

Teksty Drugie 2013, 1, s. 51-56
Special Issue – English Edition



Gender Studies Today: Building Theory, Traveling Theory.

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In the 18th century, as is well-known, European literature becomes one of the means to build the nation and national identity in Europe, but the poetics of stylistic epochs still remain international, crossing national boundaries. National literary studies have always watched and are still watching over the interpretations of the international quota of their own literature and culture. The international turn in theoretical discourse, dating at least to the 1960s, has perhaps obscured that state of affairs but has not disrupted it, since literary studies successfully continue to perform their national mission, usually at the outskirts or outside literary theory. Theory itself, as we are reminded by postcolonial studies, is not politically neutral, even if it wants to appear to be so. Traveling usually from west to east, in a longer perspective it proves to be an effective instrument of interpretive and cultural hegemony, which perpetuates the former imperial structures of thought, even if apparently we live in post-imperial times.

This strong generalization is necessary in order to assess the national and supra-national implications of the fact that theories travel, also in gender studies, which are of interest to us here.

Gender studies, which have developed from political feminism of the 1950s and 1960s, and from the parallel emancipatory movements of sexual minorities, never renounced their social and political grounding, but in the 1970s and 1980s camouflaged it under the complex theoretical structure, quite characteristic of this theoretical current. Gender studies, even if formulated at the time of flourishing postmodernism, belong to the project of the enlightenment and, as Marxist literary studies did before, strongly connect literature to the function of representation. Yet since they are inscribed in poststructuralism and its conception of literature, this implication gets revealed only in a roundabout

manner. At the same time, as the example of gender studies makes clear, the autonomy of literature, so cherished by formalism and structuralism, has long been undermined through the decentralization of literature, for example, by eliminating the author, and subjective opinions tend to be smuggled under the cover of complex constructions of depth psychology and cultural theory.

Gender studies and interest groups

Gender studies have taken root at western European and American universities as a result of the politics of equal rights and were closely related to political feminism. In middle and eastern Europe they were part of the great social and political transformations of *perestroika* and the collapse of real socialism after 1989. The ties to political feminism are even stronger here than in the west. In Poland, different generations participated in the discussion about gender and the predominance of women in the humanities created favorable conditions for gender studies to develop. Thanks to the older generation, older affiliations were reactivated, particularly those with French feminist thought originating with Simone de Beauvoir. In the 1990s, gender studies have again become the subject of discussion, occasionally very heated, but thanks to the participation of the abovementioned variety of generations, and association with a variety of fields, the discussion succeeded in integrating the community and prevented the danger of a simplistic import of foreign theory. The symbol and guarantor of the movement was Maria Janion.

Western studies of eastern Europe quickly found a partner for their own research in the feminist movement and gender studies. Gender studies have thus been established early on in a network of international contacts. At the same time, foreign research on the Polish history of gender was exposed, if unconsciously, to the danger of political instrumentality, because gender studies, even if they merely try to uncover the history of gender, always start from the ideal of gender equality and equal rights irrespective of gender and sexual orientation. Like all political utopias, the ideal of gender equality is never independent of the historical conditions and interests, but represents the interests of those who advocate utopia. In the aggravated political and social debate under the PiS government, such foreign contributions on the subject of gender occasionally revealed colonial features and had qualities of a political lesson given to a politically “oppressed” country. This phenomenon was most pronounced in the reaction to the repressions of sexual minorities, particularly of homosexuals.

Attempts to “enlighten” another nation can easily turn into their opposite, a danger which should be known full well to a foreign Polish literature scholar who probably began his Polish education from the lesson about partitions when, as is well known, the “faulty” Polish political system was abolished in the name of the enlightened categories of the law and state. Gender can be used as a political category only from inside; from the outside we have to stick to the purely descriptive if we do not want to give in to national hetero-stereotypes and unwittingly perpetuate old colonial models. Academic research, as we well know, has never been really immune to imperialist and nationalist thinking, on the contrary, it produced universal justifications for all kinds of particular interests.

Gender as a risky analytical category

For foreign literary scholars, and not only for them, gender is a risky or even dangerous category, for it may easily lead to abuses. There are several reasons for that situation that need to be briefly discussed. What I am referring to here is not so much the category itself as its use: in research the category of gender is usually separated from its historical context.

The first general reason for this is related to gender studies as a whole. The history of gender is easily mixed up with the history of sexual emancipation, as a consequence of acquiring a teleological character. Academics gladly consider sexual emancipation a universal good, always already possessed and thus not requiring reflection and exempt from academic control. It would seem that we know what liberated sexuality that destroys faulty gender relations really is, and we are supported in this unquestioned knowledge by the liberal research community. Such false assumption may obviously carry the danger of authoritativeness and ontological tendencies. And it is not only the well-intentioned student writing that errs in this matter, because we may encounter such assumptions, if obscured, also in works of “mature” writers.

The second reason is related to methodological practice. From the 1990s, the point of reference for gender studies is no longer the construction of the modern, liberated “I,” drawn from various emancipatory movements, but the – by then canonized – texts from Foucault and Lacan to Barthes and Kristeva. After shifting toward poststructuralism, in the late 1960s and especially in the 1970s, French structuralism did not create a method of text analysis – a task undertaken by the Slavic structuralism shaped by formalism – but offered instead a complicated set of ideas in the realm of philosophy of culture. Those ideas – especially in works whose subject was love – could serve also as something akin to life philosophy or life truths; in the 1980s and 1990s, taking the form of cult texts of postmodernism, they were an inspiration for whole book collections, as Nietzsche used to be at the beginning of the century. Post-feminism of the 1990s adds the works of Judith Butler to the canon of French authors. The irony detectable in those comments is not intended as a criticism of French and American sources, but of their reception, which filters much of what has been a form of thinking into a thought content. Poststructuralism has one surprising feature in common with Marxism, namely both work with frequent and long quotations and care less for developing and qualifying an argument. Theses drawn from the authoritative French and American sources, always rather complex, constitute not a departure point but, more often than not, the point of arrival in the writer’s own thinking, as a result of which the national and historical differences disappear under the cosmopolitan coating.

Looking for the historical dimension of the category of gender

Polish gender studies, which from the 1990s had been established as a branch of literary studies have long outgrown their pioneering stage and do not require foreign support, if they ever needed such support at all. Their own networks and collaboration

with Polish foreign literature studies, particularly with the departments of English, guarantee international contacts and exchange, especially in the field of theoretical discourse. In the meantime questions about gender more and more deeply and broadly affect Polish history of culture and literature. The parallel existence of the politically still very important women's and homosexual emancipatory movements and the tendencies of (variously defined) post-feminism and the elusive queer studies make the Polish situation not unlike that of western European countries. There are still gaps in gender studies, but one cannot talk of a systemic neglect. Yet gender is (both here and there) also a category which, like a number of concepts of poststructuralism and postmodernism, shows signs of exhaustion, acute exhaustion, in fact. The American neoconservative movement, which after 2000 has come to co-define the spiritual climate around the world, certainly has not engendered an interest in gender perspectives.

Is gender a dead academic category today? Surely not, where it accompanies political emancipation. On the "neutral" academic grounds the category demands, today more than before, an integration into broader contexts. It is not enough any more to simply unearth the repressed or concealed constructions of gender and to analyze cultural processes with reference to the mechanisms of repression, not because such mechanisms are no longer present, but because knowledge about them has become saturated and the myth of emancipation has lost its urgency. One of the most important contexts supplementing the category of gender is the category of the nation. Already in ancient times the *polis* represented itself with gender categories, and in modernity the history of gender and nation building are closely intertwined. Only – and this makes for an important difference – the nation building process and the giant cultural apparatus which supports it, are always overt, while the implemented gender order remains hidden. The relation between gender and the nation is complex and multilayered. Great national myths are gendered. Into the historical myth images of gender introduce the quality of what is unsaid and enrich the myth with the surplus of ambiguity. But the process of nation building not only relies on the images of gendered constructions but is based on the gender order itself. Quite predictably, the relation between gender and nation sanctions the existing gender relations and, what is more, feeds on the shifts in the representation of the assigned roles. For example, a woman, especially a bourgeois woman, is given a central role in the culture of language, which, as is well known, is an important factor in 19th century nation building: that is, against the broadly disseminated image of "muteness" or lack of her own language, so emphatically presented by the realist novel. In 19th century Poland, due to the loss of national sovereignty and uneven modernization, the field of nation – gender relations is richly cast and the image of the woman, at least that belonging to the nobility on which the nation is based, is surprisingly modern, especially in comparison with western Europe.

If one compares three Polish versions of the motif of *Finis Poloniae*: Smuglewicz's *Kościuszko ratujący Polskę przed grobem*, Matejko's *Rok 1863 – Polonia*, and Malczewski's *Finis Poloniae*, one discovers that the female figures are represented in different styles, but the national symbolic that they are meant to convey is always the same. One is immediately struck by the external position of the central female figure in relation to men.

She is above all a woman as such, when they (grouped around her and lively gesticulating) represent only history, lost history. Malczewski, who poeticizes and aestheticizes the patriotic theme, reveals its hidden gender message. Femininity escapes the position in the center of the painting ascribed to her by the semiotics of patriotism, and not so much frames the patriotically brooding artist in the center, as towers over him. The embodiment of gender in those three paintings could also be described as a process by which the woman as the sign of the nation acquires independence, loses the quality of the national symbol, and expresses her own female sovereignty instead. Obviously, the national interpretation denied this ambivalence in reading the images of gender, an ambivalence that is crucial to us today. Malczewski returns it to us poetically, in a version loaded with eroticism.

In the complicated Polish process of nation building, not only the figure of the woman but also that of a man undergoes a peculiar gender shift. The transformation of the romantic Gustaw into Konrad, the national hero of *Dziady, part III*, is an example of a genesis of the I as if independent of the gender system, a narcissistic birth out of himself after Gustaw's romantic failure in his encounter with a woman. Soon after, with the maximum power of the romantic word, the Great Improvisation will show us that this narcissistically created ego will immediately be defeated in the encounter with the Other. Despite this self-destruction, the total transformation of the I still retains its fascinating power for Polish identity, also because of its romantic form.

As both those examples demonstrate, the relationship between gender and nation is never simple. On the one hand, a gender reading deconstructs patriotic iconography, on the other, the emancipatory significance of gender construction is relativized in the context of the nation. In the relation between gender and the nation, however, what is important is not only deconstruction, but above all the historicization of both terms which tend to exclude each other in reception. The independent Polish woman in the series of paintings from Smuglewicz to Malczewski is not merely the result of the clash of the gender and national imaginary, but also the effect of the Polish order of gender relations, which in the 19th century, is incomparable to the European one.

The mutual influence of gender and nation not only defines the images of identification, as in historical myths, but above all makes itself visible in the crossing of borders between the nations. We already mentioned the permeation of national heterostereotypes and images of gender. Modern desire, which always touches the limits of the I, likes to take on the form of crossing national and ethnic borders. The sexual Other needs the images of the ethnic Other. In the 19th century, particularly the Ukraine is the space of Polish phantasmatic projections.

The Ukrainian romantic school created a whole arsenal of images that could be of use for that purpose, Sienkiewicz tinted them with a national hue, and Galician and Eastern Borderland literature continued this tradition almost until the end of the 20th century. A Polish-German comparison would be interesting here. The German image of a beautiful Polish woman, enriched by Thomas Mann with a male equivalent and successfully introduced to world literature, remains flat and stereotypical in comparison with the Polish images of the Ukraine. The main difference lies in the historical

dimension: projections of desire and phantasms explode in contact with history. The Polish phantasmatic Cossack, like the western European Mazepa, is not only the figure of desire but always also a historical adversary. In Polish images of desire, the Cossack plays multiple roles. He triangulates with the Polish desire for the beautiful Ukrainian woman: a classic representation of the motif is to be found in Goszczyński's *Zamek kaniowski*, or like Bohun in Sienkiewicz is himself an ambiguous object and the subject of desire in the Polish-Ukrainian triangle. A complicated constellation of desire is very characteristic here; its favorite form is the triangle. These relations established above the ethnic boundary not only disturb gender identity, especially male, but usually also subvert the national political order. It would be a mistake to read the Ukrainian images of desire, from Malczewski, through Słowacki and especially Sienkiewicz, to Iwaszkiewicz or Odojewski as (barely audible) sexual declarations, such as the homosexual declaration in Iwaszkiewicz, as it would be a mistake to exclude the ambivalences of the love theme in national and patriotic interpretations. These are two sides of the same coin.

By broadening the category of gender with the category of the nation we have crossed over (on the level of theory) from gender studies to postcolonial studies. Postcolonial studies are not a lifeboat for the aging gender studies; theoretical discourses of both those academic traditions are too similar and grow out of the same impulses of French poststructuralism. To historicize and contextualize gender studies is not to multiply theoretical discourses but to demand more rigorous historical research. Today's gender analysis, after the faze of multiplying the common theoretical discourse *ad infinitum*, will become interesting again if it moves beyond the application of familiar theories to the national phenomenon and, armed with theoretical tools, will go in search of historical facts outside canonical literature. Aging theory is not interesting any more; what is interesting is the unknown history.

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