

Pragmatic connections. On two visions of criticism under the patronage of Richard Rorty

Katarzyna Trzeciak

ORCID: 0000-0002-1339-3400

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”¹. 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

¹ 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"². 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 time³. 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 Rorty⁴. 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"⁵. Dunin is especially

² 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".

³ 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).

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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 theorizing⁶.

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*⁷. 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”⁸.

Let us compare the ending of *Czytając Polskę*:

⁶ 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: 5th Jan 2025.

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

⁸ 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 again⁹.

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 changes¹⁰.

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”¹¹. Thus the pragmatic model of reading has become an ally of the model of engaged criticism¹², 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 reality¹³. According to Markowski, socially-oriented literary criticism, represented by Werner: “sees the basic

⁹ Dunin, 448–449.

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

¹¹ Stokfiszewski, 21.

¹² 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.

¹³ 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”¹⁴. 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 criticism¹⁵.

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”¹⁶, 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.

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

¹⁵Markowski, “Precz z dekadencją”.

¹⁶Michał 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 reality¹⁷ 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 foundations¹⁸.

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)”¹⁹.

¹⁷He 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.

¹⁸Stokfiszewski, “Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury”, 19.

¹⁹Kaczmarek, 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 analogously²⁰.

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 important²¹.

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

²⁰ 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.

²¹Dunin, 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 criticism²², which he understands as “the ability to change social practices thanks to propagating new, beneficial ways of expressing oneself”²³. 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 distinctions²⁴. 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”²⁵. 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,

²²Markowski, *Polityka wrażliwości*, 49.

²³Markowski, *Polityka wrażliwości*, 60.

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

²⁵Tomasz 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 freedom²⁶.

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 centuries²⁷.

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”²⁸, 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”²⁹, 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”³⁰. 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 situation³¹.

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

²⁶Markowski, “Precz z dekadencją”.

²⁷Quote 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.

²⁸This 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.

²⁹“Znikające cele krytyki?”, 438.

³⁰“Znikające cele krytyki?”, 438.

³¹Markowski, “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 stage³².

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 text³³) 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

³²Werner.

³³“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 literature³⁴. 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

³⁴Kaczmariski.

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KEYWORDS

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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

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Katarzyna Trzeciak – literary scholar and critic, PhD in literary studies. Assistant professor at the Chair of Contemporary Criticism, Jagiellonian University. Her research interests focus on modern and postmodern aesthetics, relationships between literature and spatial arts, twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical theories, and materialistically oriented research into art and culture. Author of a monograph *Posągi i utopie. Rzeźba jako metafora nowoczesnej formy artystycznej, podmiotowości i politycznej wspólnoty* [Statues and utopias. Sculpture as a metaphor of modern artistic form, agency and political community] (Universitas, 2018) and papers on relationships between sculpture and literature. Laureate of the National Science Center PRELUDIUM grant, scholar of Ministry of Science and Higher Education for outstanding academic achievements. Investigator in research projects “Konstelacje krytyczne. Strategie krytyki literackiej” [Critical constellations. Strategies of literary criticism] (NPRH) and “Miasto Idealne – pierwsze lata Nowej Huty na fotografiach Wiktora Pentala i Henryka Makarewicza” [Perfect city. First years of Nowa Huta in Wiktor Pental’s and Henryk Makarewicz’s photographs] (MKiDN). Co-editor of a critical-literary podcast “Book’s not dead”, she also collaborates with Centrum Rzeźby Polskiej w Orońsku. |