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Text v. Body

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Literature consists of texts, and texts consist of sentences and words. What ties them to the body? In theater studies, the problem of the body is related to the actor, materializing in the vibrations of voice and stage movement of the characters that actors lend their bodies to for the duration of the play. In literature, it is a more abstract matter: the body is presumed, imagined, phantasmal, described and expressed with words, moreover, rarely expressed aloud, since the time of oral literature has passed; it is read quietly. And yet, the body is present as a problem related to the fundamentals of human existence, as its most basic condition. Thus, the spectrum of issues relating to body is broad indeed, including sex, death, illness, love, lust and its varied forms, sport, beauty, disability, violence, shame, birth, adolescence, and aging. Or another list of notions, such as meat and food, hunger, and appetite. The presence of the body does not only mark itself thematically, intonation, accent and pace have their source in articulation, even gesture finds its place in a literary text – which we have known since the days of Russian Formalism. The act of reading itself is not exclusively spiritual, it may cause physical effects, including sexual arousal.

*The relationship between the spiritual and the carnal side of humanity is a complicated one. Dualism, strongly embedded in the European models, places on the one side text as a record of spiritual life, and matter on the other. Texts are related to thought, and closed. Roland Barthes used to say: *il n'y a pas dehors du texte*. And yet, there exists something outside the text, which seems inasmuch necessary as difficult to solve within a structural frame of reading. A turn to the body and to somatic readings is one of the poststructural elements of newer criticism.*

In Poland, the cultural background of the discussions on the matter always rests on the centuries old frame of the dualism of body and soul, firmly rooted in the Catholic tradition. The body should be subject to penance, and its desires restrained, so that the soul could be perfected and awarded through eternity. A verse from a 15th century folk lament: “The soul has left the body/ it stood in the meadow green” ascribes to the soul a separate, posthumous existence. A century later, Mikołaj Sep-Szarzyński, a distinguished poet, speaks in “Sonnet No 4” about “our war against Satan, the world and the body” calling the body “our home”

but also seeing in the senses the reason for our fall. As a result, according to Sep-Szarzyński, man lives in a state of constant internal struggle. He can never find peace, torn by contradictions in a tragic conflict between the spiritual longing for God and the low sphere of sensual desires. Only death and salvation can put this to an end. Although the tradition of dualism and the hierarchy ascribing superiority to the sphere of the spiritual, as well as the idea of one's relation to the body as a form of conflict, are still present in Polish social life, our newer literature views those themes rather as a challenge to avoid stereotypes and move beyond the dualism in an attempt to express the undivided entirety of man.

Interpreting literary texts involves reading them suspiciously, reading in a way that that often subverts the previous order of understanding. Thus, if Sep-Szarzyński's sonnet, one of the classical works of the Polish counter-reformation, used to be read primarily as a declaration of interest in metaphysics, one could reverse such reading and posit that what sustains the dramatic tension of the metaphysical turn is the constant resistance posed by the body. How burning must be the desire, if an unremitting war is to be waged on it! If the yearning to set oneself free from the tension results in such a strong adverse declaration, the body must have burned with the flame of lust. Establishing a hierarchy where the body is assigned the lower position and repressed is one of the unpleasant consequences of dualism, but literature reveals even that which is repressed and denied.

The notion of "body" is a common denominator for several different methods of interpretation that emerged from the encounter of poststructuralism and newer humanities. Theoretical impulses behind such readings are varied and include the writing of Michel Foucault, feminism and gender, gay, queer and transgender studies, as well as varied types of historical criticism that turned to materiality. In fact, literary studies are not always the main field for that kind of deliberation, however, it usually turns out that that literary criticism responds faster than other branches of humanities. Newer humanities witnessed a transition from the structural approaches, relying on textual terminology, toward notions such as experience, case study, affect, excess, and transgression. This is signaled by the sensitivity to discriminatory practices and a rejection of systems.

Texts and the Body

In the 1975 Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison), Michel Foucault insisted that the theme of the body is not a new one, it has been, for a long time now, the object of investigations performed by historians: in the form of demographic research, histories of disease, epidemics and famine. What was new in his approach, was the introduction of the notion of the body as a self-standing topic of political importance, disclosing the connection between power and knowledge, as well as the depth of those relations, while focusing on the ways of portraying human identity and the ways of understanding and treating the body. Foucault's last work, the unfinished The History of Sexuality, is a story of talking about sexuality, talking about the ways that sex is present in regulations, norms and guidelines, connections (or a lack thereof) between the themes such as pleasure, family, woman, man, boy. The French longue durée has shown that the areas covered by fundamental notions evolve and the body is subjected to constant repressions. A suspicious reading asks, whether the same is happening today.

Thus, on the one hand, we have textual research revealing a theme present in the discourse and consistently repressed, negated and depreciated; on the other hand, literary texts that openly or indirectly subvert the stereotypes. It is difficult to say which of these appeared first in the Polish literary tradition after 1989: impulses originating in humanities stimulated the emergence of new issues while works of literature that introduced those issues, required a careful reading. Gay novels began to be published, non-heteronormative behaviors were written about. There came a wave of works on motherhood and pregnancy making the taboo practically non-functional. Young female writers wrote about adolescence, and the critics have coined a disparaging term of "menstrual literature" to use against them. Foucauldian inspirations aside, feminism claimed the body.

The history of feminist reflection in the Polish academia is closely tied to Teksty Drugie [Second Texts], even though Pelnym Głosem [In Full Voice], fully devoted to feminist issues, was its pioneer. Feminist issues were absent from the public debate after 1989, and later treated initially as a Western fad on the one hand, and on the other, as an expression of the conflicts surrounding matters such as taking away abortion rights from women, growing role of women on the job market and new career models. At that time, the business woman was viewed in positive terms, even though she was depicted grotesquely by writers. Teksty Drugie, attempting to promote certain themes, reading strategies and directions in humanities, had to begin by importing content: we published the first feminist issue in 1993 and the next one in 1995, containing, among others, my translation of the French manifest by Helene Cixous, The Laugh of the Medusa, from 1975, translations of essays by Elaine Showalter or Toril Moi and Luce Irigaray. From the very beginning, we have included also texts by Polish researchers of literary phenomena, written from a new perspective and positing their own theoretical solutions.

So widespread was the interest in the feminist issues of Teksty Drugie that in 2001 we decided to publish Ciało i tekst [Body and Text], a collection based on materials published in the journal, which quickly entered university reading lists, and as a result a second edition had to be printed. The present selection includes essays written a little later, after 2001, but focuses on similar issues and as such, carries a similar title, Tekst i ciało [Text and Body]. The essays it contains no longer reflect on the problems of the post-1989 decade, having been written in

a period when gender and gay studies were no longer a novelty. And, naturally, this time we could speak of possible export – this time it is Polish diagnoses that are the focus of interest.

A lot has changed from the day the first feminist issues appeared. Firstly, several authors who first published in our journal, wrote and published their own books.¹ Further, today, the notion of feminism is rarely used in Poland in the context of literary criticism, reserved mostly for social movements and the attitude of engagement in the current debate marked by strong differences between the liberal and the pro-social approach; liberal activists focus mostly on women's careers, the latter stress the importance of protecting motherhood and fighting discrimination. For a certain time, "gender" fulfilled the role of the key notion and basic academic term in humanities, transplanted in its English form, as the Polish language does not distinguish between sex and gender on the lexical level, using the word "płeć" to denote both, while the English "gender" is translated descriptively by adding the adjective "cultural" [płeć kulturowa]. As a term, gender appeared highly promising, mostly as it revealed the ambiguity and the process of shaping cultural patterns, or even the performativity of patterns. For a time, Judith Butler's work was a major source of inspiration. It seems, however, that with the publication of the Polish multidisciplinary gender encyclopedia, *Encyklopedia Gender*, prepared by the Institute of Literary Research and a team of upcoming researchers representing a spectrum of disciplines, one will no longer seek those reference points that would narrow down the notion of gender to a more precise term, but rather those that will allow to take further steps.

As a term, "gender" loses something that was very distinct about it in the early period – its connection to the corporeality. The manifest of *écriture féminine* by Helene Cixous (as well as other writings of the French poststructural criticism, by Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva) outlined a program of writing that includes an account of physicality. Women's writing, as opposed to several abstract ways of writing, does not ignore but reveals it through rhythm, pulsing intonation, emotionality. Cixous believes the way was paved by Molly's monologue in Joyce's *Ulysses* and the writing of Jean Genet, so it is not necessarily writing by women as their physicality was an object of repression. Grażyna Borkowska, in turn, defined women's writing using the "metaphor of yeast": that is growth, budding and experiencing one's own sexuality. Borkowska believes the disclosure of one's gender to be a necessary condition for this approach.²

Among the reasons why "feminism" was abandoned as a label was the fact that one must rather speak of feminisms (in the plural), gender thought has spawned several quite

¹ It is impossible to include a full list here, it would be too long. Among those published after 2000, the following books were of biggest importance: I. Iwasiów, *Kresy w twórczości Włodzimierza Odojewskiego. Próba feministyczna* (1994); G. Borkowska, *Cudzoziemki. Studia o polskiej prozie kobiecej* (1996); M. Janion *Kobiety i duch inności* (1996), E. Kraskowska, *Piórem niewieścim. Z problemów prozy kobiecej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* (1999), K. Kłosińska, *Ciało, pożądanie, ubranie. O wczesnych powieściach Gabrieli Zapolskiej* (1999).

² G. Borkowska "Metafora drożdży. Co to jest literatura/ poezja kobieca?" *Teksty Drugie*, 1995, reprinted in: *Ciało i tekst. Feminizm w literaturoznawstwie – antologia szkiców*. IBL: Warszawa, 2001. 65-76. <http://rcin.org.pl>

differing approaches, ranging from a very descriptive treatment of the literary material to a variety of programmatic attitudes, and ultimately dissolves in transgender approaches.

Also, the history of gay studies in Poland is tied to *Teksty Drugie*. It was, initially, an area of Polish literary studies represented by a single, lone pioneer – German Ritz, a Swiss author of several essays and a book on Iwaszkiewicz's studies. Ritz described the mechanisms of presence of homosexual themes in Polish literature: camouflage, sublimation, presence of codes understood only by the insiders and the inexpressibility of the desire itself. Ritz's work from the 90s changed a long-standing belief that in Polish literature, homosexuality is a narrow subject, one not to be discussed, and, in fact, shameful. He has shown that there exists terminology allowing to speak even about that which is "inexpressible." Furthermore, his reading, similarly to several feminist and gender readings, undermined the principle of anti-biographism (that is, of focusing solely on the text) by introducing information and interpretations related to the lives of writers. Gradually, more detailed work began to appear; right now one can hardly imagine literary studies without this reading strategy. The development of literature contributed to such state of affairs, several books were published that no longer use camouflage, including the novels by Michał Witkowski. The publication of diaries and letters of the 20th century writers was another important contribution. The socially imposed camouflage, absent from personal diaries, no longer obscures anything; today we have at our disposal the diaries of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz and his wife, containing a description of his fascination with a woman and unambiguous signals that her husband's bisexuality was not a secret to her. What on the surface appears as a heteronormative, patriarchal pattern, often has a second, much more complex layer. New readings of classical works of literature and rediscovering old literature in this fashion became an interesting field of research.

Text and Body is not as much the theme, as it is a keyword for the essays contained in the following volume. We selected what we believed to be the most interesting texts, relying on several criteria – that of the discussed author was one of the more significant. And thus, we present essays on the poetry of Julian Przyboś, Wisława Szymborska, Czesław Miłosz, and Miron Białoszewski. In other words, essays on two Nobel Prize winners, viewed from the perspective of the body, and on two other poets of extreme significance for the history of Polish poetry. Julian Przyboś was an important member of the inter-war avant-garde; Czesław Miłosz, younger by a generation, considered him a competitor. Meanwhile, Białoszewski could be viewed as a representative of the post-war avant-garde. Thus, the first circle of poetry closes.

German Ritz's essay presents a theoretical perspective; those on the prose of Dorota Masłowska, Manuela Gretkowska, and my own novel, *Księga początku*, provides a brief, far from comprehensive, but nonetheless interesting outline of the new phenomena emerging in women's writing after 1989. Wojciech Kudyba's essay on the poetry written by priest seems to us to be particularly interesting to the foreign reader: it is a phenomenon characteristic for Polish literature, undoubtedly tied to Catholic culture, but in a very complex way. Despite the fact that literary writing by priests has a long tradition rooted in the old Polish literature, in its current incarnation, it is an entirely new phenomenon. Modern poetry was pioneered among priests by Jan Twardowski, an author very popular in Poland, however,

the freedom to express opinions on controversial matters should not be taken as something obvious in case of this particular group of poets. We have also included texts discussing the historical background: Wojciech Śmieja's essay on the presence of sport in interwar literature connects the cult of beauty of the masculine body not only to homosexuality, but also to the growing wave of fascism, in other words, to the fundamental political problems of the era. Piotr Oczko, despite his declared unwillingness to discuss gay presences in old Polish literature, discusses them at length. His innovative essay fills a huge gap – it is an issue rarely explored so far, and by many historians believed to be non-existent in Poland in the past centuries. Dariusz Śnieżko explores further the theme of physical effects of reading and proves, by referencing examples from old Polish literature, that the question of the text's great influence on the body has a centuries-long tradition in our country.

The present volume summarizes a certain stage of analyses, but does it somewhat tentatively. The body cannot be ignored, superseded or negated and thus, somatic criticism will continue to develop.

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