

# *Polemika Krytycznoliteracka w Polsce* series. Between case study and history of literature

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The history of the art of the written word unfolds across various layers and dimensions – this much is evident. One of the most vital domains within the historical-literary process, and more broadly, within the continuous renewal of artistic writing and cultural traditions, is the field of (critical) literary polemics. It is therefore surprising that many debates concerning the form and development of literature – despite their crucial role in shaping aesthetic sensibilities and the worldview of successive eras – have not been thoroughly documented or meticulously reconstructed. National literary histories often remain silent on these disputes or mention only the most renowned ones. The traces of other (no less important) polemics are frequently scattered across periodicals, many of which are now difficult to access. On occasion, polemical essays by particular authors are reprinted in collected editions of their works. Yet in such cases, these texts often persist outside of their original context, detached from the critical-literary constellation in which they first appeared, and are stripped of their dialogical and intertextual nature.

In 2008, Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk [Poznań Society of Friends of Learning Publishing House] launched a monograph series titled *Polemika Krytycznoliteracka w Polsce* [Critical Literary Polemics in Poland], conceived and academically edited by Sylwia Panek. The aim of the series is to present the disputes that have animated Polish literary life from the Enlightenment (when the phenomenon of critical literary polemics first emerged in Poland), up to the present day, including the most recent confrontations over representations of the Holocaust as both the culmination and distortion of modern ideals. The project was designed to collect, edit, and critically process primary sources, resulting in the publication of a series of monographic volumes dedicated to individual polemics. The outcome is a unique collection of corpora, never before reconstructed in this form, comprising the texts involved in these debates, offering readers the opportunity to trace the dialogical nature of the contributions that constitute each controversy.

Each of the monographs (of which thirty-six have been published to date) opens with an extensive introductory essay, in which scholars describe and contextualize the (critical) literary dispute that is being reconstructed, situating it within a broader cultural framework. The second part of each volume consists of an anthology of primary texts that illustrate the course and dramatic structure of the debate, accompanied by detailed bibliographic footnotes as well as textual and cultural commentary. Significantly, the monographs collectively form a hypothetical “grand narrative” (which may, of course, be further specified through additional case studies of individual disputes or constellations thereof) charting the history of critical literary polemics in Poland. As such, they contribute to a broader account of one of the key dimensions of Polish literary and cultural life. This narrative includes links reaching back to the eighteenth century and spans the nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries, thus encompassing a substantial portion of the history of Polish literature.

The diverse concepts, aesthetic and social issues, poetics, and cultural institutions that have been the subject of contention at various moments in the history of artistic writing, together shape the conceptual vocabulary of Polish literature and literary life. This vocabulary finds its primary site of evocation, hermeneutic meaning, and gloss in literary texts, but also (particularly in the sphere of constructing literary consciousness) in critical writings: manifestos, reviews, and various forms of paratextual artistic commentary. It is worthwhile to examine these latter texts through the lens of historical variability, uncovering in individual statements traces of active participation in a broader cultural dialogue. A dialogue that, while initially unfolding in a locally defined space, reveals itself – through successive polemics that revisit old disputes in new historical, social, political, and aesthetic contexts – as part of a *longue durée*, in the sense articulated by Fernand Braudel<sup>1</sup>.

The history of literature is not merely the history of literary texts; it is also the history of critical and literary disputes and debates, in which – following Dilthey – meanings and interpretations of literary works are forged, and where evolving aesthetics, poetological projects, stylistic developments, and tensions crystallize. It can be confidently asserted that literary polemics constitute one of the most vital arenas for articulating and shaping literary consciousness and, more broadly, cultural awareness. They represent a key domain in the enduring intellectual engagement with the form and function of literature and national culture. Without a thorough understanding of these debates, any portrait of the literary and artistic traditions of individual nations and imagined communities remains inevitably incomplete.

Even a cursory review of the thematic scope of the individual volumes in the presented series reveals the richness of issues that have shaped literary life in Poland from the eighteenth century through the twenty-first. The subjects of the respective volumes (listed here in chronological order, reflecting the historical and literary sequence) simultaneously serve to introduce the titles of successive monographs: *Polemika wokół Pułtawy i Jagiellonidy, czyli oświeceniowy spór o kształt eposu* [The Polemic around Jagiellonida and Pułtawa: Enlightenment Controversy on The Nature of The Epic Genre], *Spory o sonet we wczesnoromantycznej krytyce literackiej* [The Polemic Over the Sonnet in Polish Early Romantic Literary Criticism], *Romantyczne zmagania z przeszłością. Brodziński – Śniadecki – Mochński* [The Romantics and Their Polemic with the

<sup>1</sup> See Fernand Braudel, *Historia i trwanie* [History and the Longue Durée], translated into Polish by Bronisław Geremek (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1971), 288 pp.

**Past. Brodziński – Śniadecki – Mochnacki**], *Spory wokół Romantyzmu i jego skutków Franciszka Krupińskiego* [**The Polemic over Franciszek Krupiński's Romanticism and Its Consequences**], *Pozytywistyczny spór o „estetykę «zdrowego rozsądku»* [**The Aesthetics of “Common Sense”?**], Pan Tadeusz po angielsku. *Spory wokół wydania i przekładu* [**Sir Thaddeus in English. The Polemic around Publication and Translation**], *Spór o Wyzwolenie w roku 1903* [**The Polemic over Wyspiański's Wyzwolenie in 1903**], *Spór o przyszłość literatury polskiej, czyli polemiki ze Stefanem Żeromskim po jego odczycie pt. Literatura a życie polskie* [**A dispute over the future of Polish literature, that is, polemics with Stefan Żeromski after his article Literatura a życie polskie**], *Spór o nowy «dramat narodowy». Jeden wątek dyskusji o Rachunkach J.I. Kraszewskiego* [**The Polemic Over a New ‘National Drama’. One Thread of Discussion on J.I. Kraszewski's Rachunki**], *Artysta, sztuka i społeczeństwo. Spory i polemiki wokół Confiteor Stanisława Przybyszewskiego* [**Artist, Art and Society: The Brouhaha around Przybyszewski's Confiteor**], *Brzozowski contra Miriam. Spór jednostronny* [**Brzozowski Versus Miriam. A One-Sided Polemic**], *Między idealizmem i naturalizmem. Jana Gnatowskiego i Józefa Kotarbińskiego dyskusja o modelu literatury i krytyki nowoczesnej* [**Between Idealism and Naturalism. Jan Gnatowski and Józef Kotarbiński – a Polemic On the Model of Literature and Contemporary Literary Criticism**], *Młodopolski spór o Sienkiewicza. Kampania oskarżycielska Stanisława Brzozowskiego oraz reakcje adherentów Litwosa* [**The Młodopolska Polemic Over Sienkiewicz. The Głos Campaign of Accusations and Reaction of Those Championing Litwos**], *Spór o Polską Akademię Literatury* [**The Polemic Over the Polish Academy of Literature**], *Wpływologia. Międzywojenne dyskusje wokół Pana Tadeusza i futuryzmu jako elementy sporu o wpływy, zależności i plagiaty* [**Literary Swayness. Interwar Discussions on Sir Thaddeus and Futurism – a Polemic Over Imitation, Reliance and Plagiarism**], *Irzykowski wobec futurystów* [**Irzykowski contra the Futurists**], *Spór o «niezrozumiałość» w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* [**The Interbellum Polemic Over “Dysunderstandableness”**], *Wacław Borowy versus Adam Grzymała-Siedlecki. Spór o racje rozwoju literatury polskiej* [**Wacław Borowy and Adam Grzymała-Siedlecki. The Polemic Over Polish Literature**], *Spór o Granicę Zofii Nałkowskiej* [**The Polemic Over Zofia Nałkowska's Granica**], *Między «blaskiem duchowej prawdy» a «sprawami państwa współczesnego». Spór o «czystą poezję»* [**Between ‘The Aureola of Spiritual Truth’ and ‘Matters of a Contemporary State’: The Polemic Over ‘Unsullied Poetry’ (1938/1939)**], *Światopogląd metafory. Spory o przenośnię w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* [**The Worldview of Metaphor. The Polemic on the Figurative in the Interwar Period**], *Spór o Conrada w Polsce (1945–48)* [**The Polemic Over Conrad: 1945–1948**], *Spór o realizm 1945–1948* [**The Polemic over Realism, 1945–1948**], *Uchwały Związku Pisarzy Polskich na Obczyźnie – stosunek emigracji do kraju* [**Resolutions of the Polish Writers Association in Exile – Emigre's Attitudes to Poland**], *«Powinna być nieufnością». Nowofalowy spór o poezję* [**‘Distrust Should Be Its Mission’. The New Wave Polemic Over Poetry**], *My i Wy? Spór o kształt poezji pomiędzy pokoleniem 68 i pokoleniami wcześniejszymi* [**Us and Them? The Polemic Over the Nature of Poetry Between the Generation of '68 and Earlier Generations**], *Spory o powieść w dyskusjach krytycznoliterackich drugiej emigracji niepodległościowej* [**Literary Polemics On the Novel – Second Migration Over Independence**], *Spór o Borowskiego* [**The Polemic Over Borowski**], *Relacja i reakcja, czyli spór o Kamienie na szaniec Aleksandra Kamińskiego* [**The Polemic Over Aleksander Kamiński's Kamienie na szaniec**], *Powieściowe obrachunki. Spory wokół rewolucji artystycznej w prozie lat 70. i 80. XX wieku* [**The Thrusts of the Pen. The Polemic over the Artistic Revolution in 1970s and 1980s Polish Prose**], *Barbarzyńcy, klasycyści i inni. Spory o młodą poezję w latach 90.* [**Barbarians, Classicists and Others. Polemics on New Generation Poets in the 1990's**].

Much could be written about each of these polemics. I do not have the space here to discuss them in detail – the authors of the individual monographs have provided extensive scholarly introductions to the anthologized sections in which they do just that. I would merely like to emphasize that the debates listed constitute a series of (incomplete yet representative) “peaks” of cultural dialogue conducted by participants in literary life across different eras – dialogue concerning not only the aesthetic shape of Polish literature, but also its role in socio-political life and the historical condition of both the nation and the individual. These literary-critical disputes naturally varied in scope and significance. Yet both the major and already partly examined debates – such as the classic conflict between the Romantics and the Classicists, whose echoes resonate in twentieth-century discussions of “incomprehensibility” and “poetry of liberated vision” – and the seemingly marginal or insufficiently explored ones, such as questions concerning the sonnet, “common sense,” or “the future of Polish literature”, together constitute a polyphonic discourse that defines one of the most important dimensions of the history of literary communication. The reconstructions of numerous polemics published within this monograph series allow us to grasp the richness of aesthetic and ideological positions engaged in dialogue, positions which maintain multiple relationships with one another, sometimes overt, sometimes hidden, direct or indirect. The overarching and unifying theme of this polyphony is the shaping, stabilization, and at times rebellious questioning of the significance of literature and the role it is assigned within culture (both national culture in general and the culture of specific historical epochs in particular). The literary history presented in the *Polemika Krytycznoliteracka w Polsce* series, seen through the prism of successive polemics, unfolds simultaneously across various registers. As we might say, echoing Fernand Braudel and Polish literary theorist Jerzy Ziomek<sup>2</sup>, it exhibits three interwoven oscillations, each operating on a distinct level and unevenly layered upon the others. First, there is the *longue durée*, which reveals the connection of specific literary phenomena to their foundational cultural contexts – in this case, the relationship between Polish literature and the Mediterranean heritage. Second, we observe the medium-term oscillation, which refines and reorients the *longue durée* in accordance with the historical, political, and social transformations of a given time-space. Lastly, we encounter the short-term or event-based oscillation, the most resistant to systematization, yet at the same time indispensable, for without a detailed understanding of specific events, no meaningful attempt at theoretical synthesis would be possible. This pattern applies to the history of literary debates just as much as it defines the relationship between an individual literary masterpiece and the tradition of Polish literature, itself a component of the broader tradition of Mediterranean culture. It also highlights the necessity of observing individual polemics in the strict sense (their reconstructions are the subject of individual volumes in the series) within intersecting and paradoxical frameworks – those of singular events and historical processes, isolated contributions and overarching projects, critical source editions and interpretative endeavors. Individual works and cultural texts (including, without doubt, literary-critical polemics) contribute indirectly to medium-term developments, while also revealing how the *longue durée* operates and is continually reactivated. As a result, readers of subsequent volumes in the *Polemika Krytycznoliteracka w Polsce* series are offered the opportunity to follow a hypothetical (as I fully acknowledge) “grand narrative” co-constructed by successive polemics, with simultaneous emphasis on the two remaining oscillatory dimensions of aesthetic and ideological disputes concerning Polish literature and culture.

<sup>2</sup> See Jerzy Ziomek, “Epoki i formacje w dziejach literatury polskiej” [Epochs and formations in the history of Polish literature], in: *Prace ostatnie. Literatura i nauka o literaturze* [Final works. Literature and science on literature] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1994), 35–36.

The authors of the individual monographs deliberately emphasized all the aforementioned dimensions of the tensions under investigation and their modes of expression. They made every effort to present, with the greatest possible precision, both the specific *polemic sensu stricto* – typically initiated by a text in the form of a literary-critical manifesto and followed by a series of direct rebuttals and commentaries – and the broader *dispute sensu largo*, which often comprises seemingly inconspicuous references, allusions, and paraphrases found not only in literary texts of various genres but also in artistic works more generally. This dual approach serves to safeguard critical-literary sources while also enabling the (re)construction of an intertextual space of relations and interactions – between criticism and art on one level, and between systemic frameworks (of -isms, movements, and styles) and idiolectal registers (individual artistic dictions and languages) on another.

There is little need to argue that critical-literary polemic, much like intertextuality, constitutes one of the most significant arenas for the manifestation and construction of the historical-literary process. It generates a meaning-producing space of aesthetic, cultural, and ideological dialogue. Such polemics not only place the key concepts at the centre of reflection, but also characteristically sharpen the most important ideological notions and poetological categories of particular periods and epochs. The reconstruction of successive, and at times intersecting disputes allows for a clearer perception of the qualities shaping an evolving literary tradition, in its evident entanglements with historical moments, as well as philosophical and anthropological contexts. The monographic series in question here serves as an excellent means of advancing critical reflection on the Polish literary tradition. It also contributes to disseminating knowledge about one of the most vital domains in the formation of Polish poetological thought, as cultivated by participants in the literary field.

The findings established across successive volumes of the series largely serve to illustrate and confirm Jerzy Ziomek's thesis that, in the history of literature (and culture), the law of accumulation proves more decisive than the law of renovation<sup>3</sup>. The revolutionary and revelatory projects of the initiators of each polemic – the poetics and discourses that become both their subject and medium – frequently reveal their repetitive character in relation to earlier disputes. The reader of the published results of research on Polish (critical-)literary polemic will thus have the opportunity to confront two dimensions of literature's cognitive function, which is always realized "in between history and philosophy: it presents – as history does – individual characters and events, yet – like philosophy – produces generalizations"<sup>4</sup>. They will also gain access to a wealth of critically edited source texts, central to the development of Polish poetological thought, and be invited to pursue their own investigations into a range of issues vital to both Polish and European literary-cultural heritage.

Finally, it is worth noting that the majority of the monographs published as part of the presented series are the result of the project *Critical(-Literary) Polemic in Poland—Between Case Study and Literary History* (NPRH 11H 16 0131 84). All volumes in the series are freely accessible to readers, as they have been made available both in the AMUR Repository of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, within a dedicated collection (*Series: Critical-Literary Polemic in Poland*: <https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/handle/10593/14504>), and have been deposited in the National Digital

<sup>3</sup> Ziomek, 41.

<sup>4</sup> Henryk Markiewicz, "Fikcja w dziele literackim a jego zawartość poznawcza" [Fiction in a literary work and its cognitive contents], in Markiewicz: Głównie problemy wiedzy o literaturze [Main issues in studies on literature], 4th edition (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1976), 123.

Library POLONA. Thanks to this broad dissemination, the series can be used as a resource in courses on the history of Polish literature, as well as in other literary and cultural studies classes. Its greatest value lies in the reminder – and, in some cases, the reintroduction to a wider readership – of an extensive corpus of source texts presented in carefully prepared critical editions.

Through the collective effort of scholars from numerous academic centres across Poland, a significant gap in the historiographical account of Polish literary history, spanning more than three centuries of literature and its related cultural life, has been successfully addressed. The reconstructed polemics shed new light on the sources of contemporary literary consciousness. They not only allow us to recall, but more importantly to contextualize – through parallels with kindred, often historically distant debates – topics and issues fundamental to Polish literature. The presented series is, in the spirit of Umberto Eco, a collective “open work”<sup>5</sup>, both in its potential and its necessity for continuation. Some topics still awaiting scholarly inquiry include the polemic surrounding Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *With Fire and Sword*, which stirred critics in the second half of the nineteenth century; the successive iterations of the debate on “incomprehensible poetry”, initiated in the interwar period and continued through the final decades of the twentieth century and into the first decade of the twenty-first by successive generations of poets. One might also cite the controversy dividing proponents of the “death of the novel” thesis from its staunch opponents, or the ongoing discourse on linguistic formalism, its scope, and its function. Further areas ripe for exploration include polemics concerning “settlement literature” and “reservational” or politically engaged writing, among many others. These themes still await their dedicated researchers, but future volumes of the *Polish Literary Criticism* series will undoubtedly, sooner or later, find their way into the hands of readers.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>5</sup> See Umberto Eco, *Dzieło otwarte: Forma i nieokreśloność w poetykach współczesnych* [Open text. Form and ambiguity in contemporary poetics], translated into Polish by Alina Kreisberg i in. (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2008).

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# KEYWORDS

17th-21st centuries

POLISH LITERATURE

**ABSTRACT:**

The history of literature is not only the history of literary texts, but also the history of critical-literary disputes and discussions, in which – following Dilthey’s conception – the meanings and interpretations of literary works are forged, and sequences of evolving aesthetics, poetological projects, and stylistic tensions take shape. This article presents the aims and outcomes of the research project *Critical Literary Polemics in Poland: Between Case Study and Literary History. Critical Editions*, conducted by a nationwide group of scholars at the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology in Poznań between 2017 and 2024. The project involved collecting, editing, and critically studying primary sources and publishing a series of monographic volumes devoted to individual polemics. As a result, unique corpora of texts – never before reconstructed in this form – were assembled, offering readers the opportunity to trace the dialogic nature of the exchanges that constitute each dispute. The monographs gathered in the series (thirty-six volumes to date) form a hypothetical “grand narrative” of the history of critical literary polemics in Poland. In doing so, they contribute to the broader story of one of the key dimensions of Polish literary and cultural life. This narrative includes episodes reaching back to the eighteenth century and continues through the nineteenth, twentieth, and into the early decades of the twenty-first century, thus encompassing a significant portion of the history of Polish literature.



# CRITICAL-LITERARY POLEMIC

*Polish Literary Criticism series*

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