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Between Theories

c r i t i c s :

Anna Łebkowska, *Somatopoetyka – afekty – wyobrażenia.*

Literatura XX i XXI wieku,

Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu

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As a scholar, Anna Łebkowska has been constructing bridges between theories, notions and research perspectives in the field of literature studies for many years in the constantly changing landscape of the Polish humanities. A daughter of two outstanding literature historians, Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska and Jerzy Kwiatkowski, methodologically shaped in the times of the prevalence of the Polish structuralist-semiotic school, a Polish philologist raised by Henryk Markiewicz, she has had all the qualities predisposing her to contribute greatly to the Polish literature studies since the very beginning of her career. It should be stressed that she did not waste this potential, as confirmed by her latest book, *Somatopoetyka – afekty – wyobrażenia. Literatura XX i XXI wieku* (Auto-poetics – affects – conceptualizations. Literature of the 20th and 21st centuries). But before we take a closer look at the contents of this volume, we should perhaps review the subsequent stages of theoretical interests of the author.

In the final decades of the 20th century, Łebkowska was mostly interested in the issues of literary ontologies and epistemologies, as evidenced by two monographs: *Fikcja jako możliwość. Z przemian prozy XX wieku* (Fiction as an opportunity: On the transformations in the twentieth-century prose (1991) and *Między teoriami a fikcją literacką* (Between theories and literary fiction) (2001), in which she developed the theory of literary fiction in the context of contemporary theoretical discourse. She was a pioneer of the subject in Poland. In fact, the term “fiction” became almost her trademark, and in dealing with this difficult matter, she developed a specific rhetoric in her own comments. Not only did they require “courage” and “fearlessness”, but also the “potential for danger” and “atmosphere of challenge”. “However, a sense of challenge overcomes the sense of danger”¹, as ascertained by Łebkowska in the preface to the latter book and luckily for us, she did not refrain from undertaking tasks requiring vast reading, intense intellectual work, and extraordinary skill in academic discourse.

In that study of literary fiction, the category of possibility and the related issue of possible worlds come to the forefront. This difficult question, which requires good orientation in the meanders of modal logic and linguistic philosophy, was not very popular amongst the Polish literary scholars, and it is thanks to Anna Łebkowska that it became present in our theoretical discourse, together with the vast source literature in foreign languages. Łebkowska saw fiction mostly as a factor constituting the semantics of the literary expression. She was

¹ Anna Łebkowska, *Między teoriami a fikcją literacką* (Cracow: Universitas 2001), p. 8.

interested in such phenomena as *mise-en-abyme*, metafiction, counterfactual narratives, focalization, point of view techniques; in other words, the whole repertoire of means typical for fiction of “possibilistics”, probabilistic character. She illustrated her considerations on this topic with literary examples, which she derived from the rich source of the twentieth-century modernism and postmodernism, both Polish and from abroad. It is then when she wrote her excellent analyses on the prose of Kuśniewicz and Parnicki, and numerous others devoted to such authors as Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, Umberto Eco, Elias Canetti, as well as to Polish writers: Roman Jaworski, Aniela Gruszecka, Tadeusz Konwicki, Jerzy Andrzejewski.

Empatia. O literackich narracjach przełomu XX i XXI wieku (Empathy. On the literary narrations from the turn of the 21st century) (2008) was her next monograph. And although the title might suggest that her research interests had shifted, in fact dealing with the category of empathy – which she once more introduced to the major literary studies in Poland in a pioneering way – stemmed from her past fascination with fiction as a literary and cultural phenomenon in a natural way. Let us briefly trace how Łebkowska’s thought evolved from “fiction” to “empathy”.

In the mid-1990s, two new trends appeared in her works: feminist criticism and new media, modifying her way of understanding the essence of fiction and literature. In terms of semantics and ontology of literature, her research interests shifted to literary pragmatics, literacy communication, internal and external personal relations, the interpersonal. In other words, they underwent anthropologization, just like the majority of contemporary humanities.

As a feminist critic, Łebkowska is best known for her paper *Czy „płeć” może uwieść poetykę?*² (Can gender seduce poetics?) and although there are no publications in her literary output that would clearly place her on the side of this trend in literary studies – she rather discusses and popularizes it than practices it herself – ever since, feminist sensitivities have been the *signum* of her attitude to research. I use the word “sensitivity” and not “awareness” (which may inspire ideological connotations), because it is this category that will gain importance when Łebkowska becomes fascinated with empathy and its relationships with literature. The monograph devoted to this issue concludes with the chapter „Dylematy lektury genderowej” (The dilemmas of gender reading), in which she discusses (among other things) the shaping of the worlds of literary fiction. On the other hand, taking notice of the opportunities offered to the literary communication by the interactive space of the Internet has become a natural consequence and extension of studies into fiction, which is simply a more old-fashioned way of digital reality’s existence. Studies devoted to hypertext literature or *Role Playing Games* constitute an important, yet peripheral trend in Łebkowska’s work, because the traditional form of literary work (i.e. the medium – the book, the printed word), including prose, remains Anna Łebkowska’s major object of interest and passion.

There are many places in the book devoted to empathy that contain declarations of key importance to Łebkowska’s research. For instance: “Literature is [...] emphatic writing. Through

² Anna Łebkowska, “Czy płeć może uwieść poetykę?”, in *Poetyka bez granic*, edited by Włodzimierz Bolecki, Wojciech Tomasiak (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN 1995), p. 78-93.

the projection of worlds, through oscillating on the border between fiction and meta-fiction a simultaneous unity between the longing for empathy and literacy takes place”³. Or: “To tell about the other without reifying them, maintaining its subjectified dimension – this is one of the tasks which modern literature undertakes”⁴. This is what she wrote on the tasks of literature studies: “I am thinking here [...] of such a research attitude that offers a chance to avoid reading that would on the one hand be too ideological or instrumental, and on the other – oversimplifying and unifying variety. The category of sensitivity may be helpful in such reception”⁵. And finally: “I would like to stress [...] that an attitude that combines with understanding literature as a privileged discourse is close to my heart. [...] this uniqueness relies mostly on the fact that literature – in a way available only to it – offers the biggest chance of capturing what escapes cognitive constructs. Through relations between that which allows to be saved, and what escapes the process of unification, between what is repeated as a convention, and what undergoes demistification [...] allows to capture what is otherwise impossible to capture, including also what is contained in the official culture and at the same time goes beyond it”⁶.

Hence, the meaning of the monograph *Empatia. O literackich narracjach przełomu XX i XXI wieku* was not only that it introduced the reader to the relatively new theoretical issues and applied the titular category to the analysis of specific literary phenomena in an original way, but also – perhaps first of all – that it did not shy away from asking the fundamental question: “what is literature?” and answering it in a suggestive, well-argued way. Ever since then, the relations between cultural anthropology and literature, and more precisely, on the one hand the issue of the literary dimension of cultural anthropology, and on the other hand, of anthropolization of literary studies, have been in the center of Anna Łebkowska’s research interests. However, she focuses on the uniqueness of literary phenomena rather than identifying literature with other aspects of culture.

Somatopoetyka – afekty – zmysły – wyobrażenia. Literatura XX i XXI wieku is another testament to this anthropological-cultural shift in Anna Łebkowska’s work. The volume presents her most important texts from the past decade, rewritten and placed in a new context. She used them to compose three parts, organized around the titular key words. The first part is entitled “Ciało i zmysły” (The body and the senses), and it consists of three chapters: “Somatopoetyka” (Self-poetics), “Świat dotyku” (The world of touch) and “Pochwała dotyku w dyskursie współczesności” (The praise of touch in the modern discourse). The first one belongs to review-encyclopedia articles, quite common in Łebkowska’s work; in terms of the skill and need to write them, I can see traces of Henryk Markiewicz’s training, especially his method of “intersections and close-ups”, which is extremely useful for organizing and popularizing humanities discourses. The self-poetics project is mostly about analyzing and interpreting how – according to the author – “the body is combined with literature”, about “studying the body formed by

³ Anna Łebkowska, *Empatia. O literackich narracjach przełomu XX i XXI wieku* (Cracow: Universitas 2008), p. 61.

⁴ Łebkowska, p. 174.

⁵ Łebkowska, p. 186.

⁶ Łebkowska, p. 293.

culture” and the analysis of “ways of reflecting it in literature”⁷. Having indicated the fields and directions in which somato-poetological reading can go, Łebkowska starts to put this tool into practice, focusing on the issues related to the sense of touch and its literary applications. First – in the second chapter – she reads novels by Zofia Romanowiczówna according to this principle, and later, in the third chapter, she shows how “touchability” plays and means in the concepts of such theoreticians as Elizabeth Grosz, Stepehn Greenblatt or Hans Ulrich Gumbert, as well as in prose by Toni Morisson and in Jolanta Brach-Czainy’s essay writing.

The texts collected in the second part of the volume belong to the so-called affective turn in modern humanities. (It should be noted here that on the Polish side, it is the Cracow literary studies community that develops research into this problem, especially dynamically, and Łebkowska’s works play an important, often inspiring role in this trend). The author continues here her interpretation work on the Polish and foreign prose of the 20th and 21st centuries, focusing on such issues as the relationship between the creative act and its affective aspect (the chapter “Zdarzenie – afekt – twórczość”, in which the works of Nabokov, Perec, Duras and Winterson are subject to a “close-up reading”); the category of shame in the modern studies into culture (the chapter “Wstyd i niebyt” with the analysis of the prose by Magdalena Tulla, Zyta Rudzka and Jacek Dukaj); “the theater of speech”, i.e. ways of using personal pronouns in the latest Polish prose (“Co nowego w «teatrze mowy»?” – here the prose by Zbigniew Kruszyński, Olga Tokarczuk and once more Jacek Dukaj are at the center of attention); and finally, the issue of the emphatic reception of literature discussed in the cross-sectional-theoretical way (the chapter “Odbiorca empatyczny. Między symulacją a afektem”).

I would like to stop for a moment, as a digression, at the insightful comments of Łebkowska on Jacek Dukaj’s writing, since I also enjoyed it, especially *Lód*. Łebkowska sees in Dukaj “a modern master of the theater of speech”, she analyzes “a specific form of the anthropology of shame” in this novel, and she observes that “it is high time that the broadly understood fantasy novels were not analyzed separately, as a closed, isolated circle”⁸. Such an attitude is completely understandable in the case of a theoretician of literary fiction and possible worlds; however, it is good that it is becoming more common also among other literature scholars (such as M. Brzóstowicz-Klajn, A. Gajewska, G. Gajewska, J. Jarzębski, K. Uniłowski). Fantasy (in literature, movie, comic books, video games) is becoming a major cultural phenomenon, going decisively beyond the boundaries of pop culture, and one can only be happy that the Polish fantasy books are competitive abroad.

The final part of the monograph comprises of three texts: “Przyszłość literatury wpisana w jej historię (20th century and modern times)”, “Europa wyobrażona w literaturze doby modernizmu” and “Afirmacja świata w powieści dla dziewcząt (Wanda Borudzka)”. The two former ones are devoted to such important problems and so vast in their temporal scope that they could be developed into separate monographs. In those chapters, Anna Łebkowska first presents herself as a historian of literature, showing ways in which both the Polish and foreign

⁷ Anna Łebkowska, *Somatopoetyka – afekty – zmysły – wyobrażenia. Literatura XX i XXI* Cracow: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego 2019), s. 16-17.

⁸ Łebkowska, s. 119-120.

historical-literary discourse “designs the future world of literature”⁹ at a given moment in time. This review starts at the turn of the 20th century and finishes at the latest syntheses of history of French, German and American literature. On the other hand, the chapter on the cultural figures of Europe analyzes the works of many different authors, from Young Poland to the end of the interwar period, all from the Polono-centric perspective. Sławomir Iwasiów’s comment on an earlier version of this text from his book *Reprezentacje Europy w prozie polskiej XXI wieku* may best characterize the rank of Łebkowska’s study: “I treat Anna Łebkowska’s work as a point of reference, as well as a starting point – it is an inspiration which motivates to ask questions about possible readings of Europe’s representations (and so its figures, pictures, metaphors...) present in the literary studies discourse”¹⁰. I would add that today, I read both Łebkowska’s and Iwasiów’s works with a sense of nostalgia and melancholy; after all, they were written at the time before the refugee and Brexit crises, and they are about literature that did not predict such crises (although it did not shy away from catastrophic climates).

The final text of Łebkowska’s book was a real surprise for me. Why would a scholar who analyzes the most complex mazes of fiction, theory and history of literature feel the need to read a simple book for girls, *Dorota i jej towarzysze* by Wanda Borudzka, written and published in the deeply socrealistic year of 1952? And not just to read it, but to share her views on it in the form of an academic paper placed at such an important place in the volume, i.e. at the end? As it turns out, Łebkowska referred with this text to the gesture that I made in the book *Czytelnik jako kobieta*¹¹, which I concluded with the chapter “Kobieta mówi wielkie Tak”. In that chapter, I analyzed some topos of female writing updated in the novel scenes, illustrating in its finale the female affirmation of life, often in the ruins of patriarchal culture; I used such works as *Ulysses* by Joyce, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf and *Buddenbrooks* by Mann. By finding the same topos in *Dorota i jej towarzysze*, Anna Łebkowska shows how in this novel “the terror of war, the terror of the nearest future in different forms reminds of itself, and still what dominates is comfort, optimism and this «Yes!» to the world”¹². This reference gave me a lot of pleasure.

There are some signals in this monograph that may indicate the direction of Łebkowska’s future trips between theories. The motif from chapters 2 and 3 seems to be especially promising, related to considerations on touch and the perspectives for research into it. As Łebkowska puts it, in the modern studies into this sense the question of the boundaries of the body and “the close analysis of the relations between the internal and the external” is an exciting research opportunity. In this context, such problems as “constant contact between the whole body and the world [...], constant living among other human and non-human beings, and finally [...] being among objects”. Currently, according to Łebkowska, such an “optics for understanding tactuality”¹³ is most supported by net theories related to the ANT concept of Brunon Latour and affordance theory, i.e. the possibilities to act provided by the environment, in which there

⁹ Łebkowska, p. 165

¹⁰Sławomir Iwasiów, *Reprezentacje Europy w prozie polskiej XXI wieku* (Zielona Góra: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego 2013), 103.

¹¹Ewa Kraskowska, *Czytelnik jako kobieta. Wokół literatury i teorii* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM 2007), 207-223.

¹²Łebkowska, 262.

¹³Łebkowska, 70-71.

is the perceiving subject¹⁴. Today, this term, coined in the 1970s by James J. Gibson in reference to the so-called theory of direct perception, functions mostly in IT, because the digital universe is such an environment for us especially often, whereas the “contact” point is the computer interface. Various fields of previous research interests of Anna Łebkowska are cumulated here, from fiction and possible worlds (virtual reality, augmented reality) through new media, to empathy and physicality. With her new book, Łebkowska proves that she remains among top Polish theoreticians of literature.

translated by Jolanta Kikiewicz

¹⁴W próbach stworzenia polskiego odpowiednika tego terminu pojawił się m.in. neologizm „dostarczanty” (od ang. *to afford* – dostarczać).

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KEYWORDS

ANNA ŁEBKOWSKA

fiction

EMPATHY

ABSTRACT:

The paper discusses the latest monograph by Anna Łebkowska, *Somatopoetyka - afekty - wyobrażenia. Literatura XX i XXI wieku* in the context of previous Research and publications of this author. Theoretical issues related to modern prose, cultural approach in literary studies and affective turn in humanities play the most important roles here.

affects

L I T E R A R Y T H E O R Y

*somatopoetics**new media***NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

Ewa Kraskowska (1954) – professor of literary studies. Head of the Department of Twentieth-Century Literature, Theory of Literature and Translation Studies at the Institute of the Polish Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Her major research interests include female writing and translation studies. In 2018 she published a monograph, *Tyłem ale naprzód. Studia i szkice o Themersonach* (Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań).