustrations, spiced up with social (or verbal) provocation. So much for our Marquezes and Musils, Lisowski dixit. And it is probably no coincidence that after almost twenty years, none of these geniuses has lived to see success or at least recognition. So perhaps the avant-garde also failed in the Polish People's Republic" (Jan Błoński, "Beżładne rozważania starego krytyka, który zastanawia się, jak napisać historię prozy polskiej w latach istnienia Polski Ludowej" [Disorderly considerations of an old critic who he wonders how he would write a history of Polish prose at the time of the Polish People's Republic], *Teksty Drugie* 1 [1990]: 11–12). Uniłowski disagrees; in an essay devoted to the prose of Dariusz Bittner, looking forward to the reactivation of the publishing series "Nowa prosa polska" [New Polish prose] and considering this event a "sign of normalization," he writes in a footnote: "Wishful thinking. Contrary to what Jan Tomkowski wrote a few years ago, for young people the dispute between Błoński and Bereza is not something distant and insignificant. They consider its result, i.e. the complete defeat of the writers associated with *Twórczość*, conclusive. Some still believe, therefore, that what prose writers associated with *Twórczość* propose should be ignored, that it should be dismissed with a joke. Even if the proposals of some of them do not differ from what "thirty-year-olds" write. Even if some of them are "thirty-year-olds." But why should you [author's emphasis] read something if Błoński mocked it?" ("Błogosławione skutki niemocy" [Blessed results of infirmity], in: Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Skądinąd* [Anyway] [Bytom: Wydawnictwo FA-art, 1998], 96).

<sup>23</sup>Both were published in the collection *Żadnych marzeń*. *Rozmyte tradycje* was published earlier in the collection *Badania nad krytyką literacką* [Studies on literary criticism] (ed. Michał Głowiński, Krzysztof Dybciak [Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1984]). This essay is one of Burek's most frequently cited texts; *Jaka historia literatury jest nam dzisiaj potrzebna?* [What history of literature do we need today?] was published in 1979 as a pamphlet.

<sup>24</sup>Krzysztof Uniłowski, "Chłopcy i dziewczęta znikąd" [Boys and girls from nowhere], in: Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Skądinąd* (Bytom: Wydawnictwo FA-art, 1998), 11.



*Madame* was awarded first prize in a competition organized by the Znak publishing house. On the jury we find critics associated with the “party” which appears to control Polish literature today, Błoński and Jarzębski. Immediately afterwards, the brilliancy of *Madame* was confirmed by the jury (headed by Tomasz Burek) of the “oppositional” Andrzej Kijowski Award.<sup>25</sup>

Henryk Bereza finds himself in the least favourable position at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. Pushed into the corner of the critical field as a result of his dispute with Błoński, he became known as a critic of the lost cause, dogmatic, inflating weak and incomprehensible novels to the status of masterpieces. The authors of *Literatura polska 1976–1998* [Polish literature 1976–1998] (including active young critics) seem to best describe the image of Bereza that dominated in the 1990s. In the chapter devoted to the “artistic revolution in prose,” they described him as a late avant-gardist, a critic who was tireless in promoting new and innovative prose, “eager to provoke unrest and uncritical of the chaos he created.”<sup>26</sup> They also pointed out that Bereza made empty promises, and compared his actions to “a psychomachy, a war waged against imaginary opponents, whom the critic invariably ‘portrayed as philistines,’ accusing them of ‘literary illiteracy,’ hypocrisy, aesthetic conservatism, trivial taste [...]”<sup>27</sup> How Bereza described Miłosz in a questionnaire of Parisian *Kultura* [Culture], entitled *Pisarze niedoceniieni – pisarze przecenieni* [Underestimated writers – overestimated writers], was also considered bizarre.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand – initially only in a small circle of his supporters – Bereza was considered an exceptional critic who was wronged by the opposition which became the mainstream. He was seen as a stubborn and consistent defender of artistic values (and not moral or political ones) and the literature of the 1980s. And despite, for example, texts devoted to the “black hole of the 1980s”<sup>29</sup> and Jerzy Jarzębski’s essay published in *Teksty Drugie* in 1990 [Second texts], where he wrote “I won’t mention the ‘artistic revolution’ because one doesn’t kick a man when he’s down,”<sup>30</sup> some critics defended Bereza and his favorite writers.<sup>31</sup> While critical opinions dominate in the 1990s, literary criticism also eventually acknowledges other aspects of the phenomenon of the school of Bereza. Apart from the circumstances which surround the formation of a group of writers who consider themselves students or enthusiasts of a given

<sup>25</sup>Maciej Urbanowski, “Syzyfowe prace (w 1965 roku)” [The labors of Sisyphus (in 1965)], in: Maciej Urbanowski, *Dezerterzy i żołnierze. Szkice o literaturze polskiej 1991–2006* [Deserters and soldiers: Essays on Polish literature 1991–2006] (Kraków: Arcana, 2007), 128. First printing: *Nowożytny Postygodnik* [Modern Postweek] 7 (2000).

<sup>26</sup>The chaos in question was both “sociological,” “because as the editor of *Twórczość*, Bereza institutionalized the revolution,” and “chaos,” “because when the critic announced the ‘revolution’ he relied on a vaguely defined and double criterion of linguistic innovation” (Przemysław Czapliński, Piotr Śliwiński, *Literatura polska 1976–1998. Przewodnik po prozie i poezji* [Polish literature 1976–1998. A guide to prose and poetry] [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999], 48).

<sup>27</sup>Czapliński, Śliwiński, 51.

<sup>28</sup>Bereza wrote about Miłosz: “he happens to be a poet from time to time, he is a mediocre prose writer and a skilled essayist, which is perhaps enough to win a Nobel Prize, but it is not enough for true greatness” (“*Pisarze niedoceniieni – pisarze przecenieni* [ankieta «Kultury»]” [Underestimated writers – overestimated writers (Kultura’s questionnaire)], *Kultura* [1992], 7–8).

<sup>29</sup>“Czarna dziura lat osiemdziesiątych. O literaturze ostatniej dekady dyskutują: Jan Błoński, Tadeusz Nyczek, Jerzy Jarzębski, Marian Stala oraz – ze strony redakcji TP – Jerzy Pilch” [The black hole of the 1980s. The literature of the last decade is discussed by: Jan Błoński, Tadeusz Nyczek, Jerzy Jarzębski, Marian Stala and – a member of *Tygodnik Powszechny* editorial board – Jerzy Pilch], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 13 (1990): 1, 4–5.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Jerzy Jarzębski, “Apetyt na Przemianę” [Appetite for change], *Teksty Drugie* 3 (1990): 5, reprinted in: Jerzy Jarzębski, *Apetyt na Przemianę* (Kraków: Znak, 1997), 9.

<sup>31</sup>See: Tadeusz Komendant, “Trywialne pytanie o prozę” [A trivial question about prose], *Tygodnik Literacki*, 1 (1990): 4–5; Jerzy Łukosz, “Prozaiczna głębia. Dopisek do polemiki o prozie” [Prosaic depth: My opinion in the debate about prose], *Tygodnik Literacki* 11 (1990): 1, 6; Krzysztof Rutkowski, “Bereziada” [The saga of Bereza], *Twórczość* 10 (1996): 52–59.

literary critic, which is worthy of sociological reflection, there are also more fundamental issues at stake. They concern the broader view of Polish literature and its development – disputes over avant-garde traditions and a reevaluation of the achievements of the Polish People's Republic.

## Departure

It seemed that Jan Błoński's anti-institutional stance (as Janusz Sławiński emphasized), based on readerly revelations, close personal reading, and textual romances (as seen in the writings of Roland Barthes), would be an important point of reference for young critics in the 1990s. However, that was not the case. Błoński's newfound fame (not only in locally Krakow – in the circles associated with the Polish studies magazines *Gołębnik* [Pigeon house], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, and *Znak* [Sign] – but also in Poland, as evidenced by the first page of the first issue of *Tygodnik Literacki* [Literary Weekly], a new nationwide literary magazine,<sup>32</sup> and the fact that Błoński was invited to join the jury of the Nike Literary Award established in 1997<sup>33</sup>) is accompanied by deprecating voices from younger critics reacting both to his level of interest in new literature, his “make-or-break” status, his hermetic style of writing, and his positioning as an academic and a member of the intelligentsia.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, a more serious campaign was underway. Poetic traditions, other than the one defined by Czesław Miłosz,<sup>35</sup> were to be reclaimed for Polish poetry. Also, Henryk Berezka, as young scholars argued, should regain his rightful place as a literary critic. Błoński, less and less active due to his progressing illness, did not take a direct part in this discussion. Still, he was seen as an important adversary, responsible for maintaining the canon of ‘beautiful poetry’ at the expense of avant-garde tendencies and for diminishing the critical activity of the patron of the artistic revolution in prose. In both of these matters (which intertwine significant efforts in recent years to gain recognition for avant-garde achievements and traditions), Błoński's texts from the 1970s are foundational for the polemicists.

The “question of poetry” was discussed in detail by Joanna Orska, who in *Republika poetów. Poetyckość i polityczność w krytycznej praktyce* [The republic of poets. Poetry and politics in critical

<sup>32</sup>Tygodnik Literacki was published from 17 June 1990 to June 1991. As Galant writes, analyzing, among other things, the exceptionally long list of staff in the editorial footer of the first issue, the periodical was to be a nationwide and cross-generational platform for dialogue – a magazine that would transcend generational and community animosities (Jan Galant, “«Tygodnik Literacki», czyli próba istnienia pogranicznego” [Tygodnik Literacki, or an attempt to exist on the border], in: *Boom i kryzys. Nowe czasopisma literacko-artystyczne i społeczno-kulturalne w Polsce po roku 1980* [Boom and crisis: New literary, artistic and socio-cultural magazines in Poland after 1980], ed. Magdalena Rabizo-Birek [Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2012], 125–138). In this context, featuring Błoński on the first page of the first issue (Jan Błoński, “Przeciw liczmanom” [Against banality]) seems significant. A different generation, environment, and views on prose are represented in this issue by Tadeusz Komendant and his essay “Trywialne pytanie o prozę.”

<sup>33</sup>Błoński was a member of the first jury (1997–2000).

<sup>34</sup>For example, during an editorial discussion in 1997, when asked “Are older critics trying to do something?,” Krzysztof Koehler replied: “We certainly cannot hand everything over to Professor Jan Błoński, who sleeps, suddenly wakes up, shows up, and then falls asleep again. So, I disagree with the thesis that older critics are trying to do something” (“Na powierzchni literatury i w środku...” [On the surface of literature and inside...], *Kresy* 1 [1995]: 20).

<sup>35</sup>In the famous “Apel poległych” [Roll call of the fallen] from 1993, Sosnowski writes about the state of poetry and specifically the “paradigm of new-wave poetry.” He also points out the shift in emphasis that occurred “in a manner as ethically determined as the one in which Błoński once put an end to the avant-garde.” Andrzej Sosnowski, “Apel poległych” (o poezji naiwnej i sentymentalnej w Polsce) [Roll call of the fallen (On naive and sentimental poetry in Poland)], *Kresy* 16 (1993): 158–164, reprinted in: Andrzej Sosnowski, *Najryzykowniej* [The riskiest] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2027), 17–29.

practice], published in 2013, analyzed critical texts that defined the expectations towards poetry in the 1990s. In the chapters entitled “Linia Miłosza” [Miłosz’s legacy] and “Obywatel poeta” [The poet citizen], Orska shows how in the 1970s and the 1980s attempts were made to invalidate the entire sphere of Polish avant-garde poetry, criticized by Błoński in *Odmarsz* [Departure] for continuing the legacy of Przyboś. Only some literary languages were canonized. Orska also conducts a detailed analysis of Błoński’s *Bieguny poezji* and his critical method<sup>36</sup> from the perspective of the avant-garde and the opposition between literature and politics. She argues that designating the respective traditions of Miłosz and Przyboś was not a neutral ordering of the literary field, made from a dissident perspective. On the contrary, Błoński showed whom he values more. Which makes him (along with Miłosz) responsible for distorting the achievements of the avant-garde.<sup>37</sup>

Błoński was held accountable for favoring “Miłosz’s legacy” and for actively promoting it during the times of the Polish People’s Republic. That is also why Miłosz’s legacy was actively challenged in the 1990s and the 2000s by young poets and critics who fought for the recognition of other poetics and traditions in Polish poetry. While we have witnessed a noticeable change in the critical reception of Miłosz’s poetry/Miłosz as a literary figure in recent years, Błoński was not absolved of his “crime.” Observing this change, Jakub Skurtys, again recalls the “visions of literature and criticism that relied on Błoński’s simplifying ethical and political binaries,” and points to Miłosz’s role in defending the ethos of the intelligentsia (especially in Krakow).<sup>38</sup> This last issue seems all the more interesting, as it recalls a reason for the aversion

<sup>36</sup> Orska discusses Błoński’s critical views and methods in detail. She describes the way in which Błoński combines the social with the literary from two perspectives. For one, Orska argues, it may be read in terms of the represented (Christian, essentially romantic) worldview which determines the critic’s choices. Respectively, it may also be read as an active intervention in the state of literature. In doing so, she reveals “the hidden premises of the personalist reading” – the notion that the work is sacred, judgments that exist “as if beyond the democratic textual encounter with the ‘other,’” anti-relativism. Focusing on texts from the 1960s and the 1970s (mostly reprinted in *Odmarsz*), Orska shows how literary criticism, which appears to rely on “neutral” and “authentic” foundations, may be considered ideological, and how the understanding of a work of art and greatness of spirit resulting from such an approach to literature translates into dismissing the avant-garde as a “fad” (Joanna Orska, *Republika poetów. Poetyckość i polityczność w krytycznej praktyce* [The republic of poets. Poetry and politics in critical practice] [Krakow: EMG, 2013], 86–97).

<sup>37</sup> In the afterword to the anthology *Awangarda jest rewolucyjna albo nie ma jej wcale* [The avant-garde is either revolutionary or it does not exist at all], Orska reminds us that Polish poetry was stylistically varied and that the avant-garde played a significant role in it. In her opinion, until Białoszewski’s death (1983), “the avant-garde experimental margin in poetry remained in literary criticism not so much a synonym for something worse, less important and difficult, but something in which readers were genuinely interested.” As a result, poets who challenged readers (Różewicz, Karpowicz, Wirpsza) were truly admired. And the poetic programs of artistic groups from the 1960s and the 1970s show that experimentation determined the artistic horizons of many poets. It was not until the 1980s that the avant-garde approach was challenged by the underground press and the Polish canon was narrowed down to a set of rules consistent with the aesthetic and moral decorum created by the “Old Masters” of Polish poetry. “The authorities which created the new Polish canon associated the avant-garde – which was seen, following Miłosz, as a failed experiment – with the communist past, with the Marxist concept of art; it was to fade into oblivion in a new democratic Poland” (Joanna Orska, “Awangarda jest potrzebna jak powietrze” [The avant-garde is as necessary as air], in: *Awangarda jest rewolucyjna albo nie ma jej wcale* [The avant-garde is either revolutionary or it does not exist at all], edited and compiled by Joanna Orska, Andrzej Sosnowski [Poznań: WBPiCAK, 2019], 630).

<sup>38</sup> Jakub Skurtys, “Miłosz strikes back. Powrót poety politycznego” [Miłosz strikes back. The return of the political poet], in: Jakub Skurtys, *Wiersz... i cała reszta. Rozważania o poezji i krytyce po 1989 roku* [The poem... and all that. Reflections on poetry and criticism after 1989] (Krakow: Universitas, 2021), 323. And Piotr Śliwiński, in an essay devoted to the dark side of Miłosz’s poetry, writes about Miłosz’s darkness “which Błoński marginalized in his suggestive interpretations” (Piotr Śliwiński, “Z ciemności” [Out of darkness], in: Piotr Śliwiński, *Horror poeticus. Szkice, notatki* [Horror poeticus. Essays, notes] [Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2012], 174).

to Błoński, which is often revealed in such a slogan-like manner. The “Krakowness” of Miłosz, canonized in the 1980s, like Błoński’s own “Krakowness” (however one defines this seemingly obvious label), is a recognizable feature treated by a significant portion of critics, probably as a result of the dispute over the artistic revolution,<sup>39</sup> quite unfavorably.

Andrzej Skrendo (a literary scholar and critic, an enthusiast of Bereza’s criticism<sup>40</sup>) brilliantly challenges Błoński’s methodologies and findings. In “Błoński idiosynkrazje” [Błoński – idiosyncrasies], Skrendo deconstructs the formula of Błoński’s “love affair with the text,” looking at it from the perspective of those who were “unjustly and severely” rejected and excluded, not least because Błoński was “already having an affair with someone else and was not looking for any new relationships.” Skrendo discusses Błoński’s “idiosyncrasies,” that is, moments where he stops and “refuses to understand, even though he is usually so sensitive and so ready to make an effort to understand poetry [...]” For Skrendo, the prime example of such a rejection are the works of Tadeusz Różewicz, but the same applies to the works of Miron Białoszewski and the entire tradition of linguistic poetry, as well as to Henryk Bereza and his favorite prose writers. Skrendo also demonstrates that Błoński read his favorite authors in a very peculiar manner. Błoński, as Skrendo points out, writes about Witkacy’s “ludicrousness,” Mrozek’s “personal fantasies,” Gombrowicz’s “nonsense,” Borowski’s “negligence,” Beckett’s “bad manners,” and Kołakowski’s “ridiculousness.” Such biased criticism, echoes of which we also find in the critic’s diary entries and letters, show that “Błoński’s relation with literature (especially with the writers he valued the most, that is Gombrowicz and Witkacy) is governed by a religious pattern of temptation and a vision of the world that greatly differs from the one found in the works of the contemporary writers he interprets.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup>This issue seems intriguing to me for at least two reasons. First, I am curious as to why Bereza disliked Błoński and “Krakow,” after all, most essays which criticized the “artistic revolution” were published in Warsaw magazines, and Bereza himself had been criticized more harshly and more directly before Błoński’s famous essay “Dwie groteski i pół...” (cf., among others, Michał Łukaszewicz, “Nie wierzę Berezie!” [I do not believe Bereza!], *Więź* 6 [1983]: 142–145). One could probably also look for personal reasons (related to Wyka’s decision?), as evidenced by Bereza’s criticism of “Krakowness.” However, the fundamental reason seems to be Błoński’s position and influence in the 1980s. And both critics had had completely different views on literature already since the prose of the *Współczesność* generation. The issues of an “academic” vs. an “artistic” relation with literature, the “work of reading,” intellectualism, and legitimizing the critical literary voice, discussed by Bereza in various texts over many years, undoubtedly played an important role as well. Secondly, I am intrigued by the stereotype of the “Krakow school of criticism” / “Krakow ethos” / “the Krakow intelligentsia” that may still be found in Polish literary criticism, especially since it is contrasted with the “innovative” and the “new.”

<sup>40</sup>Cf., among others, Andrzej Skrendo, “Czy istnieje proza lingwistyczna?” [Is there linguistic prose?], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2004); Andrzej Skrendo, “Genologia Henryka Berezy (kilka wstępnych ustaleń)” [Genology of Henryk Bereza (some preliminary findings)], in: *Dyskursy krytyczne u progu XXI wieku* [Critical discourses at the threshold of the 21st century], ed. Dorota Kozicka, Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski (Krakow: Universitas, 2007).

<sup>41</sup>Skrendo writes: “Błoński fights against what he is attracted to; [...] he likes to taste the forbidden fruit, and at the same time he feels guilty about it. It is tempting to think that in some sense he is forever part of the world he described in his book about Mikołaj Sęp Szarzyński. According to Błoński – and he is probably right – Sęp Szarzyński for the first time in Polish literature “notices the instability, incoherence, multiplicity of the ‘I.’ The writer’s obsession with movement corresponds to the need for stability – and this is provided by God. It would be difficult to say that Gombrowicz or Witkacy live in one of those worlds but perhaps Błoński does? And perhaps for this very reason he finds Kołakowski helpless and ridiculous, and Gombrowicz’s syringe is – at best – ‘foolish’” (Andrzej Skrendo, “Jan Błoński – idiosynkrazje” [Błoński – idiosyncrasies], *Wielogłos* 4 [2014]: 45–52). The intention to challenge Błoński’s way of reading literature leads to a reevaluation of features for which the critic is valued by others. See, for example, what Teresa Walas says about Błoński in: Marta Wyka, Teresa Walas, Małgorzata Sugiera, “Głosy o Błońskim” [Debate about Błoński], *Znak* 1 (2011): 133–136.

In the dispute over the “artistic revolution,” Błoński is criticized and his status as a “European critic of Polish literature”<sup>42</sup> is increasingly challenged. Respectively, Bereza’s output and achievements are emphasized. In *Henryk Bereza w świetle uprzedzeń Jana Błońskiego. Kulisy pewnego sporu* [Henryk Bereza in the light of Jan Błoński’s prejudices. Behind the scenes of a dispute], Andrzej Śnioszek, following in Skrendo’s footsteps, shows Błoński as an unreliable critic who judges the works of writers promoted by Bereza through the prism of his aversion to his colleague. Błoński, Śnioszek writes, also often relies on biased generalizations (which are later repeated by others). Śnioszek shows that Błoński was actually guilty of what he accused Bereza of: Błoński “was in fact a self-appointed opinion-maker, and he should be called out on his dogmatic judgements.” Śnioszek further explains that the clash between the two critics was not motivated by different literary preferences reflecting “fundamental discrepancies between contradictory visions of literature.” Contrary to what some literary critics and literary historians claim, it was not a literary dispute. Błoński’s idiosyncrasies, which had little or nothing to do with literature, played a huge role in it. One such idiosyncrasy should be discussed in greater detail because to some extent it touches – personally – on what Orska drew attention when she wrote that the aversion to the avant-garde traditions in the early 1990s was a result of anti-communist sympathies.<sup>43</sup> Writing about Błoński’s involvements outside of literature *per se*, Śnioszek draws attention to the critic’s aversion to the Polish People’s Republic:

It seems, therefore, that Błoński mostly disliked Bereza because Bereza valued works which were deeply rooted in the Polish People’s Republic. This was not a “literary” concern. On the one hand, the authors of such works did not feel obliged to fight against the communist authorities (which does not mean that they supported communism; rather, they simply chose to focus on different “tasks” of art). On the other hand, they were not ashamed to describe “gray communism,” the realities of everyday life.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to Błoński’s idiosyncrasies, Bereza’s method, based, among other things, on the study of the (timeless) *f i r s t l a n g u a g e*, was – according to Śnioszek – free from extra-literary entanglements.

“Such an arrangement”

Henryk Bereza’s dynamic positioning in the field of literary criticism in the past thirty years is best summarized by the title of Karol Maliszewski’s 2016 essay *Od krytyka przegranego do*

<sup>42</sup>Nycz coined this phrase (Ryszard Nycz, *Kultura jako czasownik. Sondowanie nowej humanistyki* [Culture as a verb. Exploring the new humanities] [Warsaw: IBL PAN, 2017], 193), and Śnioszek later quotes it in his text in order to show that in fact Błoński was not the kind of critic that Nycz describes him as – reliable, tolerant, “disinterestedly curious.” Andrzej Śnioszek, “Henryk Bereza w świetle uprzedzeń Jana Błońskiego. Kulisy pewnego sporu” [Henryk Bereza in the light of Jan Błoński’s prejudices. Behind the scenes of a dispute]. *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, sectio FF – Philologiae* 2 (2018): 299–314.

<sup>43</sup>Joanna Orska, *Republika poetów*. Cf. also: Orska, “Awangarda jest potrzebna jak powietrze.”

<sup>44</sup>Śnioszek, 52.

*patrona młodych* [From a failed critic to the patron saint of the young].<sup>45</sup> Maliszewski, himself an active literary since the 1990s, describes this transformation referring to his own (private and public) experiences. He emphasizes, among other things, that Bereza actively supported young writers and critics. Maliszewski calls Bereza the “patron saint of experimental, risky, unpredictable writing:”

When the war was being fought, when existing hierarchies were being destroyed, Bereza was an emblem one could and should claim. And he himself waited for a sign from the next ascending generation. He was ready for a creative dialogue with the young. In both his personal and literary experiences he was open to novelty and otherness. And as one of the few critics of the older generation, he entered into a relationship with the new vision of the world and literature, which grew with *Nowy Nurt* [New Trend].<sup>46</sup>

*Wypiski* [Notes] (2006),<sup>47</sup> a collection of short articles published in “*Twórczość*” between 1991 and 2004, demonstrates for Maliszewski that Bereza actively participated “in the formation of new Polish literature after 1989.” It also shows that “this critic, ridiculed by academics, was one of the few critically and empathetically prepared to study and help foster the new spirit in Polish literature.”<sup>48</sup> Maliszewski lists the excellent features of Bereza’s (emphasized as anti-academic) critical work and personality throughout his essay.

In addition to Maliszewski’s account of Bereza’s brilliance, we should also mention other circles which have embraced Bereza as their master. These include the Warsaw circle of writers, critics, and friends (Bohdan Zadura, Adam Wiedemann, Paweł Orzeł, each from a different generation) and the Szczecin Henryk Bereza Literature Foundation (which, among other things, published *Wypiski*, and in 2013 a special issue of the magazine *eleWator* dedicated to Bereza<sup>49</sup>), as well as young writers and critics. Bereza is present in the field of literary criticism

<sup>45</sup>Karol Maliszewski, “Od krytyka przegranego do patrona młodych. Henryk Bereza jako krytyk po 1989 roku” [From a failed critic to the patron of the young. Henryk Bereza as a critic after 1989], in: *Krytyka po przełomie. Wybrane problemy z dwudziestopięcioletnia 1989–2014* [Literary criticism after the transformation. Selected issues from 1989–2014], ed. Marek Kurkiewicz, Robert Mielhorski (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, 2016), 207–230.

<sup>46</sup>Maliszewski, 213. “Obrachunek” [Reckoning] – a text written by Bereza in response to the question “Do I feel like a failed critic?” – was published in the first issue of *Nowy Nurt* [New trend] (Henryk Bereza, “Obrachunek” [Reckoning], *Nowy Nurt* 1 [1994]: 3); an interview with Bereza was published in the fourth issue (“Marzę o wtajemniczeniu doskonałym. Z Henrykiem Berezą, krytykiem, rozmawia Krzysztof Szymoniak” [I dream of a perfect initiation. Krzysztof Szymoniak talks to the literary critic Henryk Bereza] *Nowy Nurt* 4 [1994]: 4–5); and Maliszewski’s essay was published in the thirteenth issue (Karol Maliszewski, “Bereza, czyli antropologia [w drodze do Krakowa]” [Bereza, or anthropology [on the way to Krakow]], *Nowy Nurt* 13 [1994]: 1, 6). Maliszewski writes about a literary criticism panel organized in 1998 by the editors of the Wrocław magazine *Dykcja* [Diction] to which Bereza was invited: “Some of those present treated what he said almost as the words of an oracle, while others thought they had to argue with him as critics of a younger generation” (Maliszewski, “Od krytyka przegranego do patrona młodych”, 218). A long interview with the critic was later conducted by Adam Wiedemann and Piotr Czerniawski, *Końcówki. Henryk Bereza mówi* (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2010).

<sup>47</sup>Henryk Bereza, *Wypiski* [Notes], selected by Paweł Nowakowski, Andrzej Skrendo (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Forma, 2006). In the afterword to *Wypiski*, Skrendo points out that many of Bereza’s key ideas take on new meaning in a new cultural situation.

<sup>48</sup>Maliszewski, “Od krytyka przegranego do patrona młodych,” 226.

<sup>49</sup>*eleWator* 3 (2013).

not only as an author of critical essays<sup>50</sup> but above all as the object of veneration of a young literary community. The special issues of *Mały Format* [Small format] devoted to Bereza (with an interesting survey entitled “Co po Berezie?” [What happens after Bereza?])<sup>51</sup> and *Wizje* [Visions],<sup>52</sup> in which young critics discuss Bereza’s works, seem to prove that the “patron saint” of the “artistic revolution” is today an important (or at least: existing, even if sometimes only at the level of general references) point of reference in discussions about linguistic innovation and artistic imagination. The same is evident in Andrzej Szpindler’s essay on Marek Słyk.<sup>53</sup> Respectively, as Maciej Libich argues,<sup>54</sup> Bereza shows how we may counter the schematic and the fashionable and search instead for a genuine and autonomic critical language.

### “Still relevant”

Even a cursory look at the Polish literary life of recent decades would lead to the conclusion that Tomasz Burek has become *the* critic of right-wing literary criticism, its strongest “asset” in the fight against the spiritual crisis, the atrophy of values, the decline of metaphysics, and the twilight of civilization. He has maintained an active presence in the field of literature,<sup>55</sup> so the

<sup>50</sup>Such as *Wypiski*, edited by Nowakowski and Skrendo and published in Szczecin in 2006, and in recent years *Alfabetyczność* [Alphabetical order] (ed. Paweł Orzeł [Warsaw: PIW, 2018]) and *Wypiski ostatnie* [Last notes] (ed. Paweł Orzeł [Warsaw: PIW, 2020]). These publications (without footnotes or historical context) are treated as artistic events, as pure examples of literary criticism; Bereza’s “poetical” style, increasingly valued by readers, also plays a role here. Essays, books and thematic issues of magazines devoted to Błoński were also published (e.g. the series: *Pisma wybrane* [Selected writings] published by Wydawnictwo Literackie, a two-volume selection of literary and critical writings edited by Jerzy Jarzębski; a special issue of *Wielogłos* devoted to Błoński), but they are more academic, commemorative, or historical in nature. The question of commemorating and returning to Burek’s legacy seems interesting in this context. Burek changed his views radically, joined the right-wing circles, and began to criticize his earlier works. The critic’s writings are thus selectively present in the literary field. Publishing the critic’s scattered essays from the 1970s in a collection entitled *Pamięć głęboka* [Deep memory] is, as Zbigniew Mentzel, who wrote the foreword and selected the texts, puts it, “[a] step forward, helping us better understand Burek’s writings.” Mentzel further explains that *Pamięć głęboka* was a result of a compromise; it was published after long negotiations with Burek’s heirs (Tomasz Burek, *Pamięć głęboka* [Deep memory], prefaced, selected, edited by Zbigniew Mentzel [Warsaw: Więź, 2021]). Cf. also: Tomasz Burek, *Niezależność i powinność. Szkice krytycznoliterackie* [Independence and duty: Critical essays about literature], prefaced, selected, edited by Krzysztof Krasuski (Krakow: Instytut Literatury, 2022).

<sup>51</sup>The series “Co po Berezie?” [What happens after Bereza?], *Mały Format* 6 (2018), <http://malyformat.com/tag/cykl-co-po-berezie/>.

<sup>52</sup>“Numer specjalny: 95. urodziny Henryka Berezy” [Special issue: Henryk Bereza’s 95th birthday], *Wizje*, 27 Oct. 2021, <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/numer-specjalny-henryk-bereza/>.

<sup>53</sup>Andrzej Szpindler, “Ciągłość daleko poza nią samą. Pokażcie choć, kto istnieje!” [Continuity far beyond itself. At least show who exists!], *Mały Format* 6 (2019), <http://malyformat.com/2019/06/szpindler-slyk/>.

<sup>54</sup>Maciej Libich, “Bereza. Encore” [Bereza. Encore]. *Twórczość* 10 (2021). Cf. also: Adam Komorowski, “Koniuszy koni trojańskich” [The stablemaster of Trojan horses], *Twórczość* 11 (2018), <https://tworczość.com.pl/arttykul/koniuszy-koni-trojanskich/>; “Dziedzictwo «płodnej mierzwy». Z Włodzimierzem Boleckim rozmawia Andrzej Śnioszek” [The legacy of the ‘fertile manure’. Andrzej Śnioszek talks to Włodzimierz Bolecki], *Odra* 10 (2020): 59–64.

<sup>55</sup>For example, he was one of the founders of the Association of Polish Writers in 1989; he was the vice-president of the organization until 1996; for over 20 years, together with Piotr Matywiecki, he was a recurring guest on *Radiowy Tygodnik Literacki* [Radio Literary Show] hosted by Iwona Smolka aired on Polish Radio 2 (until 2013). He took part in a conversation devoted to the visions of the Polish People’s Republic in the literature of the 1990s organized by the editorial office of *Znak* (“W długim cieniu Pałacu Kultury. Rozmawiają Tomasz Burek, Jerzy Jarzębski, Dariusz Nowacki, Jerzy Sosnowski i Marek Zaleski” [In the long shadow of the Palace of Culture. A discussion between Tomasz Burek, Jerzy Jarzębski, Dariusz Nowacki, Jerzy Sosnowski and Marek Zaleski], *Znak* 7 [2000]: 10–27) and in the debates on the state of contemporary literary criticism (“Znikające cele krytyki? Zapis dyskusji panelowej z udziałem Tomasza Burka, Jerzego Jarzębskiego, Michała Pawła Markowskiego, Mariana Stali oraz Włodzimierza Boleckiego. Prowadzenie: Marta Wyka” [Vanishing goals of literary criticism? A panel discussion with Tomasz Burek, Jerzy Jarzębski, Michał Paweł Markowski, Marian Stal, and Włodzimierz Bolecki. Host: Marta Wyka], in: *Dyskursy krytyczne u progu XXI wieku. Między rynkiem a uniwersytem*, ed. Dorota Kozicka, Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski [Krakow: Universitas, 2007], 411–447).

mythologization of this critic's banishment from official spaces by right-wing criticism is difficult to understand. Burek was never, as right-wing literary criticism would like one to believe, a "disgraced critic."<sup>56</sup> Such mainstream critics as Piotr Śliwiński<sup>57</sup> and Przemysław Czapliński<sup>58</sup> refer to Burek's writings. What is even more interesting, however, from the perspective of the present essay, Burek also appears to have led a different life, somewhat contrary to his claims that he distanced himself from everything that he had written before his ideological transformation.<sup>59</sup> Burek's essays from the 1970s seem to be constantly present in reflections on contemporary Polish literature; they are insightful and inspiring analyses of prose which seems to reflect the modern consciousness, conducted in the spirit of appreciation of creative individualism, avant-garde art, and revolutionary Marxism.<sup>60</sup> Critics who were interested in postmodernism and actively tried, at least since the early 1990s, to "restore" innovative prose traditions that had been rendered obsolete when the tradition of opposition literature became dominant – that is critics such as Krzysztof Uniłowski – read Burek (and not Bereza, of whom Uniłowski was rather skeptical<sup>61</sup>). Uniłowski valued Burek's essays devoted to the changes in post-war Polish prose.<sup>62</sup> Since he specialized in the writings of Teodor Parnicki, he also very much appreciated Burek's essays devoted to Parnicki.<sup>63</sup> In his writings about the development of Polish prose, Uniłowski referred to some very original sources, such as Burek's *1905, nie 1918* [1905 and not 1918].<sup>64</sup> We should also remember that the generational search for "their own" literary tradition by the

<sup>56</sup>Cf. Maciej Urbanowski, "Tomasz Burek – krytyk wyklety?" [Tomasz Burek – a disgraced critic?], *Teologia Polityczna*, 30 May 2017, <https://teologiapolityczna.pl/prof-maciej-urbanowski-tomasz-burek-krytyk-wyklety#>.

<sup>57</sup>Among others, in *Świat na brudno* [Draft world], Śliwiński describes various critical reactions to the processes taking place in literature in the first half of the 1990s (and quotes Burek's *Dziennik kwarantanny* where Burek writes about a "culture of classical and modern values which dissolves into a poor quality and easily digestible mush"). He also refers to Burek when he writes about the disappearance of history and the end of the realistic novel (p. 41), kitsch (p. 75), Barańczak's poetry (p. 174), and the dilemmas of criticism after 1989 (Piotr Śliwiński, *Świat na brudno. Szkice o poezji i krytyce* [Draft world: Essays on poetry and criticism] [Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Prószyński i S-ka, 2007]).

<sup>58</sup>For example, in *Świat podrobiony* [The counterfeit world], he refers to Burek's position in the ongoing discussion on realism (Przemysław Czapliński, *Świat podrobiony. Krytyka i literatura wobec nowej rzeczywistości* [The counterfeit world. Criticism and literature towards the new reality] [Kraków: Universitas, 2003]). In *Powrót centrali. Literatura nowej rzeczywistości*, he refers to Burek when discussing various manifestations of the center (Przemysław Czapliński, *Powrót centrali. Literatura w nowej rzeczywistości* [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007]). In *Resztki nowoczesności* [Remnants of modernity], he refers to Burek's findings when discussing Jacek Łukasiewicz's *Zagłoba w piekle* [Zagłoba in hell] (Przemysław Czapliński, *Resztki nowoczesności* [Remnants of Modernity] [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2011]).

<sup>59</sup>*Dziennik kwarantanny* [Quarantine diary] is built around the metaphor of undergoing a quarantine after an illness (Tomasz Burek, *Dziennik kwarantanny* [Quarantine diary] [Kraków: Arcana, 2001]). In a text considered programmatic after his ideological transformation, entitled *Literatura, niepoważne zajęcie* [Literature, a trival occupation], Burek writes that he is aware of "charlatanism" that he has been practicing for almost 40 years (Tomasz Burek, *Dzieło niczyje* [Nobody's work] [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001], 6–15; the text was written in 1996).

<sup>60</sup>Cf. Lidia Burska, *Awangarda i inne złudzenia. O pokoleniu 68* [The avant-garde and other illusions: The 1968 generation] (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2012) 272.

<sup>61</sup>Uniłowski writes: "It is true that Bereza's findings were very superficial. Bereza did not have a lot to say about 'aspirations,' antifiction, and metafiction [...]; Tomasz Burek commented on these issues in greater detail in his excellent *Zamiast powieści*" (Uniłowski, *Skądinąd*, 28–29). Cf. also "Szeryf polskiej krytyki literackiej. Z Henrykiem Berezą rozmawiają Kinga Dunin i Stanisław Beres" [The sheriff of Polish literary criticism. Kinga Dunin and Stanisław Beres talk to Henryk Bereza], *Opcje* 1-2 (2004): 148.

<sup>62</sup>Uniłowski considers Burek's *Zamiast powieści* the most important discussion of the Polish prose of the 1960s. Cf. Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Polska proza innowacyjna w perspektywie postmodernizmu* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1999), 133.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. Tomasz Burek, "Świat niewymierny Teodora Parnickiego" [The irrational world of Teodor Parnicki], *Twórczość* 6 (1962), reprinted in: Tomasz Burek, *Zamiast powieści* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1971).

<sup>64</sup>Uniłowski, *Skądinąd*, 45. Uniłowski also refers to the same text and Burek's belief that Polish society reached the threshold of modernity in 1905 in *Z popem na ty* [On friendly terms with pop] (Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę! Szkice i recenzje* [Buy a book! Essays and reviews] [Katowice: Wydawnictwo FA-art, 2008]).



writers and critics born in the 1970s and associated with the Krakow magazine *Ha!art* led to the rediscovery of a somewhat forgotten writer, Stanisław Czycz, whom Burek admired and praised in his writings.<sup>65</sup> And in an introduction to a collection of critical texts from the 1990s and the 2000s, Nowacki and Uniłowski write about the “astonishingly modest” influence of “undisputed classics of Polish post-war literary criticism” and point out that “a group of young authors united by a sense of ideological and intellectual community has formed only around Tomasz Burek.”<sup>66</sup>

Today, Burek undoubtedly remains one of the most important masters of literary criticism, one whose insights and craft are admired by right-wing critics from different generations, including Maciej Urbanowski, Andrzej Horubała, and Przemysław Dakowicz. At the same time, key texts from his entire *oeuvre*, the legend of his life and spiritual transformation, arranged in successive intellectual and spiritual stages (historical, ethical and metaphysical) and similar in nature to his “patron saint” Stanisław Brzozowski, allow us to see the great potential of his literary criticism (if we perceive tradition as a resource endowed with a performative and critical potential, from which narratives can be drawn).

## Resources

In 2005, Uniłowski wrote about the reception of the so-called prose of small homelands, mainly in reference to the books written in the 1990s. He thus commented on the mechanisms which defined the emergence and reception of this literature and the beliefs on which they relied:

Poetic devices and compositional solutions – understandably – do not carry ideological meaning in themselves. But at the same time, we are convinced that in the 20th century the avant-garde often leaned towards the political left, while the representatives of classicizing and mythographic tendencies did not shy away from declaring more conservative or traditional beliefs. [...] the aforementioned stereotype (that this is often the case) has become deeply embedded in the cultural and social consciousness of the era, imposing an ideological pattern which we still use to describe and order – often mechanically – artistic programs and phenomena.<sup>67</sup>

Uniłowski drew conclusions from this observation, especially when it came to the type of literature promoted at the time and conservative liberalism. I would like to draw attention to how this stereotype effected our perception of critical programs, practices, and traditions. After all, we

<sup>65</sup>Cf. Tomasz Burek, “Moment syntezy” [The moment of synthesis], in: Tomasz Burek, *Zamiast powieści*; Tomasz Burek, “Ostatni krzyk tamtej młodości. Stanisław Czycz” [The last cry of that youth. Stanisław Czycz], in: *Sporne postaci polskiej literatury współczesnej*, ed. Alina Brodzka, Lidia Burska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich, 1995). Cf. also *Ha!art* 9-10 (2002) with essays devoted to Czycz’s work and the Czyczujemy festival organized by *Ha!art*. See, among others, Mariusz Sieniewicz, “Patron-mistrz-nauczyciel” [Patron saint-master-teacher], *Witryna*, [http://witryna.czasopism.pl/gazeta/artykul.php?id\\_artykulu=134](http://witryna.czasopism.pl/gazeta/artykul.php?id_artykulu=134); Adam Wiedemann, “Czy Czycz Pani czyta, czy Czycz Pani zna” [Do you read Czycz? Do you know Czycz?], *Tygodnik Powszechny* (30) 1996, reprinted in: Adam Wiedemann, *Poczytalność. Przygody literackie* [Sanity/Readability. Literary adventures] (Wrocław: Warstwy, 2016).

<sup>66</sup>Nowacki, Uniłowski, “Do Czytelnika”, 9. It is also worth noting that they completely fail to “notice” the group gathered around Bereza, which is probably due to the fact that they do not consider Bereza “an undisputed classic of Polish post-war literary criticism.”

<sup>67</sup>Krzysztof Uniłowski, “«Małe ojczyzny» i limitowanie różnicy”. *Ze sporów nad literaturą i wizjami kultury w ostatnich latach* [“Small homelands’ and limiting difference”. From the discussions about literature and visions of culture in recent years], in: *Krainy utracone i pozyskane: problem w literaturach Europy Środkowej* [Lost and regained lands: A problem in central European literatures], ed. Krzysztof Krasuski (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2005), 195–212.

judge Błoński because his literary judgments relied on ideological beliefs, which were “discovered” and criticized by his opponents. Respectively, liberal and left-wing literary critics still value Burek’s early writings on the modern, the revolutionary, and the avant-garde and recognize that his works are thus an important voice in the debate on Polish literature and social reality (despite Burek’s harsh criticism of the left-wing “camp”). And finally, we praise artistic revolution in prose and the avant-garde works of writers promoted by Bereza but it tends to obscure the imprecise, the idiosyncratic, and the traditional in his utopian project of “first languages” and literature in general.

As Uniłowski rightly points out, the point of the critical debates he described was not to “move names around on an ideological board” but determine who truly belongs to the canon of modernity and, crucially, who has the authority to define this canon. It is hard to not agree with this, as well as with the view – returning to the story of ruptures and continuities of critical traditions from the perspective of literary authorities – that each of the three Mr. B figures not only asserted their right to make such judgements but, at different points in history, succeeded in enforcing those judgements in various contexts. The ongoing contemporary disputes surrounding their significance and place can therefore be seen as one form of the broader struggle over the ideal model of literature and ways of interpreting it.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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- 31-43 Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich, 1995.
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# KEYWORDS

## critical traditions

*Jan Błoński*

**ABSTRACT:**

The article discusses those aspects of literary criticism traditions that are associated with the figure of the master. It compares three older generation critics who entered the 1990s as authorities. All three were associated with different environments and worldviews. And the story of how their presence and absence in the field of literature has been changing across the years allows one to analyze the problems, entanglements, ruptures, and intertwinings of not only contemporary criticism but also literature.

*T o m a s z B u r e k*

# Henryk Bereza

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# The returns of Henryk Bereza

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At the turn of the second and third decades of the 21st century, there was a marked increase in interest in Henryk Bereza's critical-literary legacy. This renewed attention extended to critics from the younger generation.. This is evidenced not only by the facts of the institutional-publishing order (viz. extensive editions of Bereza's critical works) but also by the attention recently devoted to the author of *Sztuka czytania* [*The art of reading*] by online literary publications and the accompanying lively reactions of critics of the youngest generation. Such favourable conditions for a re-reading of Bereza's texts have been created by a few factors, which I will try to discuss briefly. I will consider the context in which the Warsaw critic returns and the roles in which he is cast by the way of his return, that is, how his person and his work are presented by the authors who cite him. Perhaps this will bring us closer to deciding the purpose of invoking Bereza in contemporary literary criticism.

Certainly, one of the reasons why Bereza's achievements have regained the attention of literary criticism was the publication of two collections of his essays and reviews: *Alfabetyczność*<sup>1</sup> [*Alphabeticality*] and *Wypiski ostatnie*<sup>2</sup> [*Final notes*]. *Alfabetyczność*, published in 2018, is a kind of compendium containing Bereza's most important texts published throughout his critical activity. *Wypiski ostatnie*, published in 2020, is a collection of short notes, covering the author's immediate reactions to his readings. Both publications belong to a larger publishing project<sup>3</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> Henryk Bereza, *Alfabetyczność* [*Alphabeticality*], ed. by Paweł Orzeł (Warsaw: PIW, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Henryk Bereza, *Wypiski ostatnie* [*Final notes*], ed. by Paweł Orzeł (Warsaw: PIW, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> The aforementioned project also includes Bereza's collection of poetry, *Sprawa wyboru* [*The issue of choice*] (Warsaw: PIW, 2022) (which, incidentally, went virtually unnoticed in comparison with his previous publications), as well as two planned publications: *Zgrzyty* [*Discords*], a collection of poetry announced for 2022, and *Oniriada* [*The Oniriad*], a dream journal announced for 2026.



which Paweł Orzeł – the editor and initiator – calls the “radical Bereza series”<sup>4</sup>. The creation of these publications is described by Orzeł as a long and arduous – almost heroic – labour, but also an extremely rewarding adventure. It involved negotiations with an understandably reluctant publisher, hours spent sorting out, deciphering and rewriting manuscripts, and confrontations with people from Bereza’s circle, each of whom had a slightly different vision of what the book should contain and what its title should be. He candidly states: “these books (*Alfabetyczność, Wypiski ostatnie, Sprawa wyboru...*) are more mine than Henryk’s”<sup>5</sup>. In a word, the creation story of the “Bereza series” is at the same time the story of the editor’s close relationship with Henryk Bereza and his fascination with the person and his work.

Paweł Orzeł cites these incidents in a very personal and almost sentimental memoir included in the 2021 thematic issue of “Wizje”, dedicated to Bereza on his 95th birthday<sup>6</sup>. Apart from Orzeł’s article, the issue includes texts by Bohdan Zadura and Krzysztof Bielecki, who reminisce on Bereza and comment on his work. Of course, this is not the first journal to undertake the task of reminding the readers about the legendary critic: in 2013, a thematic issue devoted to Bereza was prepared by “eleWator”<sup>7</sup> (a journal published by the Henryk Bereza Foundation), whereas “Konteksty”<sup>8</sup> published a thematic block in 2015. However, there are a few reasons why it is worth paying attention to “Wizje” and “Mały Format” in particular, the latter of which announced its “Bereza” issue in 2018<sup>9</sup>, coinciding with the publication of *Alfabetyczność*. Firstly, in both cases we are dealing with a new periodical (“Wizje” was founded in 2018, “Mały Format” in 2017), which predominantly feature young authors shortly after their critical debut, they are published exclusively in digital form and are aimed mainly at audiences of the younger and middle generation. Moreover, Henryk Bereza is the only critic to have had dedicated thematic issues of these journals. “Mały Format” had previously devoted entire issues to Jolanta Brach-Czaina<sup>10</sup>, Wiesław Juszcak<sup>11</sup> and Adam Ważyk<sup>12</sup>, as well as individual articles on, for example, Jan Błoński<sup>13</sup> or Kacper Bartczak<sup>14</sup>,

<sup>4</sup> Paweł Orzeł, “a few snotty words between Henryk and Henryk (bozzetto)”, *Wizje*, 27.10.2021, <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/orzel-bereza/>.

<sup>5</sup> Orzeł.

<sup>6</sup> “Special issue: 95th birthday of Henryk Bereza”, *Wizje*, 27.10.2021, <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/numer-specjalny-henryk-bereza/>.

<sup>7</sup> *eleWator* 3 (2013).

<sup>8</sup> *Konteksty* 3 (2015).

<sup>9</sup> „Co po Berezie?” [„What after Bereza?”] series, *Mały Format* 6 (2018), <http://malyformat.com/tag/cykl-co-po-berezie/>.

<sup>10</sup> „Szczeliny istnienia” [“Crevices of existence”] series, *Mały Format* 4 (2018), <http://malyformat.com/tag/cykl-szczeliny-istnienia/>.

<sup>11</sup> „Wiesław Juszcak” series, *Mały Format* 3 (2018), <http://malyformat.com/tag/cykl-wieslaw-juszcak/>.

<sup>12</sup> „Jestem chłonącą katodą!” [“I am an absorbing cathode!”] series, *Mały Format* 9-10 (2022), <http://malyformat.com/tag/cykl-jestem-chlonaca-katoda/>.

<sup>13</sup> In 2017, on the 30th anniversary of the publication of the essay *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* [The poor Poles look at the Ghetto], a conversation with Jacek Leociak was published (“Ja, Żyd Nowego Testamentu. Z Jackiem Leociakiem rozmawia Andrzej Frączysty”) [„I, a New Testament Jew. Jacek Leociak interviewed by Andrzej Frączysty”], *Maly Format* 6 (2017), <http://malyformat.com/2017/06/ja-zyd-nowego-testamentu/>.

<sup>14</sup> Excerpts from his book of essays, published in 2020, were accompanied by the conversation “Przybornik indywiduacji. Z Kacprem Bartczakiem rozmawia Andrzej Frączysty”, [„A toolbox of individuation. Kacper Bartczak interviewed by Andrzej Frączysty”], *Mały Format* 3 (2020), <http://malyformat.com/2020/03/przybornik-indywiduacji/>.

but Henryk Berezka is the first literary critic to feature among this group. The introductory article makes it clear that for the editors Berezka is a *pars pro toto* of Polish literary criticism – he serves as its embodiment, even if not a representative or emblematic one, yet certainly highly interesting and one which lends itself as material for a case study. The editors write that “instead of announcing an issue about literary criticism, or – even worse – “the state of literary criticism”, we prefer to deal with a specific case. “Material for interpretation” was provided by the lifelong critical activity of Henryk Berezka”.<sup>15</sup>

Given that the Orzeł belongs to the 1980s generation, we can venture a claim that the attention Berezka has received in recent years is a product of the efforts on the part of younger generation – those who were born after 1980 and after 1990 – and proof that this generation has assimilated his works, expressing their (at least symbolic) approval. It is worth examining these texts to see what image of Berezka they convey, what hopes are pinned today on a reinterpretation of his works and what potential alliances might result from it all. Most importantly, Berezka is represented as a critic misunderstood to some extent and unfairly judged. In his text, Andrzej Śnioszek (b. 1987) quotes Stanisław Lem, who complained about the linguistic experimentation of the prose promoted by Berezka, calling it “linguistic gallantry – the polishing of pretty pendants on the tongue”<sup>16</sup>. He also cites a very unflattering statement by Jan Zieliński, who in his review of the book *W barszczu przygód* [*In the borscht of adventures*] reads the formal procedures of Marek Słyk (i.e. one of the main representatives of the “artistic revolution” in prose of the 1970s and 1980s) in terms of “linguistic incompetence” resulting from ignorance<sup>17</sup>. For Śnioszek both statements are clear examples of misunderstanding the aims of the “artistic revolution” literature and the means employed by it. He argues that Berezka associated them primarily with breaking up fossilised linguistic forms, undermining the codes of correct Polish, which petrify literary language, and replacing them with “living speech”, unlearning linguistic thoughtlessness and raising awareness of the incompatibility of a dead language with the world.

Read today, Berezka thus turns out to be an ally of authors continuing the avant-garde traditions of artistic experimentation. It seems quite natural and perhaps even surprising that Berezka did not appear earlier in the critical reception of such authors as Adam Kaczanowski, Marcin Mokry, Cezary Domarus, Robert Rybicki or Konrad Góra. Critics of these authors often invoke strategies like breaking linguistic habits and challenging automatisms, especially in poetry. These approaches align with Berezka’s propositions about the nature of language and the necessity of its revision.. As Andrzej Śnioszek writes:

So, what is liberation all about? One needs to challenge the dictatorship of the norm, which in many cases means turning life upside down. The long-ordered world suddenly loses its uniqueness and validity. At first we are shocked, but the next moment we see glimpses of other, differently ordered worlds. We discover that they were not created by the whim of

<sup>15</sup>“Co po Berezce? – Od redakcji” [“What after Berezka? - From the editors”], *Mały Format* 6 (2018), <http://malyformat.com/2018/06/od-redakcji-3/>.

<sup>16</sup>Andrzej Śnioszek, “Henryk Berezka jako terapeuta” [“Henryk Berezka as a therapist”], *Mały Format* 6 (2018), <http://malyformat.com/2018/06/henryk-berezka-jako-terapeuta/>.

<sup>17</sup>Śnioszek.

hacks, although this much has been suggested so far. The effort of creation was particularly arduous. A new world requires new operators. Here one cannot copy from reality, since the whole of reality – a set of elements, and relations between them – is sometimes created from imagination. [...] The manifestations of language games are manifestations of spiritual freedom.<sup>18</sup>

The claim about the topicality of Bereza's postulates and their potential links with contemporary attempts at linguistic experimentation is confirmed in Andrzej Szpindler's text<sup>19</sup>, which appeared a year after the publication of *Alfabetyczność*. In an extensive essay, Szpindler discusses the entirety of Słyk's work and reports on the accompanying critical dispute. He presents it as a story of the failure of the mainstream to understand the prose of the author of *W barszczu przygód* and its attempts to denigrate it. Bereza, who was the spokesman for that work, is presented as the one who was right from the very beginning of the dispute. Given the experimental form of Szpindler's essay (it is reminiscent of the author's prose) and the writer's consistently post-avant-garde technique, it is difficult not to read his text as approval for Bereza's perspective and a declaration of ideological affinity with him. At the same time, Szpindler brings Bereza into contemporary criticism by applying the categories and judgments from *Związki naturalne* [*Natural unions*] to current debates about literature's condition.. This is accompanied by a suggestion that any discussion of linguistic innovation and the role of unleashed imagination in contemporary literature can and should take into account Bereza's arguments from half a century ago. A similar claim appears in Justyna Sobolewska's statement from a survey by the editors of "Mały Format": "the artistic revolution [...] is happening all the time; the only change are the writers who undertake it"<sup>20</sup>. In that same survey Jakub Skurtys also points to the timelessness of Bereza's ideas:

when one reads the following passage from *Bieg rzeczy* [*The course of things*]: "Everything that is happening in the poetry and prose of the twentieth century is a rediscovery of the living language, a revolt against the self-rule of written language, a liberation of the language of imagination and speech from the terror that made the graveyards of words impose their law of death on the life of language", one feels like shouting: oh yes! Add capitalism and the notion of commodification, and the promise of "the living speech" turns out to be an ever liberating, emancipatory promise, repeated like a mantra by cultural theorists.<sup>21</sup>

A trail of a radical revision of language leads in a completely different direction in Michał Trusewicz's (b. 1995) "birthday text". Here, Bereza appears as someone akin to a postmodern revolutionary: he calls for a literature that multiplies possibilities, capable of challenging *the status quo* by dismantling linguistic norms.

<sup>18</sup>Śnioszek.

<sup>19</sup>Andrzej Szpindler, „Ciągłość daleko poza nią samą. Pokażcie choć, kto istnieje!” [“Continuity far beyond itself. At least show us who exists!”], *Mały Format* 6 (2019), <http://malyformat.com/2019/06/szpindler-slyk/>.

<sup>20</sup>Jakub Nowacki, “Co po Berezie? – Ankieta literacka” [“What after Bereza? - A literary survey”], *Mały Format* 6 (2018), <http://malyformat.com/2018/06/berezie-ankieta-literacka/>.

<sup>21</sup>Nowacki.

It seems obvious that for Henryk Bereza humans live in language, that they play and learn in it. It is not about obscurantist games of slips of the tongue or artistic encapsulation, but about the sudden intrusion of an unannounced guest into the space of language, questioning obvious connections between words and things. The guest – this sudden anacoluthon, this unannounced loosening of grammar – establishes a host, i.e. a subject who manages the private and collective vocabulary of terms describing reality. Writers valued by Bereza, such as Marek Słyk, are supposed to play the role of teachers *à rebours* – they should unlearn the habits of cataloguing the world. Language is a matter that can be vividly reworked, making other worlds possible.<sup>22</sup>

It is not entirely clear whether Trusewicz, writing about language as that which makes “other worlds possible”, sees literature as a tool for changing social reality or merely a tool for creating alternative imaginary realities. To a certain degree, his text implies each of these possibilities. On the one hand, he notes that Bereza’s proposal is “a praise of the possibility and infinity of literary worlds”<sup>23</sup>, i.e. of the power of fiction to create images and narratives. At other times, he writes that reading literature “Bereza-style” would involve following “glimpses of other realities, adjacent to the one that, by some strange coincidence, was declared obligatory”<sup>24</sup>, which would in turn suggest that what is at stake is an alternative to the real, existing social order – a “different” version of the “obligatory” reality, i.e. one that could replace our reality. This dilemma could be resolved by assuming that social reality is linguistically (or, more generally, culturally, symbolically) mediated, so that there is no fundamental difference between the social order and the discursive order. This is the direction that Trusewicz seems to be aiming at: in his perspective Bereza appears to be an advocate for social change taking place through a change in language, that change involving a turn away from hegemonic discourses. Trusewicz goes on to write:

[T]he norm [...] is determined by dictionaries, constantly petrifying our ways of thinking about the world. As it turns out, neoliberal realism today is all about upholding the ban on alternative realities. “There is no alternative”, says Margaret Thatcher, the guardian-symbol of codices and norms, although she can be circumvented by widening the field of language, which ruptures the corsets of ideological and economic nomenclature with a bang.<sup>25</sup>

In this vision freedom is about trying to find a subversive way of describing the world. “Let us therefore read a liberated Bereza, who questions the dictatorship of norms, turns language upside down and shows that foundations are only moving concepts, substituted by the power of discourse”<sup>26</sup>, as the author concludes. The demand to replace dead language with living speech, put forward by Bereza in his texts on the artistic revolution, here feeds into the Foucauldian privileging of reflection on the “power of discourse” over the analysis of the material conditions of existence underlying social relations. Bereza thus proves to be a practitioner of a critique of ideology, guided by the assumption that “the mere erosion

<sup>22</sup>Michał Trusewicz, “Odsłanianie niewiadomego” [“Unveiling the unknown”], *Wizje*, 27.10.2021, <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/trusewicz-bereza/>.

<sup>23</sup>Trusewicz.

<sup>24</sup>Trusewicz.

<sup>25</sup>Trusewicz.

<sup>26</sup>Trusewicz.

of the monolith of speech [...] is already a critique of a unifying discourse”<sup>27</sup>. It is not the purpose of this essay to decide whether the above-quoted statements accurately capture ideas close to Bereza. However, it is worth pointing out that some of ideas of his ideas, cited by Trusewicz in support of the above-mentioned “possibility” interpretation, which was inspired by post-structural philosophy, are taken out of context. Sentences like: “It remains unknown what else will become ridiculous. The unveiling of the unknown is one of the main meanings of literature. Always and of every single one. Including the one under consideration here”, conclude one of the sections of Bereza’s essay about the peasant current<sup>28</sup>, which does not discuss alternative realities at all, but simply contains Bereza’s speculations on the artistic path taken by the writers he describes.

Maciej Libich moves in a slightly different direction, no longer on the pages of “Wizje”, but in his review of *Wypiski ostatnie* for “*Twórczość*”<sup>29</sup>. He, too, points to Bereza’s aversion to ideology, although instead of emphasising the decisive role of discourse and its criticism, he sees in the sensibility of Bereza as a reader an inspiration for the expansion and multiplication of literary and critical vocabularies.

Although I would not like to make Bereza a hostage of the current political dispute between, to put it very simply, what is collective and what is individual, it seems to me that in general *Wypiski* are a manifestation of a profoundly autonomous, not to say liberal, thought, sensitive to an individual voice, the individual truth of man, which is expressed in an equally individualised language. And I am willing to risk the claim that it is precisely this kind of criticism that we need today.<sup>30</sup>

The usefulness of Bereza’s criticism thus lies in the possibility of inventing a new language, free of the usual, worn-out patterns, which would make it possible not so much to transform reality (in Libich’s perspective, reality is more resistant to change than it was for Trusewicz) as to describe it more successfully. A contemporary revision of critical language inspired by Bereza could start from, as Libich writes, “not exaggerating the economic perspective, not sticking to one dictionary, but expanding it with a concept from the field of, say, psychoanalysis. “Replace ‘economy’ with ‘libidinal economy’ – and see what happens next”<sup>31</sup>. If, then, Bereza’s notion of artistic revolution is seen today as still carrying important consequences for literary criticism, these would entail the need to refresh the languages of literature and criticism as tools of resistance. This resistance would have to be against – as in Trusewicz – the non-alternative nature of the global order, or – as in Libich – against a narrow critical perspective which reduces literary problems to economic ones.

The peasant current, another key concept by the Warsaw critic, has also gained contemporary interest, though it carries a paradox. A crucial context for Bereza’s return and undoubtedly

<sup>27</sup>Trusewicz.

<sup>28</sup>Henryk Bereza, “Nurt chłopski w prozie” [“The peasant current in prose”], in his *Alfabetyczność*, 159.

<sup>29</sup>Maciej Libich, “Bereza. Encore”, *Twórczość* 10 (2021).

<sup>30</sup>Libich.

<sup>31</sup>Libich.

one of the factors responsible for the revival of interest in his critical proposals is the so-called plebeian turn in contemporary humanities, which began in the second decade of the 21st century and proceeded along several lines. On the one hand, it was associated with the public debate in the liberal press, which focused on the revision of peasantry, i.e., among other things, the forgotten peasant genealogy of Polish society and its imagined noble origins, class contempt, the legacy of serfdom, the shame associated with provincial origins and the marginalisation of the countryside. In part, these debates had their own dynamics and were a reaction to activist artistic projects, such as the album *Pieśni buntu i niedoli* [*Songs of revolt and misery*] by the band RUTA or the play *W imię Jakuba S.* [*In the name of Jakub S.*] by Monika Strzępka and Paweł Demirski. In part they reflected the reception of publishing proposals that belonged to the same revisionary trend: books by Jan Sowa<sup>32</sup>, Andrzej Leder<sup>33</sup>, and later by Adam Leszczyński<sup>34</sup> and Kacper Pobłocki<sup>35</sup>. On the other hand, we witnessed an analogous phenomenon in the literary field, i.e. successive books taking up the issue of peasant origins, constructing portraits of the contemporary countryside and programmatically espousing a provincial context (to name but Maciej Płaza, Wioletta Grzegorzewska, Maciej Muszyński or Weronika Gogola). The editors of “Mały Format” point to the importance of this context in the already mentioned introductory article of the issue devoted to Bereza, where they note that since “there is more and more talk about the return of the ‘peasant trend’ in Polish prose, [...] it is worth going back to the sources of this trend, which – as the author of *Związki naturalne* consistently repeated – are to be found in language, or more precisely: in ‘the first language’”<sup>36</sup>. This much was also acknowledged in the survey carried out by the editors of the journal: Magdalena Rabizo-Birek speaks of Bereza’s “almost prophetic insight” that the peasant current “is by no means over and exhausted, that we can expect its reopening”<sup>37</sup>. She sees the fulfilment of the predictions in the prose of Karpowicz, Płaza, Grzegorzewska, Stasiuk and Tokarczuk. She also writes that “Bereza was a persistent precursor of the ‘peasant turn’ in Polish culture, an opponent of exposing and exploiting exclusively the noble-intellectual part of Polish tradition”<sup>38</sup>. The author of the concept of ‘the peasant trend’ is thus directly linked to the current debate, and clearly picks a side. Justyna Sobolewska makes similar observations, pointing to what she identifies as Bereza’s characteristic “accuracy of observations on general matters”. “Indeed,” writes the critic, “the ‘peasant current’ or what appears today in writing about the countryside – is powerful, perhaps the most important current in Polish literature”<sup>39</sup>.

Commentators who see in Bereza’s proposals a foreshadowing of later phenomena and who try to apply his diagnoses to the contemporary situation in the literary and cultural field seem to forget, however, what specific hopes the critic had for the peasant current and what

<sup>32</sup>Jan Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą* [The phantom body of the king. Peripheral struggles with modern form] (Krakow: Universitas, 2011).

<sup>33</sup>Andrzej Leder, *Prześniona rewolucja. Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej*. [Sleepwalking the revolution. An exercise in historical logic] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014).

<sup>34</sup>Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski* [A people’s history of Poland] (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2020).

<sup>35</sup>Kacper Pobłocki, *Chamstwo* [Boorishness] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2022).

<sup>36</sup>„Co po Berezie? – Od redakcji”.

<sup>37</sup>Nowacki.

<sup>38</sup>Nowacki.

<sup>39</sup>Nowacki.

interested him in it. As Andrzej Skrendo rightly points out in his attempt at explaining that concept<sup>40</sup>, the contradiction inherent to it, with which Bereza never really dealt, is a product of a strictly genetic understanding of the term. Bereza speaks of a peasant ‘current’, rather than a ‘theme’, to emphasise that he means an ‘expressive’, rather than ‘explanatory’ literature. The latter, which construes fictional folklore for a bourgeois audience, is, in Bereza’s perspective, an essentially paternalistic phenomenon. On the other hand, the identity of the peasant trend is determined by “peasant social genealogy or particularly close links with the peasantry”<sup>41</sup>, which make common features of the writers included by Bereza in the aforementioned artistic trend manifest themselves in “the convergence of certain social, existential and cultural experiences, in inclinations of thought and aesthetics, in predispositions of imagination, in attitudes to language, in a kind of moral sensitivity”<sup>42</sup>. Such perspective, as Bereza admits, “excludes complete voluntarism”<sup>43</sup>: peasant literature is thus an expression, or better, a function of social genealogy. The author of *Alfabetyczność* is clearly in favour of the “social history of literature”<sup>44</sup> perspective, which assumes that, as Skrendo writes, “genealogy matters because literature is born in a world of social divisions”<sup>45</sup>. The writer is subject to a certain social determination, which, is simultaneously a condition for the authenticity of the effects of his literary work. It is on this determination, then, that the authenticity of the whole peasant current, which Bereza valued so highly, also depends. Therefore, for the author of *Związki naturalne* peasant prose was not a tool for discovering, constructing or revising identity, but rather a resultant of experiences arising from social origins. The possibility of recovering the “thousand-years’-old resources of peasant culture”<sup>46</sup>, i.e. reaching out to the sources of “the living speech” (for this was, according to Bereza, the main task of this literature) did not stem from the authors’ sense of peasantness but was a strictly historical issue. The distinctiveness or uniqueness of peasant writers was not a value to be cherished, but a socio-cultural fact which gave them access to certain means of expression, which in Bereza’s opinion were interesting and worth saving.

Contemporary prose and criticism often frame origin as a challenge to be overcome, driving an emancipation narrative. They primarily explore social advancement, reconciling identities, and the accompanying sense of shame.<sup>47</sup> This is pointed out by Karolina Kulpa, in her review of *Hanka. Opowieść o awansie* [*Hanka. A story of advancement*] by Maciej Jakubowiak<sup>48</sup>. According to Kulpa, Jakubowiak’s autobiographical novel, designed to evoke

<sup>40</sup>Andrzej Skrendo, „«Nocny złodziej jabłek» – Henryk Bereza i nurt chłopski w prozie polskiej [“The nocturnal apple thief” - Henryk Bereza and the peasant current in Polish prose]”, *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2017): 36-53.

<sup>41</sup>Bereza, “Nurt chłopski w prozie” [„The peasant current in prose”], 153.

<sup>42</sup>Bereza, “Nurt chłopski w prozie”, 153.

<sup>43</sup>Bereza, “Nurt chłopski w prozie”, 148.

<sup>44</sup>Bereza, “Nurt chłopski w prozie”, 148.

<sup>45</sup>Skrendo, 43.

<sup>46</sup>Henryk Bereza, “Dopowiedzenie drugie” [“The second addition”], in his *Alfabetyczność*, 183.

<sup>47</sup>This is well illustrated by the reception of Didier Eribon’s book *Powrót do Reims* [The return to Reims] (Kraków: Karakter, 2019); see, for example, Marlena Rycombel, “Zdrójca klasy nie odchodzi” [“The class traitor does not leave”], *Mały Format* 10-11 (2019), <http://malyformat.com/2019/11/eribon-powrot-do-reims/>; Iwona Komór, “Wstydy” [“Shame”], *Dwutygodnik* 12 (2019), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/8624-wstydy.html>.

<sup>48</sup>Maciej Jakubowiak, *Hanka* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2024).

associations with the writings of Didier Eribon and to provide evidence that “a folk turn is taking place in Polish mentality”<sup>49</sup>, meets all the criteria of a “model, French-inspired essayistic tale of advancement”<sup>50</sup>. According to Kulpa, one of the most essential elements characteristic of this genre is the subjective perspective constructed on the basis of “guilt associated with the ‘betrayal’ of one’s own roots”<sup>51</sup>, which makes it possible to take “the most comfortable (albeit tragically stylised) position, focused on the affirmation of difference and the mockery involved in a venting of fantasies of what it would have been like without all this imported science and literature”<sup>52</sup>. This position, in turn, makes the case that within the story of advancement

actual conflicts can be abstracted from by focusing on the socio-autobiographical monologue, romanticising individual shame and regret for the triumphant thwarting of social determinisms.<sup>53</sup>

While contemporary discourse crystallising around the themes canonical to the popular turn thus focuses on the transcendence of peasantry and on the tensions that arise around impossible aspirations, for Bereza peasantry acted as an immanent value: it was a socio-cultural space that contained all the desirable vectors of progress and improvement. On peasant genealogy, he wrote:

this genealogy should be a cultural honour for anyone who has not lost their marbles; its distinguishing feature is the natural – inherited – access to the oldest and historically most durable social sources of culture; its trump card nowadays is that it does not involve, or in any case should not involve, any social constraints on cultural ambitions; the growth of these ambitions is a fact that can be traced in the work of the most prominent representatives of the peasant current.<sup>54</sup>

In discussion on refreshing the language of literature and criticism Bereza featured as an unwitting ally, even though the critics invoking him did not find it easy to identify specific lines of affinity between his critical-literary thought and contemporary artistic proposals without extensively engaging their own vocabularies. Similarly, today the author of *Alfabetyczność* appears as an almost necessary point of reference, although contemporary commentators fail to agree on the actual stakes of this alliance. Bereza is important as a critic calling for an appreciation of peasant culture, but his actual motivations do not play a significant role for contemporary commentators. Bereza’s return today is therefore incomplete and inconsistent at the very least, and in some respects simulated. This seems to go hand in hand with the broader incompatibility of his critical sensibility with contemporary needs. In almost all

<sup>49</sup>Karolina Kulpa, “Spektakl awansu” [“The spectacle of advancement”], *Mały Format* 3-4 (2024), quoted in Katarzyna Sawicka-Mierzyńska, „Zwrot ludowy dokonuje się w polskiej mentalności. Oto kolejny dowód” [“A folk turn is taking place in Polish mentality. Here is another proof”], *wyborcza.pl*, 9.02.2024, [https://wyborcza.pl/7,75517,30675715,mama-hanka.html].

<sup>50</sup>Kulpa.

<sup>51</sup>Kulpa.

<sup>52</sup>Kulpa.

<sup>53</sup>Kulpa.

<sup>54</sup>Henryk Bereza, “Wyznania” [“Confessions”], in his *Alfabetyczność*, 162-163.



recollections about him that I have cited here, Bereza appears as a role model of tenacity and consistency in judgement, of unwavering belief in the momentous social role of literature, as well as a model of readiness to take a stand on issues of importance and to defend his theses uncompromisingly. At the same time, contemporary criticism is increasingly characterised by conciliatory and cautious judgements; few of the younger critics practice the polemical mode of critical activity with which Bereza is associated; few make demands on literature and enforce them consistently<sup>55</sup>.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

<sup>55</sup> The disappearance of the confrontational potential of Polish literary criticism was pointed out, for example, by participants in the discussion “Krytyka krytyki” [“A critique of criticism”] in *biBLioteka* journal (issue 1, 2015): see Monika Glosowicz, “Krucze pozycje” [“Fragile positions”]; Paweł Kaczmarek, “Krytycy i dziennikarze” [“Critics and journalists”]; Marcin Orliński “Nie bójmy się spierać” [“Let’s not be afraid to argue”]. Interestingly enough, Jakub Skurtys was the only one to openly distance himself from Bereza in the “Mały Format” survey (“I never met Henryk Bereza and had not wanted to meet him. For me he was always “an older critic”, a representative of a generation not even of my professors but of my professors’ professors, someone from a completely different, as if parallel, reality, in which literary criticism exists in spite of the academy, basking in its journalistic columns, in its irrevocable judgments and literary friendships. [...] not knowing Bereza was a certain programmatic assumption for me: to allow him to exist as a critic, but not as a person, as it were.”). Skurtys has been a consistent practitioner of this “negative criticism”, and that distinguishes him from critics of the younger generation, see his series “Krytyka negatywna” [“Negative criticism”] in *Mały Format*, <http://malyformat.com/tag/cykl-krytyka-negatywna/>.

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# KEYWORDS

## Bereza

*literary criticism*

**ABSTRACT:**

The turn of the second and third decades of the 21st century witnessed an increasing interest in Henryk Bereza and his critical-literary output, also among critics and literary scholars of the younger generation. Excerpts from archival articles by Bereza appeared in online literary press, and he was the subject of two special issues of literary journals, featuring in-depth sketches, memoirs and literary surveys. In this article, I look at the ways in which the critic's thought has been presented so far and I seek potential points of connection between the critical categories he created and the contemporary situation in the literary field, with particular reference to two of them: the artistic revolution in prose and the peasant current.

*p e a s a n t c u r r e n t*

**artistic revolution**

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# The figure of a philosophical authority in the Polish post-modernist literary criticism – on the example of Martin Heidegger

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There are not many publications characterizing the critical-literary debate in the final three decades of the 20th century which would contribute to both a revision and a simple organization of new ways of defining Polish literature from the transition period that ended with political transformation. Although works such as *Sporne postaci polskiej literatury współczesnej* [Controversial figures in the contemporary Polish literature] (2003) – on the most prominent post-war critics, *Polemiki krytycznoliterackie w Polsce* [Critical-literary polemics in Poland] edited by Sylwia Panek – a constantly growing series since 2008, or *Konstelacje* [Constellations] (2021) edited by Dorota Kozicka, Katarzyna Trzeciak and Monika Świerkocz analyze the issues of late Polish modernity, they do it in a peculiar and rather selective way. Edited volumes taking the form of dictionaries popularizing knowledge – such as the digital guide *Polska Poezja Współczesna* [Contemporary Polish poetry] (from 2017) edited by Piotr Śliwiński – fill in the gaps in the synthetically understood knowledge about that time in an *ad hoc* manner, although 1989 is commonly treated as the caesura. Synthesizing works by younger scholars on the early 1990s literary criticism are rare, entangled in current generational disagreements. Another reason behind the incomplete historical-critical discourse regarding the late 20th century is that there are few meta-critical studies which

would organize evaluative strategies and methodologies used in criticism – such as *Krytyczne (nie)porządki* [Critical (dis)orders] (2012) by Dorota Kozińska. Finally, the problem also lies in the diminishing interest in the history of literature researched in a typical way. On the one hand, this can be understandable in the face of numerous methodological doubts connected to it today; on the other, it obviously hinders a coherent discussion about critical-literary programs, worldviews, and valuation systems for which the historical context is simply necessary<sup>1</sup>.

I think that many convictions which are the basis for the reception, interpretation and valuation of new phenomena on the literary market originated from the complex historical-critical layer of the 1980s and 1990s. The currently dominating, cultural opinions related to them are incorporated in cultural narratives about the 20th and 21st centuries as something obvious – in a gesture perpetuating the arguments of the classically aesthetic dictionary. Formulas such as Kant's notion of the judgment of taste, connected with the notion of literary autonomy, are often expressed in the form of universal, Gadamer's pre-judgment, which would be justified in the social sphere of *phronesis*. Theses regarding 'the essence of poetry,' often derived from Heidegger's critical-literary theories, are frequently repeated without deeper scrutiny.

Of course, it would be interesting to consider the role played by philosophical authorities in the early post-modernist Polish literary criticism; this paper will focus on a few conclusions from the Polish critical-literary reception (mostly) of Heidegger's lectures on philosophy and the humanities, which justify the in-depth late modern hermeneutics highlighting the importance of literature's autonomy. A shared conversation about authentic, self-aware existence established in the poetic speech seemed to have formed a universalized starting point for aesthetic considerations at the early stages of the Polish post-modernism, at least for some poetry scholars and critics<sup>2</sup>. It results in homogenization of the dictionary of

<sup>1</sup> Janusz Sławiński objected to the need to write a separate history of criticism in his "Krytyka jako przedmiot badań historycznoliterackich" [Criticism as a subject of historical-literary research], in: *Badania nad krytyką literacką* [Studies in literary criticism], series 1, edited by Janusz Sławiński (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Ossolineum, 1974), pointing out to the difficulties with distinguishing its subject. Perhaps such a perspective is responsible for the fact that numerous meta-critical studies – although sometimes undertaken as a separate topic in the history of literature – have had many empty pages. Marginalizing literary criticism as devoid of academic methodology, distinguishing it from academic criticism, is likely another reason. A certain chance for studies resulting from meta-critical interests seems to be passing – as they are methodologically unfashionable.

<sup>2</sup> Connecting Nietzsche and Heidegger, typical for the French post-structuralism and deconstruction, although without the Marxist element of this methodology, occurred repeatedly in Michał Paweł Markowski's critical-philosophical discussions. Sometimes similar philosophical motifs can also be found in works by younger scholars. Grzegorz Jankowicz – who defines himself as a philosopher of literature – clearly follows a similar path (although he does not refer to Heidegger frequently), perhaps via Agamben, an ardent fan of Heidegger's (see e.g. *Uchodźcy z ziemi Ulro* [Refugees from Ulro] [2015], *Blizny* [Scars] [2019]). In this case, Marxism of post-structuralists, implemented in the Polish criticism following the political transformation, is no longer a desirable addition. Paweł Próchniak, Adrian Gleń, as well as Jacek Gutorow (in his critical-philosophical texts, such as *Życie w rozproszonym świetle* [Life in dispersed light] [2016] or *Monaten* [2017]) seem to display Heideggerism (loftiness, abstraction and poetic character of theses referring to values which are established in language, despite being inexpressible) in their style of poetry criticism. The use of Heidegger's combination of phenomenology and existentialism as a peculiar extension for assumptions regarding the autonomy of literature resulting from Kant's criticism of judgments of taste is a phenomenon of a different sort. In this case, Heidegger's concepts partially – yet significantly – support attitudes resulting from the structuralist way of reading literature, and determined by the need to anthropologize (e.g. *Zmysł formy* [The sense of a form] by Joanna Grądział-Wójcik [2016], *Z wnętrza dystansu* [From within the distance] by Elżbieta Winiecka [2012], *Pamięć afektywna* [Affective memory] by Justyna Tabaszewska [2022] and *Nowy autotematyzm* [New self-referentiality] by Agnieszka Waligóra [2022]).

literary autonomy or, more broadly, self-reflexivity, typical for modernity. Those notions were the starting point for the Polish methodological-critical debate about poetry. I believe that it was thanks to the academic authority of philosophy that it gained a special rank in the landscape of convictions regarding the place and role of literature in social life and public debate, rapidly changing at the time of the political transformation.

Assumptions regarding aesthetics – allowing for a peculiar combination of existential matters and culture with the rules of the autonomy of an aesthetic experience – often similar to Heidegger's ideas, stand on the threshold of Polish transformations of the critical-literary language (in the second half of the 1970s, and at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s). They are expressed in a rather hermetic criticism, saturated in a dictionary of a philosophical provenance, requiring a lot of erudition from readers, but also finding for itself a peculiarly poetic outlet. Its authors do not shy away from highly individualized, rhetorical and stylistic devices, often distancing themselves from strictly literary-studies discourses which subject themselves to the accepted academic norm. Polish translations of Heidegger's works began with *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1977)<sup>3</sup>, and appeared soon after Mircea Eliade's anthropological treatises were published (e.g. *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* published in Polish in 1970, *The Myth of Eternal Return* from 1976) which enjoyed a lot of popularity in Poland, as well as John Huizinga (*Homo ludens*, 1970) and Ernst Cassirer (*An Essay on Man*, 1971). Additionally, they were accompanied by Gaston Bachelard's anthropological-philosophical book (*On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*, 1975), George Poulet's essays representing thematic criticism (*The Metamorphoses of the Circle*, 1977) and Jean Starobinski's *The Style of Autobiography* (1979). We could also add philosophical-hermeneutic treatises by Paul Ricoeur (*Existence and Hermeneutics*, 1985) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*The Prose of the World*, 1976)<sup>4</sup>. Sociological and psychological discourses which were attributed to the global, counter-cultural debate at the turn of the 1970s, played a significant (although) different role: Erich Fromm (*Escape from Freedom*, 1970) and Herbert Marcuse (*Reason and Revolution*, 1966). Therefore, it may be said that the 1970s were a period during which many anthropological-hermeneutic texts which highlighted the significance of culture as a factor shaping the human and social awareness appeared – and these texts shaped Polish literary criticism, grounding its values in aesthetic, autotelic terms.. Up until the 1990s, spiritual Heideggerians: Andrzej Falkiewicz

<sup>3</sup> Janusz Mizera wrote that the first significant mentions of Heidegger date back only to 1955, to a paper by pr. Franciszek Sawicki in "Roczniki Filozoficzne KUL". It was not until *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, a selection of various lectures and short treatises by Heidegger edited by Krzysztof Michalski (and translated by Krzysztof Pomian, Marek J. Siemek, Józef Tischner and Krzysztof Wolicki), when the Heideggerian discourse was finally introduced to the Polish literary debate for good – including the special language mediated by Michalski. Finally, in 1994 the Polish translation of *Being and Time* by Bogdan Baran was published; Baran was also the author of the first monograph attempt at discussing Heidegger's philosophical project in its entirety in *Saga Heideggera [Heidegger's saga]* (1988). Janusz Mizera, "Uwagi o recepcji i przekładzie tekstów Martina Heideggera w Polsce" [Some remarks on the reception and translation of Martin Heidegger's texts], *Argument* 2 (2013): 245–262.

<sup>4</sup> The reception of the entirety of the French criticism in the early 1970s is completed by individual essays by George Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, collected in the Polish edition *Współczesna krytyka literacka we Francji* by Wojciech Karpinski (1974), as well as Barthes's first books (*Mythologies*, 1970) and Foucault's (*Archeology of knowledge*, 1977), read in structuralist terms. However, those texts were not that significant at the time.



i Tymoteusz Karpowicz<sup>5</sup> wrote lively, philosophically- and culturally-poetic criticism founded on those new sources. However, they were also crucial for transformations in the historical-critical awareness of Maria Janion, one of the founders of the Polish cultural turn in the feminist dimension. This scholar, although far from Heidegger's models and influenced by various madmen of literature, and in terms of interpretation – by Eliade's poetic essays<sup>6</sup>, had an impact on the youngest critics – Stanisław Rosiek and Stefan Chwin<sup>7</sup>, who devoured Freud and Fromm – at the threshold of the 1980s. This generation also included Tadeusz Komendant, the acclaimed Polish translator of Michel Foucault.

“Cultural” literary critics aimed to soften the rigid rules of reading imposed both on literary studies and literary criticism by political doctrines on one hand, and on the other – by the Polish structuralism. This fascinating transitional period enabled Polish readers (including its elites) to join philosophical debates about literature on an international level. Heidegger's texts – or rather their first larger selection included in Michalski's anthology – immediately built his authority which included poetry, exceeding his own discipline. They also offered a justification for the social position of intellectualists in the late People's Republic of Poland – as Komendant ironically put it – promoted to the state of being rooted out from culture<sup>8</sup>. Heidegger's philosophical-poetic orientation situated the Polish debate about literature at the turn of the 1980s beyond the need to directly participate in political struggles dominating in both its circulations. In *What Is Metaphysics?*, *Letter on Humanism*, and *What are poets for?*, which are amongst the most commonly cited of Heidegger's lectures from Michalski's anthology, there are volatile thoughts that were later referred to on numerous occasions: about man, “the shepherd of being”, about language, the “house” of that being, where “the human being dwells”, or about poets who “risk more” as eulogists of the uncorrupted, and are therefore poets at “a destitute time”<sup>9</sup>. Heidegger allowed intellectualists disenchanted with the political indoctrination of the Polish counter-culture literature of the 1980s to think in terms of independence guaranteed by the same intellectual practice. Heidegger's poetics,

<sup>5</sup> This influence is especially clear in Karpowicz's critical book about Leśmian (*Poezja niemożliwa* [Impossible poetry], 1975), as well as in later books by Falkiewicz, such as *Istnienie i metafora* [Being and metaphor] (1996). Heidegger returns as a conversation topic between Karpowicz and Falkiewicz, who identify him as a significant source for their philosophical reflection about aesthetics and ontology, and (negated) metaphysics. See e.g. *dwie rozmowy* [two conversations] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2012; especially Karpowicz's essay *Metafora otwarta* [An open metaphor]) or the recently published collection *blisko z daleka* [close from a distance] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Ossolineum, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> See especially the famous series *Transgresje* [Transgressions] published between 1981 and 1988 as a result of Janion's famous seminar at the University of Gdańsk. Its subsequent editions, entitled e.g. *Galernicy wrażliwości* [Galley slaves of sensitivity], *Osoby* [Persons], *Maski* [Masks], *Odmieńcy* [Misfits], introduced translations of texts by French, German and American representatives of revolutionary methodological propositions to the Polish literary criticism, documenting their various relationships with romanticist concepts. With their poetic form, which goes beyond the directives of academic publications, they founded the tradition of literary studies reaching beyond academia in poetic-philosophical terms, i.e. the subject of this paper. See Maria Zielińska, “Hermeneutyka Marii Janion” [Maria Janion's hermeneutics], in: *Sporne postacie polskiej literatury współczesnej: krytycy* [Disputable characters of the contemporary Polish literature: critics], edited by Alina Brodzka-Wald, Tomasz Żukowski (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2003); see also Beata Skarżyńska, *Mircea Eliade w Polsce* [Mircea Eliade in Poland] (Warszawa: Neriton, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> *Szkice bez autorytetu* (1981), i.e. the generational manifesto of Maria Janion's students, who founded “Punkt” – an association and a magazine.

<sup>8</sup> Tadeusz Komendant, *Zostaje kantyczka* [A canticle remains] (Warszawa: Oficyna Literacka, 1987), 7–9.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, edited by Krzysztof Michalski, translated into Polish by Krzysztof Michalski and others (Warszawa: PIW, 1977), quotes from pages 104, 123, 222, respectively.

understood as an integral if not the most important part of existence, left the institutionalized, Platonic-Kantian norm in all its dimensions.

*Time and Being*, Heidegger's *opus magnum*, was not translated into Polish until 1994 by Bogdan Baran; before, the book was known only from fragments translated in a way which complicated its reception<sup>10</sup>. Heidegger's strong presence in post-war French philosophy shaped the critical-literary reception of his book in the 1970s. During the transformation era, his influence shifted to French post-structuralist criticism.. Polish anti-Marxism accompanying the political transformation, resulting from the strong need to cut ties with the communist past, brought about a special, political correction to post-structuralism understood in Heideggerian terms<sup>11</sup>. The specificity of the French, leftist interpretation of Heidegger, which may seem surprising already at the starting point – as we know from *Dylematy tożsamości. Wokół autowizerunku filozofa w powojennej myśli francuskiej* [Identity dilemmas. Around the philosopher's self-image in the post-war French thought] by Marek Kwiek – it related to academic interpretations of German phenomenologists in France, among whom Heidegger played a crucial role. He was “a French philosopher *par excellence*”, without whom it was impossible to think critically after the war: “The French thought breathed Heidegger for fifty years; Kojève's Hegel was extremely popular even before the war, and it was Hegel who incorporated Heidegger (together with Marx) in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*”<sup>12</sup>. A critical project by Tadeusz Komendant – a critic associated with the beginnings of Polish post-modernism and the circle of the “artistic revolution” in prose – fits into this reception in an interesting way. Komendant was the most important representative of critical reflection about literature practiced in the circle of “*Twórczość*”, the most certain continuation of the anti-academic, anti-normative, and at the same time artistic excursion beyond the walls of academia at the turn of the 1990s. Komendant, who continued the traditions from early, pre-academic forms of cultural criticism, was possibly the most daring commentator of groundbreaking phenomena in literature. He set the tone for the cognitively- and aesthetically-determined narrative about the literature of late modernism, directly shaped by the reception of French post-structuralists. Doubtlessly, Michał Paweł Markowski's book performances, increasingly more frequent up until the 1990s, fell into such a quasi-romantic tone of philosophical-literary reception; Markowski remains an advocate of deeply specialist, but also artistic, essayistic literary criticism<sup>13</sup>.

I believe that Markowski showcases the Heideggerian character of the Polish post-modernist reflection about aesthetics. In one of his essays from *Anatomia ciekawości* [The anatomy of

<sup>10</sup>Mizera, 245.

<sup>11</sup>See e.g. Tomasz Szkuclarek, “Dekonstrukcja i szczepionka z Marksa, która jednak doprowadziła do infekcji” [Deconstruction and a vaccine from Marx, which resulted in an infection anyway], in: *French Theory w Polsce* [French Theory in Poland], edited by Ewa Domańska, Mirosław Loba (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010), p. 82 and others.

<sup>12</sup>Marek Kwiek, *Dylematy tożsamości. Wokół autowizerunku filozofa w powojennej myśli francuskiej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe IF UAM, 1999), 181.

<sup>13</sup>Agata Bielik-Robson – Michał Paweł Markowski's philosophical opponent – has been trying to incorporate a philosophical element determined by foreign traditions rooted in religious ethics in the debate about the Polish literature since the beginning of the 21st century. This is especially evident in “Na pustyni”. *Kryptoteologie późnej nowoczesności* (2008) [“In the desert”. *Crypto teleologies of the late modernity*], where she constructs a lecture on the phenomenological-existential and post-structuralist French philosophy of culture in the 20th century from anti-Heidegger perspectives. .

curiosity] – dedicated to Andrzej Sosnowski and Tadeusz Pióro – there is a fragment which seems to summarize certain convictions regarding the role and function of poetry in broadly understood human existence. It would be a complex problem of philosophy written from scratch, from the deconstructionist perspective. These theses are put forward in relation to various, post-structuralist reconfigurations (by Rorty, Derrida, Deleuze). They attack the loftiness of Heidegger’s conceptualization of *Dasein*, in which divine poetry has a privileged access to the authenticity of Being, with the irony of Rorty’s criticism, identifying the dense network of interpretations determined by socially understood relations in culture<sup>14</sup>. Markowski writes: “Since Heidegger [...] literature has seemed to be «the place of intercepting» the Logos, the home of the talking Being, hitherto obscured by the rationalized babbling about being. Obviously, from such a perspective it is possible to talk about poetry, not literature”<sup>15</sup>. He continues: “...poets are the shepherds of Being and depositaries of its truth”; only listening to their word will allow to go beyond the limits of philosophy as a theory of representations, because being is a certain event: what is unrepresentable, concealed, singular and peculiar”<sup>16</sup>. We should add that although Markowski breaks Heidegger’s pathos with Rorty’s irony, he does not resign from the conviction of the significance of working with literature. This fragment about Heidegger shows that although Heidegger’s “Truth” sanctified by Rorty disappears from the post-structuralist critical-literary reflection, its gleam – the priestly dignity of Heidegger’s emptiness left by ultimate things as the main topic of the Western metaphysics is intact. This “saint” echo resonating in Heidegger’s emptiness legitimizes the presence of a priest-literary scholar (shepherd of being) in the social space: in the new role of a titled accoucheur who helps deliver the self-consciousness of the post-transformation society<sup>17</sup>.

At the turn of the 1990s the post-structuralist French criticism was recovering from the shock caused by Victor Farias’s 1987 book *Heidegger et le nazisme* – a controversial, scandalous biography of Heidegger, which discussed in detail his relationship with Hitler’s regime during the second World War, which echoed in Germany as well as in the USA<sup>18</sup>. It would seem that also in Poland this scandalous context of Heidegger’s biography should constitute an important element of the critical reception of *Time and Being* – especially given that Farias’s book was published in the same year as the Polish translation of *Time and Being*<sup>19</sup>. Even if the controversy became an element of a strictly philosophical debate in Poland, its traces are invisible in criticism, which is limited to the negativist “poetics” of

<sup>14</sup>Michał Paweł Markowski, *Anatomia ciekawości* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999), 229.

<sup>15</sup>Markowski, 225.

<sup>16</sup>Markowski.

<sup>17</sup>As a critic, Komendant seems to be careful with using major ontological and metaphysical categories which dictate the essential character of Heidegger’s reading of poetry and the new German literary canon (Hölderlin, Rilke, Trakl) – and he does not resign from the lofty style of critical comments about poetry. When writing about Heidegger, both Komendant and Markowski rely on a dictionary devised by Michalski as one of the translators of the first Polish collection of Heidegger’s lectures.

<sup>18</sup>The French discussion reverberated in Germany; as Kwiek explains, from the German perspective, Heidegger’s issue had already been processed (among others, in post-war comments by Karla Löwith and Hugo Otto). In Germany, Heidegger had both prominent followers (Gadamer) and fierce opponents (Adorno).

<sup>19</sup>Cezary Wodziński, *Heidegger i problem zła [Heidegger and the problem of evil]* (Warszawa: PIW, 1994).

text adapted to the Polish literary studies together with the French post-structuralism<sup>20</sup>. In *Władze dyskursu* [Discourse authorities] from 1994 and *Upadły czas* [Fallen time] from 1995, Komendant reveals he was aware of the significance of the French thought about Heidegger, and he even tries to engage in it on the margins of his discussion. At the same time, Komendant is vigilant about approaches which dismiss Heidegger's fascination with fascism. He avoids a simple solution favored by many commentators (according to Kwiek, Philippe Lacou-Labarthe and Jacques Derrida), who present Heidegger's Nazi affiliation in terms of a bloomer independent from his intellectual legacy. In *Władze dyskursu*, Komendant – comparing Bataille's and Heidegger's pessimistic comments regarding the human condition and simultaneously referring to his famous lecture, *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry* – states directly in a footnote: “The text was written in 1937, when Heidegger still believed in «a not-yet, future God» (Heidegger's relationships with Nazism are by no means a coincidence)”<sup>21</sup>. It is one of very few places where Komendant is rather critical of the “king” of the modern French philosophy.

It is difficult to intellectually process the relationships between post-structuralist and deconstructionist concepts with Marxist policy without asking about Heidegger's fascism – without thinking whether it resulted directly from philosophical premises. However, from the perspective of the Polish criticism from the 1990s, Heidegger's basic theses rejecting any higher authority, or a rationalized subject as a guarantee of the certainty of cognition, first and foremost reflected the essence of what was considered as a breeze of novelty: deconstruction. In a way, the Polish literary-philosophical criticism inherited the unobvious relationship between leftist French intellectuals with Heidegger – at the same time depriving their ideas of the leftist element, troublesome at the time of the political transformation in Poland. The entirety of this simultaneously special and weird relationship – resulting from favoring Hegel's concept in Alexandre Kojève's version, from existentialism borrowed from Jean-Paul Sartre's German reflection and phenomenological texts as an obligatory element of the reflection of French philosophers – infiltrates Komendant's literary-philosophical criticism, making it a unique amalgamate, full of contradictory impulses. It is especially obvious when we compare two of his books: *Władze dyskursu* (1994) and *Upadły czas* (1996), which offer two variants of understanding Foucault.

<sup>20</sup> Kwiek wrote about the “political” part of Heidegger's biography, presenting philosophical parties arguing about his legacy. For the sake of clarity, I will mention only two: those trying to preserve something from Heidegger's legacy (Derrida and Lacou-Labarthe), and those who accused Heidegger along with post-structuralists and deconstructionalists – as spokespeople of May 1968 – of anti-humanism (Ferrit and Renaud) (Kwiek, 207). By that logic, it is possible to understand why Polish literary critics who read Heidegger in the context of post-structuralism decided to marginalize the biographic element of his work. According to Kwiek's as well as Komendant's and Markowski's interpretation, Derrida's deconstruction is identified with Heidegger's negation of Western metaphysics. This creates the opportunity to remain in poetry with criticism, in a bit structuralist way, in the world of texts freely working together in the aesthetic universe of thought. Hegel's (mediated by Kojève) specificity of the French post-structuralism, as well as the fact that after the war, Heidegger was clearly associated with the left all seem to point out to its difference from the place Heidegger took in the German perspective – and which give rise to hermeneutic interpretations of works by Hans Georg Gadamer. This is evidenced by the conflict between Gadamer and Derrida in reference to Paul Celan's poetry.

<sup>21</sup> Tadeusz Komendant, *Władze dyskursu. Michel Foucault w poszukiwaniu siebie* [Discourse authorities. Michel Foucault in search of self] (Warszawa: Spacja, 1994), 46.

In the former, Foucault's discourse (close to Komendant's ideas) is clashed with concepts by his precursors, polemicists and friends: Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze. Foucault is suggested through the politically moderate Paul Veyne rather than the leftist Deleuze. As a result, Komendant interprets Foucault as a liberal hero: disillusioned by the revolutionary terrorism, denouncing significant ontological and metaphysical gestures in favor of documenting archives – but also “an anarchist and skeptic” who distinguishes himself by his distanced approach to Marx<sup>22</sup>. At the same time, as a philosopher, Foucault – just like Heidegger – follows Nietzsche. Komendant presents him as a representative of a constructive if volitionally motivated incorrectness in terms of social institutions, rather than a philosopher read by post-structuralists in search for new, cognitive and critical applications of rhetoric (Paul de Man would be an extreme example of this). Komendant summarizes Foucault's revisionist considerations regarding the autotelic language of speculative philosophy, only seemingly divided into questions about existence and reality as unmasking the “linguistic gulag”, explaining:

Here the radicalization of phenomenology – following Heidegger – does not lead to uncovering the founding role of speech; to the contrary – it places us beyond the truth («objective truth» – the first reduction [by Husserl – JO]) and meaning (the second reduction [by Foucault – JO]), in the hope that the sphere of autonomous discourse will reveal itself. This discourse is self-spoken and self-expressed. It is some kind of a linguistic gulag – no comparison will be too strong. People who talk only to say something, their discourse is motivated by truth and sense; however, if one can show that what they say follows the rules which are alien to their consciousness, i.e. internal rules of discourse, the faith in truth and sense becomes an illusion. We remain prisoners of those rules, and what is even worse, it is impossible to verify whether this prison «really» exists – a measure of difficulty<sup>23</sup>.

From this perspective, Foucault corrects the dangerous utopian character of Heidegger's project in his first, structuralist books, which leads Heidegger to declarations of faith in the possibility of the religion of speech, religion of poetry. Therefore, Foucault reaches the problem of the unbearable locking inside of what autotelically realizes itself within itself. Komendant describes the languages of poststructuralism and deconstruction as a metonymy of a totalitarian, Soviet prison. However, according to Komendant, Foucault's concept of history – through the initially structuralist analysis of linguistic conditions of social relationships from *Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Words and Things* – points out to the way of leading a text towards the truth of existence<sup>24</sup>. Following those intuitions, we can notice that in *Władze*

<sup>22</sup>As Michał Kozłowski observes, Foucault read Marx, he even considered himself a Marxist for some time; being familiar with works by Marx was typical for intellectuals of his time. Despite his obvious connections with Althusser he distanced himself from Marxism, which did not stop him from collaborating closely with the Maoist *Gauche prolétarienne*. By performing Marxist gestures, Foucault faced heated, spiritually Marxist debates. Michał Kozłowski, “Foucault czyta Marksa” [Foucault reads Marx], *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 4 (2011); <https://www.praktykateoretyczna.pl/artykuly/micha-kozowski-foucault-czyta-marksa-marks-czyta-foucaulta/>, dostęp 3.10.2023.

<sup>23</sup>Komendant, *Władze* dyskursu, 164.

<sup>24</sup>In this context – despite the obviously Hegelian, and so also Marxist foundation of this opinion – Komendant's accusations against the doctrines of counterculture resulting from Marxist orientation, which aim to deny Foucault's political engagement, for instance at the time of his activity in *Groupe d'information sur les prisons* – are interesting. Komendant, *Władze* dyskursu, 99–103.

*dyskursu*, Heidegger – marginalized, but nonetheless patronizing the adventures of the French literary criticism in its main discussion – plays the role of a voice which, although subordinated to the truth, checks the senses of the post-structuralist philosophy. And Foucault is a good, i.e. non-Marxist post-philosopher, who achieves freedom and independence of thought, going beyond the utopia of the poetic language in the discussions of contemporary hermeneuts (“Preachers of Good News, Heidegger and Gadamer”<sup>25</sup>). He successfully avoids the Scylla of abstracted Truth, whose stakes are hidden in Heidegger’s “speech”; however, he also sees the Charybdis of the post-structuralist “linguistic gulag”. In order to critically work out a place in the crevasse between cognition and language which would accommodate Foucault’s work, Komendant reaches for Roman Jakobson’s *Einstein and the Science of Language*:

This is a conclusive testimony and a brilliant text. It shows – despite hermeneuts – that thinking beyond language exists, that the truth does not necessarily need to be tied with discourse, that desire plays a great role in seeking the truth, that apart from the discursive truth there is also a desire for the truth<sup>26</sup>.

Komendant approaches Foucault differently in his next book, *Upadły czas*. Here, he conceptualizes poetry as ‘the speech of gods,’ aligning with Heidegger’s Polish reception. He uses this framework to elevate the motherland of this speech: the Polish literary canon, reclaimed after the political transformation.. Komendant is deeply sentimental about the canon formula, which is somewhat surprising for such an anarchist critic; it is accompanied by the trust for the national Polish tradition – critical and carefully expressed. The hermeneutic horizon of interpretation towards which Komendant turns is a repository of memories of the uprooted, exiled Polish elites, for whom a cultural nest – similarly to Rymkiewicz, Przybylski, or Janion – constitutes emigration and manor house-country romanticism<sup>27</sup>. This is where post-structuralist relationships with Foucault read through the prism of Heidegger become clear. Komendant’s erudite essay, in which the Bible constitutes the origin of all poetic readings (his first essay is entitled *Book of Deuteronomy*) unravels chronologically as a treatise about philosophical aspects of culture, in which canons – religious and secular, Polish and international, philosophical and literary – are all mixed together. Komendant considers various elements constructing the problematics of philosophical enquiries about existence – in reference to Polish, historical problems which romantically mark our tradition (in the chapter about *Domek i świat* [A little house and the world] elements of Rousseau’s Enlightenment rhetoric are mixed with Voltaire’s “cultivating one’s own garden” and considerations regarding the lost motherland). In the chapter about fallen time, Komendant turns against the Hegelian dialectic which formed the basis of the twentieth-century Marxism – following Bronisław Trentowski’s religious alternative for philosophy from *Panteon wiedzy ludzkiej* [Pantheon of human knowledge], which revises the “intellectually conceited” Hegelian concept of subjective-objectivity, and identifies “absolution” as a solution of the dilemmas of such a dialectic<sup>28</sup>. Using Trentowski’s

<sup>25</sup>Komendant, *Władze dyskursu*, 172.

<sup>26</sup>Komendant, *Władze dyskursu*, 174.

<sup>27</sup>This is evident in the critical-poetic, multi-genre essay *Lustro i kamień* [A mirror and a stone] (1994), which resembles a post-modern *silva rerum*.

<sup>28</sup>Tadeusz Komendant, *Upadły czas. Sześć esejów i pół* (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 1996), 94–95.

arguments against the Hegelian dialectic, Komendant turns towards Heidegger's idea of humanism. "Something third" (which can be found in Heidegger's lecture) is supposed to become a cure for the crisis of the dialect order of materialism and idealism, excluding the possibility of God's existence. Therefore, Komendant surprisingly ties it with Trentowski: "In contemporary language, in Heidegger's language, it would sound as follows: man knows anything about being [*Sein*] because he is conscious, here-and-now [*Dasein*]. Heidegger makes man the guardian of being, whereas Trentowski dubbed him an «entrenched individual»"<sup>29</sup>.

In *Upadły czas*, according to Komendant, this man is first and foremost a literary protagonist – therefore, it is not surprising that he can be directly Heideggerian. In the chapter about being a refugee, entitled *Vincenzowe ziarno* [Vincenz's seed], he asks about the need to rebuild agora, referring to the concept of epos and Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphonic novel. Reconciling the private with the public was a strong postulate in the transformational criticism, which at this point gains justification rooted in antiquity. Once we understand that the historically understood tradition can help man "stand in the truth", Komendant reaches for the deep legacy of "the historic speech of the people", understood in strictly Heideggerian terms, at the same time talking about "existence" which is "completely overexposed by words". Following Heidegger, Komendant adds: "Thinking offers [the relationship with the essence of man – JO] as something that is granted to thinking by being. Offering lies in the fact that being in thinking becomes speech. Speech is the house of being. Man lives under its roof. Philosophers and poets guard this house"<sup>30</sup>.

At that point, Komendant's historical thinking boils down to the conclusion that there is a crisis – the sense of time is broken; this is how he reads Foucault as a historian in *Upadły czas*: listening only to what can concern interpretation understood as a "fold" in the timeless discourse, self-interpreting. Vincenz becomes a contemporary castaway – like Crusoe, Gulliver – an exile from the fallen history, the agora-house, who writes about Dante's purgatory of Poles exiled from the Eastern borderlands in an identity narrative sustained by a network of subtle literary allusions in his *Dialogi z Sowietami* [Dialogues with the Soviets]. In such places the subtle anti-communist directive of Komendant's criticism becomes directly political. Paradoxically, a philosopher who has a lot in common with a totalitarian regime remains a spiritual guide for Komendant. Heidegger's house of being, which becomes speech in thinking, is the beginning of the reconstructed Polish democracy: a new motherland, which up until recently had been located all around the world for the Polish exiles: "wherever a castaway sets their foot, wherever fate throws them, they will maintain one thing for ever: the sense of *civitas*. And there they shall rebuild – from gestures, from words, from memory – their closer motherland"<sup>31</sup>. Komendant summarizes the chapter:

God stepped behind the starry sky, hiding his face, but the mind cannot accept homelessness. This is why on the one hand, we deal with a return to the pre-criticism era and try to create metaphysics

<sup>29</sup>Komendant, *Upadły czas. Sześć esejów i pół*, 98.

<sup>30</sup>Komendant, *Upadły czas. Sześć esejów i pół*, 108.

<sup>31</sup>Komendant, *Upadły czas. Sześć esejów i pół*, 119.

[...], and on the other, with desperate attempts at “rooting” the subject in something that allows to forget about homelessness and soothes loneliness. The empirical and transcendental surfaces mix discreetly: this is how the metaphysics of race, environment or proletariat are made. This crisis of reason took place in the first decade of the century, with Husserl’s and Heidegger’s texts as its theoretical testimonies<sup>32</sup>.

Even the motto of *Upadły czas* references Foucault’s words, which could connect his understanding of history with Heidegger: “Everything is merely a fallen time, the poor presumption of a passage refused by the future, a thing in becoming which is irreparably less than history”<sup>33</sup>. The essay opens with declamatory words directing the Polish readers towards *Words and Things* (1966) as a significant starting point for Foucault’s later works, associated with post-modernism, such as *The Order of Discourse* (1970) or *Who is an Author?* (1969). *Words and Things* is a major, linguistically and intellectually impressive book which was published in Polish in 2005, translated by Komendant. In *Upadły czas* it is referred to as something legendary; however, Komendant introduces it to the debate about the Polish post-modernism in a manner which is far more in line with post-structuralism than we could expect based on *Władze dyskursu*. Komendant writes about Foucault who announces “man’s death and the coming of speech” at “a fallen time” – however, he does it in accordance with the expectations of contemporary Polish readers, as:

The triumph of literature, which therefore became the paramount philosophical question of the era. It was no longer about “serious” philosophical questions (what is being and what forms does it take? who is man and what is he supposed to be doing?) – henceforth, completely different questions were supposed to awaken our imagination. Foucault lists them: “What is language? What is a sign? What is unspoken in the world, in our gestures, in the whole enigmatic heraldry of our behavior, our dreams, our sicknesses – does all that speak, and if so in what language and according to what grammar? [...] What, then, is this language that says nothing, is never silent, and is called «literature»?”<sup>34</sup>.

Situating Foucault between the Nietzschean question “who is talking” and the Mallarméan “book” is in line with the theses of Komendant’s earlier book, *Zostaje kantyczka*. It allows to treat the entirety of his critical proposals in a non-contradictory way<sup>35</sup>. Komendant’s Foucault plays the role of a herald of negatively, autotelically understood literature, “literature which says that it says something”, which “does not communicate anything beyond the conditions of its own communication”, and which is simultaneously not serious and esoteric<sup>36</sup> – even if this literature is always immersed in history (or rather connected to its downfall), and referring

<sup>32</sup>Komendant, *Upadły czas. Sześć esejoj i pół*, 129.

<sup>33</sup>This quote also appears in *Zostaje kantyczka* (95), but in neither case is the source provided. Source for the English translation: Foucault, *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, 1988. New York, NY: Random House, xxxi [PZ].

<sup>34</sup>Komendant, *Upadły czas. Sześć esejoj i pół*, 7.

<sup>35</sup>See my book *Republika poetów* [The republic of poets] for a discussion about the relations of comments on literature in *Zostaje kantyczka* and *Upadły czas*. Joanna Orska, *Republika poetów. Poetyckość i polityczność w krytycznej praktyce* [The republic of poets. Poetics and politics in the critical practice] (Kraków: EMG, 2013), section: *Poetyckość i polityczność* [Poeticity and politicality].

<sup>36</sup>Komendant, *Upadły czas. Sześć esejoj i pół*, 8.



to it (both in *Władze dyskursu* and *Upadły czas*) is highly questionable. To Komendant, history – from the perspective of the twentieth-century philosophy, entangled in the dialectic logic and contaminated by totalitarian regimes – seems too closely connected to Hegelianism and Marxism, against which he fiercely defends his own way of reading poetry and Foucault. Thus Foucault proclaims the triumph of autotelically understood literature, affirmatively referring to the environment of “Tel Quel” – but also rescuing from “a fallen time” for the post-structural reading a significant element, which was omitted in *Władze dyskursu*:

Heidegger’s writing showcases the esoteric language which suspends the omnipotence of prattle in a temporary gesture of writing, a language making itself comfortable in the fold of a word. The famous Heideggerian “turn” was – from a certain perspective – a deconstruction of centuries-old, metaphysical opposition between philosophy and literature. In other words, Heidegger proclaimed the triumph of speech, as (together with poets) he went beyond the “serious” philosophical discourse, thus becoming the father of present-day deconstructionalists [...]. We know this, because we would constantly repeat Heidegger citing Hölderlin: “Yet what remains the poets found”. And we also know that “to write poetry, the most innocent of all occupations”<sup>37</sup>.

Apart from the fact that Heidegger – unlike in *Władze dyskursu* – is specified by Komendant exclusively with an affirmative comment, in *Upadły czas* he also becomes the most important Nietzschean poet-philosopher from the perspective of late modernity. *Upadły czas* is a critical or philosophical-critical book, dedicated to Foucault – in whose philosophy “immersing in history” means “making oneself comfortable in the fold of language” between a fallen time which “is irremediably less than history” – rather than with relief brought by esotericism. Its necessary vagueness, inability to express what is authentic, finds expression in the pathetic style – which derives its persuasive character from the discourse of theology left empty after God’s death, as Theodor Adorno demonstrated on numerous occasions<sup>38</sup>:

Being is the free establishment, absurd surplus, selfless gift – of someone? of something?; there are no adequate words, as we enter the field of negative theology [...]. In some way being is vain poetic exaltation, which permeates all of Heidegger’s writing. It is therefore unsurprising that he states: “Poetry is the establishing of being by means of the word”<sup>39</sup>.

Komendant’s approach to Foucault, and his views on the social role of literature and poetry, seem rooted in a version of Heideggerianism shaped by French poststructuralism. In Poland, this form omitted debates on Heidegger’s fascism, complicating deeper conceptualizations of

<sup>37</sup>Komendant, *Upadły czas*. Sześć esejów i pół, 9.

<sup>38</sup>Adorno was Heidegger’s fierce polemicist in terms of aesthetics: he accused him of indifference to the actual human history, as well as to nature, and he condemned Heidegger’s ahistorical abstraction of the notion of authenticity of being, especially in his essay *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* (1964) which opposed the German phenomenology. Ian MacDonald, “Ethics and Autenticity: Conscience and Non-Identity in Heidegger and Adorno, with the Glance at Hegel”, in: *Adorno and Heidegger*, edited by Ian MacDonald, Krzysztof Ziarek (California: Stanford, 2008), 3–9. What is especially worth noting is Adorno’s objection to any type of idealistic homogenization of intellectual notions, unifying opposites to “negative dialectics”, which according to Martin Jay was determined by “true materialism” of the Frankfurt school, ethical at its foundations: „it must register and draw on the sufferings and needs of contingent human subjects rather than explain them away through an historiosophical theodicy”. Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Massachusetts: Cambridge, 1984), 59.

<sup>39</sup>Komendant, *Upadły czas*. Sześć esejów i pół, 13.

‘the essence of poetry.’ In the post-transformation Polish literary-philosophical criticism, this discourse became a valued hermetic anti-hermeneutics, constituting the basis for the critical-literary “poetry religion”. Poetry enables speech. The introduction to *Upadły czas* directs our attention to the philosophical authority enlightening the whole book. It is the impossibility of the empty prattle of *esse* – and a clearing in the dense forest of Being, i.e. our openness discovered in Heidegger’s style thanks to poetry, as well as its fruit: the unconcealedness of Truth expressed in poetry, making itself comfortable in “the fold” of this thicket. Finally, Komendant does not hesitate to repeat Heidegger’s words from his 1937 lecture, i.e. the time of his most intense ideological entanglement, that poetry is the “original voice or language of a people” – without reminding us that he meant Aryan Germans. The volitional, esoteric giddiness was apparently what the reading elites wanted to experience, poetically entering the new, post-transformation world understood as a space of the freedom of interpretation.

It is difficult to talk about a critical-literary line in the Polish post-transformation debate about poetry or literature which could be derived from Komendant. It seems that he was too separate, and his discourse proved simultaneously too individualized and not enough specialized in order to be able to establish a critical-literary school. At the same time, Komendant arguably contributed to the “Heideggerization” of the language of late modern poetry criticism (although he was not the only one); firstly, by making it fashionable to discuss poetry in solemn, hermetic terms, often even without directly referring to the analysis of a given text, due to the possibility to bounce off the attractive, philosophical trampoline. Such a rule can concern reading poetry in reference to various new methodologies, often substituting proper interpretation. Secondly, by extending the tradition of “realists’ jargon” – whose discourse, full of emptied holiness of great and fundamentally undefinable terms – was heavily criticized by Adorno.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

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# KEYWORDS

*Heidegger's reception*

## Heidegger

**ABSTRACT:**

The paper presents the circumstances of Heidegger's text reception in Poland in the 1970s and in during the political transformation. Just as he did in France, Heidegger proved a significant reference point for text-centric methodologies of poststructuralism also in Poland. The paper shows how the critical-literary interpretation of Heidegger's philosophical theses combined with a strong inspiration from Michel Foucault shaped one of the most original Polish critics of the literature from the political transformation period – Tadeusz Komendant. His peculiar, philosophical-literary style, together with poetic definitions with which he tried to capture the rules of post-structuralism for the sake of Polish literary criticism, had a significant impact on the discourse of post-transformation poetry criticism.

*political transformation*

**poststructuralism**

K O M E N D A N T

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# Pragmatic connections.

## On two visions of criticism under the patronage of Richard Rorty

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In the first decade of this century Krzysztof Uniłowski diagnosed the criticism which was taking shape at the time, suspicious towards the obscurity of communication processes and aware of the mediating dimension of the act of reading in the following way: “The lack of a communal utopia condemns the discussed type of criticism to a digressive, marginal character, deprives it of media attractiveness, and reduces the chance for social impact”<sup>1</sup>. This criticism did not have any teleological framework, which is why Uniłowski argued that “there have been attempts at transgressing those limitations” in order to

<sup>1</sup> Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Poza zasadą autonomii. Z przygód świadomości krytycznoliterackiej w latach dziewięćdziesiątych i pierwszych” [Beyond the rule of autonomy. Adventures of critical-literary awareness in the 1990s and 2000s], in: *Dyskursy krytyczne u progu XXI wieku. Między rynkiem a uniwersytetem* [Critical discourses at the turn of the 21st century. Between the market and university], edited by Dorota Kozicka, Tomasz Cieślak Sokołowski (Kraków: Universitas 2007), 202.

restore the social impact of criticism. From Uniłowski's perspective, those attempts were mostly inspired by the pragmatic criticism of Richard Rorty's interpretation category, to whom Kinga Dunin referred directly in *Czytając Polskę* [Reading Poland] (2004), influencing the understanding of literary criticism in the environment of "Ha!art" and "Krytyka Polityczna"<sup>2</sup>. Uniłowski's meta-critical diagnoses led to formulating a protocol of discrepancies between Rorty's project and Polish critics. The latter are referred to as "alternative pragmatists", who ultimately omit the question of the ironic modality of literary representation, crucial to Rorty.

Uniłowski identifies those discrepancies in order to introduce corrections and present his own vision of criticism, whereas to me they are symptoms of critical-literary ways of referring to Rorty, which were necessary for the critics of the first decade of this century to articulate varied, sometimes even mutually contradictory visions of literature as a part of the public sphere; visions which became a key projection and fundamental task at the time<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the varied uses of Rorty's work (also in terms of ideological positions) also show the tangled genealogy of current empathetic-sensitive critical discourses dependent on liberalism peculiarly presented by Rorty<sup>4</sup>. The latter proved exceptionally attractive at the time which required the defense of the privileged position of literature as a medium for cognizing the reality and extending the community. To this end, Rorty's interpretation theory proved useful as a project utopianly lifting contradictions of the liberal world.

### (Liberal) model of engaged criticism

Kinga Dunin refers to Rorty to "justify the practice of reading focused on cognitive goals, located both beyond the limits of literature and literary studies"<sup>5</sup>. Dunin is especially

<sup>2</sup> Uniłowski specified that the impact of Dunin's book is mostly visible in the critical comments of Igor Stokfiszewski's, and Sławomir Sierakowski's critical-literary discussions – Uniłowski "Poza zasadą autonomii".

<sup>3</sup> In the present paper I am focusing on the line of Rorty-inspired discussions which explicitly articulates the relationships between criticism and the public sphere; for this reason, I am not referring to Kacper Bartczak's most consequent and philosophically consistent critical-literary program, *Świat nie scalony* [Unmerged world], where Bartczak discusses and updates pragmatic interpretative experience for the purpose of his interpretations, paying close attention to Rorty – see Kacper Bartczak, *Świat nie scalony. Estetyka, poetyka, pragmatyka* [Unmerged world. Aesthetics, poetics, pragmatics] (Stronie Śląskie: Biuro Literackie, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Zuzanna Sala pointed out to Rorty's patronage in the context of the current discourse about empathy, referring to the Rortian project of the transition from ethics of moral obligation to the ethics of sensitivity as a significant program for literary scholars and critics who are writing about empathy today – see Zuzanna Sala, "Etyka empatii. O statusie współodczuwania w literaturoznawczej krytyce etycznej" [Ethics of empathy. On the status of compassion in the literary-studies critical ethics], *Litteraria Copernicana* 2 (2022): 37–38. It is also worth mentioning that Andrzej Skredno also referred to the Rortian ethical criticism, comparing it to Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy. Skredno presented Rorty mostly as a post-philosophical utopian, who can propose a peculiar alternative for the scientific paradigm of interpretation evaluation. Skredno's comment is therefore significant from the perspective of debates about valuing and interpretation, rather than empathy in its current, literary-studies contexts – Andrzej Skredno, "Dwa typy krytyki etycznej i ich pogranicze" [Two types of critical ethics and their borderline], *Teksty Drugie* 2-3 (2003): 372–381.

<sup>5</sup> Kinga Dunin, *Czytając Polskę. Literatura polska po roku 1989 wobec dylematów nowoczesności* [Reading Poland. Polish post-1989 literature and the dilemmas of modernity] (Warszawa: SAGA Egmont, 2021, ebook), 34.

interested in the Rortyan differentiation into methodical and unmethodical (inspired) criticism, i.e. reading with assumptions and reading oriented towards an unpredictable identity-axiological transformation of the reader, respectively. Symptomatically, although Dunin refers to the relevant fragment of Rorty's commonly cited essay (*The Pragmatist's Progress*) she leaves out the part where Rorty provides examples of methodical reading, to which he included e.g. deconstructionist and feminist reading. Dunin refers to them (as a theory) elsewhere in the book, where she clearly opposes academic humanities, accusing academia of petrifying interpretative conventions and hierarchization of esteemed/rejected methods of approaching literature. Dunin considers the academic status of feminist or queer criticism as uncertain – she writes about treating such engaged interpretative strategies as not professional enough, which makes her favor them rather than acknowledge their methodical (in the Rortyan sense) orientation. Therefore, in *Czytając Polskę*, Rorty is mostly needed as a codifier of the tradition of affective reading, to which the professionalism of literary-studies interpretative practices is opposed, guided by a methodological key offering predictable conclusions.

What is significant, Dunin gives literature a privileged role as a tool of social sensitization, which (indirectly) refers to the Rortyan engagement vision which he directly connected to literary work on society:

If one asks which books have made American society freer and more just, again a lot of them are novels. Books like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Black Boy* and *Invisible Man* did more than any philosophical or social scientific treaties to let the whites see what they were doing to the Blacks. Books like *The Well of Loneliness* and *Giovanni's Room* did more than psychological treaties to let the straights see what they were doing to the gays. Books like *Middlemarch*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Color Purple* did more to make men realize what they were doing to women than any socio-economic data, or any feminist theorizing<sup>6</sup>.

As argued convincingly by Dominik Antonik, Rorty favored specific, progressive novels which impacted perspectives of struggles related to anti-racism, social inequalities, discrimination against women and the LGBTQ community, and ideological fundamentalism, rather than literature *en masse*<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, we could add: literature that clearly extends the social polyphony; opens “our” community to otherness, contributes to an increase in social sensitivity to pain and cruelty. At the same time, the stakes of this identity engagement are raised by Rorty's peculiar conceptualization of literary criticism as “culture criticism” first and foremost, stretching “the word «literature» to cover whatever the literary critics criticize”<sup>8</sup>.

Let us compare the ending of *Czytając Polskę*:

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rorty, “Etyka zasad a etyka wrażliwości”, *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2002): 58-59. English version: Richard Rorty, *Ethics of Principle vs Sensitivity*, 1990 Carleton College Talk, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nD248K11zNE>. Date of access: 5<sup>th</sup> Jan 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Dominik Antonik, “Pokusy i niebezpieczeństwa etycznej utopii” [Temptations and dangers of the ethical utopia], *Wielogłos* 3 (2013): 24.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 81.



Is this book about literature? The world? Society? Politics? Only about me? I think it is impossible to differentiate. Still, I am convinced that literature offers us cognitive possibilities incomparable to conventional political, publicist, or even historical-scientific and sociological discourses. It is less conservative, better at sensing the rhythm of events. It provides us with experiences and images thanks to which – despite everything – reality makes sense again<sup>9</sup>.

In both cited fragments literature appears as a privileged field of progressive engagement thanks to which the (non-literary) reality can appear to us as a meaningful whole, capable of constantly extending the limits of communities – which is why Igor Stokfiszewski's conclusion from an essay discussing *Czytając Polskę* seems apt:

In simple terms, pragmatism teaches us how to navigate a certain sphere of culture, how to learn effective action from a specific cultural reality. Pragmatism tells us: if you know your goals, if you can imagine what a community that would be better than your current one should look like – look around and find out what means you should use to implement the desired changes<sup>10</sup>.

To appreciate pragmatism in such a way, both Dunin and Stokfiszewski had to fundamentally reduce the liberal foundation of Rorty's philosophical thought. Stokfiszewski explained this cut directly in his text, accusing Andrzej Szahaj – a Polish popularizer of Rorty – of subjugating the liberal dominant to Rorty's worldview, whereas he argued that “what we are used to calling liberalism in the European tradition, in the American version would rather correspond with our notion of social democracy, i.e. the traditional Western left”<sup>11</sup>. Thus the pragmatic model of reading has become an ally of the model of engaged criticism<sup>12</sup>, declaring the ability to use literature for the purpose of social change. However, we should stress that this change – if it was to take place under such defined patronage – surely could not happen using literary-studies tools.

A few years later, in 2006, Michał Paweł Markowski revisited the question of engaged criticism, constantly referring to Rorty, which is significant in this context as Markowski is antagonistic towards engaged criticism, yet faithful to Rorty's conclusions regarding the ideological entanglement of languages – both literary and critical.

Markowski was inspired to point out the limitations of engaged criticism in Andrzej Werner's essay *Pochwała dekadencji* [Praise for decadence] published in “Europa”, in which Werner diagnoses the contemporary literature's detachment from reality<sup>13</sup>. According to Markowski, socially-oriented literary criticism, represented by Werner: “sees the basic

<sup>9</sup> Dunin, 448–449.

<sup>10</sup> Igor Stokfiszewski, “Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury” [Pragmatic criticism of culture], *Ha!art* 21 (2005): 21–22.

<sup>11</sup> Stokfiszewski, 21.

<sup>12</sup> See Paweł Kaczmarski, “Wielogłos i autonomia. Nieoczywiste sojusze w debacie wokół wystąpień Igora Stokfiszewskiego” [Polyphony and anatomy. Unobvious alliances in the debate surrounding Igor Stokfiszewski's work], *Wielogłos* 4 (2021): 18.

<sup>13</sup> Andrzej Werner, “Pochwała dekadencji”, *Europa* 19 (2006), <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/wydarzenia/artykuly/174610,pochwala-dekadencji.html>.

advantage of literary works in their direct references to the socio-economic reality”<sup>14</sup>. Markowski argues with Werner; one key issue is the approach to ideology, which according to Markowski – following Rorty – is a peculiar cognitive entanglement of every judgment and truth, which is a result of accepting a certain dictionary rather than corresponding with the reality:

According to Werner, a real critic has independent opinions, and a false one is “an expert for hire by one company or another”. I think it misconceived and naïve. One would like to know: opinions independent of who or what? The notion of independent opinions is ridiculous, as it assumes that a critic can invent a private language, similar to none and nothing, that they will successfully avoid any external influence, that they will be themselves to the bone. There is no such criticism, as there are no such opinions. The fact that a critic does not take commissions to write rubbish does not mean that they do not take any commissions at all. All of us who talk about something allow ourselves to be hired by languages vaster than our own, we become employees of ideology. There are no opinions which would not be indebted to some ideology, and every opinion is legitimized by it. Whoever thinks they can avoid ideology typically attacks ideology as such, which results in making oneself an easy target for criticism<sup>15</sup>.

Markowski accuses Werner of succumbing to a specific worldview – Marxism (referred to more broadly as a “leftist worldview”) and “highly ideological criticism” which demands that literature should “portray reality” instead of “venturing in the murky waters of soul and language”. Following Rorty, Markowski questions the postulate of independence of opinions, showing Werner’s ideological position, and defending literary autonomy from pro-social subjugation. Markowski further defines the liberal foundation of literary autonomy in his later book, *Polityka wrażliwości* [Sensitivity politics], where he directly refers to Rorty’s patronage, significant for his project: literature means “making oneself bigger by increasing our sensitivity and imagination”<sup>16</sup>, and literature is treated as a tool for changing the way of looking at things. In the polemic with Werner Markowski directly declares to be a defender of literature’s autonomy, which he understands as indifference to the imperative to keep up with the world and humanism (imposed by “highly ideological criticism”); in *Polityka wrażliwości* this autonomy is clearly a means to a pragmatically-oriented end – permanent extension of humanity through work on readers’ imagination. Markowski deprecates Werner’s criticism as dogmatic, subjugated to a specific reading key, and definable through historical-literary clichés (Markowski refers to Ignacy Fik’s Marxist conclusions). Markowski declares himself an advocate of interpretative pluralism, guaranteed (as a safeguard against authoritarianism) by the pragmatic awareness of non-finality of his own critical dictionary and ideological entanglement.

<sup>14</sup>Michał Paweł Markowski, “Precz z dekadencją” [Away with decadence], *Dziennik* 113 (2006), <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/wydarzenia/artykuly/176402,precz-z-dekadencja.html>.

<sup>15</sup>Markowski, “Precz z dekadencją”.

<sup>16</sup>Michał Paweł Markowski, *Polityka wrażliwości. Wprowadzenie do humanistyki* [Sensitivity politics. Introduction to the humanities] (Kraków: Universitas, 2013), 28.

The return to Stokfiszewski and Dunin will sound surprising in this context, as at first glance they could be places on the side of “highly ideological criticism”, i.e. treating literature as a tool for cognizing reality, rejected by Markowski. *Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury* (already mentioned here) introduces a significant category of a “protective pragmatic umbrella”: the attitude of permanent skepticism towards one’s own cognitive conclusions. So although Stokfiszewski disapproved of placing everything in quotation marks, i.e. the awareness of constant mediation, multiplication of reality<sup>17</sup> favored by Markowski, already in 2005 as a reviewer of Dunin’s book, he agreed with the postulate of mistrust for the truth as an objectively accessible, non-ideological measure of literary and critical acts. Stokfiszewski writes in the opening paragraph:

The triumphant return of “the truth” – I think this is the most apt description of what our culture has been struggling with for years, and what (contrary to what the first revealers of postmodernism) results from the need to define identity and community on any premises which would make an impression of being external. The “truth” I am writing about is not a Platonic entity, it is something that could be called a simple arithmetic of ideologists. In this case, the “truth” is more than some ideology. It is the cultural majority’s ideology, which – in the name of stability and feeling good – imposes this “truth” on minorities which would also like to rebuild its community, but on different foundations<sup>18</sup>.

According to Stokfiszewski, Dunin’s project should be treated as a minority alternative to the truth of the Polish majority ideology, as a critical proposition allowing to extend the ideological imaginarium; shifting of accents from the “nation, martyrology, sacrifice, Messiah” to “emancipation, openness to otherness, spirituality”. The stakes of the book and critical discourse are thus connected to completing the ideological polyphony and creating a space in which communal ideas can be expressed thanks to the right attitude to reading, extracting what (following Rorty) enriches a given society from literature. And such criticism, according to Stokfiszewski, is ideological, has a pragmatic umbrella of auto-skepticism towards the definiteness of conclusions. He argues that the awareness of criticism in terms of its own ideological character enables to compete with the majority’s ideology by “mimicking modern strategies”, i.e. defining axioms and constructing them based on a vision of culture. For this reason, Kaczmarek’s conclusions, who argues that ultimately Stokfiszewski’s program is based on the wish to introduce a generational (significant especially in *Zwrot polityczny*) and thematic (which can be seen in his perspective on Dunin’s book) correction to then liberal project, “a correction from the inside, within the system, following its rules (or at least its declared rules)”<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>17</sup>He projected such an attitude on Krzysztof Uniłowski and the “opposition criticism” he represented, whose ineffectiveness supposedly was about being dependent on constantly questioning its own foundations – Stokfiszewski, “Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury”, 20–21.

<sup>18</sup>Stokfiszewski, “Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury”, 19.

<sup>19</sup>Kaczmarek, 23

Markowski's comment, who clearly attributes criticism with turning stereotypes inside out, as well as the ability to create a vision of culture, which he then can "consider", could be treated analogously<sup>20</sup>.

## Rortyan cultural politics

The Rortyan appreciation of literary criticism proved attractive for the Polish humanities also due to the promise of setting them free from the rules of capitalism (on the level of self-identification), which favors science over measurable critical work. Richard Rorty, an opponent of methods and enthusiast of critical inspiration, offered a vision of peculiarly understood, non-economic usefulness of critical-literary practices. From Dunin's perspective, what proved significant was determining the difference between one's own interpretative proposal and systems of stabilizing literary works which include academia and the dominating media discourse. Academia, postponed by Dunin, reduced to an institution "selling knowledge", is juxtaposed with the critical-literary chance for individual reading, appreciated in the neo-pragmatic horizon as work on extending own language, and as a result – the repertoire of languages available to a given community:

We can also be multilingual, which can mean switching from one language to another depending on the circumstances and who we are talking to, on the one hand. And all of us do it, to some extent. On the other, the construction of our awareness, capable of creating metalevels and reflective referring to one another, is also capable of integrating those languages, of creating "private metalanguages" and new contexts. Community is not the only prime mover of change – the awareness of individuals, intentionally turned towards the world, is equally important<sup>21</sup>.

Dunin argues that this multilingualism is to be realized via criticism understood as a sum of individual (complementary, not competing) readings whose social cumulation is supposedly evidence of the reading society's polyphony. Therefore, this is about criticism enriching polyphony, rather than academically and medially (as Dunin seems to claim) reducing it to unanimous, sanctioned interpretations. Dunin seems to believe that such an interpretative polyphony can exist beyond market rules, thus situating the critical polyphony next to hegemonic institutions of sanctioning literary meanings; as coexisting, but unmediated via market rules of visibility and legibility. It is clear that following Rorty, Dunin separates ethics from ideology – she assumes that treating literature as a tool for communication and a communicative approach (contrary to rhetorical) allow to set individual interpretations

<sup>20</sup> He presented such a vision in the debate *Znikające cele krytyki?* [Vanishing aims of criticism?] in which he clearly stressed the role of criticism as an activity targeted against hegemonic wholes (cultural stereotypes), but also a certain whole capable of rewriting cultural formations – "Znikające cele krytyki? Zapis dyskusji panelowej z udziałem Tomasza Burka, Jerzego Jarzębskiego, Michała Pawła Markowskiego, Mariana Stali oraz Włodzimierza Boleckiego. Prowadzenie: Marta Wyka" [Vanishing aims of criticism? Transcript of a discussion between Tomasz Burek, Jerzy Jarzębski, Michał Paweł Markowski, Marian Stala and Włodzimierz Bolecki, chaired by Marta Wyka] in: *Dyskursy krytyczne u progu XX i XXI wieku* [Critical discourses at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries], 419–420.

<sup>21</sup>Dunin, 66.

free from the hegemonic rule of competitiveness, and tune it to “listening to others”. And although Dunin is aware that complete, compatible communication is impossible, ultimately accepting writers’ good intentions is the foundation of her assumptions.

Markowski, who as a critic is far from believing in the dialogue character of criticism, uses Rorty’s ideas in order to consistently maintain the incompatibility of objective cognition and “imagination workout” offered by criticism<sup>22</sup>, which he understands as “the ability to change social practices thanks to propagating new, beneficial ways of expressing oneself”<sup>23</sup>. Therefore – similarly to Dunin – a peculiar multilingualism as a tool for describing the same reality with different languages, thus making this reality more complex with linguistic polymorphism. This is why, towards the end of his polemic with Werner, Markowski ritualistically calls for appreciating and multiplying interpretation, perceiving his opponents – “Marxists” and “bourgeois” – as liquidators of interpretative polyphony demanding unmediated reality. At the same time, it is symptomatic that in reference to ideological opponents, Markowski clearly condemns the ideological character (of a Marxist) and a specific (bourgeois) ethos of criticism, thus ultimately presenting his own critical program as the most adequate for the previously negotiated status of reality. In this sense, Markowski takes the position of a critic who presents criticism the way it should be to function in the publish sphere of pluralist polyphony. By defending polyphony, he actually eliminates it.

Markowski’s earlier text on pragmatism, “Interpretacja i literatura” [Interpretation and literature], published in 2001 in “Teksty Drugie”, is also worth mentioning here. It announces “the end of literary theory” with a voice belonging to “an interpreter|”, i.e. “a user” of literature who goes against analytical procedures and methodological distinctions<sup>24</sup>. Markowski introduces a fundamental opposition of two orientations, above which he wants to place his own proposition. The main opposition lies between a phenomenological conceptualization, “uninterested in literature”, as its aim is to “create a concise theory which will be successfully compete with another theory”, and a pragmatic one, which favors the effectiveness of a given interpretation in “the space of social negotiation”. Although Markowski, having introduced this “paradigmatic disagreement” wants to go beyond the resulting impasse, Tomasz Kunz convincingly observes that “it would be difficult to identify any significant differences between the neo-pragmatic understanding of interpretation and Michał Paweł Markowski’s position”<sup>25</sup>. Ultimately, Markowski concludes:

[l]iterature is not one thing or another. Literature can be one thing or another, depending on the goal we set in defining it. I must admit that by defining literature as a sphere of absolute freedom I want to connect it with the public sphere, although I despise politics as such. However, I believe that there should be a sphere of expression in culture free from any restrictions or conventions,

<sup>22</sup>Markowski, *Polityka wrażliwości*, 49.

<sup>23</sup>Markowski, *Polityka wrażliwości*, 60.

<sup>24</sup>Michał Paweł Markowski, “Interpretacja i literatura”, *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2001): 66.

<sup>25</sup>Tomasz Kunz, “«Swoj do swego po swoje?» (Kilka uwag do tekstu Michała Pawła Markowskiego)” [Some remarks regarding Michał Paweł Markowski’s text], *Teksty Drugie* 1-2 (2002): 296.

a sphere of complete, unrestrained freedom, outlawed, a sphere where – contrary to any other sphere in our lives – can (and should) be ruled by unlimited freedom<sup>26</sup>.

This is a declaration by an avid defender of using literature against exegesis, who – following Rorty – understands politics as a sphere of free clashes of attitudes, worldviews, languages of description, rather than of discourses about the reality. Markowski directly lists those clashes in his polemic with Werner, against whom (as an advocate of a specific type of reading) he wants to defend criticism as a predominantly interpretative disposition, whose effectiveness is determined by attractiveness and persuasiveness of the use of literary texts in the public sphere. In this sense, Markowski could be placed on the same side as Dunin and Stokfiszewski, which should be defined as a fraction of “long-term culture politics” against “short-term politics of governing”. Rorty defined the differences between them:

However, there is a difference between a short-term power politics and long-term culture politics; in constitutional democracies, the former is about deciding who should be elected, what legal solutions should be introduced, to what extent GDP should be redistributed, etc., whereas the latter is an attempt at convincing the future generations to using different words than their predecessors at the moment of engagement in the political debate. Power politics typically refers to already acceptable dictionaries. Culture politics is trying to change them – a slow process spanning decades and centuries<sup>27</sup>.

According to Stokfiszewski, a new dictionary of ideas is at stake, thanks to which “we are constantly providing ourselves with ways of defining identity and coherence”<sup>28</sup>, i.e. what is at stake in cultural politics. In Markowski’s case, especially as a critic of reality and advocate of clashes between critical dictionaries, designing turns out to be the ultimate goal; “organizing collective imagination”<sup>29</sup>, ultimately verified by “the rhythm of life – as Markowski explained – at some point other readers say that a given project sucks, it is rejected, it is no more, it no longer matters”<sup>30</sup>. This seemingly meta-critical idea results directly from the approach to interpretation as using a text, in the face of which theory gives up, giving way to a description of a specific situation<sup>31</sup>.

## A place in the liberal utopia

Markowski’s 2006 essay answered the call for combining literature with reality and pro-social reading, in which Andrzej Werner saw a chance for restoring literature’s significance

<sup>26</sup>Markowski, “Precz z dekadencją”.

<sup>27</sup>Quote from Tomasz Umerle, “Polityka i literatura. Richarda Rorty’ego rozumienie literatury zaangażowanej” [Politics and literature. Richard Rorty’s understanding of engaged literature], *Ruch Literacki* 6 (2011): 597.

<sup>28</sup>This is how Stokfiszewski characterized Dunin’s project in his first review of *Czytając Polskę* (originally published in “Krytyka Polityczna”), to which he referred in *Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury – Igor Stokfiszewski, “Zakładnicy zużytych symboli”* [Hostages of used-up symbols], in *Stokfiszewski: Political turn* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009), 62.

<sup>29</sup>“Znikające cele krytyki?”, 438.

<sup>30</sup>“Znikające cele krytyki?”, 438.

<sup>31</sup>Markowski, “Interpretacja i literatura”, 66.

in the non-textual reality. Considering such a vision as ideological (Marxist), Markowski advocated for interpretative polyphony, also questioning his opponent's diagnosis regarding the absolute subordination of criticism to the media rules of communication. Werner writes:

The place and significance of a critic depends first and foremost on their position in the media, which is largely regardless of their intentions, skills and rank. One reason is that – especially in television, but also in dailies, and even monthlies – what they want to say needs to be adjusted to the allotted airtime (hence definite statements are more common than broad discussions), to the audience – the bigger, the better, not to mention political and ideological criteria – which have always formed the publishing-receptive reality. Nonetheless, today a critic is part of a group representing common interest rather than shared beliefs. They do not design literature and the whole real world which literature tries to contain and process – instead, they act as managers and bookkeepers of the estate which is endlessly multiplied on a daily basis. An expert to be hired for one company or another, even if they are commissioned to have independent ideas. This is because the meaning of a statement will always depend on the director of the media stage<sup>32</sup>.

Markowski found Werner's distinction between ideas and interests doubtful, arguing for their inseparability in critical-literary opinions. However, what is symptomatic from the perspective of the neo-pragmatic attitude, Markowski did not mention the fact that Werner was writing about the influence of the market ideology on critical meanings and interpretations, rather than about excluding critical comments from the media-market space. There is a significant difference, as Markowski assumes (as confirmed in a different text<sup>33</sup>) that the right incorporation of criticism to the media will guarantee its presence and audibility, and thus the coexistence next to sales-promotional discourses. In this sense, Markowski – similarly to Kinga Dunin in the introduction to *Czytając Polskę*, turns out to be an advocate of communicative diversity of clashing worldviews and interests of particular participants of the public sphere, where the dictionaries in use can extend and transform thanks to discussions about literature which both critics treat as a tool for extending collective imagination.

In the Polish literary criticism, the beginning of this century was a period of hot critical and meta-critical debates conducted in the context of solidifying free market capitalism. It is against this background – as I have tried to demonstrate – Rortyan approach to literature and ideology allowed to form parallel critical programs on disproportionate horizons – modernist-autonomist vision of literature presented by Michał Paweł Markowski and sociological-social conceptualization by Kinga Dunin. In both cases Richard Rorty turned out to be the patron of conceptualizing criticism as potentially coexisting within the framework of liberal polyphony; criticism which – apart from objective truth – prioritizes intersubjective negotiations of dictionaries, appreciating literature as a significant field of shared communicative space of a democratic society. The latter – as Dunin and

<sup>32</sup>Werner.

<sup>33</sup>“Znikające cele krytyki?”, 419.

Markowski seem to argue, following Rorty – was supposed to require inspired, passionate criticism, combining the awareness of own ideology with stubborn belief in the ethical power of individual reading, rather than methodological reading and literary theory. Thus following Rorty's attractive program influenced the programs of restoring usefulness to beyond-academic criticism, simultaneously allowing to exorcise the specter of dogmatic Marxism through redirecting the frames of political character to culture politics and identity parameters of literature. This type of political character will then resound in the debate surrounding Igor Stokfiszewski's famous texts, which – as demonstrated by Paweł Kaczmariski – significantly impacted the discussion about engaged literature<sup>34</sup>. Engagement understood in the Rortyan terms proved unusually operative for criticism, inventing its own tools, goals and places in the utopia of the polyphonic liberal democracy.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>34</sup>Kaczmariski.



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# KEYWORDS

pragmatism

engaged  
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*Michał Paweł  
Markowski*

**ABSTRACT:**

The paper analyses the influence of Richard Rorty's interpretation category on the Polish literary criticism in the early 2000s. The American philosopher's patronage is considered through two antagonistic uses: Kinga Dunin's social literary criticism, and Michał Paweł Markowski's approach which favors literature's autonomy. Both use Rorty's interpretation category in terms of the horizon of the liberal utopia of reading and writing, crucial for thinking about literature in the 2000s. The paper presents moments of unobvious convergence between the two Polish critics who proposed mutually opposite visions of literature and interpretative practices.

*leftist literary  
criticism*

RICHARD RORTY

KINGA DUNIN

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# Mambo Spinoza.

## The wanted and unwanted traditions of affective criticism

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Discourse on affect as a methodological point of reference has become well established in Polish literary studies over the last decade. It is accompanied by two symptomatic phenomena which prompted me to undertake this critical reflection. One is a methodology characterized by a relatively broad self-identification, a highly inclusive definition of its intellectual influences and genealogies, and, in the long run, by coherence. The second issue inspiring my curiosity is the emphasis placed by this approach on a particular understanding of the relationship between the world and meaning, which makes surprisingly frequent references to the concept of negativity (while claiming inspiration from the non-dialectic thought). With these issues in mind I would like to offer a critical review of the traditions which feed into the now fashionable affective humanities.

These issues are all the more interesting in light of the ongoing debates, questioning the usefulness of the above-mentioned tools. Specifically, I am referring to current theoretical meta-critical disputes concerning the ethics and politics of interpretation, which are being

developed in response to the diagnoses of the American online journal “nonsite.org” (such responses are expressed, for example, by Paweł Kaczmarek and Łukasz Żurek). One of the voices participating in the discussion is that of Dawid Kujawa, who developed his own critique project<sup>1</sup>. Notably, both parties involved in the dispute are critical towards the so-called affective research, whereas Jakub Skurtys, who is sympathetic to Kujawa’s project, remarks in his review of *Pocałunki ludu* [*Kisses of the People*]:

Kujawa’s aesthetic thus rests on solid foundations: not on the fuzzy, American metaphors of the so-called ‘affective turn’, but on a firm philosophy, which is several centuries’ old (the Spinozian movements of bodies seem more important here than the mythical and trivialised ‘affects’).<sup>2</sup>

Skurtys contrasts the two meta-critical projects by referring to the traditions of thought from which these projects originate: he contrasts ‘hard philosophy’ with Western ‘American metaphor’, with which I generally concur. At the same time, I believe that identifying the manners in which affective research approaches its own intellectual sources sheds some more light on the issue of why the methodology it proposes can be deemed ‘fuzzy’. It also helps to demonstrate the affiliation of affective studies to a particular type of literary ideology (namely to modernism, whose place in the contemporary literary field has been diagnosed by Krzysztof Uniłowski in particular<sup>3</sup>) and to understand why these studies can be highly unsatisfactory for literary criticism.

## Massumi and the return of Descartes

In the above-quoted words of Jakub Skurtys, the juxtaposition of ‘affects’ with ‘Spinozian bodily movements’ may be deemed questionable. The invocation of the Dutch philosopher is, after all, among the most frequent quotations in the affective approach, as exemplified by Brian Massumi’s texts, which are considered to be the founding (or at least impactful) texts for this current. Indeed, Massumi alludes both to Spinoza, as the patron of his enterprise, and to Spinoza’s definition of affect: “By emotions I mean the excitations of the body, by which the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the discussion in the following texts: Paweł Kaczmarek, „Nieczułe narracje. O pewnym modelu zaangażowania w poezji” [„Insensitive narratives. On a certain model of engagement in poetry”, *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 01-03 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/04/nieczule-narracje-o-pewnym-modelu-zaangazowania-poezji/>; Dawid Kujawa, „Czułość i nieczułość w jednym stały domu. Odpowiedź Pawłowi Kaczmarowskiemu” [“Tenderness and insensitivity shared a single house. A response to Paweł Kaczmarek”, *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 01-03 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/04/kujawa-kaczmarek-polemika/>; Łukasz Żurek, „Wiersz i gumowa kaczką. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie” [„The poem and the rubber duck. A reply to Dawid Kujawa”, *Small Format* 04-06 (2021); Dawid Kujawa, „Największy mankament poezji. Ciąg dalszy dyskusji z Pawłem Kaczmarowskim i Łukaszem Żurkiem” [„Poetry’s greatest shortcoming. A continuation of the discussion with Paweł Kaczmarek and Łukasz Żurek”, *Mały Format* 07-09 (2021); Dawid Kujawa, *Pocałunki ludu. Poezja i krytyka po roku 2000* [Kisses of the People. Poetry and Criticism after 2000] (Kraków: HHa!art, 2021); Paweł Kaczmarek, „Afekty, intencje, przypadki. Krytyka badań afektywnych w kręgu czasopisma „Nonsite”” [„Affects, intentions, cases. A critique of affective research in the milieu of the journal “Nonsite”] *Litteraria Copernicana* 2 (2022): 47-60.

<sup>2</sup> Jakub Skurtys, „Percepcje świata jakiego nie znamy” [„Perceptions of the world we do not know”, *Czas Kultury* 21 (2021), <https://czaskultury.pl/artukul/percepcje-swiatea-jakiego-nie-znamy/>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Proza środka”, czyli stereotyp literatury nowoczesnej [„The prose of the middle”, or a stereotype of modern literature”, in: *Granice nowoczesności. Proza polska i wyczerpanie modernizmu* [Boundaries of modernity. Polish prose and the exhaustion of modernism] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2006), 156-195.

power of that body's actions can grow or weaken, can be sustained or withheld; these are also ideas of these excitations"<sup>4</sup>. He also signals his intellectual debt to Deleuze and Guattari in his adoption of the schizoid-analytic notion of intensity, which, for the purposes of the text, he explicitly identifies with affects.<sup>5</sup>

The key (and problematic) aspect of Massumi's relationship with these traditions is his description of intensity as entirely disconnected from the order of meaning. To exemplify:

The level of intensity is organized according to a logic that does not admit of the excluded middle. This is to say that it is not semantically or semiotically ordered. It does not fix distinctions. Instead, it vaguely but insistently connects what is normally indexed as separate.<sup>6</sup>

Massumi introduces into Spinoza's monism a multilayered dualism and replaces the concept of the world as a historicised simultaneity of bodies and meaningful excitations with a dialectic based on negativity. The author of *Politics of Affects* mentions at least several pairs illustrating this dualism: semantic/semiotic and affective, content and intensity, reproducibility and novelty, structure and event. Each time the Canadian philosopher gives primacy to the second element in the above-listed pairings and consistently separates them from epistemological explainability. He does this, for example, when contrasting affect with emotion (a problem enthusiastically taken up by Polish literary studies). Meanwhile, a feature that can be ascribed to the affect as defined by Spinoza, is its epistemological openness and intelligibility as a potential for constituting the subject of knowledge:

Nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting is everywhere one and the same, that is, the laws and rules of nature according to which all things are made and changed from one form into another, are everywhere and always the same, and therefore there must be one and the same way of understanding the nature of all things, that is, by means of the universal laws and rules of nature. Therefore such emotions as hate, anger, envy, etc., considered in themselves, follow from the same necessity and virtue of nature as other particular things: and therefore they acknowledge certain causes through which **they are understood, and have certain properties equally worthy of our knowledge as the properties of any other thing** [emphasis mine, MK], the contemplation alone of which delights us.<sup>7</sup>

Massumi reintroduces Cartesian dramatic and spectacular dualism of being and knowledge<sup>8</sup> (reinstated in some modern critical circles) to the monist conception, which contrasts with the future fate of the Spinozian tradition. This also applies to the texts of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in which, contrary to their superficial readings, anti-

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics proved in geometrical order*, transl. Ignacy Myslicki (Warsaw: Fundacja Nowoczesna Polska, 2009), in. 394, <https://wolnelektury.pl/katalog/lektura/spinoza-etyka.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Massumi, "The autonomy of affect", *Secondary Texts* 6 (2013): 116.

<sup>6</sup> Massumi, 113.

<sup>7</sup> Spinoza, v. 391.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kate Stanley, "Affect and emotion: James, Dewey, Tomkins, Damasio, Massumi, Spinoza", in: *The Palgrave Handbook of affect studies and textual criticism*, ed. by Donald R. Wehrs, Thomas Blake (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 103. I thank Zuzanna Sala for pointing out that Stanley also critically highlights this thread.

representationalism does not imply a challenge to the possibility of knowledge. One only needs to turn to the French thinkers' book *What is Philosophy?* to see this: in the book the creative activity of art through affects and percepts is allied with the works of philosophy and science: "That which defines thinking – the three great forms of thinking: art, science and philosophy – is a constant confrontation with chaos, delineating a plane, extending it over chaos"<sup>9</sup>.

Anthony Uhlmann<sup>10</sup> (who quips that for Massumi Spinoza's philosophy is but a 'talisman') provides even more convincing arguments for the incompatibility of affective research with adapted traditions, partly supporting Ruth Leys' argumentation<sup>11</sup>. Uhlmann is skeptical about the titular autonomy, since all traditions implied by Massumi emphasise the interconnectedness of everything everywhere at once, including the world, mind and language. Even though declaratively the affect theory finds inspiration in a vitalist rhetoric, it tends to echo the skepticism and melancholy of postmodernity, a resentment towards rationalism and melancholy of linguistic separation of the subject from the world. I would only add that perhaps it is because of these inclinations that Massumi, while recalling the title of the Dutch philosopher's book (*Ethics: Proved in geometrical order*), consistently truncates it, rejecting the possibility of anything being proved.

In his *Ethics*, Spinoza seems to have anticipated the Canadian philosopher's skepticism in his critique of the anthropological distinction, which depends on excluding humans from the ontological order of other bodies:

Most who have written on the emotions and on the manner of human life, seem to have dealt not with natural things which follow the universal laws of nature, but with things which are outside the sphere of nature: they seem to have conceived man in nature as a kingdom within a kingdom. For they believe that man disturbs rather than follows the order of nature, and that he has absolute power over his actions, and is not determined by anything else than himself.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, one cannot help noticing that this new form of the theory of affect – in juxtaposition to Spinoza – not only separates, but also distinguishes humans from other entities, endowing them with this "absolute power". It does so, as it were, *à rebours*, placing a Midas curse on human consciousness – everything it touches loses its mysterious aura of affectivity. Meanwhile, neither in Spinoza nor in the Deleuzo-Guattarian conceptions does one notice this kind of dualism and anthropocentrism.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, transl. by Paweł Pieniążek (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2000), 218. Also in Spinoza: the obscurity of ideas derived from impressions does not mean that they are useless for building knowledge about the world (quite to the contrary).

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Anthony Uhlmann, "Affect, meaning, becoming, and power: Massumi, Spinoza, Deleuze, and Neuroscience", in: *Affect and Literature*, ed. by Alex Houen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Ruth Leys, *The ascent of affect. Genealogy and critique* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup>Spinoza, v. 389.

## Polish affective research and the dominance of modern literature

The above-indicated dualisms of world and meaning, along with the modernist metaphor of the 'trace of a lost reality', have impacted the manner of presenting affective studies in Polish literary discourse. This tendency is evident in Katarzyna Bojarska's presentation of affective studies:

[...] emotion is an elaborated and modified intensity (affect), a conventionalized and consensual mode of incorporating intensity (affect) into a semantic and semiotic network, a narratively structurable dynamic of action and reaction, function and meaning. In other words, it is intensity (affect) which has been recognised and taken possession of. Feelings, on the other hand, are personal and biographical, they belong with personal history (of experiences), emotions are social, whereas affects are pre-personal.<sup>13</sup>

Is this not an echo of another, implicit intellectual tradition? Bojarska, pointing to the 1990s as a time of the expansion of affective research, mentions in passing the parallel flourishing of trauma research. This reference, inconspicuous in the context of the entire article, rightly highlights the essential, paradoxical structure of affective discourse. Affect, declaratively Spinozian, is theoretically molded in the fashion of psychoanalytic (or more precisely Lacanian) trauma, in which that which is Real conflicts with absorption and cognition<sup>14</sup>. In this way, psychoanalysis, deconstructed in the anti-Oedipal figurations of Deleuze and Guattari, returns with its attachment to the subject-related singularity through the window cracked open by Massumi and then opened even wider by the Polish current of affective research.

One can discern a particular research procedure, outlined in the above-cited text-manifestos. The primary object of study is defined at the outset as irretrievably lost. What *can* constitute the object of scrutiny are emotions, carefully separated from the affects/arousals/intensities/movements. The relevant subject of interest must, at Massumi's suggestion, be constantly burdened not so much with hypotheticality (which is the ordinary mode of scientific conduct) as with the requirement of non-representationality. It is to remain "an abstract, formless and nameless potentiality"<sup>15</sup>.

Therefore, it is the study of trauma that constitutes a secret tradition for affective research, and the 6th issue of "Teksty Drugie" from 2013 (entitled *Zaafektowani* [*The Affected*]) turns out to have much in common with issue 4 from 2004, the theme of which was *Trauma (nie)przedstawiona* [*Trauma (not)presented*]. Agnieszka Dauksza, in the text *Afektywny Awangardyzm* [*Affective Avant-gardism*] published in 2014, also follows the path of affect as a disturbing, trace aspect of reality based on presentation. She does so as part of her polemics with Ryszard Nycz, to whose concept of "the third movement", the movement of "expressing

<sup>13</sup>Katarzyna Bojarska, "Poczuć myślenie: afektywne procedury historii i krytyki (dziś)" ["To feel the thought: affective procedures of history and criticism (today)"], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2013): 13.

<sup>14</sup>Interestingly, also Justyna Tabaszewska, when adapting the discourse on affects, does so through their relation to the category of trauma. Cf. Justyna Tabaszewska, "Trauma jako estetyczne, afektywne doświadczenie: próba analizy "empatycznej wizji" ["Trauma as an aesthetic, affective experience: an attempt at analysing the "empathetic vision"], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2010): 221-234.

<sup>15</sup>Bojarska, 13.



the inexpressible” in modern literature, Dauksza refers in the following manner:

The enigmatically determined quality, “stateless factuality”, “what is variable and formless”, “shapeless, small, insignificant and elusive”, “persistent reality” – all these refer to, I think, that dimension of affect which interests me: the irrational, emotional-survival amalgam of the human (in this case – the writer’s) experience.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of the corporeal-affective world, of which language remains a part, for Dauksza it is the subject and its separation from the primitive world of intensity and melancholy and the tragic desire to overcome this distance through language that becomes a necessary premise, as well as the right focus of thought. I am not surprised, therefore, that Massumi’s theory has run into a lot of flak from criticism oriented towards positive procedures of knowledge, including the already mentioned “nonsite” milieu.

What would an affective research program, constructed according to the logic of trauma or the trace of reality, mean for literary criticism? In my opinion, it would require an institutional extension of the long duration of a modernist understanding of literature. Applying the category proposed by Krzysztof Uniłowski, I would define affective research as one of the forms of crypto-theology of contemporary criticism, namely a negative theology, shaped by modern literature. Referring to the projects of Michał Paweł Markowski and Ryszard Koziołek, Uniłowski presents the spirit of this crypto-theology in the following manner:

[...] all this is characterized by a certain absence, an empty space, resulting from the absence of the source sense. However, thanks to the literary ritual, this empty space acquires immense gravity, more precisely, it acts as if it had an irresistible power of attraction, directing literary and reading efforts towards an eternal search for meaning.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, affective research in the above-proposed version would be fashioned according to the literary logic of modernity (or more precisely, a certain trend within it), and basically adapted to it. Perhaps that is why this research direction is the most developed one, resulting, among other things, in Agnieszka Dauksza’s book entitled *Afektywny modernizm. Nowoczesna literatura polska w interpretacji relacyjnej* [*Affective modernism. Modern Polish literature in a relational interpretation*]<sup>18</sup>. In contrast, the popularity of or even fashion for affective research in the humanities, along with the humanities’ irresistible fondness for “turns” (admittedly, Katarzyna Bojarska distances herself from such turns<sup>19</sup>) only prove the validity of Uniłowski’s claim that modernism remains an official, institutional ideology, if not of literature, then at least of a vital part of literary studies in Poland.

<sup>16</sup>Agnieszka Dauksza, „Afektywny awangardyzm” [„Affective avant-gardism”] *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2014): 45.

<sup>17</sup>Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Obrońcy literatury i ich (kryptoteologiczne) fantazje” [„Protectors of literature and their (crypto-theological) fantasies”], in: *Dyskursy, w dyskursach. Szkice o krytyce i literaturze lat ostatnich* [Discourses, in discourses. Essays on criticism and the literature of recent years], ed. by Piotr Śliwiński (Poznań: WBPiCAK, 2019), 25.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Agnieszka Dauksza, *Afektywny modernizm. Nowoczesna literatura polska w interpretacji relacyjnej* [Affective modernism. Contemporary Polish literature in a relational interpretation] (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2017).

<sup>19</sup>Bojarska, 11.

Proposals which critically account for the radical forms of cognitive skepticism accompanying the discourse on affect appear to be the answer to this melancholic stalemate. An example of a wide-ranging critical project from this trend is *Maszynerie afektywne. Literackie strategie emancypacji w najnowszej polskiej poezji kobiet* [*Affective machineries. Literary strategies of emancipation in the latest Polish women's poetry*] by Monika Glosowicz<sup>20</sup> and Dawid Kujawa's<sup>21</sup> *Pocałunki ludu. Poezja i krytyka po roku 2000* [*Kisses of the People. Poetry and criticism after 2000*]. Both projects try to develop a context for critical thought on the basis of a different, non-dialectical, machine-based ontology, originating from the Spinozian-schizoid-analytical trend.<sup>22</sup>

Within this tradition affect is understood as a defined (i.e., designed, for example, as part of "poetic machinery") shape of body stimulation<sup>23</sup> (by another body), including emotional, sensory and mental qualities. The meaning of affect is that body's certain life possibility, which can be realized in this way, always defined in relation to a larger whole of which this body is part. The central question of affective criticism would be (following Deleuze and Guattari): "What is the body capable of?", along with the ethical-political dimension of this question: an interest in the mechanisms that regulate this ability, and the creation of alternative figurations/life forms of this body ("charges of a different world, always ready to be fired at the recipient").<sup>24</sup>

From this perspective, literature would be a place for designing and opening up "lines of outlet" for affective arousals and desires, and from the critical and ethical-political points of view, it would allow for the mapping and invention of figures of individual and collective life which could, under favourable conditions, further circulate in culture<sup>25</sup>. One could say that already at the point of departure, this kind of critique is driven by a different affect than the one described in the previous section of this article. This affect is no longer melancholy, but what Spinoza calls hope: "the unstable joy, derived from the image of a future or past thing,

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Monika Glosowicz, *Maszynerie afektywne. Literackie strategie emancypacji w najnowszej polskiej poezji kobiet* [*Affective machineries. Literary strategies of emancipation in contemporary Polish poetry*] (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2019).

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Kujawa, *Pocałunki ludu. Poezja i krytyka po roku 2000*.

<sup>22</sup>However, they cannot, of course, be reduced to one another - the latter, for example, postulates a complete abandonment of the "paradigm of representation", which Glosowicz is trying to adapt to her purposes.

<sup>23</sup>Spinoza himself defines the body as "[...] a mode which expresses in a certain and determinate manner the essence of God in so far as he is considered as an extended thing" (Spinoza, w. 172), which affords a broad application of this category to, generally speaking, all beings described as material configurations. In his discussion of Spinoza's thought, Deleuze points to two dimensions of that description: the capability to arouse and "speed" (cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza. Filozofia praktyczna* [Spinoza. A practical philosophy], transl. by Jędrzej Brzeziński [Warszawa: PWN, 2014], 198; Miłosz Markiewicz, „Pomiędzy dziedzictwem Spinozy a wyzwaniem nowego materializmu. Tropy” [“Between Spinoza's heritage and the challenges of the new materialism. Traces”], *Praktyka Teoretyczna*, 20.09.2017, <https://www.praktykateoretyczna.pl/artykuly/miosz-markiewicz-pomiedzy-dziedzictwem-spinozy-a-wyzwaniami-nowego-materializmu-tropy/>). Contemporary post-humanist conceptions make references to this broad understanding of corporeality. For the purposes of the present article I will be applying Spinoza's definition only to human bodies.

<sup>24</sup>Kujawa, *Pocałunki ludu. Poezja i krytyka po roku 2000*, chapt. „Płacisz, nie płacisz? Adam Kaczanowski” [„Are you paying or not? Adam Kaczanowski”] [e-book].

<sup>25</sup>I develop this notion of ethics-politics more broadly in the book: Michał Koza, *Asceza, inność, nomadyzm. O dyskursach etycznych literatury polskiej po 1989 roku* [Asceticism, otherness, nomadism. On ethical discourses in Polish literature after 1989] (Warsaw: IBL PAN, 2021).

whose outcome we are doubtful of"<sup>26</sup>. Given the left-wing self-identification of this current's criticism, this hope must be revolutionary in nature. The affective difference is evident in the rhetorical and stylistic layers: the above-mentioned Kujawa's book or Skurtys' texts, which follow in the footsteps of the Spinozian affect, readily implement vitalistic-ecstatic metaphors. This is evidenced in Kujawa's "kisses of the people", which refer to Tomaž Šalamun or in Skurtys' "shot putters of the self".

## Two bodies of Janusz Sławiński

In my addressing the question "What is the body capable of?", I would like to abandon philosophical discourse and turn to two instances in which literary criticism meets affect in a non-obvious way: now in line with the melancholic spirit of modernism described earlier, now in defiance of it – mapping and projecting further possibilities of the body and thus referring to a different, vitalist (or perhaps even "gothic"<sup>27</sup>) model of literature.

The first text I would like to discuss is a 1979 essay by Janusz Sławiński, *Za co powinniśmy kochać Jana Błońskiego?* [*What should we love Jan Błoński for?*]. The second text is *Ciało Profesora Sławińskiego* [*Professor Sławiński's body*] by Stefan Szymutka. In both cases, the critical subject unfolds before the reader an affective image of their protagonist, listing various ways in which the body-critic/critic can be stimulated. However, the former is clearly dominated by an affect shaped according to a melancholic-traumatic logic, emphasising the inexplicability of Błoński's phenomenon and its irretrievable loss at the point of departure. The latter, on the other hand, is dominated by affective criticism as a mapping of its object, which emphasises the ability of the body (here, the body of Janusz Sławiński) to accomplish successive potentialities.

Let us consider relevant examples. The essay *Za co powinniśmy kochać Jana Błońskiego?* begins with the words:

My first impression after reading *Odmarsz* [*The deployment*]: this book is a message from another world. Through the turmoil and noise of that which tires, wears and irritates as hopelessly familiar and commonplace, a voice quite unlike the voices here has broken, clearly sent **from somewhere else**. I was **moved** by this first impression because it was contradicted by the knowledge I had of the texts I had read. After all, they were written right next door, amidst the circumstances and realities that make up everyday literary life we experience together. I knew some of them very well, as they were first printed in the magazine that the author and I edit. **I knew what orders they grew out of, what inspired them, whom they queried and to whom they responded**. And

<sup>26</sup>Spinoza, v. 207.

<sup>27</sup>The notion of Gothicity has recently been applied to Julek Rosiński's poetry by Dawid Kujawa, who metaphorically described it as a line "[...] which does not move from one point to another, but always sends us further away, towards the possible" (Dawid Kujawa, "Dzieci skitrane na tyłach katedry" O technice Julka Rosińskiego na podstawie "Streszczenia pieśni") [Children hidden at the back of the cathedral". On Julek Rosiński's technique, on the basis of "Streszczenia Pieśni" ["Summaries of Songs"]", Stoner Polski, 2022, <https://stonerpolski.pl/faza-biezaca-dzieci-skitrane-na-tylach-katedry-o-technice-julka-rosińskiego-na-podstawie-streszczenia-piesni/>.)

yet, in their book-like composition, it seemed to me they shifted into **another reality**, as it were – they turned out to be **out of this world** [emphases mine – MK].<sup>28</sup>

In the context of my considerations, I will emphasise first of all that the entire essay is based on the presentation of Błoński as a ‘body’ (I refer to it as such, in light of the Spinozian tradition) perceived through the prism of a particular arousal, which Sławiński finds hard to grasp, an intensity mismatched to the present and in this sense – something negative (this is expressed, for example, in the rhetorical use of the phrase ‘not of this world’). Błoński as a body or Błoński’s personalism as affect is above all a vestige of a departing criticism, which is “in its conception a self-proclaimed opinion that needs no endorsements, concessions or institutional safeguards. It is precisely this kind of criticism that we have managed to grow quite weary of”<sup>29</sup>. Finally, the author defines the position of this affect in relation to other bodies:

What would there be for Irzykowski to do now? Today critics have to act “professionally”. They are experts by appointment and should not for a moment forget that they represent in their judgements the body to which they owe the appointment: the university, the institute, the editorial board, the television, the committee for important matters, the key problem, the school system.<sup>30</sup>

At least two things are apparent here: Sławiński relates the phenomenon of Błoński mainly to the past (more precisely: to the activity of Karol Irzykowski). Secondly, Błoński appears to be a critic from nowhere, from outside history (or rather: from a history that has already been irretrievably lost) and a system of institutions – ‘bodies’ which are witness to the struggle of the here-and-now-existing criticism. Sławiński does note that the purpose of an institutionally contextualized criticism has not been invalidated. Ultimately, however, his text is dominated by a melancholic tracing of the inexplicable, incomprehensible passing of the affect experienced in Błoński, after which only absence will remain. Indeed, the essay closes with a nostalgic phrase: “We should love Błoński for the fact that he could be the Irzykowski of our days...”<sup>31</sup>, and the figure of the true critic remains an inexplicable mystery, impossible to be reproduced or realised by anyone else. Błoński’s being as affect occurs, as it were, outside history.

What is literary criticism, guided by this kind of melancholy, shying away from? In this case – from a more careful recognition of personalism as a type of practicing criticism and, in the long term, from a better understanding of the conditions and possibilities of criticism, which adopted many individualistic practices of the author of *Romans z tekstem* [An affair with the text] in the post-1989 period. Or perhaps, from co-creating images of new figures of literary life which would be less susceptible to market practices; figures who would include themselves into phenomena foreshadowed by Błoński’s personality and individuality. Thus, Sławiński

<sup>28</sup>Janusz Sławiński, „Za co powinniśmy kochać Jana Błońskiego?” [„What should we love Jan Błoński for?”], *Teksty* 4 (1979): 1.

<sup>29</sup>Sławiński, 3.

<sup>30</sup>Sławiński.

<sup>31</sup>Sławiński, 9.

makes no attempt to answer the question of what a critic's body of work is capable of, opting instead for a dramatic tale of its impotence. Thus understood 'traumatic affect' reveals its conservative face.

The second case is *Ciało profesora Sławińskiego* by Stefan Szymutka<sup>32</sup>. This text too, this time literally, features a body – one which is alive and intense. Characteristically, this time the rhetorical axis of the text is a series of lists 'parameterising' the activity, character, life and, ultimately, the body of the text's protagonist. Here the story is governed by the present tense, and its rhythm is dictated by subsequently listed potentials of the described body, arranged in a series of affects and perceptions. Szymutko uses the logic of "or..."<sup>33</sup>, demonstrating for us an impressive and sometimes puzzling range of terms and perceived potentialities, like in what I call the "tailor series":

[...] Sławiński is almost Carlyle's *sartor resartus*, a tailor of the cosmos, a philosopher of clothing who cuts, tries on and fastens to hide the nothingness of the universe: the skin, the body is also a disguise (the body of an athlete is a text) (T, p. 46), or material for a new piece of clothing: one can combine a *borsalino* with a pair of *kierpce* and the legs of a pinscher with the head of a lion (T, pp. 31-32). Forms of corporeality appear only as metaphors: the corpus of texts (P, p. 132) or the self-impregnation of poetry (T, p. 132)<sup>34</sup>

This approach to the body and affect differs from the previous one. Instead of a trace of past reality, we are given a renewable figuration, an experiment, a linguistic creation related to the body and the arrangement of bodies (academic and otherwise)<sup>35</sup>. Sławiński appears as a multiplicity among multiplicities, but at the same time it is a multiplicity that can be defined, named, and one whose meaning can be discovered. Moreover, in Szymutko's version of Sławiński the latter is a critic who actually exists, he is saturated with history from which he grows. In this sense, Szymutko is much closer to Spinozian and Deleuzo-Guattarian materialist proliferation than to nostalgia.

I hope that by way of introducing the reader to both traditions, I have managed to show that affective research turns out to be much more complex (or even disjointed) than one would like to admit. This is in spite of the fact that it draws upon a wide range of traditions: anthropological, psychoanalytic, gender, memory, post-humanist, and so on. The dominant form of discourse on affect (explored, among others, in the above-mentioned issues of "Teksty Drugie"), which has been adopted and shaped in Polish literary studies, no matter how promising the traditions it declares might have been, seems to be a peculiar, melancholic-traumatic variant of the

<sup>32</sup>More on this and other texts by Szymutka can be found in Łukasz Żurek, *Filologia lokalna - lokalność filologa*. Stefan Szymutka [Local philology - the locality of a philologist. Stefan Szymutka] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2022).

<sup>33</sup>On its schizoanalytic meaning cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, transl. by Tomasz Kaszubski, vol. I (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2017), 88-98.

<sup>34</sup>Stefan Szymutko, „Ciało profesora Sławińskiego” [„Professor Sławiński's body”], n.d., 50.

<sup>35</sup>In fact, one can recognise the distinctive style of *Anti-Oedipus* in these phrases, but I would not like to go too far in these comparisons.

poetics of experience<sup>36</sup>. It is all the more problematic in application, for example within the framework of literary criticism, because it makes specific claims on the creative and critical subject, imposing a peculiar model of art and cognition through literature that is specific to a certain strand of modernism.

I also think that there are traditions that are more inspiring – above all those that go beyond the non-translatability of personal experience, and preserve the connections between affect and the world and affect and knowledge. Taking up these traditions does not mean postulating another turn in the humanities. Yet, our procedures of knowledge would benefit from the question “What is the body capable of?”, which is asked in an inventive, ethical-political context and stimulating a critical mapping of literary texts.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

<sup>36</sup>Cf. Ryszard Nycz, *Poetyka doświadczenia. Teoria - nowoczesność - literatura* [Poetics of experience. Theory - modernity - literature] (Warsaw: IBL PAN, 2012).

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# KEYWORDS

affect

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Félix Guattari

## SCHIZOANALYSIS

**ABSTRACT:**

The article deals with affective criticism present in Polish literary studies and the traditions to which this project refers. It shows the discrepancies between the characteristics of this current and the ways in which the issue of affect is operationalized in philosophical traditions, which are embedded into a new context and identified with the discourse on trauma. The article illustrates the difference between the two models of affect in action – through interpretations of texts by Janusz Sławiński and Stefan Szymutka. The comparison makes it possible to grasp the different critical approaches to affect – as a (re)construction of traces of the unrepresentable and as creating maps of social bodies.



GILLES DELEUZE

literary theory

*Polish literature*

*affective criticism*

affective research

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# Literariness against the culture of autobiography

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## Anti-literariness and life

The terms I deal with in this article have a long history and various, sometimes mutually exclusive definitions. In journal discussions they are often used intuitively, which is not surprising: feeling the weight of decades'-long debates every time one attempts to articulate a critical literary conclusion could certainly hinder or at least slow down the flow of current discussions about books. What I find interesting, however, is under what conditions and for what purposes some of such loaded categories return today in reviews, essays and discussions. This article explores two particular pairs: literature and life, and literariness and anti-literariness. These antinomies were central to major twentieth-century critical programmes and interpretations, often in more nuanced forms than seen in today's debates. In order to trace the history of certain simplifications that weigh on today's critical-literary discourse, I will not reconstruct exactly how these concepts have functioned in recent decades, but rather focus on those issues which are the most relevant to my considerations.

As Anna Legeżyńska rightly pointed out, "literariness [...] does not exist as an ahistorical concept; on the contrary, it can only be defined from the perspective of the experiences and

expectations of a specific reading public”<sup>1</sup>. In this sense, then, anti-literariness is a struggle against conventional expectations of audiences/consumers, against the consolidation and stabilisation of a single image of literature, which is why it cannot be universal and could hardly be treated as a fad or trend.

Most often, however, “anti-literariness” is invoked in a much more conventionalised way. This was pointed out by Wojciech Głowala who, in his 1972 article *Ze „Słownika współczesnych komunałów krytycznoliterackich”* [*From the dictionary of contemporary critical literary clichés*], quoted the following cliché of the language of criticism:

**Against literature.** The critical text is purposefully pitted against literature, which is synonymous with all that is bad, trivial, unimportant and untrue. Paradoxically, such a cliché is often used as an argument for the abolishment of the cliché itself in the literary work.<sup>2</sup>

By recognizing “anti-literariness” as a category that connotes taking the side of experience (as opposed to convention, language, etc.), Głowala pointed to an important problem, namely the common identification of literariness with falsity or an assumed pose.

## Two discussions

The claim that life in literature can only be faked (i.e. one can only create a literary image of life) seems a truism today. Yet these oppositions, i.e. of life and literature, experience and convention, testimony and form, have been returning with surprising intensity in the reception of books published over the recent few years. I will discuss this phenomenon as exemplified by voices and disputes concerning two texts: *Kwiaty rozłączki* [*Flowers of the splitter*] by Aleksandra Wstecz and *Oto ciało moje* [*This is my body*] by Aleksandra Pakieła. These titles seem to be symptomatic: on the one hand they belong to different genres (the former is a poem, the latter – a novel, at least declaratively). On the other hand, they are an expression of the same tendency, present in recent Polish literature, namely one we could tentatively call “the strategy of the authentic”.

Jerzy Jarzębski used a similar term in his essay *Kariera „autentyku”* [*The career of the “authentic”*]. Analysing the expansion of non-fiction mechanisms into prose works, he attempted to identify and describe their functions.

“I call an “authentic””, Jarzębski wrote, “[...] such an element of a work which – by virtue of the author’s agreement with the reader – is treated by the reader as a reflection of a real, individual fact (an object, a person, an event), related to the sphere of the writer’s personal experience as a flesh-and-blood human being”.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anna Legeżyńska, „Białoszewski na «biegunie»: uwagi o głównych regułach strategii twórczej” [„Białoszewski on the „pole”: comments on the main rules of creative strategy”], *Kresy* 4 (1996): 27.

<sup>2</sup> Wojciech Głowala, „Ze «Słownika współczesnych komunałów krytycznoliterackich””, *Teksty* 2 (1972): 135.

<sup>3</sup> Jerzy Jarzębski, „Kariera „autentyku””, in: *Powieść jako autokreacja* [The novel as self-creation] (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984), 339.

The critic recognised the fact that Polish literature gravitated towards autobiography in the early 1980s and proposed the term “‘authentic’ literature” to describe new, non-obvious forms of non-fictionality in prose. He also asked questions about the consequences of those transformations at the level of intra-textual communicative instances and popular stylistic procedures. Although Jarzębski was primarily interested in highly conventionalised games with self-creation (e.g. by Gombrowicz), he also drew attention to a certain “resistance of the non-fictional material” and pointed to changes in the attitude of the recipient of such texts.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, the author of *Kariera „autentyku”* highlighted the role of technological changes in the development of “authentic” literature. Because the informative function of the written word has been diminishing since the appearance of television (and the new media nowadays), some non-fiction genres have moved away from journalism towards literature<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the meaning of facts in literary forms has been reduced, not least in favour of reinforcing the importance of protagonists<sup>6</sup>. Somewhat updating Jarzębski’s considerations, it would seem appropriate to analyse the important role of the internet, especially of social media. Bearing in mind the conclusions of new research on the emotional economy produced by social media<sup>7</sup>, one can argue that categories such as experience or expression are gaining in importance in contemporary culture. It is these shifts and contexts that constitute the backdrop for my reflections on recent critical literary discussions.

In his review of *Kwiaty rozłączki* Wojciech Szot wrote: “Aleksandra Wstecz can be brutally honest and doesn’t beat around the bush, whereas a “walk through a disconnect” can be an opportunity to trigger one’s own memories and stop to rethink life”<sup>8</sup>. This observation, which also appears in other blog posts about the book (e.g. on the Facebook fan page “kontekstualni” [“the contextual ones”]), proved to be surprisingly accurate. Wstecz’s poem indeed acted as a trigger for readers’ and critics’ memories, as evidenced, for example, by Adam Kaczanowski’s review (published under the pseudonym “Adam Remis”), who responds to the confessions of *Kwiaty rozłączki* with his own confessions. These, as a result, provide a framing for his account of the book (he begins with a scene featuring his own family and ends with a recollection of his parents’ divorce). Significantly, when discussing the reception of Wstecz’s poem, Kaczanowski does not use terms such as “to read”, “to interpret” or “to evaluate”. Instead, he focuses on “experiencing”. The book needs to be experienced, similarly to the descriptions of experiences it contains but also to one’s own experiences, which return to the reader through communing with *Kwiaty rozłączki*. Although Kaczanowski declares that he is aware

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the concept of “challenge” as the orientation of the autobiographical text towards the receiving “YOU”; Małgorzata Czerwińska, *Autobiograficzny trójkąt: świadectwo, wyznanie, wyzwanie* [An autobiographical triangle: testimony, confession, challenge], 2nd edition, revised (Kraków: Universitas, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Zygmunt Ziątek, “Reportaż jako literatura” [“Reportage as literature”], in: *Obraz literatury w komunikacji społecznej po roku ‘89* [The image of literature in social communication after 1989] ed. by Andrzej Werner, Dariusz Żukowski (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2013), 421-458.

<sup>6</sup> See Jarzębski, 356-364.

<sup>7</sup> See Ariel Hasell «Robin L. Nabi, «Emotion, Information Sharing, and Social Media», in: *Emotions in the Digital World*, ed. by Robin L. Nabi and Jessica Gall Myrick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 381-400, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197520536.003.0020>.

<sup>8</sup> Wojciech Szot, „[REVIEW] Aleksandra Wstecz, «Kwiaty rozłączki»”, *Zdaniem Szota* (blog) [According to Szot], 12.03.2020, <https://zdaniemszota.pl/2975-recenzja-aleksandra-wstecz-kwiaty-rozlaczki>.

that sincerity in literature remains as much a convention as any other<sup>9</sup>, this awareness does not seem to matter at the level of the argument itself. It is by remodelling the thinking about the reception of this poem in the review that the distinction between the literary narrative (that which is read, interpreted) and therapeutic narrative (that which serves to relive past experiences and sort them out) is blurred.

However, while Kaczanowski's voice in this matter seems justified (he operates similar narrative mechanisms as the author whose work he is reviewing<sup>10</sup>), pointing out the "anti-literary" nature of the book under discussion is ultimately a programmatic rather than a critical gesture and similar interpretative tropes in other reviews of Wstecz's poem are arguably more problematic. In her text on *Kwiaty rozłączki* Paulina Dąbkowska writes that "this is a collection devoid of traditional attributes of literariness |", "there are no metaphors here, no literary distortion that stimulates the imagination and encourages one to sink into the text. There is none of what we usually look for when we reach for books"; "the author renounces traditional poeticism", and the protagonist "does not misrepresent anything, she tells it like it is. And what she wants to say is tangible, close, immersed in the current of life". All of that leads the critic to the following conclusion:

I think depicting the "naked life" in literature and, above all, combining authentic human experience with the highly evocative power of poetic reflection is a difficult skill. Wstecz's debut seems to me to be the realisation of this vision (of removing unnecessary "literariness" from the text), and for a specific reason: because life does not look the way poetry would like it to, breakups do not look the way they are usually described. In the senselessness of a loss, disappointment and the pain of a breakup there is probably no room for literary passion, certainly not for pretence. What counts is judgement, distance.<sup>11</sup>

It is not only the direction in which the tropes taken up by Kaczanowski in Dąbkowska's review developed that matters (there was, after all, an ignoring of the conventionality of sincere confession and a complete trust in the transparency of the text), but also that both the reviewer and the author of *Stany* [States] ultimately reduce the reading of Wstecz to the knowledge of life (abstracted from its literary context). It is "worth living through", says Kaczanowski. In the context of traumatic events, "what counts is judgement, distance", adds Dąbkowska. These are terms associated less with reflection on literature and more with therapy, self-narration, reflection towards the storytelling "I".

<sup>9</sup> Kaczanowski writes: "I can imagine somebody being against this book. It will be my whipping boy. Let's say that while I am writing this text, he runs around my flat and every now and then exclaims: "honesty for the naïve!", "confessions worse than farts!". I get up from my chair only to hit the boy with the door as he is running into the room. I tell him, "what do you think honesty is, if not a convention like all the others?". Adam Remis, „Czy wszystko trzeba przeżyć? (Aleksandra Wstecz, „Kwiaty rozłączki”) [„Does everything have to be lived? (Aleksandra Wstecz, „Kwiaty rozłączki”), *Wizje: Aktualnik*, 8.03.2020, <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/adam-remis-aleksandra-wstecz/>.

<sup>10</sup>It should be noted at this point, however, that Kaczanowski uses similar narrative mechanisms in a much more conceptually nuanced manner; perhaps because he has different objectives: the author of *Stany* [States] rarely seems to aim for an adequate description of a specific subject experience; rather, he focuses on a variety of social mechanisms.

<sup>11</sup>Paulina Dąbkowska, «Kwiaty rozłączki». Zbiór anty-miłosny [„Kwiaty rozłączki”. An anti-love collection], *Nowy Napis Co Tydzień* 57 (2020), <https://nowynapis.eu/tygodnik/nr-57/artykul/kwiaty-rozlaczki-zbior-anty-milosny>.

## A referential or an autobiographical pact?

The problems of literariness and authenticity may direct us towards a literary-theoretical reflection on autobiographism: this is the context for the debate on whether such type of writing is an example of a literary, authorial “self-creation” or of the “subordination of the literary function to the anthropological meaning”<sup>12</sup>. As Małgorzata Czermińska wrote, since the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the biggest problem of research on intimate diaries has been their transformation into a literary genre. This process was a natural consequence of the very fact that such records were made public<sup>13</sup>. The growing popularity of non-fiction literature juxtaposed with the literary habits of the public (or at least of the professional, “expert” readers) influenced the ego-document literature in the twentieth century in two ways. On the one hand, it led to “novelistic readings”<sup>14</sup> of intimate records; to treating their authors as protagonists as well as (wo)men of letters, and thus to paying particular attention to the role of stylistic moves or conventions. On the other hand, the gradual absorption of the personal document into the realm of literature exerted a meaningful impact on the novel, leading to its subjectification and essayization<sup>15</sup>. This does not, of course, mean that any close reading of fiction is subject to the same tensions within the “autobiographical triangle” (introspective confession, extravert testimony and persuasive challenge) as an autobiography or a memoir are. It does point out the importance of borderline cases, allowing us to note the tendency for genres to intermingle, and to draw attention to the consequences this process has for literary criticism.

The growing importance of such phenomena was pointed out, among others, by Tomasz Burek in his 1971 book *Zamiast powieści* [*Instead of a novel*]<sup>16</sup>. As the title suggests, the critic diagnosed the unravelling of the novel framework under the influence of the expanding forms from outside the genre (and often non-fiction ones). Importantly, the scholar, known for contextualising his own reflections in history, emphasised the changing popularity of categories such as “literariness” and “anti-literariness”.

“It is often said: literariness is the main offence against literature”, wrote Burek. “But literariness can also be a virtue”<sup>17</sup>. The critic reconstructed the career of these notions as follows: a response to literature “losing the direction of its own search”<sup>18</sup> are avant-garde directions of writing, focused on formal and stylistic search. Writing then “concentrates its forces, systematises its methods, sharpens its tools”<sup>19</sup>. However, the triumph of programmatic literariness quickly turns into domination, which, in turn, becomes easily reproducible and thus leads

<sup>12</sup>Cf. inter alia. Artur Hellich, *Gry z autobiografią: przemilczenia, intelektualizacje, parodie* [Games with autobiography: silences, intellectualisations, parodies] (Warsaw: IBL PAN, 2018), 33-35.

<sup>13</sup>Czermińska, 364.

<sup>14</sup>Czermińska, 159.

<sup>15</sup>Czermińska, 357-358.

<sup>16</sup>Tomasz Burek, *Zamiast powieści* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1971).

<sup>17</sup>Burek, 46.

<sup>18</sup>Burek.

<sup>19</sup>Burek.

to derivative, uninteresting works. In response to these changes comes a programmatic anti-literariness and the “barbarians” who want to renew the face of literature in a spontaneous, ignorant and authentic manner. These three phases (“of a philosophically and aesthetically justified literariness”, “literariness devoid of theoretical justifications, non-programmatic and reproductive” and “anti- or a-literariness”<sup>20</sup>) essentially form a circle: they pass seamlessly into each other and co-create the historical-literary process.

It is worth noting that what Burek means is an anti-literariness that cannot be reduced to naïve claims of closeness to life and experience. Rather, he understands it as a rebellion against the prevailing structural principles of the literary work. This vision of the process thus allows him to place contemporary literature (from the late 1960s and early 1970s) in the phase of “literariness devoid of theoretical justifications, non-programmatic and reproductive”. When the critic notes, with his usual acuity, that one of these established writing patterns is the writers’ artistic elaboration of their own experiences, he diagnoses them with “accidental fan mentality”, the results of which are as follows:

Their creations [...]are reminiscent of gossip overheard on a Sunday on a park bench or in a neighbour’s flat. A roughly sketched outline of eternal human psychology, a moral picture observed on the nearest street, a few pages from an autobiographical notebook, a bit of remembered reality, preferably that of the occupation time, a bit of bitter reverie on loneliness and suffering, and finally a bit of the so-called lyricism: here is a recipe for contemporary prose, here is a common set of literary correctness, a model of a cliché which they fulfil and “perfect”, with the kind encouragement of publishers<sup>21</sup>.

Burek’s objections to the recipe for a literary autobiographical story bring about connotations with contemporary debates about “auto-fiction”<sup>22</sup>. Aleksandra Pakieła’s notable prose debut, which gave rise to further critical-literary discussions around these issues, is worth discussing in the context of these reflections on genres bordering on autobiography.

Philippe Lejeune in his *Le Pacte autobiographique* [*The autobiographical pact*], outlined the distinction between autobiographies and books which are autobiographically inspired but do not meet the criteria of the genre. His example is a book by Olivier Todd, subtitled “a novel”, whose protagonist is a man called Ross. On the back cover of the book the publisher assures the reader that “Ross is Todd”. But for a researcher of autobiography this is by no means a foregone conclusion. If, declaratively, the author and protagonist, who bear different names, are not the same person, and if the subtitle makes reference to the genre of fiction rather than to ego-documents, there is no autobiographical pact there, only a referential one<sup>23</sup>. In other words: the literary function prevails over the anthropological one.

<sup>20</sup>Burek, 49.

<sup>21</sup>Burek, 50.

<sup>22</sup>See, inter alia, Agata Sikora, „Ja w pudełku” [„Me in a box”] *dwutygodnik.com* 365 (2023), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/10824-ja-w-pudelku.html>.

<sup>23</sup>Philippe Lejeune, „Pakt autobiograficzny” [„The autobiographical pact”], in his: *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu: o autobiografii* [Variations on a certain pact: on autobiography], ed. by Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska, transl. by Wincenty Grajewski, Stanisław Jaworski, Aleksander Labuda, Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 35.

In *Oto ciało moje* Pakieła creates an almost identical scenario to the one in Todd's book. Her work too implements the word "novel" in its subtitle and here, too, the name of the protagonist (Natalia) is different from the author's (Aleksandra). Also, just like in the case of Todd's book, the publisher, critics and, indirectly, the author herself, all draw attention to the convergent identities of the writer and the narrator/protagonist. Despite all that, just like in Lejeune's example, it is hard to argue that we are dealing here with an autobiographical pact.

When years later the French literary scholar revised his reflections, he also drew attention to another consequence of this distinction:

Throughout the entire *Pact*, I have proceeded as if the label "novel" (both in genre subtitles and in critical discourse) were synonymous with fiction, as opposed to "non-fiction", "factual reference". Now, "novel" has other functions as well: it signifies literature, literary creation in opposition to the flatness of the document, to its non-existent testimonial value. These two directions of meaning are often (but not always) combined. The word "novel" is therefore not as unambiguous as the word "autobiography". The other issue is one of valuation: pejorative (novel = fabrication pure and beautiful; autobiography = flatness of an unformed experience) or positive (novel = pleasure of a story well written and well conducted; autobiography = authenticity and depth of experience).<sup>24</sup>

These necessarily simplistic oppositions point to one important aspect of the reader's mindset. When the author (here: Pakieła) uses the subversive category of "novel" in the subtitle of her book, she not only attempts to disguise superficially the autobiographical nature of the experiences she describes, but also redirects critical expectations towards what Lejeune called "a well-written and well-conducted story". And it is this redirection that underlies the controversy in the reception of Pakieła's debut.

Most reviews of *Oto ciało moje* offer a two-pronged evaluation. Critics acknowledge the book's significant themes, such as eating disorders, while also pointing out shortcomings in Pakieła's narrative technique. Olga Wróbel's short review in "Gazeta Wyborcza", in which she expressed her opinion on the "literary and psychological underdevelopment"<sup>25</sup> of the novel, inspired immense controversy and a barrage of Facebook comments, despite the critic's repeated assurances that she was aware of the importance of Pakieła's topic. Still, hers was a much milder criticism of Pakieła's debut than the one by Marcin Bełza, in "Kultura Liberalna". He wrote: "[e]very creative failure has its charm; it serves as a lesson. *Oto ciało* only serves as an example of wasted paper". Bełza referred to the book's dialogues as implausible, calling them as lively as "frogs during anatomy lessons". He ironically stated that "[t]he statue of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, in Świebodzin has more life than all this pseudo-prose put together and multiplied". Above all, taking up the binary theme and style proposed by Wróbel,

<sup>24</sup>Philippe Lejeune, "Pakt autobiograficzny", in his: *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu: o autobiografii* (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 184-185.

<sup>25</sup>Olga Wróbel, "Z tej książki sączą się pot, krew, łzy, wymiociny i kwasy żołądkowe. Oto cena szczupłości" ["Sweat, blood, tears, vomit and stomach acids ooze from this book. This is the price of a slim body"], *Wyborcza.pl*, 28.06.2022, <https://wyborcza.pl/ksiazki/7,154165,28604284,gra-w-ideal.html>.



he denied the author's work literariness<sup>26</sup>. Bełza also argued that "Pakięła's book is very bad; it is not a prose book, much less a novel, despite the shameless claims on the cover". On chapters composed as "lists" (e.g. of tips for inducing vomiting), he wrote that "they have as much in common with a literary record as a bassoon with a drum". He also took the following position on the language of the book:

Let us therefore look at the language of the text, its non-existent powers of recognition, and the similarly non-existent structure (its deliberate absence is not at all uncommon in literary works, but here the text is reminiscent of an eighth-grade girl's notebook). There is no rhythm or even a semblance of style.<sup>27</sup>

Instead of referring to the quality of the formal components of Pakięła's book, the critic simply denies their existence: he writes about the lack of structure, rhythm and style (not about a disorganised structure or low-brow style), which, within Bełza's system of valuation is the harshest critical-literary judgment possible. Thus, if, in the reviewer's opinion, the book does not bear any marks of literariness (understood here simply as components of the form), then even the apparently neutral genre designation on the cover ("novel") becomes a brazen appropriation<sup>28</sup>. Pakięła's anti-literariness – contrary to what happened in the reception of Wstecz's book – thus becomes the greatest argument against the value of the text.

Moreover, the critic calls *Oto ciało moje* a "menacing" book, justifying this term with a more general diagnosis of the contemporary literary field:

Nowadays [...], if one looks at the reception of so-called "literary events", the onslaught on the frontiers are the self-presentational *themes* and *biographies* of the writers, battered by fate and power, eaten up by disease and exploited by the upper classes, non-binary, preferably with a peasant pedigree, damaged by mothers, fathers and the church, women self-emancipating in pains, suffering mothers and gay men fighting against the patriarchy. [...] I have the impression that in recent years [...] rampant exhibitionism and grasping at *strong* and *loaded* themes have been passing for courage [...].<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup>According to the critic, literariness - as opposed to the topic, which is only the starting point of a literary text - is supposed to testify to the value of a work. In a way, Bełza repeats the views of Maciej Jakubowiak, articulated a few years earlier in his text *Nie na temat* [Off topic] about contemporary Polish novels, which are a "realisation of the reader's order", a response to emerging media debates: "the topic is adopted from somewhere else and is not backed up by independent work, but rather by a tendency to pick up what is currently fashionable. This affliction can be observed more and more frequently in the most recent Polish literature and helps understand not only why certain books are published but above all why they are commented on, praised and awarded". Maciej Jakubowiak, „SCHEMATY: Nie na temat” [PATTERNS: Off topic], *dwutygodnik.com* 1 (2016), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/6358-schematy-nie-na-temat.html>.

<sup>27</sup>Marcin Bełza, „To nie jest powieść. Recenzja książki „Oto ciało moje” Aleksandry Pakięły” [„This is not a novel. A review of the book ‚Oto ciało moje’ by Aleksandra Pakięła”], *Kultura Liberalna* 29 (2022), <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2022/07/12/marcin-belza-recenzja-aleksandra-pakiela-oto-cialo-moje/>.

<sup>28</sup>At this point it is worth recalling the words of Lejeune revising his autobiographical pact and his thoughts about the pejorative valuation of autobiography relative to the novel: "novel = fabrication pure and beautiful; autobiography = flatness of unformed experience". Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact (encore)" 185. The genre designation itself, according to the French scholar, is supposed to carry the corresponding reader expectations of the "literariness" of the text.

<sup>29</sup>Bełza.

Despite their directness and emotionality, Bełza's remarks do point to an important trend in Polish prose of recent years<sup>30</sup>. Perhaps it is the discursive expansion of therapeutic languages<sup>31</sup> that has contributed to the flourishing of auto-fiction<sup>32</sup> and the appreciation of open descriptions of the subject position. The explicit link to trauma (often – though not exclusively – illness) is what distinguishes contemporary leaning of literature towards autobiography from the transformations of the twentieth-century novel diagnosed by Burek or Jarzębski. Bełza notices these tendencies, but (although he ostensibly sets himself up as their animated critic) he plays by the rules they impose. He does not attack the fad for trading in identities and victimhood; he attacks the meagre “literariness” of some of the texts that are part of it. Similarly, when he wants to legitimise his negative attitude towards the trauma narrative, he decides to put himself in the role of a victim of another trauma (cancer). And only after devoting a few paragraphs to describing his own difficult experiences does he try to convince the readers that he has the right to criticise other people's descriptions of illness. This self-justification is somewhat reminiscent of Henryk Grynberg's position in attacking Michał Głowiński's *Czarne sezony* [*Black seasons*].

## Experience vs. literariness

Głowiński's memoir, which covers the liquidation of the ghetto and the author's wartime fate, was in general warmly received by the critics, with one notable exception. In the pages of “Odra”, Grynberg (in a longer text devoted to Holocaust literature) reproached the theoretician, accusing him of technical shortcomings<sup>33</sup>. In the eyes of the author of *Drohobycz*, *Drohobycz*, Głowiński's book was “a catalogue of wasted, ill-used chances, a missed opportunity

<sup>30</sup>His intuitions align with less directly expressed opinions of Igor Kierkosz: “Suffice that a given work is a weapon for a good cause and all of a sudden criticising it seems to be morally questionable”, Igor Kierkosz, “Lubię tę robotę” [“I like this job”] *dwutygodnik.com* 4 (2023), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/10616-lubie-te-robote.html>.

<sup>31</sup>See, among others, Eva Illouz, “Suffering, emotional fields and emotional capital”, in: *Feelings in the era of capitalism*, transl. by Zygmunt Simbierowicz (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2010), 61-108; Katy Waldman, “The rise of therapy-speak”, *The New Yorker*, 26.03.2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-rise-of-therapy-speak>; Kinga Dunin, “Moda na depresję, czyli kultura terapii” [“Fad for depression, or the culture of therapy”], *KrytykaPolityczna.pl*, 11.03.2023, <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/czytaj-dalej/kinga-dunin-czyta/jak-plakac-w-miejscach-publicznych-kultura-terapii/> It is hard to pinpoint the precise moment when this expansion started. In the US, the term “therapeutic culture” was used as early as the 1960s and ascribed to Philip Rieff (cf. Philip Rieff, *The triumph of the therapeutic: Uses of faith after Freud*, Fortieth-Anniversary edition, 2nd print [Wilmington: ISI Books, 2007]). The “therapeutization” of public discourses was recognized in Poland some time after the transformation of 1989. Most works analysing this phenomenon (or considering it to be a starting point) started appearing after the year 2000. See, inter alia, Małgorzata Jacyno, *Kultura indywidualizmu* [The culture of individualism] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2007); Eliza Czerka-Fortuna, „Przejawy kultury terapeutycznej w edukacji akademickiej” [„Manifestations of therapeutic culture in higher education”], *Edukacja Dorosłych* 2 (2013), <https://www.infona.pl//resource/bwmeta1.element.desklight-c8d79612-749a-44c4-9da7-835cd0c7154e>; Łukasz Andrzejewski, „Zagadka społeczeństwa terapeutycznego: historia, konteksty, praktyka” [„The mystery of the therapeutic society: history, contexts, practice”], *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* 1 (2017): 68-89; Ewa Ficek, „Totalność terapii? Dyskursu terapeutycznego filiacje i translokacje” [“The totality of therapy? Filiations and translocations of therapy discourse”], in: *Reprezentacje świata w dyskursach* [Representations], ed. by Bernadetta Ciesek-Ślizowska et al. (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2019), 253-263.

<sup>32</sup>It was not, as argued by Rafał Pikuła, a democratisation of literary spaces. The journalist wrote: “the ‘me-and-my-life’ literature is a hot trend in the Polish literary cauldron”. He traced the reasons for that in the growing numbers of amateur writers. Rafał Pikuła, „Ekshibicjonizm literacki i pożytki z niego” [„Literary exhibitionism and its benefits”], *Tygodnik Przegląd* 31 (2022), <https://www.tygodnikprzeglad.pl/ekshibicjonizm-literacki-pozytki-niego/>.

<sup>33</sup>Henryk Grynberg, „Pokolenie Szoa” [„The Shoah generation”], *Odra* 4 (2002): 37-49.

to establish a stronger, authentic contact with the reader”<sup>34</sup>. Although Grynberg’s review was controversial and was rebuffed by Jacek Leociak<sup>35</sup>, as Janusz Waligóra points out in his reconstruction of the dispute, an important context for it was the reviewer’s subject position. Various “imitations” of criticism (such as the authority of Głowiński-the-researcher or the weight of historical testimony inherent in the nature of Holocaust literature) did not affect Grynberg’s assessment, for he, as a “child of the Holocaust”, knew first-hand the weight of the described trauma and was able to treat *Czarne sezony* as literature without any mitigating filters and thus apply literary criteria to it.

Even if we accept that it is impossible to judge the gravity of a traumatic experience, we can still take into account its historical significance, which gives Holocaust literature its special position in literary criticism or in trauma studies. However, even here, it is important to distinguish between testimony (oral history, the written memoir of a witness to history, etc.) and a text with literary ambitions. Responding to Leociak’s polemic, Grynberg, wrote: “I treated *Czarne sezony* as literary prose, rather than as yet another witness testimony. If I was mistaken, then of course I withdraw most of the allegations”<sup>36</sup>. Thus, he emphasised the primacy of the historical and anthropological function of testimony, as opposed to the literary function of literary prose, even if the latter is inspired autobiographically or historically.

Despite the unquestionably special status of Holocaust-related writing, the distinction outlined above (between literature and testimony) is sometimes also applied to other trauma narratives. This very distinction was the foundation of yet another review of Pakieła’s debut: in “artPAPIER” Adrian Witczak the fact that *Oto ciato moje* claims fictionality (and thus – literariness):

I understand that novelistic fiction provides a kind of safety buffer for the author; it creates distance and prevents the readers from identifying the author’s personal experiences. However, instead of hiding behind novelist fiction one might label the text somewhat differently, e.g. an art-therapeutic intimate journal, supporting the author’s healing process. If the author was expecting a more empathetic approach to her text, it was definitely worth opting for more authenticity. I believe that an illness described openly would not have provoked such critical reactions. Such a setting would have forced a calmer, more empathetic reading of these notes.<sup>37</sup>

Witczak writes directly: there is no room for critical-literary doubt in the reading of a pathographic ego-document: it is a therapeutic space for empathy. A “de-novelisation” of Pakieła’s debut would

<sup>34</sup>Janusz Waligóra, „Pamięć i tekst: wypowiedanie Zagłady w „Czarnych sezonach” Michała Głowińskiego” [„Memory and text: pronouncing the Holocaust in Michał Głowiński’s *Czarne sezony*”], *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Historicolitteraria* 9 (2009): 164.

<sup>35</sup>Leociak attacked Grynberg, among other things, for his focus on evaluation according to literary criteria: “I wonder if Grynberg really tracks the level of banality of the events described by Holocaust witnesses and victims, and considers the “non-trivial” ones to be better than the “trivial ones”? Is it even possible to use these criteria to judge autobiographical prose attempting to record the experience of the Holocaust as experienced by a child?”. Jacek Leociak, „Grynberg niebanalnie o Głowińskim” [„Grynberg non-trivially about Głowiński”], *Odra* 6 (2002): 64-65.

<sup>36</sup>Henryk Grynberg, „Mój krytyk za dużo wyczytał” [„My critic read too much into it”], *Odra* 6 (2002): 67.

<sup>37</sup>Adrian Witczak, „Pułapki szczerości” [„Traps of sincerity”], *artPAPIER* 14 (2022), <http://artpapier.com/index.php?page=artykul&wydanie=444&artykul=9020&kat=1>.

have affected its reception and, to some extent, would have thrown a spanner in the works of literary criticism. Her “anti-literariness” would have been irrelevant, and the shortcomings of her narrative technique would have at best illustrated the author’s inner state, and at worst – would have constituted stumbling blocks irrelevant to the main purpose of the text. To put it briefly, things would have been different if an autobiographical pact had been proposed instead of a referential pact.<sup>38</sup>

## The culture of autobiography

It is worth asking ourselves here: is this the case? If we accept Witczak’s diagnosis, then instead of the distinction between traumatic testimony and literary prose we will be defining the horizon of interest for literary criticism. Ostensibly, this would solve the problem: criticism is concerned with what is actually and declaratively literary, studies in trauma and maladies, empathetic reading of texts which are non-fictional externalisations of the inner state. This distinction, however, prevents the possibility of looking critically at phenomena which are more broadly present in the literary field and within the book market; of commenting on what a review of Pikuła calls the “culture of exhibitionism”<sup>39</sup>; of asking fundamental and broad questions about the state of Polish literary production and drawing conclusions from the perspective of the sociology of literature. When dealing with “authentic” texts which “tell it like it is” need to be “experienced” and “received calmly and empathetically”, the critic is faced not so much with an ethical duty, as with emotional blackmail.

This problem, moreover, is not transparent in the eyes of commentators. Voices of scepticism are increasingly frequent: Olga Wróbel, in a text entitled *O sobie* [About myself], criticised Dorota Kotas’s *Czerwony młoteczek* [The red hammer] for its egocentric narrative and for its writing which is “psychologically interesting, unpalatable reception-wise”<sup>40</sup>. Antonina Tosiek devoted the first paragraph of her negative review of Malwina Pająk’s *Wstręt* [Disgust] to problematising the position of a reviewer confronted with an autobiographical narrative<sup>41</sup>;

<sup>38</sup>The same distinction, albeit in a critical tone, was pointed out a little earlier by Mateusz Witkowski in his review of Natalia Fiedorczuk’s *Jak pokochać centra handlowe* [How to fall in love with shopping malls]: “Fiedorczuk states in the afterword that her book is something in between a novel and a reportage. And this is where the problems with evaluating her work begin. It is difficult not to treat this statement as a kind of safety net. If we apply novelistic criteria to *Jak pokochać centra handlowe*, we will probably ascertain a painful lack of composition, stylistic blandness, lack of any “operations on language”. [...] Perhaps *Jak pokochać centra handlowe*, treated as pure journalism or therapeutic prose, would not have provoked such resistance. As fictional prose (drawing on the author’s experience, as we know from her interviews), however, it must be subject to specific criteria.” - Mateusz Witkowski, “Literatura bez literatury i nagroda za temat, czyli Paszport Polityki dla Natalia Fiedorczuk” [“Literature without literature and an award for the topic, or “Polityka” Passport for Natalia Fiedorczuk”], *ksiazki.wp.pl*, 18.01.2017, <https://ksiazki.wp.pl/literatura-bez-literatury-i-nagrada-za-temat-czyli-paszport-polityki-dla-natalii-fiedorczuk-6145960874330241a>

<sup>39</sup>Pikuła.

<sup>40</sup>Olga Wróbel, „O sobie” [„About myself”], *dwutygodnik.com* 5 (2023), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/10708-o-sobie.html>.

<sup>41</sup>“We are talking about another novel backed by the author’s declarations about the convergence of autobiography and fiction, written “70 per cent about her and for her”. And just like that, boom! At least three crayons from the literary critic’s pencil case land overboard, because judgements on experience are, after all, a filthy thing. How to save oneself? Grit one’s teeth and write something about a losing battle in the name of goodness and beauty, i.e. how the protagonist exposes a degenerate system? Or would it be better to avoid judgement because of compassion and human (female, straight from the barricades!) empathy?” - Antonina Tosiek, “Szkic do rozwinięcia” [“An essay to elaborate”], *dwutygodnik.com* 5 (2023), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/10718-szkic-do-rozwinięcia.html>.

Adam Wrotz, in his well-known *Czy bohater polskiej powieści kupił już sobie komputer?* [*Has the protagonist of the Polish novel purchased a computer yet?*] recognized in the “private novel” one of the two dominant patterns of prose writing in Poland, which requires criticism and revision<sup>42</sup>. Agata Sikora, on the other hand, in her essay entitled *Ja w pudełku* [*Me in a box*], consistently argued against the subjective primacy of contemporary cultural production, claiming that its main function is to prevent debate.<sup>43</sup>

These voices of scepticism, however, do not make the matter any simpler: disagreement with Witczak’s diagnosis (of maintaining a definite separation between fictional and autobiographical literature) does not, after all, leave the role of the critic unchallenged either. While preserving the right to comment on semi-autobiographical genres is an important postulate, it does not invalidate the constitutive differences between therapeutic and traumatic narratives and that which is primordially literary. Faced with the expansion of therapeutic languages and cultural phenomena based on the category of subjective experience, critics should once again ask themselves about the scope of their competence.

A broader historical and literary perspective provides an interesting context for these considerations. In his book *Gry z autobiografią* [*Games with autobiography*], Artur Hellich meticulously reconstructs the historical conditions of a specifically Polish aversion to non-fiction narratives focused on individual experience. Partitions, wars, discussions about the shape of new forms of statehood, and the censorship restrictions in People’s Republic of Poland were all factors that effectively turned writers away from introspective ambitions towards participating (more or less directly) in social discussions. The autobiographical breakthrough came only after 1989, when:

on the one hand, restrictions to freedom of speech imposed by the authorities came to an end, and on the other, Poland adopted a liberal-capitalist system that contributed to the popularisation of the Anglo-Saxon culture of individualism. From then on, publishing autobiographies in print became massively popular. Confessions started to be published by writers and literary scholars, as well as politicians, scholars of various disciplines and celebrities. Autobiographies, often written by ghostwriters, flooded the publishing market, but in many cases they also became an important and inspiring voice in public debate. Today, still current is the cry of the English poet of the Lakes, Robert Southey (expressed in 1807), when he complained that he lived in a t i m e when even “booksellers, lecturers, pickpockets and poets become autobiographers”<sup>44</sup>.

The researcher, pointing to a discursive shift which enabled the appreciation of the individual perspective, rightly linked it to the socio-economic context. However, while autobiography (understood in the strict genre sense) was in Poland an unwanted genre for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because of political conditions, its

<sup>42</sup>“Thus, this private novel, which could still be called intimate and impressionistic, deprives the Polish novel today of any chance for a further career, for a place in contemporary discourse, among important areas such as science, technology and politics” - Adam Wrotz, „Czy bohater polskiej powieści kupił już sobie komputer?”, *dwutygodnik.com* 6 (2023), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/10791-czy-bohater-polskiej-powieści-kupil%C2%A0już%C2%A0sobie-komputer.html>.

<sup>43</sup>Sikora.

<sup>44</sup>Hellich, 65.

particular popularity after 1989 can also be explained by the ideological need produced by liberal democracy.<sup>45</sup>

The issue becomes more complicated, of course, when we are focusing on the broader phenomenon of autobiography: the above-quoted diagnoses of Burk, Czermińska or Jarzębski prove that autobiographies were doing just fine in Polish prose of the 20th century. However, the autobiographical breakthrough recognised by Hellich can only reinforce these tendencies (to establish autobiography as a matrix for other forms of writing). The anti-literariness of contemporary literature should be considered more broadly: acknowledging the influence of both autobiography and, more generally, non-fictional genres – a problem which has already been addressed in literary criticism in recent years. For example, Maciej Jakubowiak, in his article *Nie na temat* [Off topic], made the following claim on the expansion of reportage mechanisms beyond non-fiction:

It is the fad for reportage, dominating literary circulation in Poland in recent years, that makes the “what” more important than the “how”. The supremacy of the reportage convention, which depends on a narrowly defined literary realism, means that little attention is paid to issues of style. The expectations of the reading public are thus reduced to, at most, technical proficiency, i.e. such mastery of language which allows the subject of the literary presentation to reveal itself, or, to put it more simply, makes it “easy to read”<sup>46</sup>.

Let me narrow down this idea and take it further: the desire for non-fiction is joined in the “reader’s order” by a strong appreciation of the uniqueness of individual experience. This ties in with the development of a therapeutic culture, and the cultural primacy of identity perspectives. Kinga Dunin, among others, drew attention to this in literary criticism. Writing about Emilia Dłużewska’s *Jak płakać w miejscach publicznych* [How to cry in public spaces] she thus diagnosed broader discursive tendencies: “[n]ew identity narratives are emerging, such as confessional literature and confessional journalism, institutions and professions, patterns of behaviour, ways of experiencing emotions”<sup>47</sup>.

Critics have noted these transformations in literary production and systems of prestige, including reception, prizes, and scholarships. This suggests the need to examine post-1989 literary trends that oppose autobiographical attitudes. This does not, of course, mean eliminating personal experiences from literature but rather, not treating their expression as an end in itself. Autobiography in texts under analysis can be understood functionally, as a literary mechanism, similar to other formal or stylistic procedures<sup>48</sup>. It thus becomes

<sup>45</sup>Cf. the reconstruction of the relationship between expanding globalisation and the growing “appetite for authenticity” - Olga Szmidt, *Autentyczność: stan krytyczny: problem autentyczności w kulturze XXI wieku* [Authenticity: a critical stat.: The problem of authenticity in 21st century culture] (Krakow: Universitas, 2019), 246-248.

<sup>46</sup>Jakubowiak.

<sup>47</sup>Dunin.

<sup>48</sup>This way of understanding the “authentic” in literature of the 1960s is argued for convincingly by Joanna Orska in *Liryczne narracje* [Lyrical Narratives], see Joanna Orska, *Liryczne narracje: nowe tendencje w poezji 1989-2006* [Lyrical narratives: new tendencies in poetry 1989-2007] (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), 37-50.

a particular task of criticism to track those artistic gestures that can be understood as opposition to the dictates of the “autobiographical turn”, i.e., those whose aims remain oriented towards a structural (e.g. sociological, aesthetic, political) rather than individual (autobiographical) commentary.

On the formal level such opposition is linked to “literariness”, understood not as a high style or textual ornamentation, but as a conscious use of formal strategies to articulate specific (though not necessarily explicit) views. It is not, however, a matter of simple oppositions: although “anti-literariness” is supposed to link literature to life, unmediated experience and traumatic narrative, “literariness” (revealed through awareness of one’s technical skills and strategies) is in this case oriented not towards pan-textuality, but towards a communicative purpose. Investigating this reverse of “authenticity” is a separate task, which goes beyond the scope of a single article, but it seems particularly important in view of ongoing critical discussions. Among the aesthetic tools involved in problematising the relationship of the storytelling entity to the structures in which it situates itself are humour<sup>49</sup> or quirkiness. Authors writing in opposition to the “autobiographical turn” (even when they refer to personal experiences in their works) include many writers from several generations, for example Kacper Bartczak, Adam Kaczanowski, Dorota Masłowska or Natałka Suszczyńska. A thorough interpretative examination of their strategies against the background of the “culture of autobiography” can lead not only to interesting readings, but also to the mapping of important trends in contemporary Polish literature.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

<sup>49</sup>I wrote about humour in the context of de-individuating mental disorders, based on the analysis of Tomasz Bąk’s poetry and Olga Hund’s prose - Zuzanna Sala, “Cierpiący na depresję doskonale odnajdują się na bezrobociu”. Humor w narracjach psychiatrycznych Tomasza Bąka i Olgi Hund” [“People suffering from depression enjoy their unemployment”. Humour in the psychiatric narratives of Tomasz Bąk and Olga Hund”], *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 3 (8.11.2022): 3311–337, <https://doi.org/10.19195/prt.2022.3.13>.

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# KEYWORDS

**literariness**

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**ABSTRACT:**

The article discusses the relationship between the way the categories of “anti-literariness” and “literariness” operate in contemporary literary criticism and the “culture of autobiography” after the breakthrough of 1989. Based on two recent critical discussions around the books *Kwiaty rozłączki* by Aleksandra Wstecz (2020) and *Oto ciało moje* by Aleksandra Pakieła (2022), the author looks at how the expansion of therapeutic languages and the primacy of stories about individual traumatic experience are remodelling the conditions of literary criticism.

# anty-literariness

*Aleksandra Pakieła*

## CONFESSION

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Zuzanna Sala (1994) – literary critic, assistant in the Department of Contemporary Criticism at the Faculty of Polish Studies of Jagiellonian University. She has published, among others, in “Czas Kultury”, “Forum Poetyki”, “Litteraria Copernicana”, “Praktyka Teoretyczna”, “Wielogłos” and in multi-author monographs.

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