

Micropoetics and Its Contexts

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Contemporary polemics about the autonomy and function of literature are concentrated, speaking in the broadest terms and therefore naturally oversimplifying, between two positions that differ in their definition primarily of literature's status and role. The first of these points chiefly to the entanglement of literature in various real-life problems (of society, politics, customs, ethics, and media), which every literary work symbolically represents and depicts, exerting real influence on readers and their attitudes. The artistic values of a work are in the process often relegated to the background, subordinated to other, more important goals. The second approach, frequently modified by successive twentieth-century schools, aims on the contrary to highlight the sovereignty of the literary work as an independent and self-sufficient whole which should be read within the context of its relationships to other similar entities: conventions, literary-historical processes, inner transformations and dependencies, whose repercussions relate to changes in concrete phenomena of a literary nature.¹ For scholars of this bent, literature is of cardinal importance, and they see no need to fill up the chasm between it and its social contexts; instead, they would showcase its separate life and sovereign independence from such things.

¹ This approach is represented today by, among others, Terry Eagleton, who postulates a return to the partially forgotten principles of reading literature as literature. See Terry Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*, New Haven 2013.

Rita Felski attempts to reconcile these two sides.² Softening this rather categorically outlined opposition, Felski rationally proposes building bridges between reading that highlights the particularity and hermeticism of the rules of literary communication as a discrete field of art, demanding highly specialized competencies, and the pragmatic or even naïve reading that takes pleasure and various practical uses from literature. In other words, by opposing such divisions, she shows that inspiration can be drawn from the positions of both camps, without becoming too strongly attached to either of them.

Felski observes, first and foremost, that the academic criteria for evaluating literature have nothing to do with how ordinary readers engage with it. The latter are guided by emotions, are spontaneous and often uncritical toward what they read, and use literature as a supplement to their own lives, allowing themselves to be shaped by the works they read, to be seduced by the stories those works tell, experiencing sometimes acute and extreme emotions and thrills, or sometimes simply extracting knowledge from them about themselves and their lives. Literary scholars, on the contrary, attempt in the course of their professional engagements to demonstrate the separate nature of literature as verbal art, assessing with a gimlet eye the artistic values of a work, and at the same time maintaining mistrust and skepticism towards the truth of the work and toward their own findings. Felski harshly judges that irony is a disease of humanist scholars, who treat critical reading in the spirit of a hermeneutics of suspicion as a binding methodological model. In her opinion, however, the opposition of scepticism and suspicion to a simple-hearted, gullible approach to reading in no way reflects the realities of readerly experience, which abound in variety and can be much subtler than such a dichotomy would suggest. In connection with this, Felski formulates her own plan for research into actual engagement in the text, which would breathe new life into literary studies and bring a fresh breeze of spontaneity and emotion into university libraries: “perhaps the time has come to resist the automatism of our own resistance, to risk alternate forms of aesthetic engagement,”³ Felski writes, while also reminding readers that today’s literary studies practices are located not in the quiet of the library, but rather amid other, much more expansive and perceptually attractive media, with which literature must contend for its audience’s attention.

If literary studies is to survive the twenty-first century, it will need to reinvigorate its ambitions and its methods by forging closer links to the study of other media rather than clinging to ever more tenuous claims to exceptional status. Such collaborations will require, of course, scrupulous attention to the medium-specific features of artistic forms.⁴

Such is Felski’s premise. What she has in mind is thus both a broadening of sensitivity to non-linguistic forms of cultural communication and an acknowledgement of the fact that theory does not always know more than the work, and that in connection with that fact it need not position itself at a higher level of consciousness than the latter, while the scholar should accept that he himself can learn something (if only something about himself, even) in

² R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, Malden 2008.

³ Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 4.

⁴ Felski, *Uses of Literature*, pp. 21-22.

the course of reading. Rita Felski thus proposes a “hybrid phenomenology,” wielding a first-person perspective in research, but focusing its work on the way phenomena emerge. By postulating a conscious anti-intellectualism, a corporealization and heightened spontaneity of reception, Felski points toward the need to restore the experiential dimension to professional reading. Practices of reading are ambiguous and not divisible into those that focus on the poetics of the work and its aesthetic values and those that constitute a form of consumption of those values. What matters in reading is rather the conveyance of complexity, opacity and problematic aspects of reading and what these produce. Conventions, methods, and repeatable procedures clash with the pleasure of reading for oneself. And that very individuality, subjectivism, and emotionalism of the work’s aesthetic perception are what Felski is calling for.

She thus points the reader toward such aesthetic categories as recognition, enchantment and shock, which she claims readers must experience prior to taking the position of a critical commentator and scholar. This new “close reading” is a kind of opposite to the close reading that promotes immanent, penetrating and analytical reading concentrated on the text and its meanings. Felski’s proposal for a description of the selected forms of engagement that the literary work elicits represents an attempt to look at it not as an autonomous object, but as a phenomenological form of existence which only comes into being in the reader’s consciousness. Hence her premise of “[d]isentangling individual strands of reader response and sticking them under the microscope one at a time for a closer look,” though it “is [...] a highly artificial exercise.”⁵ For the procedure is in fact no more artificial than the traditional analysis of the poetics of a work, and has a better chance than strategies of text-centred reception “to capture something of the grain and texture of everyday aesthetic experiences.”⁶ The belief that understanding the ways and reasons why we read can lead to a renewal in literary studies, and perhaps also to a return of experience to literary life, leads Felski to formulate a postulate of developing a peculiarly understood “microaesthetics” that would exhibit the affective and cognitive dimension of reading.

However reasonable her premise of a new kind of close contact with the work and her call for closing the divisions between exponents of diametrically opposed approaches to literature may sound, they nonetheless give rise to certain doubts. Her critique of literary studies’ consciousness and self-consciousness, which, in negating the simple pleasures of the text, debase spontaneous readings, as well as the appeal she issues for suspending ironic suspicion toward our own methodological procedures, in the final analysis seem rather unrealistic. It is hard to efface a hundred-year history of efforts by literary theory, set in motion on the basis of changes in the philosophy of consciousness and language, as if Felski’s doubts regarding the attitudes of the discipline in which she works were directed merely at a caprice of bored intellectuals. And the return to the direct reading experience that she writes about seems nothing less than utterly impossible.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁶ *Ibid.*

If I thus invoke her proposal in the context of reflections on micropoetics, it is because there resounds within it a postulate repeated and implemented with increasing frequency in Felski's works. I refer to the departure from stiff rules of reading in favor of individualized, microscopic reading practices, unafraid to admit the feebleness of methods of literary analysis which in the past frequently took on the shape of metanarratives that usurped, at the outset of a reading, the right to determine what literature is and what the tasks of the critical reader are. In the face of today's whirling revolutions in the humanities and literary studies, Felski's admission of initial helplessness and unavoidable subjectivism seems simply a much safer and more honest point of departure for reflections on literary artefacts. Such a position of openness and caution constitutes the introductory phase of every micro-poetological reading.

In light of the peripeteia described above, the proposal for a revitalization of careful reading proposed by the Silesian school of literary micrology sounds intriguing.⁷ That proposal suggests yet another way out of the impasse in which contemporary literary studies, entangled in cultural, social and political contexts, find themselves. It is a way that, judging by appearances at least, leads to old and familiar paths – calling for careful and inquisitive reading, for attentiveness to the analytical detail, for listening closely to the melody of the phrase, the rhythm of the line and the resonance of alliteration, and, in the process, for the restoration of a greater focus on the sensual and corporeal dimension of reading. This is the old school of close reading, which nevertheless, placed in a new theoretical and cultural context, can lead to new discoveries and sometimes revelatory conclusions. It allows us to expose the subcutaneous (subtextual), that which has frequently been stifled in reception by the dominant discourse. These nuances, discovered in the course of a minute reading, are sometimes tropes consciously muted by the author, and occasionally are clues left on purpose, barely making themselves known, which only the most receptive reader-detective is capable of joining together in a logical network of connections and dependencies.⁸

“What is micrology?” – Aleksander Nawarecki asks himself in the introduction to the collection, an essay entitled “Skala mikro w badaniach literackich” (The Micro Scale in Literary Studies).⁹ As the inventor of a new term for what seems to be an entirely familiar position

⁷ The larger framework of this project included the following publications: *Miniatura i mikrologia literacka*, vol. 1, ed. A. Nawarecki, Katowice 2000, *Miniatura i mikrologia literacka*, vol. 2, ed. A. Nawarecki, Katowice 2001, *Miniatura i mikrologia literacka*, vol. 3, ed. A. Nawarecki, B. Mytych – Forajter, Katowice 2003, *Skala mikro w badaniach literackich* (The Micro Scale in Literary Scholarship), ed. A. Nawarecki, M. Bogdanowska, Katowice 2005. The following book is also written in a similar spirit: A. Nawarecki, *Paraferalia* (Paraphernalia), Katowice 2014.

⁸ A good example of the effectiveness of this type of study, performed independently of the Katowice theoreticians' proposals, is Agnieszka Gajewska's book *Zagłada i gwiazdy. Przeszłość w prozie Stanisława Lema* (The Holocaust and the Stars. The Past in the Prose of Stanisław Lem, Poznań 2016). This Poznań scholar, using an unusual method of microlecture, managed to write a new, in many ways revolutionary, chapter in Lem studies. A careful reading, concentrating on the analysis of literary texts and historical sources, placed within biographical and literary-historical contexts, was supported, in this case, by a sensitivity feminist in character and an acute awareness of what is not obvious and sometimes is simply passed over in silence. By using this method, Gajewska was able to investigate the presence in Lem's prose of nearly imperceptible echoes of the trauma of the Holocaust, which in previous studies of the writer's work were either completely omitted or trivialized.

⁹ A. Nawarecki, “Czarna mikrologia” (Black Micrology), in: *Skala mikro w badaniach literackich*, ed. A. Nawarecki and M. Bogdanowska, Katowice 2005, p. 9

taken toward literature, the author gives a precise indication of the problems connected with defining its properties, scope and specifics. This micrological and micropoetological hustling and bustling which Polish scholars have been declaredly engaged in for about twenty years, can most broadly be described as distinguished by intellectual passion and inquisitiveness, and at the same time conscious of its limitations and suspicious toward accepted premises for the examination of literary particles. But after all, if we overlook the contingent, historically situated term for this position, it turns out that what we are considering here is a permanent component of the philologist's workshop, the philologist, who since antiquity, that is to say, since forever, has inclined attentively to examine every detail perceived in the text, inquiring into its values and meanings by all available means. In fact Nawarecki is perfectly well aware of that; in attempting to clarify, for skeptics, the seriousness and function of micrology, he invokes a variety of scholarly movements, indicating that the micrological approach is not reserved for certain selected ways of reading or exclusively for contemporary ones. On the contrary Micropoetics represents philology's natural element; here we see its finesse, precision and role in revealing what escapes our attention in a casual, everyday glance, reading or understanding. This is also what makes it a phenomenon and herein lies its opportunity: micrology unites within its investigations representatives of dissimilar schools and views, as can splendidly be seen in the publications prepared so far by the Katowice team of scholars.

Thus not only does there not exist a single, coherent definition of micrology, but there is, also, inscribed in its projected treatment of the text, an inability to set clear rules, repeatable principles, or firmly fixed premises that would make possible cohesion and the maintenance of order in the conduct of its adepts with the object of study. That object itself in fact demands separate attention: does it consist of a single text? A literary genre? A sentence? A word? Or perhaps an author's entire oeuvre? It appears to depend each time on the initial (subjective!) premises accepted by the individual scholar. Because what matters here is the comparative perspective, which exhibits differences in scale, allowing us to highlight the fundamental fact that small is small in comparison with what is large (or, also, depending on our needs: official, dominant, manifest, self-explanatory, important, inspiring). And that what hitherto was overlooked or only fleetingly shown, particularly in the panoramic perspective on the history of literature, now finds itself at the centre of scholarly interest. As we can see, the scale of micro is micro only when there exists in our consciousness a broader context for it: macro-problems, macroprocesses and macrostructures.

Though micrology thus raises more questions than it provides answers, it is in that sense an exercise in humanistic thought which in the contemporary era has a chance to become singularly valuable and useful. To confirm his own micrological intuitions, and at the same time for the purpose of dissolving the doubts of those who are not entirely convinced of the potential cognitive possibilities of micrology, Nawarecki cited the definition developed at the beginning of the 21st century by Przemysław Czapliński. This Poznań-based critic, with a masterly aplomb that is Borgesian in both spirit and execution, forges an encyclopedia entry whose aim is to validate both the phenomenon and the object of his research. On the back cover of his *Mikrologi ze śmiercią* (Micrologues with Death), we find the following extract:

micrologue <gr. mikrós+lógos=small+word, study, concept, truth> 1. *hum.* Interpreter of small fragments, scholar of small things; 2. *gr.* minor speech (*lógos mikrón*), a term in ancient rhetoric defining accidental utterances, spoken to random listeners, members of the household, objects or oneself, compositionally and stylistically unpredictable, concerning affairs of the individual, serving to express intimate feelings and thoughts, and also constituting a form of engagement in non-systematic thought – the tradition of minor speech included the Socratic dialogue, the soliloquy, the monologue, the fragment; 3. *clas.* feeble, incomplete conversation (*mikron logos*), dialogue with a silent addressee, represented by probable utterances (see spoken monologue); 4. *est.* a part of the whole not assigned to a definite position and compositionally independent (see prologue, epilogue); 5. *gr. phil.* small truth, uncertain accuracy, formulated based on a repeatable event but which follows a different trajectory each time (see chaotics); 6. *gr.* individual destiny, personal fate (see logos); 7. *deconstr.* independent fragment of a conversation composed of many utterances (see polilogue) and conducted in conditions of unattainable understanding, disposed towards the definition of differences and characterization of their status; 8. *postmoder.* small narration; 9. *phil. coll.* everyday wisdom, growing out of domestic activities, conscious of its limitations and ignorance, finding its extension in talking, betrayed by generalization and synthesis (see “I know that I know nothing,” Bear of Little Brain, bustlement).¹⁰

Although everything in this definition is true, nothing is what it seems to suggest. The phenomena referred to in it are ephemeral and fragile, eluding unambiguous definition and concretization. Hence the explications on the back cover sketch out the broad horizons of micrological reflection rather than unambiguously clarifying anything. Czapliński explains, for the purposes of his own research that the micrologues he tracks in contemporary prose are “dialogues with a silent addressee, represented by probable utterances, small narratives in search of a single destiny expressed in idiomatic language, uncertain accuracies, formulated based on a repeatable event but which follows a different trajectory each time.”¹¹ That is how the uncertain object of the observation conducted by Czapliński takes shape. As far as the micrological perspective understood by him is concerned, it rather resembles the position of a mistrustful ethnologist-explorer, learning about a foreign land and encountering the incomprehensible otherness of its inhabitants, who must search for an entirely new language for his experiences, rather than a scientist confident in his methods and purpose who observes and describes an unchanging object under precisely defined laboratory conditions.

The micrologist sets forth with a sense of always insufficient competencies and the incompleteness of accumulated data, and in connection with that fact is continuously ready to undermine his own findings. And that, in my view, is probably the most important philosophical change that has surfaced in the micrological approach to the literary text. What was always a feature of the humanities as a sphere of understanding rather than of knowledge – the non-autonomy of its foundations and non-finality of its findings – now takes on the form of an equal subject of knowledge. It is through work with the text and by the text that the interpreter learns as much about the read work as about him or herself – his or her limitations, predispositions and possibilities.

¹⁰P. Czapliński, *Mikrologi ze śmiercią. Motywy tanatyczne we współczesnej literaturze polskiej* (Micrologues with Death. Thanatic Motifs in Contemporary Polish Literature), Poznań 2001, back cover.

¹¹Ibid., p. 10.

To confirm that this approach has its own estimable tradition, Czapliński lists the styles of interpretation of which he feels himself to be the continuator or to which he sees himself as indebted. The names of scholars and schools that he mentions are the same ones cited by Nawarecki: the phantasmatics of Maria Janion, hermeneutics, the American school of close reading, deconstructionism, Roland Barthes's interpretations and his concept of punctum, Jean-Francois Lyotard's diagnosis of the postmodern condition of culture with its key thesis on the end of grand narratives, finally, the *krzq̄tactwo* (bustlement) of Jolanta Brach-Czaina, cultivated in her *Szczeliny istnienia* (The Cracks of Existence), as well as the poetry of Czesław Miłosz and his position of "attentiveness."¹²

At the same time, Czapliński notes that all of these styles of reading preserve the quality of being authorial, unrepeatable, single-use approaches, and what connects them is their focus of attention on details. "This may be a special virtue of micrologues, that they cannot be duplicated: unlike methods (that is, forms of macrology), they are not transferable."¹³ Micrology is thus "reading scraps,"¹⁴ because in the end both parts of this definition, reading and the scrap, are not in themselves comprehensible; the scope of possible ways of encountering texts is practically inexhaustible, and the quasi-method itself appears as something eclectic, discontinuous and polymorphic.¹⁵ Particularly if we take into account that the interpreter is not an impartial observer, but part of the communicative relationship which he enters into and co-designs.

Micrology can easily refer as well to the situation of other, non-humanistic fields of knowledge, indicating that the "fashion for the small"¹⁶ is not simply a project of literary scholars, but the symptom of a broader interest in the micro scale, relating to the social and natural sciences too, such as: microeconomics, microsociology, microsurgery or microbiology. These similarities are to some extent limited to purely lexical convergence, and the analogies are essentially distant metonymies or metaphors. It should, however, be observed that in reality, both observed cultural, social and psychological processes and the influence of the development of new technologies in medicine and computer science, can be connected to the transformation in the cognitive approach to many problems. Precise or individualized micro-analyses inspire more confidence than those that refer to broad perspectives of diagnosis and generalization.

¹²To this list, following Nawarecki, we could also add Gaston Bachelard's concept of miniature (See *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, New York 1964, Chapter 7; Jean-Pierre Richard's theory of microreading (*Microlectures I*, Seuil, Poétique 1979, *Microlectures II. Pages Paysages*, Seuil, "Poétique", 1984), Roman Jakobson's microscopy ("Une microscopie du dernier „Spleen” dans les Fleur du mal," in: *Questions de poétique*, Paris 1973.), as well as the neologisms that appear in a variety of contexts and feature the prefixes mini- or micro- in Bakhtin, Benjamin, and Foucault. I will only add that I do not address the topic of small forms in this article because I feel they constitute a separate problem and should rather be linked to the authorial philosophy (however dubious) and the lives of particular poets and writers. If we were interested in making a list of all the artists who appreciate the "whiff of detail," the list would be very long. And perhaps it would simply have to contain the names of all verbal artists? Here we are only interested in micropoetics as a poetics of reception and a way of engaging in literary scholarly reflection.

¹³P. Czapliński, *Mikrologi*, p. 10.

¹⁴Ibid..

¹⁵See *ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁶See E. Suszek, "Moda na małe? Innowacyjność śląskiej mikrologii literackiej" (A Fashion for the Small? The Innovative Nature of Silesian Literary Micrology), *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* 2016, no. 1(17), pp. 179-191.

The most interesting connections are found between literary micrology and microhistory. As Ewa Domańska has written, this method was developing in historiographical studies as early as the 1970s as the “answer to the crisis of the traditional understanding of history, which revealed itself in, among other things, the interest in the ‘secret dimension of reality’ (Levinas), in the turn from macro to micro, from external to internal, from history as process to history as human experience.”¹⁷

Employing the method of “thick description” taken from interpretive anthropology¹⁸ and focusing on individual case studies, historians, maintaining a subjective perspective, have begun to describe small areas in time and space, lingering primarily over those spheres and domains of life that escaped the attention of traditional history. And thus the everyday life documented in texts, customs, the consciousness and beliefs of people, often ordinary people absent from the pages of history textbooks, have become the realm of inquiry for microhistoriographers, who are aware that the past is woven from an incalculable number of individual fates which constitute the underoil and factual environment and also the conditions for great events and historical processes.

Everyday life, until now considered the transparent background to events, has also become a subject of interest to cultural anthropologists and literary scholars. It is being newly discovered.¹⁹ Official strategies of action, overseen by institutions of power, and grand historical narratives are being contrasted with everyday tactics: ordinary people’s personal methods of coping with the models of life, thought and reading imposed on them from above:

Historians focused on studies of small communities and particular individuals for the purpose of obtaining both maximum depth in their view of past reality and a more natural and vivid picture of it. Microhistory is thus qualitative and miniature rather than quantitative and globalizing in its intentions.²⁰

A similar approach marks literary micrology, which – first in the phase of critical deconstruction of rational bases and premises of interpretation of texts, phenomena and processes, and later in the form of innumerable other ways of conducting subjective readings, critical of their object, subtle, careful, and simultaneously subversive, represented by the styles of reading of the adherents of various schools of hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, feminist critics, gender studies and queer theory, postcolonial studies and many other approaches – revealed inside texts what hitherto seemed insufficiently important, marginal, incomprehensible, or even imperceptible.

¹⁷E. Domańska, *Mikrohistorie. Spotkania w międzyświatach* (Microhistories. Meetings in Inbetweenworlds), expanded and updated second edition, Poznań 2005, pp. 270-271.

¹⁸See Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York 1973, pp. 3-30.

¹⁹See M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley 1984; M. de Certeau, L. Giard, P. Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik, Minneapolis 1998.

²⁰E. Domańska, op. cit., p. 273.

The horizon of the problematics of the microscale also includes microphysics, usually placed at the opposite pole from the range of interests proper to the humanities. Surprisingly, however, if we carefully consider the theoretical premises and the consequences that the discoveries of this discipline have brought, it may appear that it, too, has exerted considerable, though indirect influence on the epistemological conditions that bear on the work of the contemporary micrologue, who moves in a world that is shaky, unstable and elusive. Because microphysics is the physics of atoms and elementary particles.²¹ Its progenitor was Niels Bohr, who in 1913 presented his model of the atom. The revolutionary discovery that an electron can shift in an atom from orbit to orbit, in the process emitting or absorbing a quantum of light (a photon), initiated the development of quantum mechanics. Through that new science, the world and vision of it studied and described by classical physics faded into the past. For more than ninety years, that is, since the moment of its origins, quantum mechanics, and with it the contemporary theory of science, have been developing based on the principle of uncertainty, formulated in 1926 by Bohr's student, Werner Heisenberg. The principle relates to the properties of microparticles – endowed with a double, corpuscular-wave nature, these are the equivalents of the particles that so impress the literary-scholarly lovers of small things – and states that the more exactly we measure the speed of a particle, the less exact is our description of its position, and vice versa. There is thus no way to overcome the limit on the exactitude of measurement, which is dependent neither on the type of particle nor on the methods used to study it. The irremovable impossibility of precisely defining the actual state of the observed object meant that quantum mechanics, instead of defining a concrete result of measurement, focuses on indicating an aggregate of possible results and defining the probability of each one's materialization. The theory of science thus describes not so much real states of the world as certain properties of what is being observed in a given situation. The principle of uncertainty has also influenced the way we imagine the macroworld. It has been revealed as a constituent feature of it and has radically changed the way we understand and explain phenomena. The area of science, previously the domain of certain and permanent laws, has been encroached upon by chance and unpredictability.

“Quantum mechanics is based to a large extent on phenomena that contradict our intuition, that defy all of our knowledge based on the world of macro”²² – so writes a reviewer of the book *Quantum Mechanics: The Theoretical Minimum*. Erwin Schrödinger's famous thought experiment with a cat closed in a hermetic box with one atom, whose disintegration would activate poisonous properties, nonetheless shows that it is difficult to define the boundary between the micro- and macroscopic worlds, in the latter of which the phenomenon of the superposition of particles (their occupation of two positions or experience of two states simultaneously) is not possible. In keeping with quantum mechanics, which states that particles have the ability to find themselves in superposition only in an envi-

²¹This part of my analysis is based on general knowledge (microscopic in the sense of spatial dimensions, not detail) and various works of popular science read at different times, particularly the following books: Abraham Pais's: *Niels Bohr's Times: In Physics, Philosophy, and Polity*, Oxford 1991, [Richard P. Feynman's, QED – The Strange Theory of Light and Matter](#), Princeton 2014, and selected passages from the textbook by [Richard P. Feynman, The Feynman Lectures on Physics: Quantum mechanics. Vol. 3](#), Boston 1965.

²²R. Kosarzycki, Review: *Quantum Mechanics. The Theoretical Minimum* – Leonard Susskind, Art Friedeman, <http://www.pulskosmosu.pl/2016/05/24/recenzja-mechanika-kwantowa-teoretyczne-minimum-leonard-susskind-art-friedeman/> [accessed: 9.02. 2016].

ronment with no observer, Schrödinger's cat should be simultaneously alive and dead. So why is that not true? The explanations significantly exceed both the scope of the present author's competencies and the needs of the argument being made here. Nevertheless, this contradiction between what experience and common sense tell us, on the one hand, and what we learn from the findings of physicists and micrologists, on the other, constitutes a form of powerful (because it derives from experimental sciences) justification for the contemporary status of the humanities, including literary studies. Micropoetics have a role to play, if we believe that what matters is not the scale of the object of study and the values, implied in the interest in the small, of appreciation for and distinguishing among minutiae, interpretative detail, and trivia, but rather an epistemological position that manifests self-reflection, a spirit of inquiry, discernment, suspicion and an awareness of the situationality of the scholar's position (its contingency upon a variety of conditions) that is proper to the natural sciences.

Modest micropoetological studies therefore lead to the displacement of previous literary frames and macro-orders that we have been accustomed to treat with uncritical acceptance. Micrological readings undermine fixed truths regarding particular texts, the nature of their understanding and their function in macroprocesses. In prioritizing closeness of inspection, micrology simultaneously trusts, as described by Aleksandra Kunce, "all kinds of **simplifications, inruns of thought, microstumbling** in the hope of succeeding in finding the **entanglement of thought in what is both permanent and variable at the same time**, whole and fragmentary, continuous and punctual, etc."²³

It is worth mentioning that it was in fact knowledge of the principles of quantum mechanics that made possible the development of contemporary nuclear energy science and electronics, including the invention of electronic devices such as microprocessors, transistors, televisions, computers, lasers and the electron microscope. If we treat the classical optical microscope as a metonymy of the position of attention, it is that attention of the Cartesian-Kantian subject, who attempts to plumb and next to unify the world of the work within the boundaries of his own consciousness. At the same time, contemporary electron microscopes, which allow scientists access to microworlds, wherein they deal with the electron clusters in the void, demand a revision of our imagining of the micrological method as guarantor of cognitive precision and inquisitiveness, directing us toward probabilistic premises that contradict the Newtonian world view.

At the end of this thread in our microreflections, let us observe that contemporary literary studies, like physics, construct the object of their inquiry and everything that we can say concerning that topic relates to the imaginings we construct based on the premises we adopted. Its body of knowledge is thus essentially a series of approximations rather than truths about the nature of the discipline's object of study. Micropoetics, in depriving the interpreter of hope for supporting his own findings in something beyond questioning, awakens, on the one hand, a peculiar kind of fear of the loss of legitimization; on the other,

²³A. Kunce, *O motyłu i dyskretnym uroku mikrologii* (On the Butterfly and the Discreet Charm of Micrology), in: *Skala mikro w badaniach literackich*, p. 39 [emphasis in original].

however, it inspires us to continually undertake new, adventurous readings of works already well-known to us.

This particular property of micropoetological studies thus forces scholars to maintain their mistrust toward their own findings. As a perspective of seeing,²⁴ it cannot perpetuate uniformity or finality in its judgments. And at the same time it treats each detail as a trace of the presence and influence of the macroworld, because what is most important is not self-contained but is entangled in a network of real connections, associations and barely felt intuitions that do not fit into systematic thought, and at the same time cannot exist without it.

In this sense **micrology becomes the warden of the nature of our thought as such** – crowded due to lack of coherence, depth and causality, but also underpinned by individual tendencies and the desire for systems. Is it possible not to think micrologically if we wish to track the subcutaneous rhythm of reality?²⁵

– this is the rhetorical question posed by one commentator on micrological theory.

Micropoetics as a poetics of reception thus not only undertakes an effort to redefine the object of its inquiry, but above all, demands a new definition of the system in which the reading is taking place. It must be clearly said that the position occupied by the scholar and the way he defines his role is far from unrelated to the results of his analysis. The link to the category of micropoetics is the attentiveness that should, as seems obvious on the face of it, mark every interpreter. However, the attention we devote to particular elements of reality or a work is not a neutral or universal category. On the contrary, it is dependent on many historical factors that influence what we find in the field of our perception and why one element instead of another is found to be important, interesting, striking, worthy of deeper analysis. Jonathan Crary, in his work on the historical transformations of the category of attentiveness, underscores:

Normative explanations of attentiveness arose directly out of the understanding that a full grasp of a self-identical reality was not possible and that human perception, conditioned by physical and psychological temporalities and processes, provided at most a provisional, shifting approximation of its objects.²⁶

The cognitive model in which the subject upholds the cohesion of his world view is neither strictly optical nor, for that matter, a faithful representation of reality. An entire tradition of philosophers who have undertaken a critique of presence – Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan – has pointed to the lack that figures in every perceptual experience and the related belief in the impossibility of unmediated immersion in any experience whatever. The world does not present itself to the looker directly, and perception

²⁴See A. Kunce, op. cit., p. 43.

²⁵A. Kunce, p. 45, [emphasis in original].

²⁶J. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Cambridge 2001, p. 4.

is not atemporal. This pertains as much to the everyday attention we turn to things, people, and events that we (in imagistic terms) duplicate each time as it does (in a still greater degree) to cultural texts: readings, images, films, etc. The attention with which we turn toward our selected objects (or those imposed on us) lays bare precisely this contradictory condition. When we sharpen our focus on an object of inspection, that causes the displacement of other elements of reality beyond the purview of our perception; that reality thus fades and loses meaning. This is what gives perception its twofold nature: it must always lose something to gain something else; in perceiving a detail, it loses the whole, and in gazing at the whole, it misses the details.

Referencing the etymology of the word “attention” and the implications of its relation to the word “tension” (both words also suggest, or can suggest waiting and expectation) Crary focuses on the position of the subject. As it succumbs to rapture or experiences contemplation, this subject “is both immobile and ungrounded.”²⁷ A state of suspension, disturbance, or even the negation of perception thus accompanies the deepest experiences of immersion in something and absorption. For that reason, to the characteristics described by Rita Felski of readerly affective enchantment and fascination with the work, we might add that when it affects a reader in this way, it deprives him or her, at least for a time, of critical aptitude. And even though we are dealing here not with two mutually exclusive reading attitudes, but only two stages in the perception of a work, it must, perhaps, nonetheless be admitted that a micropoetics concentrated on the work and a microaesthetics interested in readerly perception of the work project two different perspectives for analysis of the communicative situation, two distinct objects of study.

It is instructive to consider how Jonathan Crary reconstructs the historicity of the category of attention. Retracing the path demarcated years ago by Walter Benjamin, he shows that it is not so much a predisposition of the subject as a cultural construct that undergoes inner transformations, but also submits to sociotechnical influences, among which the technological context plays a significant role. It is through the technological orders that certain “natural” predispositions of the subject to maintain attention, as well as toward the strain of reflective activity, take shape. That type of orientation was propitious to the technology of print, with its most highly prized achievement – literary culture, forming a particular type of intellectual activity that we now usually link to hermeneutic inquisitiveness. In the contemporary world, a feature of the dominant visual technologies (cinema, computer, Internet) is “the imposition of a permanent low-level attentiveness [...]”²⁸ That in turn has the result that the reverie relating to the state of inattention “now most often takes place with preset rhythms, images, speeds, and circuits that reinforce the irrelevance and dereliction of whatever is not compatible with their formats.”²⁹

It is curious that Aleksander Nawarecki points – on the horizon of micropoetological literary scholarly reflection – to the chaomic diffusion and reproduction that are now duplicated

²⁷J. Crary, p. 10.

²⁸Crary, p. 77.

²⁹Crary, p. 78.

and represented by the internet.³⁰ It is thus worth considering to what extent the literary phenomena present in digital virtuality satisfy the demands of micrology, and above all – to what extent they submit to the rules of micropoetological readings. The micro scale, in which the algorithmic processes that constitute the surface layer of visibility in digital media, can in no way be brought into accord with the rules of micropoetics as a strategy of reading oriented toward profound exploration and detailed analysis. There is no connection of cause and effect or probability between the mathematical languages used for programming and the audiovisual codes that we deal with on the plane of cultural interfaces that could become the object of micrological analysis and interpretation. Literary scholars do not even possess the language to name the nature of such phenomena, and we therefore use visualizing metaphors that allow us to imagine that binary code occupies some kind of material space-time realm. Finally, reading computer science source code, despite not being impossible, can only slightly help to understand what appears at the cultural level of the digital project.

In addition, the environment of electronic media, though built from pixels, that is, micro-points, each of which is capable of being isolated and examined in an enlarged form revealing its mathematical nature, projects a kind of reception that is a negation of attention. Coming too close causes the image to become washed out and distorted. Thus, in defiance of the micrological hopes in which Nawarecki seems to find an affinity with the new medial situation, we can posit, with a high degree of probability, the thesis that there is no place in the Internet for micrologist literary scholars. Or, put differently: literary scholarship – let us repeat once again after Rita Felski – must submit to transformation and form relationships with other media, as well as examining the qualities of the artistic forms specific to each of them. Furthermore, the micropoetics of digital forms will demand from literary scholars an expansion of their competencies, to include (among others) those in the domain of knowledge of the basics of the programs used to create internet art and literary hypertexts.³¹

Intellect, the tool of the micrologist that distances him from virtual artefacts, is unintentionally becoming, in the milieu of digital literature, an ally of the conservative project for a return to critical philosophy. At the same time, according not only to Felski's theses but also to the findings of scholars of the affective, performative or somatic turns, understanding is not tied to reflectivity alone. If we want to understand the nature of new cultural phenomena, we must replace (or supplement) the contemplative posture with affective categories: shock, enchantment, bewilderment, fascination, disgust, repulsion. To examine our reaction as that of an active participant in communication. Because the scholar is part of the system that he (or she) attempts to characterize. He always conducts his analysis from an internal perspective and that impossibility of absolute distance inscribes in his situation the conditions for the failure of operations that seek to furnish unambiguous conclusions. To the extent that at-

³⁰See A. Nawarecki, "Mikrologia, genologia, miniatura" (Micrology, Study of Genres, Miniature), in: *Miniatura i mikrologia* (Miniature and Micrology), ed. A. Nawareckiego, vol. 1, Katowice 2000, p. 28.

³¹It is worth remembering that the creation of electronic literature also demands that its authors possess these kinds of competencies. At a website which presents the technical bases of hypertexts, we read: "To young authors who are starting out on their path as authors of internet art, we recommend [...] a deep initiation into the mysteries of HTML5, JavaScript, jQuery, Cocoa and Objective-C." <http://techsty.art.pl/warsztaty/warsztaty/warsztaty.htm> [accessed 10. 02. 2017]

tention, as a cultural construct, still upholds the model of a coherent and logical object, ruled over by a concentrated and watchful observer, then in the moment when instead of dealing with an object we deal with a dynamic event, attentiveness ceases to provide a guarantee of understanding.

This is true not only because multimedia demand divisible attention, and that naturally is tied to an increased shallowness of perception and its distraction. Above all, the very nature of internet objects rules out reflective, contemplative or hermeneutic reception, oriented toward close, intimate contact. Their dynamism, variability, fluidity and momentality mean that we either allow ourselves to be transported by impressions, immersing ourselves in what the interactive medium offers (which is far from simple – in keeping with the self-reflexive self-consciousness of the scholar described above), or we proceed in defiance of their nature: we will pause the image and subject it to a micrological frame-by-frame or screen-by-screen analysis (though doing so is technically not always possible). But then, focused on the statified detail, we lose sight of what seems a condition of understanding cultural change: a new kind of aesthetic experience, built on instant, short-lived and ephemeral stimuli intended to act only (or primarily) upon the sensual and emotional sphere. That sphere can productively be studied by the new microaesthetics proposed by Rita Felski, demanding the borders of literary studies be opened to other media. At the same time, this method remains for the time being within the realm of plans, because the manifestations of e-literature and other multimedial reconfigurations of verbal art available at present in virtual reality, engage critical thought to an undoubtedly greater extent than they do the emotions. By forcing interactive co-participation in the creation of a disposable artefact, they place the scholar in a triple role: as creator, participant, and commentator. And that once again redefines his cognitive possibilities.³²

It is therefore worthwhile to keep in mind that attention adapts to new technological conditions. Each medium structures our perceptual experience. The screen is now the main tool that mediates the receiver's encounter with external reality and texts of culture: of verbal as well as audiovisual culture. Distraction of attention is a fundamental property of the screen. If, since the time of Kant, the transcendental synthesis of the field of knowledge, which was always partial and fragmentary, has presented a problem, we now speak of the total disintegration of perception. We have bid adieu to the dream of synthesis. And precisely that anti-system, decomposed perception represents fertile ground for micropoetological scholarship in literary studies. They are, at least to a certain extent, an expression of longing for the depth, seriousness and sensibleness of the intimate realm that have been lost as a result of great historical and technological processes. At the same time, micropoetics encounters a fundamental difficulty, about which Crary has written convincingly, on the way to its object: we today are subjects incapable of the sustained concentration necessary in order to be able to consistently place the studied object in the order of attentiveness.

³²Here I omit the problem of the status of interactive hypertextual phenomena and/or multimedia digital objects due to their complexity and tenuous connection with the topic of my article. Intuition, however, tells me that micropoetics is not yet up to the task of describing the phenomena just mentioned.

Disturbed perception was the distinguishing characteristic of modern subjectivity for Georges Simml, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Theodor Adorno.³³ These sociologists believed distraction and deconcentration to result from irreversible changes in culture. Crary, on the other hand, shows that distraction and concentration are points on a continuum, and the shift from focus to deconcentration occurs gradually and imperceptibly.³⁴ If we accept, following Hannah Arendt, that a collapse of contemplation has taken place in our culture,³⁵ the cultural effects of those changes in the form of the downfall of grand narratives, the loss of a holistic vision of the world and the permanent disintegration of the personality are merely consequences of great processes that have been happening for several hundred years.

In this situation, micrology is revealed to be the remedy for the changes that have come to pass in culture. Somewhat like a relic of the historical sensitivity that was bound to the philosophy of the modern, putatively integrated and autonomous subject, micrology attempts to oppose the phenomena which play a distracting role and demand from us multitasking and divisible attention rather than focusing on a single object.

A somewhat similar formulation of the problem of micrology, likewise based on a foundation of philosophical reflection, has been proposed by Paweł Jędrzejko,³⁶ who expressing his attachment to the traditional, autonomous nature of literary studies, nevertheless opts for a scientization of micrology. He finds it to be a clearly defined scholarly perspective and treats it as a bridge between Gadamerian hermeneutics and the contemporary critique of consciousness. Microanalysis (and microdeconstruction) in his presentation are stages in the workings of the hermeneutic circle. Micrology would theoretically be a field in the border area between descriptive and historical poetics, “dealing with the literary detail, its ‘life’ and transformations in the text or texts, concentrating on the analysis of the role and function of detail in the formation of the immanent poetics of the work, or as well – in its diachronic formulation – analyzing the detail as indicator of historical changes in poetics at the macroscale.”³⁷ It would therefore represent the position of a fairly traditional textual analysis. At the same time, however – and this makes Jędrzejko’s voice interesting for the present elaboration – micrology is defined by him as a philosophical stance. An interest in the detail as “the place where contemporary thematic criticism and traditional hermeneutics become intertwined; the semiotic together with the existential”³⁸ leads him to the conclusion that “micrology, emerging from the anxiety of the post-Derridean generation, was brought to life by the divergence between existence and discourse: joining – via emotions – the entitativity of the detail and its signage, micrology performs a bona fide interpretation, based on the philological honesty of ‘learning the language’ of a work and its period.”³⁹

³³More extensively on this topic, see: Crary, p. 70.

³⁴Crary, p. 73.

³⁵See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago 1958.

³⁶P. Jędrzejko, “Oscylacje literackie, czyli od Gadamera do mikrologicznej krytyki świadomości” (Literary Oscillations, or, From Gadamer to the Micrological Critique of Consciousness), in *Mikrologia*, vol. 2.

³⁷Ibid., p. 29.

³⁸Ibid., p. 56.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 55-56.

This idea of *bona fide*, the good faith with which the analysis of a work is carried out, shared by a significant number of the authors whose works appear in the successive volumes of *Mikrologia literacka*, edited by Aleksander Nawarecki, nonetheless obscures what seems to be the genuine innovation and opportunity of the “post-Derridean” perspective invoked by Jędrzejko: its fragility, provisorial nature, and – above all – immanent resistance to such fundamental categories as “the language of a work and its period,” against whose usurping claims micropoetics stands in reading practice, as it stands against all kinds of generalizations, certainties and findings. Because micropoetics is, above all, a practice of reading. Let us repeat, a practice, not a theory. Micropoetics goes into textual particles, but also into the cracks between them, attempting to fathom what is unspoken and unspeakable. It is thus not exclusively an art of analysis, but rather, primarily, of interpretation.

In the extended essay “Czarna mikrologia”⁴⁰ (Black Micrology) that opens the fourth volume from the Silesian group of scholars, like its predecessors devoted to a variety of contexts, understandings and uses of the category of smallness in literary studies, Nawarecki likewise does not focus on method but on micrological sensitivity and aesthetics. That aesthetics is, for him, a minor, minute thing, an aesthetic of the vanishing world of the melancholic, the collector of scraps and seemingly useless things, important only in the perspective of an individual, single-use existence. The micrological approach is thus represented by the man who, like Adorno in his *Reflections on a Damaged Life*, written from the perspective of an intellectual and a Jew who survived the Holocaust, attempts to enunciate his own *Minima Moralia*.⁴¹ It is the perspective of one whose own experiences and memory are anchored in the past and who gazes on the contemporary world as a heap of fragments and ruins, bearing witness to the impermanence of the world, the fragility and transitoriness of things. The signature of melancholy thus marks the workshop of the micrologist, because that which is small is not only fleeting but is also frequently overlooked, and only when it has been irreversibly lost becomes the object of tender adoration. Its existence is thus purely hypothetical, potential, until it is brought to the light of day by the penetrating gaze or thought of the micrologist, who nonetheless not only trusts his senses but avails himself of all available precision tools of dissection and analysis that allow him to name and authenticate whatever has hitherto been located beyond the horizon of existence and understanding.

Micrological poetics is, to some extent, a metaphysical poetics, and at the same time, a post-secular one, founded on the experience of loss, the loss of faith in the value of what cannot be directly expressed or captured in the rigor of syntax and logical argumentation. It is, to a significant measure, based on the belief that what is important is revealed in flashes, fleeting flickers, moments, endowed by the reader’s attention with their full form. Attentiveness and concentration are meant to offer resistance to perceptions that are subject to the operations of mass media technologies, which Benjamin described already in the 1930s as proceeding in a state of distraction.⁴²

⁴⁰A. Nawarecki, “Czarna mikrologia” (Black Micrology), in: *Skala mikro w badaniach literackich*, op. cit., pp. 9-24.

⁴¹T. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, New York 2005.

⁴²W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, translator uncredited, Scottsdale 2010.

In reality, the surplus of stimuli coming at us causes us to be less and less capable of perceiving; our reception of things and states is increasingly superficial, and we are increasingly desensitized to the signals that reach us. Micropoetics would therefore be a remedy to the disease of disintegrated postmodern subjectivity. A remedy applied with premeditation in defiance of what is forced on us by the contemporary online world: divisibility of attention, multitasking, speed in taking decisions and action.⁴³ Micropoetics pauses time, freezing it in a careful gaze that rushes into depth. It has no thought for the contemporary aesthetics of disappearance,⁴⁴ which in its velocity of images and things turns every detail into a distantly fading trail. It is the posture of a melancholic who looks out longingly for things to fill his lack, felt painfully amid inattentive people living in haste and shimmering images without depth.

The fancy for the micro scale reveals a desire to oppose great globalizing, generalizing and unifying processes. It contains a desire to save what is unrepeatable, what is one of a kind and one's own, because anxiety before nothingness, anonymity, and homogeneity gnaws at the contemporary mind. We thus seek a custom-made medicine for it: in the affirmation of the detail the trifle, in the fleeting sensation of something real. Only they, unnoticed by the casual eye and sensibility, give us a sense of the exceptional.

Micropoetics as an escape into smallness, into detail should nonetheless not postulate that since the whole cannot be grasped, it is then possible to isolate at least the smallest indivisible particle which we can observe. The literary microparticle is not an elementary particle like a quantum in physics or a point in mathematics. After the critical experience of deconstruction, no empirical attempts to exhaust the richness of the literary object or the ontological nature of that object, which represents an area of free play as it is understood in Derridean terms, will allow that goal to be accomplished. The micrologist's posture is precisely the result of the realization that we cannot possess full knowledge of the object of study, exhaustively describe it, or write out all possible versions of its interpretation.

That is why micropoetics is not an innovative method, as Ewelina Suszek⁴⁵ suggests in her discussion of Silesian micrology, nor is it a methodological fashion. It constitutes rather a reaction to the lost dream of modern literary studies, whose symbol was the structuralist project

⁴³The properties of perception in the online discourse of the computer science community has been described interestingly by Karol Piekarski in his doctoral thesis. See K. Piekarski, *Ekonomia percepcji. Mechanizmy selekcjonowania informacji w Internecie*. This doctoral dissertation was written under the guidance of Prof. Tadeusz Miczki, Katowice 2014, <http://sbc.katowice.pl/Content/126980/doktorat3505.pdf>, [accessed: 12. 02. 2017]. Here of particular relevance are the chapters devoted to changes in perception and the historical contexts of the phenomenon of information overload.

⁴⁴I have borrowed the term "aesthetics of disappearance" from Paul Virilio (*Estetique de la disparition*, Paris 1980), whom in his work, repeatedly underscored the crucial importance, for progress, of speed, and its society-structuring role. Especially in relation to contemporary civilization, we can discuss the enormous acceleration that was embodied by the appearance of cinema. Cinematographic art, in Virilio's view, constitutes the quintessence of change, because it is in that area, as Krystyna Wilkoszewska notes, that "the shift took place from the aesthetic of material transmission of things and works toward the aesthetics of disappearance, because in film technique the faster things vanish, the more present they are" (K. Wilkoszewska, "Paula Virilio filozofia prędkości i estetyka znikania" [Paul Virilio's Philosophy of Speed and Aesthetics of Disappearance], *Kultura Współczesna* [Contemporary Culture] 1993, no. 1, p. 110).

⁴⁵E. Suszek, *Moda na małe? Innowacyjność śląskiej mikrologii literackiej*, "Postscriptum Polonistyczne" 2016, nr 1(17), s. 179-191.

of interpretation as a hypothesis of a hidden totality. Micropoetics is also a conscious return to sources, richer for all the experiences acquired over the centuries – to the modest artisanal tasks of the philologist, who, in the rubble of the great systems, patiently rebuilds his small, provisory workshop, providing him with a fragile sense of reliability and a makeshift professionalism.

KEYWORDS

LITERARY STUDIES

postmodernity

ABSTRACT:

The article attempts to place micropoetics on the map of contemporary cultural phenomena and within the context of other areas of scholarship. The author treats micropoetics as a subjective quasi-method in scholarly literary studies, oriented toward detailed, in-depth analysis. She shows the traits that connect it with traditional philological scholarship, as well as what constitutes its innovative element: an individualized reading strategy, adapted to the object of analysis, an individualized approach to the work, and the self-consciousness of the scholar-micrologist, who takes a distanced view of his own judgments and is conscious of their situational nature. The main distinguishing feature of micrology becomes, in her reading, its attentiveness, discussed here as a historically legitimate category.

micropoetics

analysis

attention

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