

# How Are Evaluative Notions Created? On the Example of a Dispute over Louise Glück's Poetry

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I would like to present a few working theses regarding ways of creating evaluative notions in literary criticism.

I understand evaluative processes (to which I connect evaluative notions conceptualized here as theoretical tools and materializations of these processes) broadly, but this paper will focus on the context of literary criticism. Evaluating is a complex social and cultural practice rooted in specific systems of values, connected with selection processes, which participate both in cognitive and emotional decisions<sup>1</sup>. In this sense evaluative practices can become synonymous with practices of valuations, but they should be seen as narrower than valuating behaviors. When we evaluate, we do not need to incorporate our judgments into systems – axiological, aesthetic, political *et cetera* – and we do not need to recognize our motivations and needs. I assume here that evaluation is a part of valuating practices, directing our attention and interest not at values, but also at price, costs, and benefits<sup>2</sup>. I also advocate for an approach which problematizes the difference between evaluative and descriptive judgments without absolutizing it, and accepts that it always works within the practice of a specific language and context. Relationships between the evaluator and normative character of notions connected with valuating practice and institutions normalizing mechanisms creating literary values also require some explanation. These relationships allow us to think about the cultural reproduction (reinforcing) values, and they are

<sup>1</sup> See Zdzisław Najder, *Wartości i oceny* [Values and evaluations] (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1971), 6–45; Barbara Hernstein Smith, “Przygodność wartości” [Contingencies of value], translated into Polish by Agata Preis-Smith, in: *Kultura, tekst, ideologia. Dyskursy współczesnej amerykanistyki* [Culture, text, ideology. Discourses of modern American studies], edited by Agata Preis-Smith (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2004), 213–254.

<sup>2</sup> See Najder.

constantly studied and considered from the historical perspective. However, for the purpose of this paper I will focus on this aspect of normativity out of the complex and rich history of the dispute about normative foundations of values, which allows me to introduce the concept of the binding power of values. When a value becomes normative, supported by culture, knowledge, education, the most ambivalent character of valuation practices is revealed, which may lead to canonization (absolutization) of specific literary-aesthetic values and literary definitions. This is why it is so important to think about valuation as something systematic and continued – this way we can prevent the absolutization of values and their elimination from social life.

Obviously initial differentiations are not an organized discussion through theoretical frames. This is a peculiar paradox of considerations regarding valuation: although values basically integrate our motivational and emotional systems<sup>3</sup>, they remain ambiguous (see e.g., the definition of value) and complex. It is best to study them on specific examples. So, how are evaluative notions created? I shall look into the process behind the emergence of notions which were used in Polish literary criticism after Louise Glück was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2021.

### There are no non-evaluative notions (in criticism)

Translators and poets argued about the value of Louise Glück's (a Nobel Laureate) poetry. It all started with Julia Fiedorczuk's enthusiastic Facebook post ("What poetry! Not pretending that it is what it isn't. Poetry by a woman. Joy!!!"<sup>4</sup>) and Kacper Bartczak's comment, which introduced several categories to the discussion: narcissism, authenticity game, egotism, lyricism, monologueness and vision (prophetic tone), all of which were supposed to depreciate Glück's poetry. Bartczak stressed that:

[...] I used to read Glück but I was always put off by the "I" fetish, very strong narcissism – but the kind that serves poetry and is necessary for it. In Glück I hear narrowing narcissism. Glück plays the "authenticity game" and modifies this category poorly: she believes and follows it far too much. And this is an inbred kind of authenticity, which does not engage readers much. [...] She turns poetry to monologueness, which has always been a threat for it. And moreover, there is this unbearable tone of vision. And yet another disappointment, because this vision concerned – again – "myself and I"<sup>5</sup>.

Natalia Malek replied to Bartczak, citing intellectualism and antimoralism in defense of Glück: "Sometimes it is lyrical, where lyricism is a groan which puts you off, but sometimes it is completely alyrical, surgical even? I do not find Glück stilted *en masse*, in fact it was one of the reasons why I found her interesting"<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> "The grand promise, grand suggestion of values is thus – third of all – their power of structuring the world. Those who do not believe in values typically believe that they can be numbered, that there are many of them, and that they significantly determine the way in which we perceive and shape our world [...]" Andreas Urs Sommer, *Wartości. Dlaczego ich potrzebujemy, chociaż ich nie ma* [Values. Why we need them although they do not exist], translated by Tadeusz Zatorski (Warszawa: Fundacja Augusta Hrabiego Cieszkowskiego, 2021), 39. [Translation from Polish mine, PZ].

<sup>4</sup> Julia Fiedorczuk, Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/profile/1056624955/search/?q=gluck>.

<sup>5</sup> Kacper Bartczak, Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/profile/1056624955/search/?q=gluck>.

<sup>6</sup> Natalia Malek, Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/profile/1056624955/search/?q=gluck>.

If we did not know the emotional charge of notions used by Bartczak, which resulted from the generally devaluating character of his comment, it would be harder to understand why he criticizes Glück for vision and prophetic tone, and why monologueness becomes an evaluative notion, losing its neutral, analytical character. Monologueness and vision are two categories from a dictionary of literary studies; although originally they are different from ethical or psychological categories of authenticity and narcissism, they cease to refer to formal aspects of poetry, and start to characterize its value. A similar mechanism can be observed in Malek's comments – it is default values that stand behind alyricism as a category opposed to lyricism, it is not only a historically defined structure of an utterance.

As can be seen, when one discursively enters the space of circulation of capital (as proposed by Bruno Latour), most notions become evaluative. Then it is the context and appositions that stabilize the evaluative meaning of used notions. It would thus seem that there are no non-evaluative notions – if specific categories enter the field of impact of social critical practices, they become infected with the evaluative character of the activities which they are a part of. Generally, it is the complex spectrum of social and political behaviors within which a given notion gains meaning and informs the value of the object it refers to that determines the evaluation of artistic phenomena, rather than stabilized meanings of the used notion.

Let us return to the discussion about poetry. “For me, these terms (narcissism, egotism) do not mean much in the context of this author” – Fiedorczuk replies to Bartczak. It is difficult to tell how much Fiedorczuk's comment says about the work performed by notions in critical-literary discussions, and how much about the character of social media discussions. For Fiedorczuk the aesthetic notions and related values introduced by Bartczak are only subjective, insignificant details. We do not learn why they do not mean much, nor what makes them inadequate – but perhaps this is the moment to consider what happens when we ostensibly ignore certain values and notions which refer to them; it is easier to imagine that such a gesture can have a re-evaluative character. Some kind of stripping off of established values and working on the effectiveness of change of evaluative notions can produce new social relations. And although Fiedorczuk's comment is not an example of such an action, as she only questioned the reasonableness of the notions used by Bartczak, she did not introduce new meanings nor did she attempt to reshape those already used for the benefit of the discussed poetry<sup>7</sup>, the strong negation gesture should be considered in the valuation process. It seems that in this context – when it is not said which terms would be more adequate for evaluating this poetry, leaving the question open – we are dealing with an attempt at situating poems outside of any systems of values. Then it is praising the idea – opposite to what I have just described – that aesthetic notions are basically non-evaluative<sup>8</sup>. Obviously, the question about non-aesthetic notions used for describing or evaluating a piece of art arises, whether or not they can be seen as non-evaluative. I shall return to the problem of aesthetic and non-aesthetic notions (moral, cognitive, political) later in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Later Julia Fiedorczuk has discussed Glück's work extensively. However, I have not found any references to Kacper Bartczak's opinions questioning the value of that poetry. This is not the case in Natalia Malek's text (discussed later in this paper), which takes into account negative opinions about Glück's work.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. James Sommerville, “Czy istnieją jakości estetyczne?” [Are there any aesthetic qualities?], in: *Estetyka w świecie. Wybór tekstów t. III* [Aesthetics in the world. Selected texts, vol. 3], edited by Maria Gołaszewska, translated by Leszek Sosnowski (Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 1991), 123.

## Scouts

The Facebook dispute did not end the discussion about Glück's poetry. Malek and Bartczak continued, clarifying their opinions, later joined by Joanna Piechura, Justyna Sobolewska, Maciej Stroiński, Magda Heydel, and others. Most Polish texts discussing Glück's work, which is generally little known in Poland, represented the laudatory convention of post-Nobel opinions, resulting in a descriptive-interpretative, and sometimes anecdotal character – which is not to say that they were deprived of evaluative functions. It is common knowledge that the laudatory convention is the basic reproducer of values and forms which are already well-established and appreciated, or those considered worthy of appreciation. Evaluative notions are used as stabilizers in such a convention – they should convince us that a work of art represents values which should be appreciated. As viewers of art, we do not consider one specific artistic realization then – we rather think about it as a representation of specific aesthetic, political, ethical values, etc. However, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to extract the intersubjective potential of such vaguely defined notions, which is why they are becoming scouts rather than indicators of universality of aesthetic judgments. If we share the idea that, say, the notion of universality reasonably informs us about the value of a given object, then we belong to the same ideological club. Evaluative notions scout for potential allies.

So-called “feminine writing” is one example of such a functioning of a notion in a discussion about Glück's work. Malek concludes her text with: “This ease [overlooking erudition in Glück's poetry – A.K.] represents a certain protectionist tradition regarding feminine writing”<sup>9</sup>. It is easier to understand (e.g., compared to the notion of vision) why “feminine writing” becomes an evaluative notion – it can express praise or criticism. For Malek “feminine writing” may automatically cause depreciation. We know the history of this notion and numerous examples of its usage – see e.g., Krystyna Kosińska's work, in which she outlines its depreciating character<sup>10</sup>. Feminine writing, processed via various theories, revealing relationships between writing and gender (or, more broadly, between artistic work and gender), is still characterized by its evaluative aspect rather than by its analytical-theoretical value. In discussions about the difference between female and male writing, it can be either positive or negative, depending on intention. Recently it seems that due to feminist and media practices it suggests that a female author allows us to reevaluate literary texts, slightly disregarding the values they carry.

## Exchange of notions: universality and longevity

In work on notions their exchange is a basic mechanism. In *Philosophy of Money*, Georg Simmel seeks value in the exchange process rather than in characteristics of specific objects<sup>11</sup>. Values and

<sup>9</sup> Natalia Malek, “Za co ziemia nienawidzi nieba” [Why earth hates heaven], *Dwutygodnik* 295 (2020), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/9228-za-co-ziemia-nienawidzi-nieba.html>.

<sup>10</sup> See Krystyna Kłosińska, “Kobieta autorka” [Woman author], in Kłosińska: *Ciało, pożądanie, ubranie. O wczesnych powieściach Gabrieli Zapolskiej* [Body, desire, attire. Early novels by Gabriela Zapolska] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo eFka, 1999), 7–37.

<sup>11</sup> Georg Simmel, *Filozofia pieniądza* [Philosophy of Money], translated into Polish by Andrzej Przyłębski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Fundacji Humaniora, 1997), 59.

notions referring to them are produced because value is always negotiable<sup>12</sup>. However, it seems that there are notions which have more trans-historical potential than others (e.g., the notion of beauty which was exchanged with ugliness and the grotesque in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or the categories of authenticity or honesty, which were used to valorize works of art). Exchange of notions results from the interaction of different forces: aesthetic, political, cultural, religious, social. A history of the human world told from the perspective of the transformation of dominating evaluative notions which were modeling culture and society of a given point in time would be genuinely interesting.

In the discussion about Glück's poetry universality is a notion whose trans-historical activity is undeniable. Magda Heydal writes:

Her poems discuss issues which affect everyone, such as loss, death, love, loneliness, experiencing one's own existence in the world (this is the "universality" mentioned by the secretary of the Swedish Academy), at the same time using simple language, without any experimental transformations<sup>13</sup>.

Maciej Stroiński writes in a similar tone: "Her poems were written long before the pandemic, but – as any truly successful and universal work – they are good for any time, including a «dark hour»"<sup>14</sup>. Bartczak also mentions universality:

We are told that Glück seeks the universal, but her universalism focuses on archetypal, hurt women (Dido, Persephone, Eurydice) who experienced only pain and injustice. [...] It is difficult to disagree with Glück. Reaching for personal experience, she universalizes it relentlessly<sup>15</sup>.

In literature, evaluative notions often function automatically. We more or less know what universality means in the context of poetry; vagueness seems to be its most important distinguishing feature. Compromised by various theories – minority, postcolonial and gender-queer – universalism as a criterion for evaluating poetry remains significant. It definitely will not be able to mark hidden values of dominating groups, which camouflage their historicity, locality, certain interests (economic, gender, racial, class) and elitist ideas regarding what can become poetry/art. It will rather be an indicator seeking intersubjective possibilities of constructing social relations around aesthetic experience (multisensory intellectual work). Is this what is happening in the dispute in question?

Let us look into how Bartczak and Malek interpret universal images in Glück's poetry. According to both authors the universal is connected with a certain type of imaging, with references to the Bible, Greek mythology, and American poetic tradition, and focused on communicating the human experience of death, trauma, suffering, torment. Malek appreciates the most con-

<sup>12</sup>See Luc Boltanski, "Od rzeczy do dzieła. Procesy atrybucji i nadawania wartości przedmiotom" [From object to masterpiece. Processes of attribution and attributing value], translated into Polish by Iwona Bojadziejewa, in: *Wieczna radość. Ekonomia polityczna społecznej kreatywności* [Eternal joy. Political economy of social creativity], edited by Aniela Pilarska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Bęc Zmiana, 2011), 17–44.

<sup>13</sup>Magda Heydal, "Literacki Nobel dla Louise Glück" [Nobel Prize for literature for Louise Glück], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 42 (2020), <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/literacki-nobel-dla-louise-gluck-165192>.

<sup>14</sup>Maciej Stroiński, "Louise Glück: Dla zdrowych i chorych" [Louise Glück: for the healthy and the sick], *Przekrój*, 2.11.2020, <https://przekroj.pl/kultura/louise-gluck-dla-zdrowych-i-chorych-maciej-stroinski>.

<sup>15</sup>Kacper Bartczak, "Zima w centrum: post-konfesyjny pat Louise Glück" [Winter in the center: Louise Glück's post-confessional stalemate], *Mały Format* 01-03 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/04/zima-centrum-post-konfesyjny-pat-louise-gluck/>.

structuring lyrical stories which reveal the fundamental “non-negotiability” of basic parameters of human existence that are difficult to accept – especially today:

Glück uses literary biblical or antique tropes not to practice any religion. With every book she is getting more confirmations and proof that there is nothing beyond “the dying order” (a quote from the poem “Thanksgiving”), unforgiving. [...] For modern readers the awareness of ruthlessness combined with the omnipotence of the superlative “instance” can be shocking. Hierarchism and predestination of such an outlined world clashes with the conviction of the democratic negotiability of rules organizing the world, and the forbearance of “human” instances upholding agreements which resulted from social negotiations. It is this dissonance which is partially responsible for the power of Glück’s poetic images<sup>16</sup>.

According to Malek, the consistent methodological observation of the world of suffering in Glück’s poems, always focused on the inevitable end of biological bodies, is a brave, radical contestation of conviction about the vitality and activity of individuals. In Glück’s poetry they encounter a “demiurgic force”, which is an unknown and incomprehensible power. Here universality is a temporality perspective other than that of people, laws of nature, and space. It just so happens that they are hostile to people.

Bartczak recognizes universality on an interpretative-philosophical level in a similar way to Malek, connecting it to mythological and biblical rhetorical tropes characteristic for confessional poetry – however, in his text this universality is described with obvious disdain. According to Bartczak the way Glück uses poetry, language and tradition invalidates the work of American poets on changing readers’ habits. In this sense universality would be an evaluative notion, specifically referring to aesthetic (pathos, loftiness) and artistic (monologue, confessionalism, cultural intertextuality) values, upholding writing which resigns from poetry’s possibility to react to (technical, ethical, political, etc.) transformations of a person’s situation in reality. Universality understood in this way would be a worldview perspective, thematized in poetry, but also a specific idea about how to do poetry. It masks its historical background, considering a specific perspective as the only, universal one.

However, Bartczak demonstrates that it is impossible to separate the universal concept of poetry from the concept of the subject (human) clashing with a demiurgic force (of nature, fate, destiny). According to Bartczak, “an aesthetically solemn formula”, formal rigor, distanced observation which highlight the vegetative status of all beings abstract Glück’s poetry from a specific, sensual-material space which leads to “the female subject not arguing with any socially established system of beliefs, but rather with timeless necessity. [...] Nature, together with body, sexuality, and ultimately gender are victims of this desert metaphysics”<sup>17</sup>.

Bartczak clearly refers to the relationship between imagination and death (“In this poetry cemetery is the place of speaking, with elegy as its main formula”), when he compares the motif of light in Glück and Wallace Stevens. This comparison introduces the category of longevity, which may be fundamental for Bartczak’s argument. He interprets the poem *Messengers* – about deer as messengers of death – pointing out that the signs of life/vitality/youth turn out to be an illusion;

<sup>16</sup>Malek, “Za co ziemia nienawidzi nieba”.

<sup>17</sup>Bartczak, “Zima w centrum: post-konfesyjny pat Louise Glück”.

the deer are in fact skeletons, dead since forever, leading us towards archaic thanatology. In *Sunday morning*, a poem by Stevens, “before the last stanza gives justice to death, deer and birds will be caught for a moment in the amazing light of their inexplicable longevity”. Bartczak formulates his accusations clearly, although he does not specify the notion of longevity as a source of value in poetry and as an evaluative notion. He does not directly oppose universality to longevity, but we understand that his criticism of Glück stems from his objection to Glück’s imagination, which is trapped in thanatological images. He does not see her poetry as removed from the receptive-social sphere of solitary confessions; instead, he suggests various forms of influence of poetic record on social imagination, prejudice, fears and beliefs. His argumentation leads us to the question of how such poetry reinforces social conformism and acceptance of the *status quo*:

Meanwhile human carnality and general erotic emotionality related to it remain like corpses in the battlefield – true love or sexual energy glows in some places, but paralyzed by religious-cultural prohibition (one prayer in “Wild Iris” is about incestuous longing for brother’s body), cut short by hieratic patriarchal order (father as an object of longing and a silent ruler, preoccupied with his own dying), or reduced to pure mechanical sexual attraction<sup>18</sup>.

Bartczak thus replaces universality with longevity, in which paths of (tradition of) lyrical-confessional poetry and ideology cross. Longevity as a theoretical-visual category would be opposed to images of death, freezing and corpses, but it would also be a part of the idea of poetry as something taking advantage of its predecessors’ practices in a life-giving way.

William J. Thomas offers a similar conceptualization of the notion of longevity; he introduces understanding images (which he differentiates from representing) as forms of life which have their counterparts in genres and specific representations of genres:

With pictures, the question of vitality is generally posed in terms of liveliness or lifelikeness, a sense that the picture either “captures the life” of its model, or that it has in its own formal qualities, an energetic, animated, or lively appearance. With images, the question of vitality has more to do with reproductive potency or fertility. We can ask if a picture is a good or bad, living or dead specimen, but with an image, the question is, Is it likely to go on and reproduce itself, increasing its population or evolving into surprising new forms?<sup>19</sup>.

Taking into consideration what Bartczak wrote about Glück’s poetry and developing Mitchell’s metaphors, we should summarize the status of such a poetic practice as pseudo-longevity, zombie-like functioning. Glück is able to use the energy forces of her predecessors; however, she cannot give them new life in different conditions. She is like a vampire, sucking on past poetry, digesting it into dead signs. Stevens’s deer are only carcasses. Glück’s poems mimic “dead images”, because thanatological scenes, images and figures transform any form of life into a prop room of dead conventions.

<sup>18</sup>Bartczak, “Zima w centrum: post-konfesyjny pat Louise Glück”.

<sup>19</sup>William John Thomas Mitchell, *Czego chcą obrazy?*, translated into Polish by Łukasz Zaremba (Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2013), 120. English version: *What do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 89-90.

Paradoxically it might seem that such a “universal” idea of writing poetry, with its different variants, is sometimes understood as classical/modernist poetry of culture, a dead museum piece which has a huge reproductive potential, as evidenced by its institutional appreciation. We should nonetheless remember that institutions which distribute “universal” values (reinforcing e.g., the idea that poetry is an anachronistic medium, which gives her a nostalgic allure, but also deprives it from undertaking current problems) and block “lively” images uphold the reproductive potential of various artistic and aesthetic concepts.

## Evaluative notions and aesthetic values – honesty

Using an evaluative notion which does not refer to a collection of notions and values developed by aesthetic concepts of art, but is used in order to reinforce aesthetic concepts of art – i.e., those which consider aesthetic values as basic criteria for evaluating a piece of art – is another interesting phenomenon. These aesthetic values are shaped during an aesthetic experience, and they were considered significant or distinguishing between art and non-art since connecting aesthetics with fine art<sup>20</sup>. I have to admit that these are the most interesting situations, as they testify to the constantly significant, not fully explicit definition processing of writing practices and attempts at negotiating what is considered to be literature (value).

Perhaps today thinking about historical-social production and transformation of evaluative notions is obvious, however we should bear in mind that not long ago (more or less 60 years ago) such notions still functioned in aesthetics ahistorically, as universal points of reference for evaluative practices. The process of dismantling traditional criteria for evaluating art and literature (i.e., reserving a separate set of values and judgments for art, inadequate for other cognitive-axiological systems) started around the 1960s. We could refer to e.g., feminist attempts at developing different rules for evaluating art, which ultimately was supposed to result in criticism of the aesthetic idea of evaluating art, reinforcing non-aesthetic values in evaluating art, and acceptance for evaluating art using ethical, political, or cognitive notions<sup>21</sup>. However, this is not a complete process, nor one which would take a regular course in all areas of art, environments, institutions – its diversification would surely refer to geographical-political diversification which we can recognize in artistic traditions, practices, and theories. However, currently there are increasingly more artistic projects which question the aesthetic character of art and literature – suffice it to mention various performances, bio-art, or art using tech-science. It even seems that due to the collective character of artistic practices evaluative strategies based on notions (authorship, originality, innovation) developed by modern aesthetics lose their functionality.

In the Facebook dispute in question honesty is a notion which – despite being outside the dictionary of aesthetic values – is seen as proof of high artistic-aesthetic quality of Glück’s poetry. Magda Heydel presents the question of honesty in the following way: “Glück’s poetry stems

<sup>20</sup>Monroe C. Beardsley, *W obronie wartości estetycznej* [In defense of aesthetic value], translated into Polish by Barbara Smoczyńska, in: *Estetyka w świecie. Wybór tekstów*, tom II [Aesthetics in the world. Selected texts, vol. II], edited by Maria Gołaszewska (Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 1986), 153–175.

<sup>21</sup>See Grzegorz Dziamski, “Estetyka wobec feminizmu” [Aesthetics versus feminism], *DYSKURS: Pismo Naukowo-Artystyczne ASP we Wrocławiu* 25 (2018): 58.



from the confession tradition, but her poems are furthest from emotional nudity or so-called «honesty», which we might associate with this term”<sup>22</sup>. Joanna Piechura writes that “Glück loses her honest and direct tone in translation – whereas it is in this tone where the power of her poetry lies”<sup>23</sup>. Bartczak writes about authenticity in the context of confessional tradition in more detail, taking into account the complex character of this category in the context of historical luggage which it carries: “Trying to modify the confessional formula, Glück leaves out any news which could weaken the authenticity category, e.g., that about the subject depending on language. Thus, she leaves out postmodernism and returns to Eliot, however changing his understanding of major organizational structures and reinterpreting his metaphysics”<sup>24</sup>.

All the participants of the dispute are convinced that authenticity/honesty figures need to be processed in such a way as to “be far from emotional exhibitionism” (Heydel), so that they “maintain a direct tone” (Piechura) or – what Bartczak does – to consider their historical supply base. There is no doubt: these are important notions, even though authenticity replaced with honesty bears the marks of ahistorical obviousness in texts by Piechura and Heydel. We should mention here the modern origin of authenticity. Michał Warchała reconstructs its tropes, highlighting their philosophical-anthropological dimension. Tensions affecting authenticity – communicative, rhetorical-linguistic, semiotic, psychoanalytical and its relationships with truth, illusion, pretense, fiction, fantasy – are responsible for, as one can expect, sustaining the interest in this Enlightenment idea (thanks to *Confessions* by Jean Jacques Rousseau), through Romanticism corrections, until today – when many still believe that the truth about who we are is still to be discovered. As explained by Warchała: “Authenticity as a certain moral postulate contains the traditional issues of reality and appearance. Longing for «authentic existence» is accompanied by constant fear of non-authenticity, pretense, affectation, and the manipulation associated with them”<sup>25</sup>. Remaining in the game of reshuffling the categories of authenticity, directness, honesty – the less openly entangled in illusion, imagination, pretense, fantasy, the better – are still important criteria for evaluating a literary text. And yet it is difficult (especially after the semiotic turn) to evaluate artistic confessions with directness. Are evaluative practices actually taking place here? Or maybe we are dealing with the ritualistic upholding of empty critical gestures? It seems that Bartczak refers to a naïve understanding of authenticity, which does not incorporate awareness about the medium through which a given message is realized, when he criticizes Glück for wasting the achievements of her predecessors, among other American confessional poets. Considered more broadly, this would be a call for real work on understanding, usage, and production of (the values and meanings of) evaluative notions, rather than reproducing them, simulating critical decisions.

Critics who use the notion of honesty/authenticity in order to evaluate positively the value of a literary venture typically also believe that a work of art should be understood in terms of aesthetics. If we assume that aesthetic notions referring to aesthetic values are notions which

<sup>22</sup>Heydel.

<sup>23</sup>Joanna Piechura, “Wyznania, którym nie należy ufać. O poezji Louise Glück” [Confessions which are not to be trusted. On Louise Glück’s poetry], *Wizje*, 11.12.2020, <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/piechura-gluck>.

<sup>24</sup>Bartczak, “Zima w centrum: post-konfesyjny pat Louise Glück”.

<sup>25</sup>Michał Warchała, *Autentyczność i nowoczesność. Idea autentyczności od Rousseau do Freuda* [Authenticity and modernity. The idea of authenticity from Rousseau to Freud] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2006), 5–6.

construct aesthetic experiences, and that aesthetic experiences interfere with the sense of reality, going beyond the order of dominance and leading to a sensual “free game” (according to e.g. Jacques Rancière, a representative of Kant’s tradition)<sup>26</sup>, then authenticity as an artistic practice which constitutes a work of art (in conceptualizations which differentiate between art and non-art) should automatically take a form incorporating such effects as illusion, pretense, and mediation. However, this is not the case in the dispute over Glück’s poetry. Honesty/authenticity are used here as categories (with reservations) which obviously justify the value of poems in the same way as we justify liking honest people. At most, an artistic utterance is distinguished from other forms of communication due to its “emotional oversharing”.

Such a conceptualization of honesty/authenticity – showing that aesthetic values are tied with cognitive, ethical, or existential values – is one step away from dispelling doubts regarding how to evaluate artistic practices which are examples of activism, a specific political idea, or experiment with untypical materials, and as such do not subject to aesthetic evaluations.

There is no need for hierarchical differentiations between evaluation referring to aesthetic criteria and evaluation based on moral, ideological, political, cognitive criteria; there is no need to argue whether a work of art can be evaluated considering only non-aesthetic values – every value is in debt to every other value.

The dynamics of evaluative notions is connected to the process of producing values by artists. In other words, if Małgorzata Lebda, a poet herself, considers running along the Vistula River an artistic-poetic activity, which is directly connected with her books, should these books be evaluated from the perspective of the value of that water performance? We could also ask: where in this project are the values we want to notice and appreciate, framing them with appreciation practices? How should we evaluate them?

Evaluative notions have always referred to aesthetic categories and values in a mixed way, which is especially evident when we consider individual examples, such as the case of honesty. It is important because in discussions about evaluating engaged artistic forms which are at the intersection of craftsmanship and activism, it is possible to use history of artistic forms and talk about aesthetic experiences. And vice versa: we should not be afraid that the perspective of aesthetic valuation will significantly extend with non-aesthetic values when evaluating a piece considered a model representative of the formalist-aesthetic concept of art.

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Obviously, this case study is not an exhaustive review of ways of producing evaluative notions. Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s postulate to introduce a systematic reflection of the rich and complex evaluative practices seems to deserve some consideration. She explains the lack of studies in valuation of literature, which is surprising in the light of theories accentuating

<sup>26</sup>Jacques Rancière, *Estetyka jako polityka* [The Politics of Aesthetics], translated into Polish by Julian Kutyla, Paweł Mościcki (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2007), 21–39.

mostly interpretative aspects of research. She also points out the basic consequence of the decline in studies in valuation and values of literature:

[...] literary evaluation is not merely an aspect of formal academic criticism but a complex set of social and cultural activities central to the very nature of literature has been obscured, and an entire domain that is properly the object of theoretical, historical, and empirical exploration has been lost to serious enquiry<sup>27</sup>.

This loss, which has also happened in Polish literary criticism, is responsible for the lack of discussion about processes of producing values and working with them: processing, circulating, re-evaluating. However, these issues seem to be having a comeback in literary criticism and theory, which is unsurprising given that more and more artistic activities are facing us with the problem of producing and distributing (aesthetic-political) values.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>27</sup>Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value. Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 23.

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# KEYWORDS

honesty

evaluative notions

UNIVERSALITY

**ABSTRACT:**

The paper is a reflection about ways in which notions related to valuation function in literary criticism, focusing on processes of constructing, consolidating, and exchanging notions in socio-cultural circulation. Based on essays by, among others, Kacper Bartczak and Natalia Malek, who have different opinions about Louise Glück's poetry, such notions as universality, honesty, female writing are considered.

*aesthetic value*

**exchange**

POETRY

*non-aesthetic categories of valuation*

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