

Teksty Drugie 2014, 2, s.5-11

Special Issue



CENTRUM
HUMANISTYKI
CYFROWEJ

Introduction: from the periphery to the center.

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Foreword

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Introduction: from the periphery to the center

There is no more universal and at the same time more problematic question posed by literary theory than the one about the relationship between the literature, the reality and the truth. This question is present in all theoretical investigations starting with Aristotle's category of probability and mimesis and going through following theories of rhetoric, nineteenth century concepts of realism and naturalism, phenomenological theory of quasi-judgments (Roman Ingarden, *Das Literarische Kunstwerk*). It ends with contemporary concepts of the objective novel, differentiations between "fiction literature" and "non-fiction literature," "literature and document" and the question of "literariness" of non-fictional genres, such as reportage, etc. These issues have been approached from many vantage points inside the realm of literary criticism – depending on literary culture in which they were being formulated. Remaining within the range of theoretical questions, for the purposes of this introduction, I will reduce them to four most general subjects.

The first one is the evolution of terminology that spans across the ages. These terms – some of which are ancient – constitute the history of poetics. At the center of this evolution there always lies the relationship between the text and the reality.

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The second subject is a theoretical problem of the ontology of literary texts as linguistic constructs, or a collection of questions about the possibility or impossibility of truth in literary texts.

The third is a question about the role of literary communication in establishing the status of a text (as well as its genre) or about the relations between semantics of literary texts and their recipients. These questions are concerned with criteria used by the readers treating, for example, the same text as a true story on some occasions and as a literary fiction on others.

And finally, the fourth subject characteristic for discussions on literature in the last several decades: a set of questions about whether modern literature represents reality or if it merely creates one. These questions are followed by the discussion on non-fiction genres (reportage, autobiography, documentary account), and whether by employing strictly literary means to describe the reality (such as metaphors, dialogue, composition) they lead to the destruction of their essence – the principle of “non-fiction.”

Two issues keep resurging in the above described relationships between literature and truth. The first one is a specific character of the relationship between a text (language) and the reality; second one is a question about the credibility of a narrator from whose perspective we learn about that particular reality. The relationship between a literary text and the reality can be reduced to two primary dilemmas.

Firstly, if one believes that literature (fiction) and reality constitute an opposition (along the lines of “it is not reality, it is literature”) than how could the so called “non-fiction” be possible at all? Following that thought, how could a fictional work of literature be treated as a representation of reality? It is not difficult to observe that the core of the issue is constituted by the historically changing term “literature.” It has been formulated throughout the ages in a way that the literally understood works of “non-fiction” have remained outside of the realm of literature.

There is one more, fifth, perspective connected to the last question. It is perspective of history of literary criticism and theory. Issues tackled from that perspective are concerned not with the theoretical questions but with cultural characteristics of literature, e.g. features characteristic of particular national literatures as well as criteria employed by their readers. Hence, these are the issues concerned with a sphere of “literary culture” in which both writers and readers immerse themselves.

2.

Let us begin with those last questions.

The relationships between literature and reality, fiction and truth, document and conventionality, etc. for over a hundred years have been among the most important questions of the modernist literature. They have been formulated according to the aesthetics and variations of national modernisms – most often as concepts

that would exclude one another, contradict, oppose, and involve debate. There have been numerous different answers to the question posed by modernists about the relationship between literature and the reality. They were concerned, among other factors, with language of a given literature, themes, ways of constructing the text, its genre status, its protagonists, origin of events, means of telling the story as well as credibility and construction of the narrator and the concept of writing. It so happened that the modernist questions about relationships between literature (art) and the reality have coincided with the beginnings of a modern – that is, modernist – literary studies and criticism.

While the linguistic and formal (genre, compositional, semantic) experiments have been considered to be specifically literary tools for the description of the reality in the avant-garde tradition, the realistic tradition understood “representation of reality” as a resignation from experiments for the sake of “faithful reconstruction” of that reality. While some writers believed that the warranty of truth in literature has to lie in the personal character of the story told by the narrator (as a guaranty of objectivism in its representation of the world), others pointed to the neutralization of the “I” of the writer as a condition necessary for the truth in literature. Hence, while some searched for truth about the reality in subjects “taken from the real life” or “belonging to the other,” others claimed that a writer can represent the reality exclusively from the perspective of his or her personal experience. However, this notion of experience has been rendered problematic as well. For some it had personal and individual character (or even a radically subjective one), for others – social and generational. And so, while some writers searched for the literary truth in the “raw” material taken directly from the reality (personal experiences, newspapers, documents, historical sources, witness accounts), others recognized literature itself as the only material for the future works of literature (e.g. that was the starting point for the postmodernists). Some, who wanted to speak in the languages of reality reached out for the spoken language along with all of its social variations and deviating from the norm grammatical forms. Others searched for the reality in the inter-textual play with forms, conventions and literary traditions.

These juxtapositions could be continued for a long time using examples from the universe of different modernisms’ aesthetics. However, independently from the examples and concepts standing behind them, all of them have to be considered as attempts to solve two central “paradoxes” of the modernist literature. The first paradox: if the literature is fiction why would the readers approach it as truth about the reality? The second paradox: if the non-fiction work is a faithful representation of the reality (hence, of the truth about the reality), why is it treated as a literary work? In other words, how is it possible for the non-fiction works, ones that are *ex-definitione* free of fiction, to be discovered as possessing literary quality by modern readers; quality that was supposed to be exiled from non-fiction works once and for all?

The explanation for the first paradox is simple – the status of literature depends on the literary culture of its readers. Works that used to be mere documents in the past (or, alternatively, in somebody's interpretation in the past) could be read as works of literature in a new context. It is enough for their style, semantics and syntax to become archaic and, most importantly, for their references to the immediate reality to stop being meaningful to the readers. After that what has been a document turns upon reading into literature.

The explanation of the second paradox is more complicated. All of the non-fiction genres are based on the recognition by the readers of some clear norms allowing differentiation of fiction from non-fiction. These norms, however, constitute a set of hidden criteria of which existence most of the readers are not even aware. In reality, the norms thanks to which all readers recognize (accept) particular genres as non-fiction and ascribe them the status of real works are merely stereotypes of receptions – such as conviction that a reportage or autobiography are non-fictional genres. Social norms of reading – not the content, poetics, or the genre of a given text – decide about some readers preferring the non-fiction literature, while others the fantasy genre.

3.

In Polish literature of the last century all of those questions belonged to the main current of literary debate. It has been conducted for decades, hence some of the phases of the debate have been impressed with the most prominent ideas and concepts of particular periods. During the early modernism the distancing of the literature (art) from the reality has been considered the greatest virtue. The more autonomous the themes, poetics, or literary styles the higher their artistic status. Literature used to be synonymous with "fiction."

The radical change occurred after the First World War. Along the concept of literature as a completely autonomous phenomenon – one having the avant-garde as its patron – its ability to represent the reality in a non-literary or unconventional, hence true and cognitively ingenious way that collapses current understanding of literature and its markers, has become recognized as its fundamental value. It opened a world of new possibilities not only for the undertaken subjects but also, or primarily, for the ways of writing, shaping of genres, and the relationship between fiction and non-fiction.

After the year 1918 non-fiction genres such as reportage and travelogue has developed on an unprecedented scale. Experiences of the Great War and the Bolshevik Revolution resulted in numerous works and personal accounts, fundamental markers of which where their cognitive values – faithful representation of individual and collective experiences. Simultaneously in literature (fiction) the so-called authorial narration has began to emerge more and more often; a narration based on identify-

ing the role of the author with that of the narrator (and the protagonist). In truth, it introduced to literature a play designed to keep the reader uncertain about the level of reliability of the autobiographical elements of the work. It resulted, however, in a gradual change of the understanding of the term "fiction." It ceased to mean the improbability and invention and began to be understood as transformation of the elements of the real, e.g. biographical, autobiographical, sources and documents, into elements with much more general meaning. That way the meaning of what used to be specific and very concrete in a document became general and metaphorical in literature.

Yet another caesura in the literature of the Polish modernism that had a crucial meaning to the development of non-fiction genres was the Second World War and the introduction of the communist regime (as a version of the Soviet model) in Poland in 1945 that was based on the rule of the omnipotent censorship bureau.

The Second World War resulted in a drastic upsurge in the need for documentary accounts – chronicles, sources, memoirs, journals, and letters as testimonies of personal and historical experiences. That is where both historians and readers search today for knowledge and information. In short, that is where they search for the truth about the German and Soviet concentration camps, war crimes, and genocide on an unprecedented scale, including the truth about the Holocaust.

This expansion of testimonies in Polish letters has resulted in radical changes throughout the entire literary system. On the one hand, a testimony as a kind of account was a product of the need for revealing the truth about terrible war crimes of the Nazis and communists but most importantly about the sufferings and mass extermination of millions of people. On the other hand it was a result of a violent crisis of the literary conventions and their extremely rapid erosion in the form of inability to present the war crimes using forms of traditional literature (fiction).

The testimony – especially unrelated to the poetic traditions and literary conventions – became for literature both the source of its credibility and an impulse for fundamental changes in the understanding of its artistic characteristics. It is so because the testimony is a mechanism of establishing the meaning of events that – for very particular reasons – are important in culture. And even though, according to its most fundamental meaning, the category of literary testimony is tied to the category of truth – the testimony itself is a category much broader than truth. Not only literary scholars but also historians, lawyers, sociologists, and psychologists know that very well; anyone who deals with accounts of people about their very experiences – individual, collective, historical or existential, etc. has that knowledge.

The second factor that influenced Polish non-fictional literature – censorship – evoked phenomena of the opposite character. After 1945, when Poland became a part of the communist block the censorship became the main "regulator" of public life (as was the case in all of the communist countries). On the one hand, censorship has become a tool for blocking all kinds of subjects that were considered dan-

gerous for the regime (regardless whether they were concerned with the past or present of the country). As a consequence, censorship stifled the development of documentary forms and non-fiction accounts such as autobiographies, in which the truth about the past and present could be presented in a non-ideological way and against the official propaganda. That is why that particular type of literature developed strongly among the Polish émigrés and not in the communist Poland. That is what led – especially after 1956 – to writers' interest in literary forms that were not particularly interesting for the censorship bureau. Those forms included different kinds of fiction, especially experimental and avant-garde ones. The paradox was based on the fact that the censorship bureau, by blocking content that described social, historical or political reality, triggered development of refined literary experiments ranging between different genres, types of narration, and linguistic solutions.

However, as the communist system grew weaker, numerous non-fiction genres began to develop quickly. In particular, reportage and travelogues that have been desired by readers craving for some unfalsified knowledge about the outside reality. Because the censorship still existed, however, works belonging to these genres were interested mostly in affairs removed from the Polish reality (typically of other countries or continents) or with ones that were extremely local and narrow in character.

The year 1989, with the fall of the communism and of censorship as a government institution, changed everything. A new reality resulted in an eruption of non-fiction forms that were preoccupied with everything that concerned public life and championed development of autobiographies in literature. Autobiographical writing became a reference point of literature understood as personal testimony contrasted with the literature understood as a study of social issues.

The biggest loser was an avant-garde aesthetic – itself being a product of communal optimism after the Great War – that turned out to be completely helpless facing the necessity to confront the scale of atrocities brought about by humanity in the twentieth century (Holocaust, genocide, repressions, torture). In such circumstances the weight of confronting these extreme experiences has been shifted onto the non-fiction genres.

The last decades of the communist system in Poland have been accompanied by rapid and radical changes in understanding and functioning of literature. The most important factors involved were the aesthetic concepts from western Europe justifying broadening of the term literature to all the forms of writing, a rapid influence of situation on the world's markets on the way of literature has operated and been understood and the development of new media followed by the globalization. The ever changing and more effective forms of commercializing of the book market have played increasingly important part as well.

As a result, the old oppositions between fiction and non-fiction not only lost their importance but also made the non-fiction genres the most dynamically developing and desired form of literature. Today, many literary forms that have been

doubted in terms of their merit several decades ago represent the non-fiction literature. Reportage, journals, memoirs, travelogues, document anthologies, quotes and entries from various sources, stenographic records, manuals, advertising materials, text messages, e-mails, blogs and various internet content – all those forms of communications have been moved from the literary periphery to its center. They ceased to be – according to both readers and critics – genres that merely accompany the great literature. Instead, they have become some of the most important markers of the contemporary literature and modern culture.

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