

Volume 04

Cross-Roads.

Polish Studies in Culture,
Literary Theory, and History

Edited by Ryszard Nycz
and Teresa Walas

Grzegorz Grochowski/Ryszard Nycz
(eds.)

From Modern Theory to a Poetics of Experience

Polish Studies in Literary History and Theory

Introduction

Grzegorz Grochowski

This book constitutes an anthology of articles first published in the Polish bi-monthly periodical *Teksty Drugie* (literally, *Second Texts*), selected with a view to presenting the most significant and prominent scholarly trends and perspectives within Polish literary studies over recent decades. The journal itself came into existence in 1990, as a continuation of *Teksty* (*Texts*), a bimonthly published by the Institute for Literary Research at the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) from 1972 until 1981, when it was suspended during martial law and subsequently never reactivated. From its beginnings, *Teksty Drugie* has consistently upheld a principle of thematic and methodological openness (the journal's subtitle suggests its three main subject areas: *Literary Theory, Criticism, Interpretation*). In this way, it has not so much represented the voice of a specific movement, but rather provided a platform for discussion and the exchange of views. At the same time, the link with the earlier journal reflects a certain programmatic ambivalence combining aspects of continuity (signaled by the repetition of the title, *Teksty*) and change (suggested by the qualifying *Drugie*, or "second") – just as postmodernity preserves traces of modernity's postulates, and as poststructuralism represents not so much a critique as a development of certain structuralist assumptions.

The simple continuation of the earlier editorial strategy – which had involved experimentally testing the boundaries established by the dominant paradigm – was no longer feasible in the new circumstances. *Teksty Drugie* passed through its formative phase of development during a time of distinct and dynamic transformations within literary studies and the humanities as a whole. Among the central tendencies dictating the direction of these transformations, we might mention – among other things – a marked decline of interest in questions associated with the general program of modern literary theory. According to the prevailing view, this term denotes the field of scholarship embracing the study of literature's broad characteristics and the general principles of its development. As a broad discipline, it developed at the beginning of the twentieth century – mainly through such movements as phenomenology, formalism, New Criticism, and structuralism. Within the English-language humanities, the well-known *Theory of Literature* (1948) by René Wellek and Austin Warren (who placed themselves, respectively, within the traditions of Czech structuralism and American New Criticism) represents one of the most important, accessible and original attempts to present this type of

theory as a whole. Although their project at first met with a mixed response, it undoubtedly contributed to a general departure from the idiographic practice of “close reading” in favor of more abstract generalizations. It also helped to revive dialogue with the more speculatively inclined continental humanities.

In the 1960s and 1970s, theory triumphed as a form of reflection that would allow literary scholars – in accordance with the ethos of modernity – to go beyond the particularism of historical customs and expose the naivety of “common sense” readings. In this way, they would replace popular convictions with the expert opinions of professionals. However, from the latter stages of the twentieth century, similar projects began to shift into a more defensive mode, as the titles of various works from this period suggest: *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Stein Haugrum Olsen, *The End of Literary Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003). At the same time, we should remember that this departure from the primacy of systematic thought has remained an ambiguous process, opening paths in various different directions, often widely dispersed in time. Among the main inspirations for the anti-theoretical revolt, scholars frequently cite the rise of post-structuralism, which appeared at first as a kind of extravagance and then gradually attained broader resonance. However, this movement actually dates back to the end of the 1960s, when the earlier paradigm was at the height of its splendor. In fact, it was the last decade of the twentieth century which saw the greatest concentration of new tendencies and comprehensive revaluations, torn – we might say – between the projects of Wolfgang Iser (e.g.: *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* [1989]) and Stephen Greenblatt (e.g.: *Practicing New Historicism* [2000]), both of whom programmatically rejected the theoretical foundation in favor of cultural contextualization.

Since then we have witnessed the growth of numerous similar enterprises, various discussions about the consequences of these conspicuous shifts, as well as a gradual stabilization of the new configuration of sub-disciplines, movements, and approaches. At the same time, a modicum of uncertainty still remains as to whether this process has come to an end. Although the voices predicting the death of theory are presently in the majority, we cannot exclude the possibility that this assessment might turn out to be exaggerated or even premature with the benefit of future hindsight. Already certain authors have suggested a return to classificatory thought, pointing to the usefulness of conceptual generalizations. We should also remember those scholars who have always regarded the decline of theoretical enthusiasm as something transitory – a result of temporary disturbances rather than a final end to long-term processes. There are also those who argue that we cannot escape theory, since every reading implies certain general assumptions.

Nevertheless, we can probably accept without risk of contradiction even from the most vigorous defenders of scientism that the scientific theory of literature (along with the whole body of modern thought legitimizing it) has lost a great deal of its former epistemological momentum and professional prestige.

Yet as much as the process of departure from the modern model of the humanities is a universal and international phenomenon, the trend remains internally diverse, taking on different forms in various specific local conditions. The main determining factors in these transformations – including the pace and scope of innovation, the direction and intensity of polemical attacks, the extent of rapprochement with other disciplines – are outcomes both of global trends and of the specific traditions dominating in a given region (here we should consider not only academic doctrinal traditions, but also the influence of artistic, philosophical and cultural traditions).

The fact that the critique of modern theory emerged so early within the French humanities – often in alliance with psychoanalysis, thus giving birth to new forms of critical writing and the “eroticization” of rhetoric (in the writings of Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida) – was to a large extent a consequence of the poststructuralists’ anti-bourgeois attitude. Indeed, one of their primary artistic obsessions was the experience of surrealism, while the countercultural student revolt formed an important social context. We might also wonder whether the provocative gestures of deconstruction were not precisely a reaction to the dryness of French structuralism, which – in comparison with other movements (such as the Prague and Tartu schools) – distinguished itself by its scientific radicalism, focus on abstract universals, depersonalization of discourse, and a central striving towards the formalization of description.

In the American context, the strong position of authors representing philosophical pragmatism (Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, Richard Shusterman) and a tradition of utilitarian pedagogy favored concepts inspired by slogans of ethical criticism, often with a strongly ideological flavor. This tendency makes even more sense when we consider that the scientific status of critical works had never been treated with same emphasis in North America as within certain currents of continental thought. When we examine the interests of American scholars, we should also take into account the particular role played in American society by mass culture, which has tended to favor a gravitation toward cultural studies.

In Polish literary studies, the critique of the modern paradigm developed somewhat later and was adopted with reluctance and anxiety, often resulting in compromises intended merely to moderate the earlier theoretical rigors. A tangle of diverse factors determined the pace and direction of these transformations. Among the most general components, we might point to the Polish (or, more broadly, Eastern European) tradition of glorifying literature and the accompany-

ing faith in the vital importance of artistic achievements, which partly explains the resistance of many scholars to cultural studies. However, when examining the framework for academic discourse, we must also take into account the position of intellectual thought with respect to concrete realities (its disciplinary authority, contribution to collaboration between disciplines, participation in didactic work, access to organizational infrastructure, relation to artistic creation, and so on). Indeed, it would appear that in this particular geo-cultural space, literary theory has garnered a strong and stable position, preserving significantly more prestige than theoretical movements within the English-language or French humanities. At the risk of a certain exaggeration, we might treat theoretical discourse almost as a kind of regional attraction, a showpiece *spécialité de la maison*, marked from the beginning by local flavor. In fact, the authors of various genealogical analyses of theory would seem to lean towards this perspective. Galin Tihanov has become a standard bearer for this thesis, with his suggestive argument that modern literary theory arose in Central and Eastern Europe as a result of various overlapping cultural factors (see: Tihanov, Galin, “Why Did Modern Literary Theory Originate in Central and Eastern Europe? [And Why Is It Now Dead?],” *Common Knowledge* 10 [2004]). From this perspective, one can easily understand why theory preserved its status longer in the Eastern European humanities than elsewhere – as a form of reflection deeply woven into the fabric of local culture.

Clearly we should also ascribe some significance to the specific nature of the methodological tradition dominating this region. Polish structuralism – which bore the greatest affinity with the traditions of the Prague School, opening theory to questions of literature’s historical and social determinants – was far removed from the excesses of naive aestheticism or doctrinaire scientism. The main current of its investigations centered on a theory of literary communication, which broadened the possibilities of structural analysis with diverse inspirations from Mikhail Bakhtin’s cultural poetics to J. L. Austin’s pragmatics, thus demonstrating great assimilative capacity and a readiness to take up new themes. A good example of this flexibility lies in the question of intertextuality introduced by poststructuralism. The communicative theory efficiently paraphrased, adapted, and integrated this term into its own repertoire of earlier categories – much as Gérard Genette and Michael Riffaterre did. Accordingly, it makes sense that such a liberal understanding of theory – more interested in manifestations of the utterance’s subjective characteristics than in abstract textual algorithms – never provoked violent polemical responses or any calls for its immediate liquidation. Indeed, for a long time it met only with the mildest forms of opposition.

The interest exhibited towards particular trends in various places has also tended to correspond with the challenges springing from specific social and civilizational situations. If we assume that the increasingly anarchical gestures of the

French poststructuralists – with their emphasis on free individuality – were linked with an opposition to bourgeois uniformity, and if the dynamics of American cultural studies resulted from the practical dilemmas of a multicultural society, then in the Polish humanities the establishment of communicative pacts and contracts acquired the status of an ethical critique aimed at a language that had been appropriated by the authorities (this is confirmed by the various analytical works examining propaganda, manipulation and “newspeak”). The need for faith in an objective order was felt intensely and widely enough that any tendencies close to poststructuralist skepticism or “cultural” criticism had little chance of success. A similar desire to evade any external dictates led in very different situations to entirely contradictory solutions. While many Western scholars attempted to undermine the autonomous status of artistic creation in order to liberate it from the control of “experts” and free it from the ghetto of aestheticism, the experience of communism in Poland fostered a sense of ideological instrumentalization as an imminent threat. Therefore, Polish scholars continued to emphasize the autonomy of literature (thus prolonging the vitality of theoretical interests based on this assumption).

This distinction points us towards the broader context, allowing us to examine the more general dimensions of the question. For if we assume that changes in the humanities do not take place in a civilizational vacuum, then we should emphasize that in Eastern Europe the postwar processes of modernization unfolded painfully slowly, inhibited by constant struggles with a shortage of tools, resources and skills, usually bringing only partial success. There were few firsthand opportunities to become convinced of the pathology, alienation and reification supposedly inherent in modern functionalism. The critique of modernity itself did not seem to be an immediate need. Subsequently, the political, social, and cultural changes beginning in Poland at the end of the 1980s drew their dynamic power precisely from a local sense of dissatisfaction based to a large extent on references to a modernizing rhetoric that favored the prolongation of the older paradigm’s vitality. The limited access to many foreign works – which closed off any possibility of reference to certain ideas, positions, and arguments – also contributed to shifts in the chronology of the various epistemological turns.

Consequently, it is no surprise that when the need for reorientation emerged, the changes began to take place at an accelerated pace. The subsequent overlapping of various themes, perspectives and concepts – with entirely different origins and springing from disparate historical situations – represents a crucial consequence of this de-synchronization. Scholars close to Habermas’ view of modernism as an “unfinished project” have continued to participate actively in academic debates (indeed, they may be more strongly represented in Poland than in other parts of the world). At the same time, authors alluding to the slogans of poststruc-

turalism have not ceased to critique modern theory as the curse of contemporary thought – as if it still posed a genuine challenge. Meanwhile, supporters of the most recent tendencies have announced the need to rebuild the discipline, supposedly devastated long ago by the deconstructionists. At other times they are more generous, treating poststructuralism merely as a venerable tradition. Such confusion – which has plagued the humanities for some time now – is evident everywhere. Here it includes an additional complication in the accumulation and interpenetration of different temporal planes.

Irrespective of any historical baggage, it is difficult to capture the dominant trend in the endeavors described above – somewhat evasively – as “the most recent tendencies.” In a space liberated from the rigors of theory, no new paradigm has consolidated its position. Instead, one partial program or local project after another has emerged: New Historicism, geopoetics, somatoaesthetics, ethical criticism, gender studies, postcolonial studies, post-humanism, post-Marxism, performatism, and so on. None of these orientations has acquired enough of an advantage to mark out any overarching direction of research or to stabilize a new “disciplinary matrix” (as Thomas Kuhn defines it). We have become accustomed to eclecticism as the dominant attitude and to polymorphism as the universal form of research. At the same time, we may still seek out certain common themes or broader tendencies allowing for a more general orientation in the thicket of multiplying movements. Scholars have proposed such generalizations on more than one occasion. In such cases, any general outline of new directions is often provided by anthropological references or by situating the object within broader cultural contexts. This trend has even inclined many authors to speak of an anthropological or cultural turn.

Another popular motif within the contemporary humanities is the concept of “experience,” which scholars have adapted and used within various different methodologies, sub-disciplines and scholarly movements. For instance, this category has come to occupy a central place within the cognitivist philosophy of language, as the basis for the ordering of textual phenomena. It also holds crucial significance for pragmatism, which has developed its critique of epistemology around the concept. Studies on affect, corporeality, empathy, memory, the senses and agency have also referred – though in different modes – to various other questions raised by the term. As further evidence of its enormous popularity, we might point to the wave of interest in the question of “limit experiences” – both in the context of practices within liminal anthropology (Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault) and in reflections on the experience of the Holocaust, the manifestation of trauma and the dilemmas of witness testimony. Finally, most of the philosophies promoting the ethical primacy of “Otherness” (from Emmanuel Levinas to Maurice Blanchot) have treated reading as a peculiar form of experience.

The specific instantiations, interpretations, and applications of this concept differ significantly. Nevertheless, we can point to several general convictions held above any narrow doctrinal divisions. These beliefs define the broader trend in current methods for studying the humanities. Above all, the category of experience usually suggests an integral understanding of reading as a tangle of cognitive, affective, volitional, ideological and autobiographical elements. This approach opposes any abstract model of knowledge reduced to mere processes of decoding and combining meanings. It also suggests the inevitable importance of perspectivist factors and the need for personal authentication of knowledge, which must be rooted in an existential context rather than in the professional neutrality of the expert. Finally, this model does not view the act of encountering a text as a process of assimilating meanings and bringing them into the realm of the reader's cognitive reserves, but rather as a risky adventure that may result in the destabilization of the subject's previous identity.

In this anthology, we treat this very understanding as the intellectual antithesis of modern theory – thus providing a focus for many disparate initiatives – but also as a compositional limitation shaping the volume. The various forms of anthropological and cultural research (including cultural studies, poetics of culture, cultural theory of literature, literary anthropology, anthropological poetics, and so on) remain ambiguous, since they combine elements of both continuity and change – sometimes even creating the impression of direct reference to the semiotic tradition. Yet the “poetics of experience” (here I broaden the range of Ryszard Nycz's original phrase) provides a convenient reference point for a transparent polarization of positions – at least with respect to its clearly anti-scientistic, inventive and transgressive dimensions. Moreover, we may link it with research into cultural systems, though – unlike this area of study – it also opens the possibility of research focused purely on the idiomatic, inimitable and singular nature of the literary event (in a similar way to the arguments presented in Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* or Timothy Clark's *Poetics of Singularity*).

Accordingly, we may understand the popular “from. . . to . . .” formula used in the title of this volume in two ways: 1) as an indication of the direction of factual shifts in research trends and conditions; 2) as a description of the field of the developing conflict and the broad range of known positions. At the same time, the use of this term does not imply any acceptance of a dogmatically progressivist attitude. Although it provides a measure of the dominant tendencies, it does not necessitate the constraints of any final solutions. We can never entirely exclude the possibility that currently marginalized positions and arguments may regain their appeal in the future and return in revitalized form.

Through the selection and arrangement of the texts included in this volume, we have attempted to convey – at least roughly – the multiplicity of themes and

the dynamic nature of this debate over the course of time. The perspective of modern theoretical thought finds expression here above all in Janusz Sławiński's piece, "What Remains of Structuralism?", which includes a succinct, though suggestive recapitulation and encomium on the achievements of this movement (of which Sławiński himself is a leading representative). Another perspective close to the modern scientific model appears in the works of Włodzimierz Bolecki ("Questions on the Subject of Literary Studies"), who defends the distinct identity of the discipline and the methodological rigor of its analysis. At the same time, he issues a negative appraisal of new trends interested in the study of social and cultural contexts. Danuta Ulicka ("On the Epistemological Function of Literature and Literary Studies") also defends the earlier paradigm, though – unlike Bolecki – she does not attempt to protect literary studies from the consequences of the social turn. Instead, she endeavors to demonstrate – against the popular view – that anthropological reflections have permeated modern theory from its very beginning. We might also situate Michał Głowiński's piece ("Literary Studies and Cultural Studies") in a similar area. Like Sławiński, he is one of the founders of Polish structuralism. Like Bolecki, he raises the question of the relation between literary studies and various fields associated with cultural studies. However, in Głowiński's case, upholding the modern model of the discipline goes hand in hand with a positive attitude towards the new impulses coming from cultural studies. This allows us to place his thought slightly closer to the competing tradition's field of interests.

At the other extreme, we find works programmatically rejecting the axiom of textual autonomy in favor of research into literature's cultural entanglements. Anna Burzyńska discusses the main premises of this turn, while almost playing the role of liquidator of the structuralist method ("Does Literary Theory Still Exist?"). Whereas her argument still largely involves a strategy of dismantling the previous paradigm, Michał Paweł Markowski's article ("Economy and Representation") represents a positive and programmatic proposal for a new direction in scholarship. Markowski introduces specific descriptive categories and sketches out a general typology of artistic strategies, while simultaneously placing the question of literature in the broader context of social and cultural practices.

A complete departure from modern scientism towards similar contextualizations is also evident within another group of texts, which examine selected questions from the domains of comparative literature (Andrzej Hejmej, "Comparative Cultural Studies: Interpretation and Existence"), geopoetics (Małgorzata Czermińska, "Places of Biography: A Geopoetic Proposition" and Elżbieta Rybicka, "From a Poetics of Space to a Politics of Place: The Topographical Turn in Literary Studies"), postcolonial criticism (Dariusz Skórczewski, "Postcolonial Poland: An [Im]possible Project"), and somatic studies (Anna Łebkowska, "How

to Embody the Body: On a Dilemma of Somatopoetics”). It is worth noting that – within their respective areas – these articles also represent attitudes that bear a strong affinity with reflections on experience (against the perspective of radical constructivism), since they strongly emphasize themes of the individuality of experience, personal responsibility, particular limitations and the local character of context (by drawing our attention to *autobiographical* places, by seeking the *corporeality* of the body beyond abstract schemes, and by drawing out comparative parallels from the entanglement of *interpretation* and *existence*).

The remaining articles essentially fall somewhere between the two opposing tendencies. Some of them combine these tendencies, others endeavor to work out a compromise, while still others attempt to reformulate the earlier model. Edward Balcerzan (“The Mono- and Bi(multi)lingualism of Literary ‘Worlds’”) elucidates the peculiar features of literary works that go beyond the boundaries of a single language, before concluding that none of the traditional sub-fields of literary studies are ready to deal with this issue. Dariusz Śnieżko (“The Written and Spoken Word: History and Literature”) takes up questions associated with the traditional study of literary history, though he problematizes them in a similar manner to the methods of cultural anthropology. Danuta Szajnert raises the classic question of “intention,” which has long been a canonical *topos* of literary theory, though she shifts the center of gravity from epistemological analysis to a discussion of ethical demands (“Intention Versus Invention: An Ethical Dilemma?”). Grzegorz Grochowski (“Images in Texts: Iconic Signs in Multi-Code Text Structures”) makes allusions to semiotic theory, though he largely utilizes asystematic proposals taken from pragmatism (represented here by Charles Sanders Peirce) on account of their practical usefulness in the study of syncretic prose forms. Stanisław Balbus’s article (“The Extinction of Species”) represents the clearest example of a similar shift. Balbus discusses the problem of “species” (or genre), which plays an important role in the modern project of scientific literary studies. At the same time, he reinterprets this problem through original intertextual and hermeneutic concepts.

Other authors argue that a meaningful equilibrium between the opposing tendencies is possible. Here we might point to at least two examples. When Zdzisław Łapiński (“Fictional v. Lyric Identity”) demonstrates the various strategies of writerly self-creation through selected examples, he embroiders his argument with erudite cultural references, a modern theoretician’s professional analysis of poetic language, and discussions of (auto)biographical testimonies characterized by both literary gusto and personal engagement. A somewhat different dynamic defines the reflections of Jan Kordys (“Language, the Brain, Ecstatic Religious States, and Artistic Output”), who adopts the perspective of neurosemiotics – the discipline perhaps closest to the pole of scientism – with certain anthropological

elaborations in order to reach subtle interpretive reflections on the mystery of sacred experience in the prose of Pascal and Dostoevsky.

Ryszard Nycz – from whom we have taken the anthology’s title (“From Modern Theory to a Poetics of Experience”) – contributes a panoramic overview of all these tendencies. Nevertheless, we should remember that Nycz himself is an important initiator of the cultural turn within Polish literary studies, the author of numerous works on the poststructuralist tradition, an advocate of strategies of “weak professionalism,” and also the creator of a concept defined as the “poetics of experience.” Therefore, we may (and should) recognize in his arguments not only a dry reconstruction of general methodological transformations, but also a programmatic manifesto and original research blueprint with great potential for further development.

At the same time, we have included a selection of short texts by Janusz Sławiński in a less formal register than his abovementioned defense of structuralism. These represent notes extracted from a private notebook, certain sections of which he published in *Teksty Drugie* in the form of a regular column entitled “No Assignment.” These pieces elucidate selected tendencies and phenomena (including the success of intertextuality, the turn away from systemic linguistics towards a theory of the utterance, and the status of truth in the humanities) from the perspective of a former structuralist authority, while still preserving a relaxed tone, free of any doctrinal or programmatic commitments. Indeed, we may read this cycle as a fragmentary story, paralleling Nycz’s argument in a certain sense, but developed from a very different position. This counterpoint of voices – featuring a leading representative of modern theory and an initiator of the postmodern turn (who also happen to be, respectively, a former editor of *Teksty* and the current editor of *Teksty Drugie*) – allows us to exhibit the diversity of attitudes, strategies and positions with particular clarity, while encouraging the reader to reflect independently on the dilemmas presented throughout this collection.