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Where are my Limits? Postcolonialism in Literature.

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The notion of postcolonialism has been embraced gradually and with a certain degree of reluctance by the Polish humanities. This reluctance could be partially explained as resulting from the period of totalitarian stagnation, but there were other reasons as well. Assimilation of postcolonial theories required a full immersion in successive layers of Polish cultural consciousness, a questioning of traditionally defined identity, a reevaluation of stagnant perceptions of nationality, and a stance toward the new processes of globalization. All those phenomena could have settled in the Polish collective consciousness only after the fall of Communism. In the same period, however, Western criticism welcomed several critical works showing clearly that the postcolonial worldview itself has expanded beyond its initial, historical sense and in its scope can now refer to all forms of domination, locating itself within the broad current of contemporary social and cultural thought.¹

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1 B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Routledge, London-New York 1989; G. Spivak *The Post-Colonial Critic. Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Routledge, London 1990; H. K. Bhabha *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London 1994. Those seminal works were, of course, preceded and inspired by E. W. Said's *Orientalism* (New York 1978), translated to Polish as late as 1991.

Today, the impact of those works on the development of Polish critical thought seems unquestionable. However, as the boundaries of the notion expanded, the chances to formulate its single and precise definition shrunk accordingly. Postcolonialism did not create a closed system, and it could not have created one, as from the very beginning it denoted, first and foremost, a state of consciousness that reveals itself only in particular situations and circumstances.

Those few observations may help realize the numerous difficulties spawning with application of postcolonial perspective in Polish cultural research, however, one cannot negate the role that the “decolonialization of thought”² plays today in all branches of the humanities, from history and social philosophy to art and literature.

The breakthrough (no longer political but cultural), came with the work of Ewa Thompson.³ Referring directly to Said’s *Orientalism*, Thompson focuses on Polish national stereotypes and conducts a thorough reassessment of their historical determinants. Discussions accompanying the process, however, were symptomatic of a series of deeper developments that have pervaded Polish society since the dawn of the post-totalitarian era. In fact, one could view contemporary reflection on nationality, Polocentrism, multiculturalism, racism, ethnocentrism as the determining factors of the specifically Polish postcolonial consciousness that continued to spawn new ideas (I purposefully leave out the questions of gender as a separate domain). Insightful works by W. J. Burszta, A. Fiut, R. Nycz and M. Janion,⁴ illustrative for the processes of “decolonization” of literature, were followed by a debate over the method. Bogusław Bakuła⁵ wisely emphasized the need to investigate the colonial language, while Włodzimierz Bolecki⁶ was equally right to call for an

2 Expression used by D. Kołodziejczyk in “Trawerssem przez glob: studia postkolonialne i teoria globalizacji.” *Er(r)go* 2004 Vol. 1 (8), 22.

3 E. Thompson “Nacjonalizm, kolonizacja, tożsamość.” *Teksty Drugie* 1999 Vol. 5; *Trubadurzy Imperium. Literatura rosyjska i kolonializm* Universitas, Kraków 2001; „Sarmatyzm i postkolonializm, o naturze polskich resentymentów. *Europa-Tygodnik Idei* 2006 Vol. 46; „Said a sprawa polska” *Europa-Tygodnik Idei* 2006 Vol. 26.

4 W. J. Burszta „Postkolonializm i dekolonizacja umysłu” *Różnica, tożsamość, edukacja. Szkice z pogranicza*. T. Szkuclarek (ed.) Impuls, Kraków 1995; . Fiut *Spotkanie z Innym*. Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2003; R. Nycz „Každy z nas jest przybyszem. Wzory tożsamości w literaturze polskiej XX wieku.” *Teksty Drugie* 1999 Vol. 5; M. Janion *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2007.

5 B. Bakuła. “Kolonialne i postkolonialne aspekty dyskursu kresoznawczego (zarys problematyki)” *Teksty Drugie* 2006 Vol. 6.

6 W. Bolecki „Myśli różne o postkolonializmie” *Teksty Drugie* 2007 Vol. 4; see also: G. Borkowska „Polskie doświadczenie kolonialne.” *Ibid.*

investigation of the “(post)colonial topics” that would go beyond “mechanical copying” of the Western patterns and read with the help of post-colonial filter also Polish classics. Critical attention focused on the fluidity of the border between the oppressor and the victim, the familiar and the strange, the center and the periphery. Each of these concepts, resurfacing repeatedly and sometimes seemingly unconsciously in scholarly analyses (no longer directly tied to American criticism), became an expression of a new sensitivity, one that could be seen (following, in fact, Said’s wish) as a new form of contemporary humanism.

Still, a glance at particular situations suffices to realize that the matter at hand is highly complex, not devoid of self-contradictions and paradoxes tied, despite the appearances, not only to the geopolitical context or a specific ideology, but to the general processes of globalization whose affinity to the postcolonial phenomena will probably serve as a basis of many further reflections.⁷

My analysis concerns a more neutral domain – literature understood as an immanent value and yet, subject to the same selection and hierarchization as national, ethnic, and sexual groups. This, in the Polish context, entails the following question: how does the postcolonial consciousness influence or potentially influence the status of Polish literature within the European – Western – and world literature?

From universalism to geocriticism

One could comment without the risk of exaggeration that literary studies in general and the comparative approach in particular have undergone a revolutionary change, one that has largely relativized traditional notions of the literary canon. Until quite recently, comparative studies assumed as a point of reference the notion of world literature (*Weltliteratur*) which from the day of Goethe served as a universal model for the literary tradition of Western Europe. And it was not that long ago that the great French comparatist, René Etiemble⁸, defended universalism as a set of constant values (invariants) in the name of the principle of primal and essentialist uniqueness of the human being:

7 D. Kołodziejczyk *Trawerses przez...*; E. Domańska *Historie niekonwencjonalne. Refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2006; D. Skórczewski „Postkolonialna Polska – projekt (nie)możliwy” *Teksty Drugie* 2006 Vol. 1/2.

8 A. Marino “Entiembles, les “invariants” et la littérature compare.” *Le Mythe d’Entiembles; hommages, études et recherches*, Didier Erudition, Paris 1979.

there is one human being, and so there exists only one literature. Consequently, there is nothing surprising about the fact that the same motifs, images and forms are found in the literatures most distant in terms of time and space⁹

Today, this deeply humanist image of literature struggles to fend off allegations from the postcolonial criticism undermining the principle of selection whose criteria had been so far established at the expense of that which is particular, specific and local.¹⁰ At times, the critique of universalism takes the form of indictment, revealing a sense of guilt. A few years ago, A. Finkelkraut published a telling work on the ingratitude toward cultural heritage that concerns also Eastern Europe,¹¹ and today it is a subject that resonates deeply with the comparativists. Accusations culminate with the charge of European cultural imperialism which seems to result in an unambiguous conclusion that cultures previously deemed secondary could only be compensated with a complete relativization of universal values. Consequently, the theory of invariants that assumes an atemporal stability, is juxtaposed against an image of humanity immersed in historical reality and the border of the familiar and the strange that for many decades has served as the axis of all comparative studies becomes annulled. In the postcolonial perspective the very notion of the exotic reveals itself to be nothing else than another sign of European hegemony. There are also attempts to conciliate between the traditional values and globalizing socio-economic and cultural processes. Those entail dangers that alarmed Auerbach already in the 50s when he made predictions about the standardization of lifestyle and irreversible reduction of languages and cultures, which in consequence, undermined also the point of comparative studies as such.¹² Half a century later, alluding to Auerbach, Didier Coste asks: "can the thought of globalization (of literature, culture) be anything else than a globalized thought?"¹³ I shall return to those aporias further in my essay. For now, let it be emphasized that they have already become the subject of several works raising the problem of the aim of contemporary comparative studies, or – to be more precise – the problem of how comparative studies are to be

9 M. Détrie "Connaissions-nous Etiemble? *Revue de Littérature Comparée* Vol. 295 July–September 2000. 421.

10 D. Coste "Les universaux face à la mondialisation: une aporie comparatiste? *Vox Poetica* 21.05.2006. <http://vox-poetica.org/sfglc/biblio/coste.html>

11 A. Finkelkraut *L'Ingratitude, conversation sur notre temps* Gallimard, Paris 1999.

12 E. Auerbach *Philology and Weltliteratur* [1952] cf. M. and E. Said, *Centennial Review* XI.1 (1969). 3.

13 D. Coste "Les universaux..."

approached when, as a result of a general disappearance of differences, one will soon have trouble knowing what is to be compared to what.

One must wonder, if there is still a continuity between the great works of Spitzer, Curtius and Auerbach, who many years before the postcolonial breakthrough exceeded the range of philological binarism, preferring to research cultural topics that build the greater picture of European culture. An answer, even if an incomplete one, is supplied by the field of intertextual research, which itself is not devoid of paradoxes. On the one hand, intertextual approach strengthens and deepens the epistemological knowledge of the work and its cultural ties to what is beyond the canon, placing it at the same within a network of determinants that weaken the work's ontological status. One could nonetheless agree with Ryszard Nycz that the unavoidable "dependence" of the work that reveals itself in intertextual research ensures its "participation in the world of art as well as in the contemporary world of human experience."¹⁴

Such understood intertextuality is very close to what Bourdieu refers to as "denationalization" of literary text, and seems even closer the notion of deterritorialization as used by Bertrand Westphal when he discusses Deleuze in his geocritical writings.¹⁵ The similarity of these notions originates in the act of leaving the stereotype that Deleuze sees as remaining within a given space.¹⁶ Deterritorialization understood as an intertextual act allows to abandon a conceptual framework where particular hierarchical order remains closely connected to localization (*Ordnung/Ortung*).¹⁷ Instead, Westphal proposes to create a new "cartography of imagination" that would delocalize representation of the world. Or, in other words, tear it out of its stagnant state. Such representation contains no division into national spaces; geographical boundaries disappear as well, there is no split between the own and the strange space, as they exist simultaneously in a multiplied gaze that refers at the same time to several perspectives, to observations and experiences that correct each other. Emphasis is placed not on separate cultures but on the connections, relations, and passages that reveal surprising parallelisms of plots, motifs, and phenomena whose existence had not been noted by primary research before. Westphal takes interest, for instance, in the peripheral Europe, but not in its nations. Instead of Poland, Czech,

14 R. Nycz "Poetyka intertekstualna, tradycje i perspektywy." *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy*. M. P. Markowski, R. Nycz (eds.) Universitas, Kraków 2006.

15 B. Westphal *La Géocritique, reel, fiction, espace*. Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 2007.

16 Ibid. See also: G. Deleuze, F. Guattari. *AMille plateau*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 1980.

17 B. Westphal *La Géocritique...* 235.

or Ukraine, he writes about Galicia and Bukovina as cultural systems that exist beyond all geopolitical connections. From Polish literature he quotes Stasiuk's *Moja Europa* [My Europe] and Andruchowicz as perfect examples of the cultural disequilibrium that he views as particularly interesting.

This new perspective resurfaces also in the Polish research where literature itself enforces a re-evaluation of literary canons. Ahistoricity and acculturation as well as the influence of the media weaken the interest in the old culture, which in turn influences the disappearance of diachronicity. The past presents itself as a museum, through incidental evocations, while linear history is consciously rejected. Those phenomena resonate immediately within the realm of literature and its reception, the latter reaffirming the need for writing no longer fully national but rather one that chooses a changeable "touristic" overview of literatures viewed so far as marginal. This is confirmed by the reception of Polish literature in the West, where prominence is given to the translations of Stasiuk, Tokarczuk, Huelle, and Bieńczyk, in other words, to the representatives of minority cultures, lower, peripheral and meeting the expectations of the West.

Interest in otherness is a necessary condition for the disappearance of the differences between the center and the periphery; it sets new goals for literature, claims Westphal, seeing in intertextuality a chance to move beyond the quiescence of one cultural space. It is an optimistic approach, especially considering the fact that until recently, Polish literature was marked by the complex of a periphery and resentment notable in Miłosz, Konwicki, Rymkiewicz, and Zagajewski. Today, in his discussions of Polocentrism, Luigi Marinelli expresses the wish for the notions of the "center" and "peripheries" to become "fully relative and interchangeable" in humanities and historical-literary studies, recalling Kristeva's famous appeal to be "strangers to ourselves"¹⁸ while the first part of Maria Janion's *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna* bears the telling title: *Sami sobie cudzy*¹⁹ [Other to Ourselves]; facts like these vividly illustrate the enormous breakthrough in the process of nullifying cultural hierarchies that has begun to seep into the collective consciousness.

One would present, however, an incomplete picture of the current situation if one failed to discuss the numerous misunderstandings and the previously mentioned aporias.

18 *Polonistyka w przebudowie, literaturoznawstwo, wiedza o języku, wiedza o kulturze, edukacja.* Materials from the Polish Studies convention (Kraków, 22-25 September 2004) edited by M. Czermińska, S. Gajda, A. Legożyńska, A.Z. Makowiecki, R. Nycz. Universitas, Kraków 2005 Vol.2. 206.

19 M. Janion *Niesamowita...* 5.

The trouble with otherness

While there is no doubt that the growing interest in the cultures of national and ethnic minorities can be regarded as one of the most positive consequences of the postcolonial pursuit, we must not forget that the period of political division of Europe into the Western and Eastern part strengthened for years historical cultural oppositions that are yet to be fully overcome. Exchanges between cultures are governed by new laws that nonetheless are not very different from the old ones. This leads to several questions: how to negotiate between the Polish presence in Europe and Eurocentrism? Is the triumph of finding our place in Europe, in fact, a Pyrrhic victory? Finally, a fundamental question: to what extent does the postcolonial consciousness, which in itself is an ethical and deeply humanistic value, melt with the processes of globalized “neutering” and, further, can those processes be avoided? The answer is not easy. While the notion of *Weltliteratur* became an anachronism, the dream of a global village is, in fact, a return to universalism, this time grounded not as much in common values but in a mechanical pursuit of homogenization.

Moreover, today, is there any point of view that can claim primacy? When colonial rule ended, many other things were discredited along with it: the domination of one civilization, one color, and one religion over all others and, in the same way, the domination of one sex over another or of one sexuality over others. The hour has come of the copresence of diversity, but now in the silence of God.²⁰

This is the core of the misunderstanding at hand: absence of a unifying collective norm replaced by “heterarchy” (to quote Douglas Hofstadter), in other words, by a desacralized hierarchy where all ideas of priority have evanesced.²¹ At the same time, as mentioned before, postcolonial consciousness converges from the very beginning with the search for not only collective but also individual identities. It is not without importance that Levinas’s name reappears even in the works discussing geopolitical spaces (Thompson, Westphal). Cultural difference and subjective identity are inseparable.

If we view the postcolonial phenomena from this perspective, it becomes clear how the process of broadening the geographic-cultural horizons may be perceived in negative terms, as a process of absorbing the Other. A complete integration, stresses Dominique Quessada in the treatise on “othercide,”²²

20 B. Westphal *La Géocritique...* 14, [based on the English translation by Robert T. Tally].

21 D. Hofstadter *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, Basic Books, NY 1979 after Westphal, *ibid*.

22 D. Quessada *Court traité d’altercide*, Verticales, Paris 2007.

is the most radical form of exclusion. In a society where all difference has been made void, and there are no dialectical relations between the master and the slave, the inside and the outside, between what is of me and what is strange, the Other, while not rejected, is swallowed, digested, and assimilated. This dissolving of the Other becomes a new form of colonization, multiplied, anarchistic, irrational, resulting in an "autistic culture" while the connection between postcolonialism and the processes of globalization reveals itself as "fake altruism."²³

A way out of this deadlock can only be found via a clear distinction between the postcolonial consciousness and the globalizing phenomena, accounting for the fact that the latter refer to processes imposing themselves from the outside and concerning entire humankind, while postcolonial consciousness shows itself through confrontation with the Other not only in the collective but also in the individual dimension.

Where are my limits?

I will allow myself a digression now, foreshadowed by the title of my essay. It is a line from Białoszewski's "Autoportrait as felt"²⁴ and a perfect illustration of the existential disequilibrium that will serve as a point of reference for further reflection. What limits exactly did Białoszewski have in mind? Definitely not the limits of self-determination ("Of all the faces known / I remember least my own.") Self-determination is impossible without the intervention of the Other ("They look at me / so probably I have a face").

I refer to Białoszewski because the subjective space that the poet mentions grows especially important in the encounter with postcolonial humanism. The question of boundaries of subjectivity revealing themselves in the relation with the Other have intrigued both pragmatists and phenomenologists long before the emergence of postcolonial theory. "I am as others see me" Sartre argues in *Saint Genet* and his essay on Jews.²⁵ Sartre emphasizes the relationship between Self and Other from the outside (similarly to Gombrowicz). The shift inwards takes place later, in Levinas. The connection is not only spiritual. The physical tangibility of the contact is important. Corporeality, as we know, is an inherent part of identity. Ricoeur aptly notes that identity consists of

23 Cf. J. Baudrillard *Le crime parfait*, Galilée, Paris 1995; after Lydia Salvayre's presentation at Journée des écrivains du Sud. Aix-en-Provence (28-30 March 2008).

24 Transl. by Czesław Miłosz [AW].

25 J. P. Sartre *Réflexions sur la question juive* [1946] *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, Gallimard, 1969.

more than external factors such as *habitus*, social roles and character traits, it also consists of anchoring in one's own body. The body, in turn, is a frame of identification that reveals itself in encounters with the Other. It is a boundary separating me from the Other but at the same time a bridge between the intimate and the external world,²⁶ between the familiar and the strange. But Ricoeur the phenomenologist goes even further, moving towards anthropology: my body can exist among others only after I acknowledge my otherness among the others. This concretization (embodiment) of the Self-Other relation reverts Husserl's principle of seeing otherness as a second "self" or a shadow of my "self" (as noted already by Homi Bhabha²⁷). In Ricoeur, the opposite happens – the Other makes me aware of my own Otherness.²⁸

Taking all of this into account, let us go back to literature. If we treat literary work as an encounter with the Other, each act of reading is a comparative act that can be understood on several planes. In the classical sense, it is an encounter with the Other that is an extension of one's own sphere of psyche, a truism these days. The matter looks differently when a given work is viewed from the perspective of cultural studies. It becomes a space where my subjectivity can meet the subjectivity of the author but only inasmuch as our cultural horizons cross. This, of course, has nothing to do with political or religious beliefs, nor with my or the author's inborn sensitivity. Native works, located within my cultural horizons, can be ideologically opposed to my views but this does not evoke in me a sense of strangeness. (I may disagree with Kuśniewicz's *Mieszaniny obyczajowe* but I cannot resist the pleasure of interacting with the substance of the text located within my cultural isotopy.) It takes an outside look at Polish literature to discover that Konwicki's novels are more metaphysical than they are political, that Kuśniewicz as a writer is more European than Polish and that the messianistic historiosophy of *Dziady* can be radically strange to a Western recipient. For a complete evaluation of a work or literature I need a confrontation with the otherness of the text but also with the otherness of the recipient. This requires more than aesthetics of reception: an in-depth confrontation referring not only to views, ideologies, stereotypes, but also to corporeality as a space of experience and sensation.

Emphasizing the role of corporeality in the subject's encounter with otherness helps to avoid the hypocrisy of "fake altruism" – it is not the Other who

26 P. Ricoeur *Soi-même comme un autre*, Editions du Seuil. Points Essais, Paris 1990. 372.

27 A. Burzyska, M. P. Markowski *Teoria literaturyXXX wieku*, Znak, Kraków 2007. 558.

28 Contrary to Kristeva (*Etranges à nous-memes* [1988] Gallimard folio/essays, 1991), who searches for the sources of otherness in the layers of the Unconscious, Ricoeur bases his proposal on cultural anthropology and phenomenology.

needs me, it is me who needs the Other! The Other, removed from me in time and space, becomes a measure of my distance. If a literary text evokes my approval or outrage or distaste, those feelings are not only directed at the sender but also influence my identity as a receiver. What I have in mind here is no longer simple tropism in the form of phantasms or a mirrored self but rather its cultural envelope. In this perspective, the confrontation with the Other leads not to an annihilation of otherness but to the evening out of differences in the crossing of views on what is distant and open.

This is what Gadamer means when he writes about the “fusion of horizons” as a principle of the dialectic of participation and otherness.²⁹ It is an attempt at mutual understanding that will never be complete as the very act of understanding is always an understanding of a certain otherness. Awareness of this truth is at the same time a confirmation of the existence of the boundary between myself and the Other, a boundary that is my own horizon, without which my “I” could not exceed its limit. An act of reading as an act of comparison understood on several planes boils down to interaction and as such can never be definitive as it is a part of the process of socialization that exceeds the frame of a single culture.

Concluding remarks

“Where are my limits?” is a question without a single answer. Each is only partial, insufficient, incomplete, anchored in time that is only my own, time that I cannot share with anyone even if we share the common space of some sort of a mythical “pre-age.” This broad parable by Olga Tokarczuk could serve as a motto for further comparativist reflection in Polish studies, complementing the proposals put forward by Westphal who bases his geocritical argument on spatiotemporality. Westphal refers to Jauss’s beautiful astral metaphor that is worth citing here as well:

Just as looking at the stars in the sky gives an impression of their simultaneous existence and only the work of an astronomer reveals their temporal distance, so does the contemporary critic of literature grasp from the cultural archipelago particular places – islands, investigating their temporal distance, fully aware that Otherness means simply being in a different time.³⁰

29 See P. Ricoeur *Język, tekst, interpretacja. Wybór pism*. Transl. P. Graff, K. Rosner, PIW, Warszawa 1989; K. Rosner *Gadamerowska koncepcja doświadczenia hermeneutycznego* and *Gadamerowskie rozumienie języka, ibidem.*, *Hermeneutyka jako krytyka kultury*. Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, PIW, Warszawa 1991.

30 B. Westphal *La Géocritique...* 226. [transl. AW]

The recognition of otherness is one of the most important achievements of contemporary literary and cultural criticism. But it is not free of its own problems. The notion that literature is an act of going beyond the boundaries of my own cultural space (not because it is a negative space but because the Ego cannot fulfill itself in enclosure) has already become an obvious truth.³¹ Literature sets us free from ourselves. The role of the critic is, thus, is to perform a cross-cultural jump that, in the words of Alexis Nouss, a renown researcher of the processes of metisization,³² allows to “tear oneself away from oneself, challenge the laws of gravitation and soar.” Nouss adds: “Instead of a substrate, essence, we should propose otherness and becoming.”³³

Following Nouss’s reasoning one feels tempted to add that such a jump requires a trampoline to spring off the ground (and the ground itself should be understood not only as a particular geographical place.) Mobility becomes today an attribute of a multiplied identity that is no longer determined by its belonging to a given place but becomes increasingly a matter of choice. It is language, then, that remains – the ultimate determinant of identity, language understood not only as a mean of human communication, but also as a determinant of the vertical dimension of subjectivity. In the era of spatial shifts and cultural transformations, my “selfness” does not belong to my homeland, it is my homeland that is a part of myself.³⁴

The cultural dimension of literary research and its openness to otherness allow to see that my own world, the world that I accept, could just as well be entirely different. At the same time, however, investigative auto-reflexivity prevents excessive cultural syncretism where all cultures lose their specificity. Only by becoming aware of our own finiteness can we open ourselves up to the horizons of other cultures, not in order to appropriate them but to try and understand them.

Translation: Anna Warso

31 J.-T. Desanti. *Réflexions sur le temps, Conversations avec Dominique-Antoine Grisoni, Variations philosophiques* [1992], Librairie générale française, Paris 1997.

32 A. Nouss. *Plaidoyer pour un monde métis*, Textuel, Paris 2005. 29. See also: Y. Clavaron and B. Dieterle *Métissages littéraires*, Presses universitaires de Saint-Etienne 2005, Actes du Congrès de la SFLGC 2004.

33 *Ibid.*

34 R. Nycz mentions “settling in without putting down roots” (“Každy z nas jest przybyszem” *Teksty Drugie* 1995 Vol. 5. 51).