

Traditions of autonomy.

Notes for a comparison*

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Introduction

The methodological aim of the following article is quite simple: I want to analyse various models of autonomy current in contemporary Polish literary criticism from the standpoint of the so-called intentionalist reflection on autonomy, developed in the circle of the American journal “Nonsite” by authors such as Walter Benn Michaels¹, Nicholas Brown², Todd Cronan³ and others. The aim of such meta-critical analysis is not only to map the field, but also to suggest that Polish literary studies today could benefit from adopting this anglophone tradition. In this suggestion, the following article offers a further step in an ongoing process of cultural translation: the work of ‘the nonsites’ has been described and popularised in recent years in a few different articles published in Polish.⁴

¹ See, for example, Walter Benn Michaels, *The beauty of a social problem: photography, autonomy, economy* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2015); Walter Benn Michaels, *The shape of the signifier: from 1967 to the end of history*, transl. Jan Burzyński (Krakow: Korporacja Ha!art, 2011).

² See, for example, Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: the social ontology of art under capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

³ See, for example, Todd Cronan, *Against affective formalism: Matisse, Bergson, modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Todd Cronan, *Red aesthetics: Rodchenko, Brecht, Eisenstein. Cultural studies and Marxism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

⁴ Łukasz Żurek, “O pojęciu towaru w polskiej krytyce literackiej po 1989 roku” [“On the notion of ‘commodity’ in Polish literary criticism after 1989”], *Forum Poetyki* 28-29 (2022): 44-59, <https://doi.org/10.14746/fp.2022.28-29.36749>; Paweł Kaczmariski, „Afekty, intencje, przypadki. Krytyka badań afektywnych w kręgu czasopisma «Nonsite»”, [„Affects, intentions, cases. A critique of affective research in the circle of the “Nonsite” journal], *Litteraria Copernicana* 2 (2022): 47–60, <https://doi.org/10.12775/LC.2022.020>.

I refer my reader back to these articles, as well as to the original works in English, primarily due to technical constraints: the following article cannot accommodate at once a detailed reconstruction of the intentionalist position and an analysis of local traditions of conceptualising autonomy. A highly abridged version of the former is therefore included below (at the end of the introduction), while the latter are presented in their short version, based on a necessarily arbitrary selection of works by critics with otherwise long and rich careers. (It is worth noting that in the case of at least some of them – Joanna Orska, Anna Kałuża or Przemysław Czapliński – reflections on autonomy remain an open project, still under development. The latter, for example, published a new piece on the history of the concept of autonomy⁵ while I was finishing my work on this article, and has recently spoken publicly at length on the subject. Out of necessity, in what follows I will not be referring directly to his recent – undoubtedly important and highly relevant – comments).

An intentionalist understanding of autonomy could be summarised as follows: what makes works of art/literature escape the logic of usage (in the sense that they cannot be reduced to mere objects that they otherwise are, and whose value and status depend entirely on their users) is their own purposiveness, that is, their objective and unchanging meaning. That is the only thing that does not change in the process of the social circulation of art/literature – unlike the price, conditions of reception, the type and quality of the physical carrier, etc. In other words, the work establishes – through form – its own rules, which explain what it is and what its aims are, and which can be influenced by nothing but itself. In a market society, thus understood autonomy translates above all into the impossibility of reducing works of art/literature to commodities; meaning cannot be equated with a capitalist value-form. The market and the consumer can change everything in a work – except its meaning.

This approach to autonomy is characterized, among other things, by its focus on what Brown calls a social ontology of art and literature, that is, social consequences of what the structure of a work looks like by nature, by its very definition. In this context, the “intentionalists” draw on a set of claims on authorial intention⁶ (hence their label) – derived, among others, from the works of Michael Fried and Elizabeth Anscombe. Authorial intention is seen here as coterminous with the meaning of a work as – at the risk of oversimplification – the only criterion for determining the boundaries of the latter. One could state that whenever we undertake interpretation – in recognising language as language, the work as work – then, by (logical) necessity, we must also postulate the existence of an author. It would follow from this (an assumption important for intentionalists) that intention is contained within that which is intentional (it is an integral part of the work) and does not remain a mental state of the author or the physical cause of the text; it comes from the author but is contained in the work.

Autonomy regained? (Uniłowski)

Autonomy occupies a specific place in contemporary Polish literary debate. It is constantly present as a side issue, rarely taking centre stage. It is not even a marginal issue; rather, it seems

⁵ Przemysław Czapliński, „Tożsamość, autonomia, solidarność. Kilka uwag o polonistyce XXI wieku” [Identity, autonomy, solidarity. Some remarks on Polish studies in the 21st century], *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2023).

⁶ See, for example, Steven Knapp, Walter Benn Michaels, “Against theory”, *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1982).

to emerge by the way of discussions about other issues (like realism, incomprehensibility, the social duties of the writer...). Occasionally, autonomy becomes the subject of an explicit debate, like in the exchange between Joanna Orska and Anna Kałuża, or in a friendly polemic between Przemysław Czapliński and Dariusz Nowacki (more on both will follow), but this is quite rare. The interest in autonomy itself seems to have two foundations: firstly, it is triggered by a sense of the disappearance of autonomy and can be related to the political transformation in Poland of the 1990s; secondly, it appears as the flip side, or the mirror image, of the notion of engagement, which – particularly in poetry criticism – has dominated recent decades.

Autonomy was undoubtedly an important topic for Krzysztof Uniłowski, although it appears in his texts almost exclusively in the contexts of polemics and commentaries (e.g. in his debates with Joanna Orska, Jerzy Franczak or the “Krytyka Polityczna” milieu⁷). On these occasions, the issue of autonomy is usually intertwined with more general reflections on the history, nature and heritage of modernism. A positive understanding of autonomy itself can be found in two of Uniłowski’s works: the essays *Poza zasadą autonomii* [*Beyond the principle of autonomy*⁸] and *Autonomia odzyskana* [*Autonomy Regained*⁹]. The former is structured around a distinction between two types of autonomy, namely the (post-)Romantic and modernist ones. Uniłowski views the Romantic autonomy as an outmoded and, in a way, suspicious concept. The socio-cultural independence of literature is supposedly motivated by authenticity and the need for individual expression, a “fetishization”¹⁰ of subjectivity. The reason for sustaining it would be to create a space for an unfettered expression of an individual or a group. Autonomy understood in this way “became obsolete” during the period of political transformation, not because literature really lost the independence it had won (no one questioned its “privileges”), but because it ceased to be treated as a “value”, a “guarantee for the changes and transformations of literature”¹¹. An alternative to the Romantic tradition of thinking about autonomy would be the modernist tradition (or one of the modernist traditions), which would separate the autonomy of literature from the experience of subjectivity. The categories of “self-creation” and “invention” would play leading roles¹², while autonomy itself would mean the freedom to constantly reinvent itself, to complicate and differentiate, to oppose any established patterns. The latter is, of course, one of the guiding thoughts of Uniłowski’s entire critical work. It comes as no surprise, then, that not only does he not see autonomy understood in such a positive way in opposition to engagement, but he even posits that engagement is a dialectical condition for autonomy: “It is not the case, after all, that engagement contradicts autonomy. On the

⁷ Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Granice nowoczesności: polska proza i wyczerpanie modernizmu* [Limits of modernity: Polish prose and the exhaustion of modernism] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2006), 25–31; Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Prawo krytyki: o nowoczesnym i ponowoczesnym pojmowaniu literatury* [The law of criticism: on modern and post-modern understanding of literature] (Katowice: University of Silesia, FA-art Publishing House, 2013), 170–172; Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Autonomia odzyskana: Stanisław Brzozowski i „Krytyka Polityczna”” [„Autonomy regained: Stanisław Brzozowski and „Krytyka Polityczna”], FA-art 1 (2008): 44–51.

⁸ Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Poza zasadą autonomii. Z przygód świadomości krytycznoliterackiej w latach dziewięćdziesiątych i pierwszych” [„Beyond the principle of autonomy. From the adventures of critical-literary consciousness of the nineties and noughties”], in: *Dyskursy krytyczne u progu XXI wieku: między rynkiem a uniwersyteciem* [Critical Discourses at the beginning of the 21st century: Between the market and the university], ed. by Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski, Dorota Kozicka (Krakow: Universitas, 2007), 189–205.

⁹ Uniłowski, „Autonomia odzyskana”

¹⁰ Uniłowski, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 193.

¹¹ Uniłowski, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 195.

¹² Uniłowski, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 191.

contrary, commitment confirms autonomy, while autonomy legitimises commitment, which can only be of value if it is founded on a sovereign gesture”¹³.

Similarly, what is brought to the fore in *Autonomia odzyskana* is the relationship between autonomy and self-criticism, distance from the self or literature’s capacity for self-questioning:

However, autonomy cannot be reduced to the cultivation of singularity and the enjoyment of the resulting privileges (for example, literature as an institution within which one can say anything in every possible way). The autonomy of literature involves an effort to earn the right to mark and move difference in relation to itself. This is about ‘internal’ or ‘critical’ difference, about the heterogeneity or double position of the literary work. [...] Since we have already listed the particular complexity and ambiguity among the principles defining modern literature, the autonomy of literature will not be affirmed when we “simply” realise these features, but only when we ask about systemic meta-rules which determine the way in which the texts we call literary are understood and operate.¹⁴

When reading Uniłowski, however, one gets the impression that he is not so much talking about what the autonomy of literature is or could be, as about its inevitably partial conditions: about what is necessary for literature to be truly autonomous. According to the author of *Prawo krytyki* [*The law of criticism*], the prerequisite for literary autonomy is, therefore, “a critical distance from [...] its own rules”, invention, self-questioning of literary works, etc. However, when we ask what autonomy itself is, what it actually means that literature or a specific work can be autonomous (if they can), Uniłowski offers no answer. We do not know, for example, whether the problem of autonomy is purely institutional or partly ontological; whether autonomy means winning something that, by the nature of the work, remains within it, or merely creating such political space in which a certain kind of artistic risk can be taken.

This is where we run into one of the fundamental problems which make it difficult to compare various models of autonomy developed in the Polish literary-critical tradition with the more concepts with its intentionalist account: reflection on autonomy in Polish literary criticism of recent decades rarely encompasses (at least on the conscious level) the ontology of a literary work, on a more abstract level. Uniłowski, for example, discusses autonomy in terms of ethos, a practical recommendation: literature, like criticism, is only free when it constantly reinvents itself. He puts these considerations in a social-historical context, without reflecting on the nature of the work. Nevertheless, we can also find his critique of the ‘post-Romantic’ quest for autonomy (in which autonomy is not the key issue, but the valorisation of a subjective expression is) convincing from the above-outlined perspective. Similarly poignant seems to be the sense that the ability to critique and revise one’s own rules is the litmus test of true autonomy. If autonomy were to be based on the affirmation of meaning (to return, e.g., to Brown), then this kind of dynamic, in which the logic of the work is determined solely by the work itself, would obviously be a condition for such autonomy. (The ability to create its own rules – its own goals, its own form – would actually be one possible definition of autonomy.) It would be an exaggeration to suggest that Uniłowski makes such a claim. Yet again, his reflections are not so abstract, although one might suggest that this is the direction he seems to have adopted.

¹³Uniłowski, “Poza zasadą autonomii”, 192.

¹⁴Uniłowski, „Autonomia odzyskana”, 50.

Autonomy and non-exchangeability (Czapliński, Nowacki)

Przemysław Czapliński moves in a similar direction, although, of course, in different ways. The author of *Powrót centrali* [*The return of the central*] is, of course, one of the key figures of left-wing criticism at the turn of the century, perhaps the most prolific, extraordinarily versatile and particularly influential commentator on multiple political entanglements of modern and contemporary literature. His interests, however, are typically related to the notions of the political and engagement, whilst autonomy appears, in a sense, as their reverse, with a few notable and interesting exceptions. For our purposes, therefore, it is worth focusing primarily on Czapliński's good-natured polemic with Dariusz Nowacki's *Kto im dał skrzydła*¹⁵ [*Who gave them wings*] – a book whose central problem, as Czapliński himself writes in the first sentence of his review, “concerns the disappearance of the autonomy of literature”.

It is worth noting that Nowacki himself does not articulate this central problem directly – *Kto im dał skrzydła* revolves around the more general titular question, i.e. the issue of who and how in the turn-of-the-century Poland determines the visibility and significance of individual writers or literary works. The book is primarily a collection of specific interpretations, linked by Nowacki's general interest in the relationship between literature and marketing, mass media etc., although ultimately it also makes claims, for example, about the difference between modernism and postmodernism, succinctly reconstructed by Czapliński.

Nowacki's initial diagnosis (which Czapliński also subscribes to) is as follows:

The title of the study, while not stylistically elegant, introduces the essence of the issue: the author asks who nowadays endows the artist with their wings. He also provides the answer: it is not the artist themselves. Whoever gives literature its wings, also controls the flight. When the senders of texts are not the givers of meaning, and the givers of meaning are not necessarily the readers of texts, the characteristics of literature must be explained by analysing the communicative situation.¹⁶

The claim that the “giver” of meanings today is not the one who writes may seem like a clear anti-intentionalist declaration, but it soon becomes apparent that Czapliński does not use this and similar phrases in their strict sense, but as a broad metaphor of sorts. The crux of the matter is that the social functioning of literature – its visibility, its accessibility, but also the very ways in which it is read – is determined by fashions and codes established entirely outside its realm (among and by those who “need not be readers of texts”).

This is a new situation for literature, not because it suddenly lost its autonomy (Czapliński recalls the long tradition of critics and writers proclaiming the ultimate end of autonomy throughout the twentieth century) but because this time the incorporation of individual works into a broader communicative situation appears not to be the result of their conscious choice (as it might have been, for example, in the times of the original avant-garde), but

¹⁵Dariusz Nowacki, *Kto im dał skrzydła: Uwagi o prozie, dramacie i krytyce* (2001-2010) [*Who gave them wings: Remarks on prose, drama and criticism*] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Naukowe „Śląsk”, 2011).

¹⁶Przemysław Czapliński, “Poza zasadą autonomii” [“Beyond the principle of autonomy”], *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* 1 (2013): 215.

something imposed from outside, in the face of which literature remains an essentially passive recipient. The breakthrough of the 2000's thus consisted not so much of the entanglement of the literary work in various social codes and discourses, but in the fact that the degree and type of this entanglement no longer seems to depend on authorial choice or commitment; the 'coders' from the outside are in charge.

In consequence, literature is oriented towards "paraphrasability", aligning with Nowacki's and Czapliński's shared observations. This is a situation in which the "necessary condition for the existence of literature"¹⁷ is that it reduces itself to a form which can be easily paraphrased for the purposes of marketing, high-circulation press, etc. Works that do not submit to the dictate of the paraphrase are at risk of "falling out of the essential area of social communication". This, in turn, leads to a gradual shift away from innovative, exploratory and experimental aesthetics, away from understanding its own social obligations in terms of "confusing the reader", "questioning every stable arrangement", de-automatising language, etc. (as we will see, these are categories, are central to Piotr Śliwiński's understanding of autonomy). For if only what is paraphrasable can survive – that which is written in a way already known to the media – then one must rely on repeating what is known, writing for the reader who is "reassured"¹⁸.

This is where Czapliński's and Nowacki's paths diverge. That is because the latter seeks and resolves the problem through a direct resistance against media entanglements of literature, as it were (this stance also features in Śliwiński's work, as will be shortly demonstrated). As a rule, he also remains pessimistic about the possibility of literature regaining its social influence. Czapliński, meanwhile discerns an opportunity for writers in a reworking or an internalisation of this ominous "paraphrasability", which is probably the most interesting aspect of his reflections on autonomy from our standpoint.

To emphasise the difference between his own and Nowacki's perspectives (the latter expresses it in his *Kto dał im skrzydła?*, Czapliński points to two possible interpretations of what it actually means for literature to be or need to be 'non-interchangeable'¹⁹:

"Non-interchangeability" in this [Nowacki's] view is another name for "poetic quality", "aesthetic value" or "literariness". In a duel profiled in this way – between a non-interchangeable literature and the media which enforce a state of paraphrasability – literature not only has to lose; it has to suffer a humiliating defeat after the stage of collaboration with a hegemon that neither values it nor reads it. But what happens if we look at literature differently? What if we assume that "non-interchangeability" has a different meaning today?

In this – different – view, it seems important to take into account, first and foremost, the transformations of autonomy.²⁰

¹⁷Czapliński, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 218.

¹⁸Czapliński, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 217.

¹⁹Crucially, the Polish term niewymienialność implies both non-interchangeability and non-exchangeability – that is, a literary work's unique character both in relation to other works, as well as to non-works (both within and without the field, as it were).

²⁰Czapliński, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 224.

To take these transformations into account would mean understanding that it is impossible, indeed, undesirable, to return to old understandings of autonomy, an attempt by literature to cut itself off from the other areas of social communication; the entanglement itself is necessary and useful. “Non-interchangeability”, entails not surrendering to that entanglement completely and remaining incompatible within a mass-media circulation:

This non-interchangeability thus occurs where an artwork is simultaneously paraphrasable through media and indigestible, servile to mass communication and useless, cobbled together from recycled materials and not suitable for further recycling. This can be called a de-cycling practice, as it involves taking an order from mass culture and returning the completed work in a form that disrupts the processing cycle.²¹

The basic strategy for achieving such “non-interchangeability” is to expose the very mechanisms that strive to make literature “paraphrasable”: “expos[ing] the non-autonomy of writer and literature”; “drawing the rules of communication into the text”, creating “in the work a momentary meta-language that does not allow existing systems of dependency to remain hidden”²². What is meant, then, is something surprisingly consistent with the intentionalist understanding of autonomy in the non-trivial sense; taking the commodity character of the work of art (its “paraphrasable”, “interchangeable” nature) as part of the material to be processed, one which must be subordinated to the logic of the work as a whole and incorporated into it on a formal level. While Czapliński does not use concepts such as commodity or market, the “non-interchangeability” of literature understood in this way can easily be linked to the resistance of the work of art to market exchange (its irreducibility to exchange value).

However, not unlike Krzysztof Uniłowski’s, Czapliński’s reflection breaks off where questions concerning the ontology of the work arise – as the critic himself notes, his perspective does not allow one to determine where literature’s successful resistance to interchangeability/paraphrasability originates, that is, at which point it manages to ‘disrupt’ the rules of media communication:

Its modest victory does not lie in establishing an area independent of mass communication, but in unveiling its rules. Literature becomes a humiliated collaborator of a new hegemon and at the same time an unreliable implementer of the contract. What is peculiar to the literary work no longer concerns the story itself, an individual story, a non-interchangeable aesthetic; rather, the peculiarity can be seen in the disruption of communication.

I would not be able to explain what this disruption caused by literature consists of.²³

In order to provide such explanation, one would have to consider what it is in the very nature of a literary work that makes Czapliński’s diversion or subversion possible. Insofar as it is clear how literature can be reduced to a “paraphrase” (commodity), it is difficult to

²¹Czapliński, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 225.

²²Czapliński, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 225-226.

²³Czapliński, „Poza zasadą autonomii”, 227.

say why the hegemonic “media” should leave the door open to the subversive, politically progressive activities.

Perhaps because of this ambiguity, a model of successful resistance are for Czapliński the works of Olga Tokarczuk – the author directly accused by Uniłowski (and, up to a certain point, also by Nowacki) of commodifying the conventions of high modernism²⁴. In his interpretation of *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* [*Drive your plough over the bones of the dead*], which concludes the review of *Kto dał im skrzydła*, Czapliński is not really interested in form or convention, but only in the plot of the novel (including the main protagonist’s lexicon).

In a column for “Tygodnik Powszechny”, written a year later,²⁵ Czapliński repeats his key theses on autonomy, but makes them more politically oriented: “the actions of literature are [...] undertaken not in the name of art for art’s sake, but in the name (inaudible or inexpressibly pronounced) of the weaker participants of social communication”. However, some doubts remain: is literature written in this way effective? How do we measure its effectiveness? What makes these kinds of strategies work (or not)? Why is it specifically the language of the ‘weaker ones’, smuggled into the text, that cannot be taken up by the hegemonic media, and is thus irreducible to a ‘paraphrase’?

In the context of the intentionalist account of autonomy, we could say that the problem with Czapliński’s comments – which are based on otherwise accurate intuitions about the dual nature of the literary work under capitalism (i.e. as a commodity and potentially as something else) – lies in their doubly abstract nature. On the one hand, the author of *Poruszona mapa* [*The moved map*], like Nowacki, avoids notions like “market” and “market society”, resorting in his criticism to the blurry categories of “media”, “codes”, “social communication”, etc., which are difficult to pin down. Secondly, and probably more importantly, like Uniłowski, Czapliński avoids explicitly linking his accurate socio-historical intuitions with the level of the ontology of the work, which concludes his reflections prematurely. One could say that both ultimately focus on the autonomy of the artistic craft rather than the autonomy of the work; an issue we will return to at the end.

Non-partisan autonomy (Śliwiński)

Piotr Śliwiński’s influential, programmatic essay *Polityczna, niepartyjna*²⁶ [*Political, non-partisan*], presents the case somewhat differently. The critic develops some of his intuitions from *Przygody z wolnością*²⁷ [*Adventures with freedom*]; for instance, his claim that Polish literature is unique in being political by default, seems to echo his previous claims about the

²⁴See, for example, Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Proza środka, czyli stereotyp literatury nowoczesnej” [„The prose of the middle, or a stereotype of modern literature”], in his *Granice nowoczesności: proza polska i wyczerpanie modernizmu* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2006), 156-199.

²⁵Przemysław Czapliński, „W poszukiwaniu suwerenności” [„In search of sovereignty”], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 37 (2014), <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/w-poszukiwaniu-suwerennosci-24040>.

²⁶Piotr Śliwiński, „Polityczna, niepartyjna” [„Political, non-partisan”], *Polyglot* 1 (2011): 59-66.

²⁷Piotr Śliwiński, *Przygody z wolnością: uwagi o poezji współczesnej* [*Adventures with freedom: remarks on modern poetry*] (Kraków: Znak, 2002).

“enslavement to freedom” among the writers of the 90s. However, this time around Śliwiński focuses less on the historical layer; rather, he is more interested in articulating his own positive vision of autonomy. The term itself, however, occurs only once in the essay²⁸, while the body of the essay rests on a critique of the notion of engagement.

At first glance, some of Śliwiński’s intuitions could be interpreted as coinciding with those of the “Nonsite” circle. He calls for a view of autonomy that sees it as a politically significant force in its own right; he points out that the affirmation of autonomy can nowadays be, in political or social terms, a more powerful gesture than engagement (realised in the poetics of a call, manifesto, etc.). In the case of literature, “the most interesting aspect of its political character might be its capacity to repel politics”²⁹. These remarks are supplemented by an interesting distinction between the uncertain (and therefore suspicious) social impact of literature and its “aesthetic impact, which is evidenced by reading alone”³⁰; i.e. that which depends on the use of the work and that which depends on the work itself. Śliwiński is here one, maybe two steps away from describing the difference between experience and interpretation, between the work-as-object and the work as a meaningful totality. Even his recognition that “the literary debate actually takes place outside of literature”³¹ and that it has to reckon with the demand for certain declarations, fashions or aesthetics shaped elsewhere, seems to point us towards considerations on the relationships between literature and the market, value, and commodity.

In the end, however, Śliwiński doesn’t seem to reach that point. The external force exerting pressure on the work – that which ultimately threatens its autonomy – simply consists of all those who would like to get rid of this autonomy; all those who would like literature to merely repeat the conclusions developed in other “discourses”. At the turn of the century, the agents of such “ideology” turned out to be – seemingly almost by chance –, the proponents of ‘engagement’, who wanted simple messages rather than ones that would question and challenge them.

One might of course question the validity of this literary-historical diagnosis. It certainly seems unlikely that many proponents of literary engagement would agree with the views ascribed to them by Śliwiński, but this is a side issue, from the perspective we are interested in. The near-tautological structure of Śliwiński’s argument appears to be more important: in order to justify its existence as literature, literature needs to be something other than sociology or journalism. It is difficult to argue with this view, but the resulting vision of autonomy proves to be both simple and abstract in a way which renders it virtually inoperable: the autonomy of literature is realised in its ability not to be something else. One could say that, unlike “nonsites”, Śliwiński views autonomy as ultimately non-dialectic. Indeed, he does acknowledge the dialectical relationship between autonomy and commitment (likewise acknowledged by Uniłowski), but he considers the forces threatening the autonomy of literature to be something entirely external rather than something that, like market society and commodity production, changes the very nature of a literary work, in a way dividing it in two.

²⁸Śliwiński, „Polityczna, niepartyjna”, 61.

²⁹Śliwiński, „Polityczna, niepartyjna”, 61.

³⁰Śliwiński, „Polityczna, niepartyjna”, 65.

³¹Śliwiński, „Polityczna, niepartyjna”, 65.

Autonomy and purposelessness (Gutorow)

In the context of reflections on autonomy in Polish literary criticism of recent decades, one cannot, of course, fail to mention Jacek Gutorow, especially in the context of his influential works from the beginning of the century. While the author of *Niepodległość głosu* [*The independence of the voice*] refrained from mentioning the concept of autonomy directly, his titular category of independence is a clear allusion to it.

Gutorow's works are perhaps the most explicit example, indeed the embodiment, of critical literary anti-intentionalism of Poland at the turn of the century. The critic openly opposes the reduction of the subject of interpretation to that of authorial intentions, he rejects the vision of the work as a carrier of those intentions³², consistently resisting any ontology of the work which suggests the existence of stable pre-established meanings (the very category of meaning is suspicious for Gutorow, who aligns it with "realism" and "common sense", highlighting its alleged naivety³³). The openness of a work of art, its "ambiguity" (in the sense of not having fixed meanings as these are to be provided each time by the reader) are the programmatic foundation of Gutorow's critical activity. The very idea of the "independence of the voice" relies explicitly on the rejection of the primacy of meaning/intent in favour of "the acoustics", i.e. the assumption that the work is a physical object, inevitably changed in the process of reception: "even the purest voice is subject to inevitable reflections, reverberations, distortions", whereby "the work acquires new dimensions"³⁴.

Gutorow's proposals clearly contradict the intentionalist account of autonomy. From the latter standpoint, the author of *Niepodległość głosu* misunderstands what intention is, hastily rejects the category of meaning, confuses the material carrier with the work as such – while functionally abolishing the possibility of interpretation. Moreover, the critic seems to understand intuitively some of the relationships described by authors such as Michaels: he realizes that an appreciation of the "acoustics", i.e. the materiality of the work, is in practice an appreciation of the "distortion" of the voice, i.e. the experience of the viewer, but see this as something positive.

From the comparative perspective offered here, however, it is another feature of Gutorow's stance that deserves most attention and which is discernible in his canonical essay, written in response to Jacek Podsiadło as part of the well-known debate on "incomprehensible poetry" in "Tygodnik Powszechny"³⁵. In the debate the critic attacks the poet for demanding poems which would be easier to read. According to Gutorow, Podsiadło's demand betrays a theoretical-literary naivety and "totalitarian" (literally "Lukácsian", i.e. communist) inclinations. At the same time, he is keen to make references to Theodor Adorno, whom he treats as a theoretical and philosophical authority, proving that poetry is not necessarily meant to be understood – that its meaning can be completely undetermined, dependent on each reading.

³²Jacek Gutorow, *Niepodległość głosu: szkice o poezji polskiej po 1968 roku* [*The independence of the voice: essays on Polish poetry after 1968*] (Kraków: Znak, 2003), 6.

³³Jacek Gutorow, "„O poezji niezrozumiałej”" [„On incomprehensible poetry"], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 35 (2000), <http://www.tygodnik.com.pl/literatura90/gutorow.html>.

³⁴Gutorow, *Niepodległość głosu*, 8.

³⁵Gutorow "O poezji niezrozumiałej".

Gutorow demonstrates how a certain reading of Adorno (or any other related theorist), one that is based on a simple affirmation of the literal and practical aimlessness of poetry, can lead to a highly specific account of autonomy – one that is openly contradictory to those which, also drawn from Adorno, are offered by authors such as Brown. Gutorow's comments thus show, in a very tangible way, the far-reaching consequences of a seemingly minor shift from a conception of the work as actually purposeless to a conception of the work as organised by its own purposiveness. The former requires rejecting the categories of authorship, intention or even meaning; the latter requires their steadfast defence.

Autonomy, differently (Orska, Kałuża)

It might seem surprising that this part of the article concludes rather than opens with reference to Joanna Orska and Anna Kałuża. Orska and Kałuża are among the literary scholars who consistently address the issue of autonomy, whereas their position in poetry criticism means that their work is a necessary reference point to virtually every new approach to this problem.³⁶

Therefore, if we finish, rather than begin, with autonomy in Orska and Kałuża, it is precisely because of this consistency: for almost two decades now both authors have been reflecting on autonomy in a number of books, essays and reviews, both clarifying and revising specific points. A detailed reconstruction of their views (as well as of past debate between them, summarised, for example, by Jakub Skurtys³⁷) would necessitate an essay of its own. Here, one could perhaps see the seeds for a future, more expanded commentary.

Let us first note, then, that both Orska and Kałuża are fundamentally opposed to one of the foundational claims of the intentionalist approach to autonomy, that is, the equation of meaning with authorial intention (and the assumption of the immanent character of intention). For both, a work is not exclusively (if at all) constituted by virtue of thus understood meaning. They both assume that the work transcends its author's intention, the realisation of which they consider to be an important achievement of modern (or postmodern) theory. This assertion aligns them with a range of philosophical, theoretical, and sociological inspirations incompatible with the intentionalist account – ranging from Deleuze, Derrida and Agamben in Orska's work, to new materialism, Latour or Krauss in Kałuża's. It bears emphasising that the theoretical model of the work proposed by both scholars remains openly anti-intentionalist: from Orska's poem-as-action (or practice) and poem-as-a-performative (both of which imply poetry as something undetermined, unfinished, in the process of becoming) to Kałuża's text-as-event and "entangled objects" (where what is emphasised is a certain porosity of the work, i.e. the assumption that its constitutive feature is its ability to be penetrated by the outside world).

³⁶Admittedly, I have been influenced by both critics' understanding of autonomy.

³⁷Jakub Skurtys, „ Czy estetyka zdoła nas z(a)bawić? [“Will aesthetics manage to save/ entertain us?”] (Anna Kałuża “Under the Game”)], *artPaper* 21 (2015).

In other words, both critics' positions on autonomy (programmatically sympathetic in Orska's case, habitually critical in Kałuża's) on many levels seems to openly contradict the intentionalist account, so it seems that the former should be seen as alternative to and incompatible with the latter. Given that the intentionalist approach remains explicitly non-pluralist (that is, it rejects the possibility of being but one of several equally legitimate perspectives), it seems one should perhaps stop at simply acknowledging those fundamental differences.

At this point, however, I would like to suggest that both scholars' understanding of autonomy is subject to a particular rupture, through which some of their ideas and intuitions become, if not openly congruent with the intentionalist approach, then at least close enough to be placed in a productively dialogical relationship with the latter.

In Kałuża's work, such a rupture is to be found whenever she puts emphasis on the objectivity/event-ness of literature/art in order to highlight not so much its entanglement in other registers of reality as to point out the productive distance that a work creates between itself and its audience (who are otherwise already accustomed to aesthetics familiar to them). While Kałuża values above all "open" literary projects, which declaratively or implicitly seek to appreciate the readerly "freedom", it seems that sometimes the aim of this "freedom" is not so much to allow a subjective transformation of the work, as to indicate the necessity of interpretation. This much is suggested, for example, in the important chapter *Poluzowanie więzów* [*Loosening the ties*] in *Pod grą* [*Under the game*], where the stakes of the two strategies described by the critic is to create in the language a distance which forces the reader to consciously change their view, rather than to loosen the author's control over the work.³⁸

Orska's work features even more moments of such rupture. A common denominator for her successive observations on autonomy is a clear (and stronger than in Krzysztof Uniłowski) link between the latter and the question of literature's self-determination. A work is autonomous only insofar as it constantly reinvents itself, even at the cost of criticising its own commitment to autonomy. This is the key to interpreting, e.g. the "avant-garde breakthrough"³⁹, which was not a one-off historical event but remains a constant horizon of the avant-garde. As aptly summarised by Uniłowski,

For Orska, the "avant-garde breakthrough" is not a one-off event, an incident, but a kind of principle (matrix) of all "radicalisation of the prerogative of autonomy" in modern art. The breakthrough associated with the occurrence of the Great Avant-Gardes is here merely a glaring example of the working of a dialectical logic, within which art asserts its autonomy by carrying out a critique of itself and its limitations. "The 'moment of radicalization' does not signal [...] aesthetic extremism, a unilateral exacerbation of modernist characteristics, and thereby breaking or at least undermining the entire system of binary oppositions that define modernism. "The moment of radicalization" as such is ambivalent. It signifies a transgression, but also a restitution and

³⁸Anna Kałuża, *Pod grą: jak dziś znaczą wiersze, poetki i poeci* [Under the game: how poems, poets and poets mean nowadays] (Krakow: Universitas, 2015), 28-33.

³⁹Joanna Orska, *Przełom awangardowy w dwudziestowiecznym modernizmie w Polsce* [The avant-garde breakthrough in twentieth-century modernism in Poland] (Krakow: Universitas, 2004).

a reaffirmation of autonomy. With the avant-garde gesture of questioning tradition, art returns to itself, it renews its own myth of a language (code), both primordial and critical.⁴⁰

The emphasis on literature's self-determination, the work's own logic as an overarching principle, affirmed also by its capacity for self-criticism, revision of previous rules etc., leads Orska, for example, to such readings of Adorno in which *purposelessness* is distinguished from *sefleness* (or literally "altruism"); the former is reminiscent of the work's immanent purposiveness, as described by Brown⁴¹. Orska also defends the interpretive relevance of authorial intentions, at times even suggesting that these intentions should not be regarded as the "exterior" of the work.⁴²

Orska's polemical interventions, however, seem even more significant. For it is in this mode that her resistance to the commodification of literature, to its subordination to the logic of the market, is fully revealed. It seems interesting and telling, for example, that in the debate around Igor Stokfiszewski's (in)famous manifestos⁴³ Orska was the only one to explicitly warn against the dangers of the market: not just the "mainstream", "mass media", or the "mercantile" attitude of critics and journalists, but the market as such. She did that while invoking the metaphor of commercial exchange:

However, I prefer to be on the side of the noble-fooled; to argue that poetry is better off left alone, safely isolated in its niche. I find it difficult to accept that poetry appears on the pages of newspapers simply because it is "religious" or "gay", or written by a gentleman who dresses funny, or is nominated for the Nike award. [...] So what if the curious, collective viewer, eager for exotic flavours, reaches for Pasewicz's or Dehnel's books, if a minute later they reject poetry that demands sensitivity to language? The transaction has been made, and when you leave the checkout, complaints are not taken into account.⁴⁴

The suggestion that poetry should remain something niche, articulated in the same debate also by other participants, such as Karol Maliszewski⁴⁵, is supported by this kind of reflection only by Orska. A threat to the very essence of poetry comes not from particular, ill-willed critics or journalists, but the very manner of interacting with the work, enforced by the market. This mode of operation is antithetical to meaning, as it is oriented entirely towards usage, and as such it not so much destroys poetry (at the level of its production) as it hides its proper shape.

⁴⁰Uniłowski, *Prawo krytyki* [The law of criticism], 171.

⁴¹See, for example, Brown, 13.

⁴²See, for example, Joanna Orska, *Performatywy: składnia/retoryka, gatunki i programy poetyckiego konstruktywizmu* [Performatives: syntax/rhetoric, genres and programmes of poetic constructivism (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Publishing House, 2019), 34.

⁴³On this issue, see, for example, Paweł Kaczmarek, "Wielogłos i autonomia. Nieoczywiste sojusze w debacie wokół wystąpienia Igora Stokfiszewskiego", [„Polyphony and autonomy. Non-obvious alliances in the debate around Igor Stokfiszewski's speeches", *Wielogłos* 4 (2021): 9–36, <https://doi.org/10.4467/2084395X.WI.21.028.15291>.

⁴⁴Joanna Orska, „Czkawka” [„Hiccups”] *Tygodnik Powszechny* 16 (2007), <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/czkawka-138211>.

⁴⁵Karol Maliszewski, „Czkawka po Lukacsu” [„Post-Lukacs hiccups”], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 11 (2007), <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/czkawka-po-lukacsu-139474>.

Orska's and Kałuża's reflections on autonomy remain rooted in an in-depth authorial reflection on the ontology of the work. This makes their comparison with the intentionalist proposal particularly interesting, even if, ultimately, the critics' ideas (insofar as they remain rooted in a gesture of rejection of authorial intention and the allegedly 'essentialist' model of meaning) contradict the said proposal.

(Provisional) conclusions

When comparing Polish traditions or ways of conceptualising the autonomy of literature with the reflection developed in the "Nonsite" circles, one notices that the former are suspended in a double vacuum of sorts. Firstly, they develop outside any explicit criticism of commodity and market society; secondly, they do so outside considerations on the ontology of the work (i.e. concerning, for example, the essential nature of the relationship between interpretation, meaning and authorship). The absence of the former means that statements about the relation of literature to external forces that threaten autonomy remain abstract and mediated by a series of elusive notions such as 'media', 'social communication' etc. This makes it difficult to identify the political stakes of such considerations. Meanwhile, the lack of focus on the ontology of the work caused the otherwise accurate intuitions about the tension between literature and the market – and ways of working through this tension – to remain largely undeveloped. The latter problem could be summarized in the following manner: Polish critics dealing with the problem of autonomy tend to direct their attention towards the autonomy of the creative work, rather than the autonomy of the work of literature itself.

Meanwhile, the accounts of autonomy that are supported by some reflection on the ontology of the work – such as those offered by Joanna Orska, Anna Kałuża and, to a lesser extent perhaps, Jacek Gutorow – are dominated by an anti-intentionalist approach, stemming not (it seems) from any particular theoretical or methodological paradigm, but from an "implied" rejection of the essentialist model of meaning and a lack of in-depth reflection on the very notion of intention. All this makes the broad and coherent approach to autonomy proposed by the "Nonsite" circles – which encompasses both the 'hard' ontology of literature/art and a Marxist reflection on the relationship between the work and the market – a potentially productive contribution to various debates within Polish literary studies. The central claim which needs to be better understood is as follows: that which resists commodification is not what is difficult to sell (what is difficult to see, or to make profit from), but that which is difficult to make into a commodity in the first place – i.e. that which does not change in the course of circulation – in the case of literature, meaning itself.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

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KEYWORDS

autonomy

ABSTRACT:

This article offers a comparative analysis of various accounts/models of literary autonomy in the Polish literary criticism of recent decades. The different ways of understanding autonomy are analysed from the standpoint of the so-called intentionalist approach to literary studies.

CRITICISM

c o m m i d i t y

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