

AGNIESZKA CZECHOWICZ

## SOME REMARKS ON THE METHODOLOGICAL COMPULSIONS IN THE STUDIES OF OLD-POLISH LITERATURE

*Formido quid aget, da Venus consilium*

### INTRODUCTION

The most vital elements in all the reports from various fields of methodological arguments, all kinds of statements, exhortations, and in-depth diagnoses of the burning issues that scholars of Old Polish literature of the past three decades have faced, are actually less extensive, marginal or cursory remarks accompanying individual detailed and comprehensive (or, conversely, introductory) studies on the literature itself. First of all, because in each of these cases a multitude of models of reading and types of methodological involvement is revealed. Secondly, their value and usefulness are automatically verified. Thirdly, it is possible to check on an ongoing basis whether a given approach works in reality. And, fourthly, the rhetoric of the declaration neither aids nor hinders such a recognition, because in view of its inevitability, it has a perfectly balanced meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Old Polish literature places high demands on the researcher, especially in terms of broadly understood literary competences. Of course, these requirements apply to literary scholars of any other historical and literary formation, the only difference perhaps being that in other cases, the languages

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the initial intention, regrettably this article bears all the features of a report, statement, exhortation, and in-depth diagnosis, if not of a burning issue.

of the scientific description (or interpretation) and the text being described (or interpreted) differ far less from each other. The culture of old epochs, with all the complexity and heterogeneity of the tendencies that inform it, is a still non-anatomized whole, of which the humanistic model of education with classical rhetoric is an important integrating factor. Another one is classical erudition, including—in short—the rhetorical, philosophical, artistic and theological achievements of Antiquity and Christianity. Literature offers the best understanding of the size of the whole and the place that erudition and significance occupy in it. The division into fine literature and usable literature, which we have been dealing with since the eighteenth century, has not yet taken place in it. The whole, to a greater or lesser degree, exists in the order of art, i.e. regularity. It is an art of varying quality, which does not change the fact that everything that has been written—including texts that according to contemporary criteria do not fall within the category of the *belles lettres*—i.e. pious, political, theoretical, polemic, didactic, moral, ascetic, and other writings all fall within the context of the rules of rhetoric or poetics, or one and the other simultaneously. And vice versa. The part of the literary output of old epochs which we without hesitation term fiction fully participates in communication and the exchange of values and ideas, shaping the specificity of the culture that creates them. The aesthetic energy in these works does not detach itself from the (ethical, didactic, etc.) message itself, but is bound to it. The books are full of “eminent teachings, examples, customs, laws and God-fearing” and even authors who have nothing in common with the fear of God (e.g. different varieties of the *ars amandi*), eagerly attest to their intentions, at least the didactic ones.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of texts of a parenetic or political character, their artistic and ideological aspects coexist harmoniously, model each other, their merger having nothing to do with artificiality or coercion. Poetry and fiction are not a costume donned by didactics or politics. Neither are they a sugar coating to make them more palatable but are rather their body and language.

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<sup>2</sup> Two ad hoc examples: Kasper Twardowski’s *Lekcyje kupidynowe* [Cupid’s lessons], a text about seducing girls, subject to church preventive censorship, refers to school rhetoric and enters the paradigm of poetic text books or self-help manuals. The preface of Adam Korczyński’s *Wizerunek złocistej przyjaźni zdrady* [An image of treachery with a silver lining of friendship], very Boccaccioesque, a romance about a successful seduction of a wife before the very eyes of her husband, makes a disclaimer that the poem was born out of the need to make spouses aware of the risks that might ensnare them and to instruct them how to safeguard themselves from them.

It suffices to mention Kochanowski's *Dismissal of the Greek Envoys* or Kochowski's *Polish Psalms*.<sup>3</sup> These works arise from culture. One of its most fascinating features is the fluidity of the boundaries of the literary and scholarly discourses,<sup>4</sup> where political reflection is aesthetic, ethical and philosophic, and the civil engagement of the authors is seen as the ultimate expression of creative maturity. To fully identify and describe the whole, and thus the work in its cultural context, shaping and conditioning its meanings, to recognize the qualities that constitute it, the systems of intertextual references and relations that add to its meaning, and to finally decide what is the artistic value of the text, i.e. apart from the bare rudiments, we need (apart from elementary literary studies competence with an awareness of the structure of the literary work of art, poetics and stylistics, history of development of art forms, etc. or what Janusz Sławiński once called the fundamental repertory of concepts that delineates the horizon of questions currently reflected on in Literary Studies<sup>5</sup>) an erudition that helps us match the erudition of the authors of old, the knowledge of old poetics and rhetoric and familiarity with the context of the history, customs, religions, arts (e.g. the performative arts), and philosophy of the era under scrutiny.

It is not too attractive to reiterate well-known and rudimentary things, but once you have started, you need to be consistent. After all, such reflections can be questioned via mental *exercitationes* or in good faith. Old Polish culture is not atomised or ironic, and the literature of former centuries is not autotelic. For instance, the approach to the legacy of Antiquity differs in the literature written before and after Romanticism, the latter being clearly distanced from the conviction of the Greeks and Romans that the writer is the educator of society.<sup>6</sup>

For old culture, this ancient tradition with its accomplishments in poetics, rhetoric, philosophy, and ethics continues to be alive and topical. Its treatment is subject to historical change, similar to changes in tendencies, styles, currents, and eras: the authors of the Latin Middle Ages, when referencing pagan patterns, did so without evident emulation zeal, to follow an observation made by Juliusz Domański. The Renaissance tried to revive and update in an

<sup>3</sup> Let us recall for a change J.U. Niemcewicz's *Powrót pośta* or Orzeszkowa's *Marta*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mirosława HANUSIEWICZ, *Pięć stopni miłości. O wyobraźni erotycznej w polskiej poezji barokowej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Semper, 2004), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Janusz SŁAWIŃSKI, "Zwłoki metodologiczne," in IDEM, *Teksty i teksty* (Kraków: Universitas, 2000), 51.

<sup>6</sup> This difference was noted by J. Domański (*Użytkownicy i badacze dziedzictwa antycznego, czyli o różnicy między humanizmem a humanistyką* (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2007)).

unadulterated manner the ancient legacy, not so much with scholarly studies in mind, but for the sake of everyday life. Finally, the Baroque adapted them, but only on its own terms, without much heed to the original qualities.<sup>7</sup> Recognizing the variable intensity of Antiquity's influence on culture at that time, as well as its sensitivity to religious and aesthetic ideas, philosophical proposals or scientific discoveries, is a condition enabling us to effectively penetrate the artistic uniqueness of the bygone time. The reconstruction of this specificity is possible precisely thanks to the subjective expression of the human understanding of this universe contained in the texts.

The most important, or one of the most important features of culture is its continuity, i.e. the continuum of its duration, the values that constitute it, the ideas that influence its creators, and the changeability and redefinition of these ideas. In order to talk about these phenomena responsibly and objectively, one needs to know what is being talked about, i.e. against the distance of time, aesthetic and historical hermeneutical alienation, against "things in themselves" (since in their research literary historians are not philosophers and need not use the apparatus of philosophy, e.g. phenomenology, since they study a message which is a unique thing, definitely also in itself, but more importantly for a philologist—self-communicating, intentional and supplemented in each and every concretisation) one needs to make an effort to discover, uncover and recover the identity of old culture in its ideological, rhetorical and literary fullness, in its changeability over time. Only after uncovering identity, given the imperfect recognition, which will forever remain a reconstruction and of necessity a hypothesis (even if a very probable one, once you stick to the appropriate rules and keep your focus) can one speak about the study of continuity, as we know then what continuity we have in mind and what it is that we seek.

The odds of a correct evaluation are not that slim. We have texts and records of their impact and perception, written in discourse or in poetry.

We have other disciplines of art, painting, architecture or music that illuminate and illustrate what is written in literature within a different code. We can confront. When the continuity is cast out of the area of interest, the process of research will sooner or later be affected by entropy and dispersal. They can also come into play when the difference between the subject and the object, reconstruction and construction, creativity and interpretation, and

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. IDEM, "Recepcja—imitacja—emulacja. Kilka uwag o twórczości łacińskiej humanistów jako wyrazie postawy użytkowniczej wobec dziedzictwa antycznego," *Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce* 47 (2003): 7–19.

finally—one's own and someone else's ground—is lost to the researcher's awareness. It is difficult to say where we are starting from and where we are going to because it all becomes a vicious circle. It is not very clear what. One repeats and hears the oft-quoted bits and pieces of quotations, which do not even ask for identification. Discourse oscillates around what can be heard (or around the awareness of the subject, i.e. the scholar, reduced to a point registering the different audible voices—the Barthesian and Jungian ego, or a complex which has dominated other complexes)—and all of this can be very pleasant, as pleasant as talking about oneself to oneself in the presence of others. I do not see any reason, however, to make these pleasant activities a methodological must. Culture is communication, while self-communication and fascination are fixed states, merely points of departure towards what is different and what remains outside.

Playing games of meaning, scattering, searching for discontinuity and escapes of meaning can be interesting in moderate quantities. Even in such cases, however, it calls for the author's talent and sensitivity, a special literary sense of hearing, a unique and fine sense of taste. In larger quantities it can be boring, and sometimes, more seriously, there is a loss of precious time, which, as we know, once lost never comes back. What can you say about the postulates of applying Deconstructionism in readings of Old Polish literature? Let us try, it may be interesting, let's take part in the race. How about the diagnoses offered by Gender Studies? Let's try. Hasn't anyone tried it yet? However, apart from the insightfulness of analyses, the value of such methodologically oriented works is measured by the imagination and style of the authors. The encouragement by supporters of methods which we may call alternative for the ease of discussion, do not cross a certain boundary and do not include a call for researchers to be more talented in writing (nobody would dare to do so).

Deconstructionism is outspoken about the lack of continuity, absence, difference, entropy, and displacement. It has published important works proving the persistence of questions about the Greek crisis of culture at the time of the Sophists and showing the impact of these questions on classical philosophy. It also published other works in which methodological inspiration is particularly visible on the graphical level of the text. Many studies have been written in which the frequency of hyphens connecting words can be indeed unbearable.

I must embarrassedly admit—paraphrasing Janusz Sławiński (who observed this outside the context of any methodology or philosophy)—that

I have not been able to read everything: I cannot make use of them and lack the strength to mentally grasp them. As to their style, these are somewhat repulsive texts despite all the makings of scholarly stylisation. There are many statements that verge on exercises, similar to brain teasers.

While, as Ryszard Nycz has it, Deconstructionism made its last programmatic, self-critical and polemical effort around a generation ago,<sup>8</sup> affirmation and good faith still meet the methodological demands requiring it. And the other way around: still rare yet present Deconstructionist readings of Old Polish texts make the impression of a significant presence along the researcher (reader)—text line. It is hard to reject the idea that the demands for the search for inspiration in this method may be triggered by the need, acutely felt in Old Polish Studies, of a more in-depth textual interpretation. However, this direction of methodological explorations may in this context seem indeed doubtful.

Philology and interpretation are vital for old literature, as for any literature really. Traditionally conceived philology does not undermine or reduce the value of interpretation, which is its natural supplement. The risk of such depreciation lies solely in the possible limitations of the researcher. But even when such limitations stand in the way of interpretation, there is some positive knowledge, some trace of recognition—thanks to philology. Alternative methods offer a lesser guarantee of recognition, and in methodical terms distrust both philology and interpretation. Studying literature without philology is an egregious void, says Osip Mandel'shtam, who notes the paradoxes of Russian symbolic poetry:

The European castles and Acropolises, the Gothic cities, the cathedrals like forests and the dome-topped basilicas would stand as before, but people would look at them without understanding them and even more likely would grow frightened of them, not understanding what force raised them up or what blood it is that flows in the veins of the mighty architecture that surrounds them.<sup>9</sup>

Mandelstam's rhetoric is clear and powerful and that is why I quote him here. There are many sentences here, when he spoke about the consequences of "imaginary, professional symbolism" which are automatically brought to mind under the circumstances. They relate to the fact that human beings

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<sup>8</sup> "Słowo wstępne," in *Dekonstrukcja w badaniach literackich*, ed. Ryszard Nycz (Gdańsk: Słowo / obraz terytoria, 2000), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Osip MANDEL'SHTAM, "About the Nature of Word," in *IDEM, Selected Essays*, transl. Sidney Monas (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 73.

have ceased to be in this arch-symbolic situation the hosts of their own home; they inhabit some church or a sacred grove of the druids, where each piece of furniture and furnishings cries out, confirming absolute significance. Or there is another statement, about the contradance of “appropriateness” that beckon to each other:

Eternal flickering. Not a single clear word. All allusions and understatements. A rose beckons to a girl, a girl beckons to the rose. [...] One can no longer eat lunch on a table as this is no ordinary table. One cannot light a fire as all of this can mean something that you will be dissatisfied with later.<sup>10</sup>

Like any writing, good writing about Old Polish texts is in some measure a mystery of the writing subject. I don't think that a methodological decision can have any significant influence on it, as long as the researcher is its steward, not a servant. In the opposite situation, the choice of the method really affects the quality of writing. A literary historian is a servant of the text (or its spokesman) but can also be its partner: such an understanding of the literary profession can probably be still satisfactory (I am satisfied). Good Old-Polish Studies include reliable contributions, detailed works on texts, articles on text-interpretation, comparative works, monographs, reading proposals, interpretative essays, etc.—that is, all types of studies which should grow out of curiosity, preferences and a desire to know, underpinned by the scholar's efficiency and reliability, sufficient erudition<sup>11</sup> and also—necessary in interpretative proposals—literary sensitivity and individual talent, i.e. creative disposition.

At the beginning of these remarks (which nevertheless turned out to be another in-depth report of burning postulates), we spoke of minor methodological comments accompanying specific studies on literature, and of the edge they have over all a priori incentives and directives. The marginal notes vary as to their rhetoric, style and methodology.

They indicate that objects of culture, as documents of ideological concepts or a system of socially approved values, should be seen as real, unique and autonomous and that this recognition, evident in the respect for the na-

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, 45.

<sup>11</sup> All of this was comprehensively addressed by Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa in her article “Komparatystyka i filologia. Uwagi o studiach porównawczych literatury epok dawnych” (in *Polonistyka w przebudowie. Literaturoznawstwo—wiedza o języku—wiedza o kulturze—edukacja. Zjazd polonistów*, Kraków 22–25 września 2004, vol. II, ed. Małgorzata Czermińska et. al., Kraków: Universitas, 2005).

tive code of the objects under scrutiny, is a precondition for their proper reading<sup>12</sup>; they confirm the conviction of the principal meaning of the reconstruction, interpretation and valuation in the history of literature<sup>13</sup> and indicate that the work of the scholar is a gradual discovery and recovery of the energy and beauty of old texts<sup>14</sup>; they refer to the last philosophical and theoretical manifestations of the twentieth century, recognizing the sense of internal intellectual reflection<sup>15</sup>; they underline the necessity to refer to the sources and contexts of a literary work in the face of possible threats to the ideologization of discourse.<sup>16</sup>

This review is selective, but it gives some idea—as Old Polish literature experts write today—what research tools they use and even what anthropological meaning they attribute to them. It is possible to list many more similar remarks; one can indicate even whole articles, which do not make demands but have the form of a beautiful, methodological dream.<sup>17</sup>

The path of radical suspicions opens up the mind and offers innumerable possibilities of expression and persuasion. Old-Polish literary scholars, while uncovering the “glistening, aggressive intelligence and drama of the rhetoric”<sup>18</sup> of critics from Foucault’s and Derrida’s constellation, if they distance themselves to this current they do so due to their usefulness for studies on old literatures.

The very demands of applying a “new philosophy” in dealing with these texts can be overwhelmingly naïve, and the recommended method proves, at least for the time being, to be of no use and leads nowhere. It does not even lead to Nothing, which offers no satisfaction really.

<sup>12</sup> EADEM, *Pieśni czasu śmierci. Studium z historii duchowości XVI–XVIII wieku* (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 1992), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Adam KARPIŃSKI, “O konsekwencjach ‘wieku rękopisów’. Rekonstruowanie epoki,” *Teksty Drugie* issue 3 (1994): 5.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Mirosława HANUSIEWICZ, *Świat podzielony. O poezji Sebastiana Grabowieckiego* (Rzym–Lublin: Fundacja Jana Pawła II–Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 1994), 29.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Kwiryna ZIEMBA, *Jan Kochanowski jako poeta egzystencji. Prolegomena do interpretacji “Trenów,”* (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Ogród Książ, 1994), XII.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Marta WOJTKOWSKA-MAKSYMİK, ‘*Gentiluomo cortigiano*’ and ‘*Dworzanin polski*’. *Dyskusja o doskonałości człowieka w ‘Il Libro del Cortigiano’ Baldassarra Castiglione’ i w ‘Dworzanie polskim’ Łukasza Górnickiego* (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2007), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Let me refer you to the article by K. Ziemia, “Literatury Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów ze stanowiska komparatystyki wewnętrznej” (in: *Barok polski wobec Europy. Sztuka przekładu, materiały międzynarodowej konferencji naukowej w Warszawie 15–17 września 2003 roku*, ed. Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa, Marek Prejs (Warszawa: ANTA, 2005), 393–407.

<sup>18</sup> Kwiryna ZIEMBA, *Jan Kochanowski jako poeta egzystencji*, XII.



It cannot be ruled out that one day the whole diagnosis may prove not only a gross oversimplification, but also a misunderstanding that—contrary to what has been said—this is not a very good path, which brings promising research results. Meanwhile, I have serious doubts. I recall the smile of the Poet who did not trust even a very good and certain rule, which his friend, in good faith, recommended him to observe. But it was the Poet who had the right rules and regulations. Besides, when writing, he had visions. In this vision, permeated with creative anxiety, he himself decided on either necessity or freedom:

As to the rule which you have, my Honourable Friend, recommended to protect *in vertendo*, it is very good and certain. Yet, sometimes when I write I have visions and two goddesses appear: one is *Necessitas clavos trabales et cuneos manu gestans athena*, and the other *Poetica, nescio quid blandum spirans*. When the two encroach upon me, I do not know what to do. *Formido quid aget, da Venus consilium*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> IDEM, “List do Stanisława Fogelwedera,” in IDEM, *Dzieła polskie*, ed. Julian Krzyżanowski (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 1980), 751–52.

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## Summary

This paper is a hidden polemic with the texts that have recently been published (not quoted by their names or indicated in the footnotes). These texts have brought forth a diagnosis that there is a delay in terms of methodology with regard to the studies of Old-Polish literature and have postulated their application to the studies of ancient literature. The author formulates her belief that traditional philology is indispensable in the studies on Old-Polish literature with an awareness that there should be a free choice in selecting the method of its interpretation. The text emerges from a protest against the rhetoric of methodological directives formulated under the influence of fashion, ideology, or fatigue with the object of research and from radical distrust to methodological directives as such, and the majority of directives in general.

**Key words:** methodology, Old-Polish literature, reconstruction of the specific character of the time past, elementary repertoire of the rules of text study, researcher's creative freedom.

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