

Towards affect

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c r i t i c s :
Marek Zaleski, *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne* [Intensity and other related matters], (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2022)

Marek Zaleski – a scholar who specializes in 20th-century Polish poetry, the author of the classic works *Przygoda drugiej awangardy* [The adventure of the second avant-garde] and *Formy pamięci* [Forms of Memory] – in his most recent book, *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne* [Intensity and other related matters], ventures into the more and more popular field of affect studies. Zaleski writes about memory and thus returns to the problems he discussed years ago; however, this time his approach has a different focus – emotions – as he reflects on such concepts as shame, resentment, envy, boredom, fear, and ecstasy. Zaleski examines them in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Polish poetry and prose because, as he argues, literature is the best tool with which one may fully experience life.

Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne is divided into three parts with slightly provocative titles: I. *Historyczne, więc terażniejsze* [Historical, therefore present]; II. *Nienormalne, więc normalne* [Abnormal, therefore normal]; III. *Anachroniczne, więc żywe* [Anachronistic, therefore alive]. Part I consists of *Świadectwo versus wydarzenie. W czerwonej Hiszpanii Ksawerego Pruszyńskiego* [Testimony versus event. In Ksawery Pruszyński's Red Spain]; *Historyczna terażniejszość, czyli przestrzeń afektu* [The historical present, or the space of affect]; *Natręctwo niepamięci naszej o Zagładzie* [How we obsessively try not to remember the Holocaust]; and *Czarny sekret* [A Dark Secret]. Part II consists of *Linokoczek nad otchłanią normalnej nienormalności* [A tight-rope walker over the abyss of normal abnormality]; *Niczym mydło w grze w scrabble* [Like soap in a game of scrabble]; *Ekstazy Jana Błońskiego* [Jan Błoński's Ecstasies]; *Herbert trickster* [Herbert the trickster]; *Estetyka zmąconych emocji, czyli estetyka zwykłości – o Dorocie Masłowskiej dwukrotnie* [The aesthetics of disturbed emotions, or the aesthetics of the ordinary – about Dorota Masłowska twice]; *A jednak* [And yet]; and *Podróżny media-światów* [A traveler in media-worlds]. Part III consists of *Alaryk ante portas, czyli korzyści z anachronizmu*

[Alaric ante portas, or the benefits of anachronism]; *Katastrofa jako metafora, czyli historia afektywna* [Catastrophe as a metaphor, or affective history]; *W zniewoleniu szczęśliwi. Raz jeszcze o Zniewolonym umyśle Miłosza* [Happy in captivity. Once again about Miłosz's *Captive Mind*]; *Wstyd jako katastrofa Innego* [Shame as the tragedy of the Other]; *Kłaniając się okolicznościom* [Bowing to circumstances]; and *Słowo zapomniane?* [Forgotten word?]. It is not my intention to discuss all of Zaleski's essays in detail. Instead, I shall focus on the few chosen texts which are, nevertheless, representative of the reviewed collection.

Zaleski's book is a collection of essays which have been previously published in various journals and post-conference proceedings, but they all share a common theme, namely affect. One can get the impression that the essays were written with a larger whole in mind from the very beginning. *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne* has monographic ambitions. Indeed, we learn that the study of affects was financed by a grant received by the members of the Literature and Culture of Late Modernity Research Group at the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

When Zaleski writes about affect in art, he often draws on psychology, mainly psychoanalysis, especially as codified by Sigmund Freud, but also on the findings of Jacques Lacan. He also often refers to post-structuralist thinkers (Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, to name a few), as well as the latest humanist publications.

Zaleski operates between four main categories – memory, identity, language, and affect – arguing that all four coexist and condition each another. Such a perspective is visible, for example, in an extensive essay devoted to Dorota Masłowska ((*Estetyka zmąconych emocji, czyli estetyka zwykłości – o Dorocie Masłowskiej dwukrotnie*). Zaleski argues that in Masłowska's prose, language is the medium of the aesthetics of the everyday. Language is also both determined by and reflects one's identity. It is both the source of affect and a manner in which it manifests itself. The spoken, living word, and the relationship between the word and orality, so important to Masłowska, also play a substantial role in Piotr Sommer's poetry (*Kłaniając się okolicznościom*).

In a number of essays in *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne*, the experience of the Second World War is an important point of reference, at whose center, the author places Polish-Jewish relations, or to be precise, the unprocessed memory of Polish-Jewish relations. In *Historyczna terażniejszość, czyli przestrzeń afektu*, Zaleski proposes to look at the past not so much through the prism of the victim's false sense of guilt, but through the prism of shame. Being stigmatized makes the stigmatized feel shame. "Whoever was tortured, stays tortured," Jean Améry said.¹ Although the researcher does not refer to Améry and his concept of the tortured individual, Zaleski and Améry both say the same thing, which is also expressed by Primo Levi – "the injury cannot be healed."² The victim is forever humiliated. One cannot break free from this vicious circle.

¹ Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor of Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 34.

² Primo Levi, *Levi, Primo*. "The memory of the offense", in idem: *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1998), 14.

Zaleski interprets Magdalena Tulli's novels and Michał Zadara's play *Sprawiedliwość* [Justice] but he does not mention the feeling of shame that should be felt by the persecutors, the active participants of the anti-Semitic campaign in March of 1968. Roman Bratny, the author of the anti-Semitic novel *Dawid, syn Henryka* [David, Henry's son] which was published at the height of the anti-Jewish campaign, did not feel ashamed, even after many years.³ The leading commentator of the era, Kazimierz Kąkol, did not feel ashamed either (as evidenced by the memoirs entitled *Marzec 68. Fakty i mity* [March 1968. Facts and Myths]).⁴

Zaleski argues that shame and oblivion define the most sensitive aspects of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II (*Natręctwo niepamięci naszej o Zagładzie*). What would those relations look like if not for the veil of oblivion that the communists cast over the war experience (not only over how Poles treated the Jews)? No one can tell for sure. There is no doubt, however, that Polish literature has commented on such inconvenient truths. Stealing, blackmailing, betraying, participating in and committing murders, the phantasm of Jewish gold, plundering – Polish prose and poetry comment on all these difficult things. It was the collective memory that did not want to accept disgraceful facts and memories. “As long as it hides the truth, a secret is not a lie, but a procedure performed on our knowledge about the world, and at the same time on the truth” (p. 126), Zaleski writes in *Czarny sekret*.

In *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne*, Zaleski comments on the works of several different writers he has previously discussed in other essays. Magdalena Tulli is one such writer. Zaleski's essays on Tulli's hermetic prose are the most interesting in terms of proposed interpretations.⁵ *Czarny sekret* and *Niczym mydło w grze scrabble* are not only some of the most intriguing interpretations of Tulli's novels but also some of the best essays in the entire volume.

The essay *W zniewoleniu szczęśliwi. Raz jeszcze o Zniewolonym umyśle Miłosza* is retrospective in nature. Zaleski adds psychoanalytic tropes to the rich history of the reception of the Nobel Prize winner's essay, arguing that “Miłosz's idiosyncratic approach towards psychoanalysis should be discussed in a separate article” (p. 348). Zaleski points to the ambivalence over love and fear – two emotions that the New Faith evoked in the individual.

It seems that readers of *The Captive Mind* were too quick to dismiss Gustaw Herling-Grudzinski's perspective, especially when he asked about why the intelligentsia collaborated with communists. His approach cannot be reduced to the observation that *The Captive Mind* is but an abstract, contrived attempt to understand eastern totalitarianism. Apart from fear, Herling-Grudzinski talks about artistic conformity – finding one's role in and taking advantage of the new world.

³ See: Roman Bratny, *Rozmowa z Anonimem* [Conversation with Anonymous] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1988), 25.

⁴ Kazimierz Kąkol, *Marzec 68. Fakty i mity* [March 1968. Facts and Myths] (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1981).

⁵ See: Bogumiła Kaniewska, Krzysztof Skibski, ““If things are to go on...” – potentiality and entropy in Magdalena Tulli's early prose”, *Forum of Poetics* 26 (2021).

Milosz also does not differentiate, as Zbigniew Herbert did in an interview with Jacek Trznadel, between “kids” and “veterans.”⁶ Tadeusz Borowski and Jerzy Andrzejewski or Jerzy Putrament may not be judged with the same severity.

The strategy of Ketman, so often referred to as the *modus vivendi* of how intellectuals and artists functioned under communist rule, ultimately turns out to be disastrous for the individual. It creates the illusion of victory over the New Faith. However, the question arises as to how Ketman was perceived by others. Could the outsider, the uninformed citizen of the People’s Republic of Poland, notice or recognize this camouflage – this supposedly intricate game one played with the System? He only saw and understood what was visible, in the open, and openly declared, while the essence of Ketman (concealing true thoughts and beliefs) remained hidden. The uninformed citizen did not, could not, notice Ketman’s contestatory thoughts and actions, because they were hidden.

Zaleski does not refer to secondary sources extensively. It seems that he mainly wants to introduce the Polish (academic) reader to some English-language publications (while many have been embraced by the Polish academia, Zaleski reads them in a new critical context, reinvents them conceptually). What I missed in *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne* was an engagement with Rita Felski’s works. I thought about Felski when I read about Jan Błoński’s admiration for literature. I would like to learn whether Zaleski finds Felski’s texts useful in interpreting Błoński’s reading strategy (e.g., as concerns Felski’s notion of attachment).⁷

The essays collected in *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne* may be divided in accordance with one more criterion. The book then works as two separate collections of, for one, case studies which discuss individual texts or the entire oeuvre of a given author, and, respectively, essays which go beyond the perspective of a single author and their work (works), presenting the reader with a broader critical repertoire. The “case studies section” would consist of *Niczym mydło w grze w scrabble*; *Ekstazy Jana Błońskiego*; *Herbert trickster*; *Estetyka zmąconych emocji, czyli estetyka zwykłości – o Dorocie Maślowskiej dwukrotnie*; and *W zniewoleniu szczęśliwi. Raz jeszcze o Zniewolonym umyśle Miłosza*. And the “wider perspective section” would consist of *Czarny sekret*; *A jednak*; *Historyczna terażniejszość, czyli przestrzeń afektu*; *Natręctwo niepamięci naszej o Zagładzie*; and *Słowo zapomniane? A certain regularity can be noticed here: texts which are essayistic in nature usually belong to the second category. This is the case with *Podróżny media-światów*.*

Podróżny media-światów addresses a very important issue, which is increasingly being recognized as one of the most important contemporary critical questions. That would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. Although Jean Baudrillard talked about such problems in his study of simulacra and simulation back in the 1980s, his main point of reference was television, whose role had since been overshadowed by the Internet and video games. For Zaleski the development of virtual reality is problematic. The (futuristic) concepts of the avatar and

⁶ Jacek Trznadel, “Wypluć z siebie wszystko” [Spit it all out], in idem: *Hańba domowa* [Native shame] (Warsaw, 1986).

⁷ Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

the matrix are more of an opportunity than a threat to the issue of identity, as seen in, for example, Francis Fukuyama's *The Last Man* or the so-called post-apocalyptic prose.⁸ However, the traveler in media-space has not finished his journey yet. And who knows if he ever started it. The poetics of the essay, however, is not the only one or not even the dominant one in the reviewed collection. Such essays as *Estetyka zmaconych emocji, czyli estetyka zwykłości – o Dorocie Masłowskiej dwukrotnie* read like “traditional” academic dissertations (*Świadectwo* versus *wydarzenie*. *W czerwonej Hiszpanii Ksawerego Pruszyńskiego* is also very academic in nature).

Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne reads like a crossover between a strictly academic text and an essay. It is not the only book of its kind to explore the poetics of the essay. The essay *A jednak* (dedicated to Marek Bieńczyk) has the strongest focus on poetics.

Słowo zapomniane? moves towards the poetics of the essay. It is a laconic and coherent discussion of one of the most important features of modern culture – a new understanding of the category of beauty. Although Immanuel Kant distinguished between the beautiful and the sublime, this distinction was confirmed and recognized as universal only in the twentieth century. The Holocaust played a huge role in recognizing the importance of the sublime (and the fact that the beautiful followed the sublime). The question of representation, which Zaleski discusses extensively in other essays (e.g., *Świadectwo* versus *wydarzenie*. *W czerwonej Hiszpanii Ksawerego Pruszyńskiego*; *Historyczna terażniejszość, czyli przestrzeń afektu*), and the related question of the (un)representability of the Shoah (as a traumatic experience) put emphasis on the sublime at the expense of the older, purely aesthetic, understanding of the beautiful. Today, the sublime is being colonized, as Zaleski rightly puts it, by ethics, which often takes it hostage.

Alaryk ante portas, czyli korzyści z anachronizmu is as original as *Słowo zapomniane?* (both texts are concise and yet insightful; there is no room for overly long arguments and even longer footnotes). It may come as a surprise, but anachronism has a future (actually, its history is being remade as we speak).

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁸ See, for example: Lech M. Nijakowski, *Świat po apokalipsie. Społeczeństwo w świetle postapokaliptycznych tekstów kultury popularnej* [The world after the apocalypse. Society in the light of post-apocalyptic texts of popular culture] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2019).

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ABSTRACT:

The article discusses Marek Zaleski's monograph *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne* [Intensity and other related matters] (Warsaw 2022). The reviewed book reads like a crossover between a strictly academic text and an essay. In a number of different essays, Zaleski insightfully analyzes the category of intensity and related notions of collective and individual memory. Discussing the problems of contemporary Polish prose, the scholar draws on the findings of the new humanities.

the new humanities

Polish literature of the 20th and 21st centuries

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Sławomir Buryła – literary scholar, literary critic, professor at the Faculty of Polish Studies at the University of Warsaw. His research interests include 20th-century editing, contemporary Polish literature, especially WW2, occupation and Holocaust prose. He is the author of, among others, *Opisać Zagładę* [Describing the Holocaust] (Wrocław 2006, 2nd edition Toruń 2014), *Wokół Zagłady* [Around the Holocaust] (Kraków 2016), *Rozrachunki z wojną* [Coming to terms with war] (Warsaw 2017), and *Wojna i okolice* [War and other things] (Warsaw 2018). He is the co-editor, together with Dorota Krawczyńska and Jacek Leociak, of the monograph *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady (1939–1968)* (Warsaw 2012, 2nd edition Warsaw 2016, English version: *Polish Literature and the Holocaust (1939–1968)*, Peter Lang 2020) and the two volumes of *Reprezentacje Zagłady w kulturze polskiej* [Representations of the Holocaust in Polish culture (1939–2019)] (Warsaw 2021). He is also the editor of several collective volumes on contemporary Polish literature (including the five-volume synthesis *Pogromy Żydów na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku* [Pogroms of Jews in Poland in the 19th and 20th centuries]). Most recently, he edited the anthology *Getto warszawskie w literaturze polskiej* [Warsaw Ghetto in Polish Literature] (Warsaw 2021).