

MIROŚŁAWA HANUSIEWICZ-LAVALLEE

ON THE STUDY OF EARLY MODERN LITERATURE
(AND INSECTS).

A COMMENTARY ON THE POLEMICS

Paweł Bohuszewicz's polemic with Agnieszka Czechowicz refers to research on old Polish literature, treated and described here quite generally, and in fact, having even broader references, as it concerns the relation between philological and deconstructive approaches (and their related forms of discourse) in literary studies. The fact that the dispute concerns the place of both methodologies in the studies of early literature is not only due to the fact that both scholars deal with it in their research, but perhaps even more so because these studies require a philological approach particularly acutely and the interpretative procedures, more than in any other area, run the risk of factual errors, resulting simply from an improper reconstruction of the form of the text, misunderstanding of the word, ignorance of the meaning defined by the context, rules of the genre, historical reference, etc. The triumphs of "alternative methods"—to use the term applied by Agnieszka Czechowicz—in other areas of literary studies do not necessarily turn out to be equally great when the same models of reading are applied to early modern or medieval texts. The great authorities of Brückner or Krzyżanowski find no match in the achievements of deconstructionists interested in Old Polish literature. Is it just a question of individual talents or a problem of adequacy of the methodology?

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The Polish version of the article was published in "Roczniki Humanistyczne," vol. 59 (2011), issue 1.

“Radical decontextualisation” addressed by Paweł Bohuszewicz is intended to update the latent potential of the semantic text, independent of the author’s intention. It should be remembered, however, that the author’s intention is not the only context and source of meaning of the work. In the case of contemporary works, a significant part of this meaning is simply provided to the reader or researcher. A literary work by Czesław Miłosz or Wisława Szymborska is published in a language which we use and are more or less familiar with. The text does not lack any verses or letters, it refers to concepts, names, and events, the recognition of which is generally available to the reader. Meanwhile, when Paweł Bohuszewicz recalls in his essay Daniel Naborowski’s poem “Na oczy królowny angielskiej” [On the eyes of the English princess], calling it somewhat exaggeratedly a “masterpiece,” we must first of all ask what text he is referring to. Is he referring to one of the records from the Kórnik Library? Or from the Library of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Krakow? From *Wirrydarz poetycki*? From the Ossolineum Library or from the National Library? Naborowski’s poem exists in multiple dissimilar versions. It may bear the title “Opisanie oczu ślicznych” [A description of beautiful eyes], one of the “Wiersze Imci Pana Daniela Naborowskiego Elżbicie, córce Jakuba króla angielskiego, na oczy jej napisanych, gdy księżę Radziwiłł, wojewoda wileński, w poselstwie jeździł do Anglijej” [Poems by honourable Mr. Daniel Naborowski written on the eyes of Elisabeth, daughter of King James of England, when Prince Radziwiłł, Voivode of Vilnius, was an envoy to England] or one of the “Wiersze Pana Daniela Naborowskiego Helźbicie, córce Jakuba króla angielskiego, która potym szła za Fryderyka Palatinum Rheni, króla czeskiego, na oczy jej napisane” [Poems by Mr. Daniel Nieborowski on the eyes of Elisabeth, King James of England’s daughter, who later married Frederick Palatinum Rheni], or even “Na oczy królowny anielskiej” [On the eyes of the English princess].¹ Still, as we have known for a long time, the text is a translation, quite faithful at that, of a French poem by Honorat Laugier de Porchères entitled “Sur les yeux de Madame la Duchesse de Beaufort”, translated and modified by at least a few seventeenth-century European poets. We do not have any autograph of the work or its printed version, the publication of which would be supervised by the author, so we would not even examine this *intentio auctoris*. The philologist, to a much greater degree than the deconstructionist’s

¹ I owe information on the places of publication and variants of the text to Dr Radosław Grzeškowiak, who together with Krzysztof Mrowcewicz is working on a critical edition of Naborowski’s poetry. Their findings have not come out in print yet.

interpreter, experiences the consequences of the existence of the text as a separate “discursive event” with its unique dynamism, history and logic. It is not deconstruction, but philology that allows us to see and recreate all that resulted from the “collision” of the text with its subsequent readers, copyists and—so to speak—users. The transformations to which the text was subject are nothing more than subsequent updates of its semantic potential.

However, the issue at hand is not only the history of the text itself in its material form. The subsequent updates encapsulate the history of motifs, images, poem forms, and complicated intertextual relations. To what extent was the poem by Honorat Laugier de Porchères linked to the tradition of *les blasons du corps féminin*? To what extent was the same convention inspirational for e.g. Sonnet 132 by Shakespeare? How about other (innumerable) Baroque praises of a dame’s eyes? What are the semantic consequences of “radical decontextualisation,” which involves the change in the poem’s address, initially meant for the mistress of Henry IV, Gabriela D’Estrées, then dedicated to the pious daughter of James I? As far as the updating of the semantic potential is concerned, philology can—in the case of old works—recognise and read them and can moreover make them the basis and starting point for subsequent updates. Irrespective of its “age,” literature is undoubtedly, as Foucault claimed, a space of “discursive events,” in which the mutual referentiality of texts is arguably one of the most fascinating issues. The point is that it is philology that provides navigation instruments that allow you to move in it as such. It allows you to recognize the space of expression and the semantic consequences of the place occupied by particular “events.” Finally, it reveals the very communication reality that deconstructionist discourse tries to describe in a theoretical mode.

Is the dispute completely pointless, then? Paweł Bohuszewicz does not deny the need for philology and Agnieszka Czechowicz confirms that “every way of researching the works of culture is interesting in itself as a phenomenon.” Of course, at issue is what we consider as a research procedure. Paweł Bohuszewicz writes directly about the “abolition of the border between the subject and the object” (the recognising and the recognised), which—in his opinion—ultimately pays off. Agnieszka Czechowicz asks about the purpose of such procedures—is it still cognition? And if so, what do we get to know?

It is true that coming to understand any textual message, and especially a literary work, is not the same as that of the biology of the centipede, because the nature and the way of existence of the former are—at least in everyday consciousness—much less stable and fleeting, if only because of

their intertextual and referential character. But the centipede seems to us to be an entity only seemingly obvious; modern physics knows that its existence is as suspect as that of a poem. The deeper we go down in the study of the structure of matter, the deeper and more chaotic the abyss that opens up for us. Thus, the situation of the humanities, including literary studies, is by no means unique.

Entomologists have virtually no way out: they can study the centipede or look for another job, even if they know that the material integrity of an insect is not obvious and is the result of the action of powerful physical forces, which we do not know how to grasp. Breaking the boundary between the subject and the object in this case will not help in any way, although undoubtedly both experience the same instability of being. How about literary studies? If I ignore this barrier in order to “update the semantic potential” of the work, I undoubtedly allow it to continue to exist and include myself and my sensitivity in the historical sequence of reading concretisations. Using the terminology of Paweł Bohuszewicz: I have truly read a literary work of art. Did I get to know it? Probably not, but because we assumed that the work is by its very nature unrecognisable, this fact does not matter very much. The work is alive and this is what counts; a dialogue is taking place and a voice reverberates with an echo.

And what happens if I don't ignore the boundary and naively assume that the work is, at least roughly speaking, cognisable, and will start this arduous procedure of reading its successive cultural updates? Will I lose anything, and if so, what? It seems that Paweł Bohuszewicz's answer is: the work will remain unread. But actually why? Is it because I will be aware of the covert nature of the text, its references and intertextual wealth, of the various and often contradictory readings and ways of using it? Is it because “the microscope” will kill any emotion, sap energy, immobilize the text, like a butterfly stuck on a pin?

Every literary scholar knows perfectly well the thrill of emotions and elations that accompany—at least sometimes—work on a text. They know how intimate and deep the contact with the work and... the author who emerges from outside of it can be. Regardless of our theoretical convictions concerning the structure and the way in which a literary work exists, we read literature because we seek somebody's voice in it. And it is by no means the longer we look for it, the less we hear it—although I cannot provide hard evidence of this reading experience, unfortunately, and Dr. Bohuszewicz must take my word for it.

Concluding this gloss, I must admit to something that might slightly outrage the distinguished Guest of our *Roczniki*. The voice I am referring to is invariably a human voice for me, and I must admit to something even more embarrassing—quite often I recognize it simply as a voice of an author. True: this voice is hard to capture. Ultimately, then, I arrive at some obscure and uncertain *intentio auctoris*. The sense of dealing with the history of literature and of any humanities in the first place is the anthropological sense for me.

On another occasion I quoted a statement by Andrzej Wargocki from his work about Rome: “I do not curse the times of old. I know that there were humans and what they themselves admit to in their writings [...]”² I, too, know that there were humans and therefore I do care about their thoughts, utterances and actions. I would like to bring to life at least a droplet of their voice. It should be their voice, not mine, even though I know that when using their words, I will impart my own life to the people of the past, for all my efforts not to stifle their voice. There is, then, some naivete in this procedure. Yet this naivete is precisely why I deal with literature rather than with a centipede I found in my bathroom yesterday.

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Summary

The article is the editor-in-chief’s comment to the discussion between Agnieszka Czechowicz and Paweł Bohuszewicz as presented in the current issue of the journal. The author defends philological methods in studying early modern literary texts and expresses her scepticism concerning any methods questioning and negating the fundamental epistemological difference between what is being studied and a researcher himself.

Key words: old Polish literature, philology, deconstruction.

Translated by Marcin Turski



The preparation of the English version of *Roczniki Humanistyczne (Annals of Arts)* and its publication in electronic databases was financed under contract no. 836/P–DUN/2018 from the resources of the Minister of Science and Higher Education for the popularization of science.

² Adam WARGOCKI, *O Rzymie pogańskim i chrześcijańskim ksiąg dwoje* [...] (Kraków: W Drukarni Łukasza Kupisza, 1648), 106.