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Writing about Polish Literature in an Age of “Post-Global” Literary Studies

How to write about Polish literature in English in the 2020s? How to do it outside of the frame of Polish Studies? What is the place of Polish literature in the fields of comparative literature and world literature? These are some of the questions that a scholar of Polish literature might ask in relation to recent debates about the writing of global, transcultural and planetary literary histories.¹ When engaging with these debates, we are challenged with a series of paradigmatic shifts that invite us to move beyond the concept of narrowly understood national literatures in the spirit of decolonisation, and at the same time to pay renewed attention to the specificity of local cultures, histories, and modes of literary production. The methodological tools put forward by proponents of new ways of conceptualising and writing literary histories offer us an opportunity to conceive of a fresh, expansive way of writing about Polish literature that would bring to light its transnational, transcultural, and translational iterations and connections. This, of course, comes with a set of unique challenges, which might lead to further critical debates.

At the turn of the 21st century, Polish Studies scholars based in the UK and in the US articulated a need for Polish Studies abroad to embrace interdisciplinary methodological frameworks that would engage with and respond to contemporary developments in literary and cultural studies.² They proposed that Polish Studies

¹ See T. D’haen, *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics*, Leiden 2021; A. Pettersson, “Transcultural Literary History: Beyond Constricting Notions of World Literature,” *New Literary History* 2008, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 463–479; F. Ferguson, “Planetary Literary History: The Place of the Text,” *New Literary History* 2008, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 657–684; F. Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 2000, no. 1, pp. 54–68; P. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise, Cambridge 2004.

² E. Grossman, “Blaski i cienie globalizacji, czyli problemy polonistyki w badaniach komparatystycznych. Przyczynek do dalszych badań,” *Teksty Drugie* 2009, no. 6, pp. 66–78; E. Grossman,

move away from the image of a self-contained field whose sole focus is on the narrowly envisioned “Polish canon” and whose identity is too often conceptualised, in Halina Filipowicz’s words, as a “self-esteem machine.”³ They argued that Polish Studies would benefit from taking part in critical debates taking place in fields as diverse as comparative literature, identity studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies, performance studies, and Jewish studies. What their arguments had in common was an understanding that if the disciplines of Polish literary and cultural studies were to remain relevant to more than a very small and select group of scholars, the ways of writing about Polish literature and culture had to be boldly reimagined in critical and creative ways.

These calls for a paradigmatic expansion of Polish Studies, when considered from our present moment in the 2020s, prompt a reflection on how recent methodological developments specifically in the fields of comparative literature and world literature offer a particular set of questions and challenges that might inform our thinking about the place of Polish literature in the broad field of literary studies. Here I would like to focus on two specific issues that merit further consideration: (1) an ongoing critical inquiry into the dominant paradigms used in comparative and world literature studies; (2) the use of English as the language of (post)global literary studies.

Dominant methodologies used in world literature scholarship typically focus on hierarchies that are articulated in terms of power relations defined as interactions between the core and the periphery. Drawing on Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system analysis, world literature scholars examine ways in which the core-periphery relation has shaped and continues to inform literary and cultural production. While this strand of world literature scholarship has proved particularly fruitful for the disciplines of postcolonial studies, with its focus on the marginal, peripheral and minoritised writings and questions of social justice, it has created a challenge for scholars of literatures that do not seem to easily fit into the categories of either the core or the periphery, like Polish literature.⁴ How do we create a space for writing about Polish literature within a framework whose focus is predominantly on the

“Interdyscyplinarna wizja polonistyki zagranicznej XXI wieku, czyli inna optyka” [in:] *Inne optyki. Nowe programy, nowe metody, nowe technologie w nauczaniu kultury polskiej i języka polskiego jako obcego*, ed. R. Cudak, J. Tambor, Katowice 2001, pp. 29–37; H. Filipowicz, “What Good Are Polish Literary Studies in the United States?,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 2006, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 117–134.

³ Filipowicz borrows this term from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who used it in a discussion of the status of Afro-American studies as a discipline. See H. Filipowicz, “What Good Are Polish Literary Studies in the United States?,” *op. cit.*, p. 131.

⁴ As a number of scholars have pointed out, postcolonial studies can offer valuable perspectives on Polish history, culture, and literature. However, Poland can also be seen as a case study that throws into relief the shortcomings of postcolonial theory. See, for example, C. Cavanagh, “Postcolonial Poland,” *Common Knowledge* 2004, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 82–92; C. Snochowska-Gonzalez, “Postcolonial Poland – On an Unavoidable Misuse,” *East European Politics and Societies* 2012, vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 708–723.

literatures of the former empires, in particular the British Empire, and their critical dialogue with the former colonial powers? Scholars who have grappled with the restrictive nature of this framework, including Theo D’haen, Marta Skwara, and Anna Klobucka, use the terms “minor” or “semiperipheral” to describe the status of European literatures such as Polish.⁵ D’haen laments the fact that the decolonial critique of “Eurocentrism” has unwittingly led to an ongoing “peripheralization” and “marginalisation” of Europe’s “minor” literatures, that is literatures written in languages other than English, German, French, Spanish and Italian.⁶ Klobucka argues that “the biased perspective of traditional comparative literary studies as ‘Eurocentric’ generally fails to take into account the fact that literatures and cultures of the European periphery have only on token occasions been considered as rightful contributors to the common ‘European’ cultural identity.”⁷ She uses the term “semiperipheral cultural formations” to describe writings originating in the regions that do not fit into the neat categorisation of the world into the Western core and the colonial periphery. Yet describing Polish literature as a “minor” or “(semi)peripheral” literature remains problematic as it can be argued that this terminology further reinforces Western hegemony and obliterates centuries of cultural and literary production in the Polish language and on the historically Polish lands. The scholarly jury is still out on the methodological value of such terms. While Piotr Florczyk and K.A. Wisniewski argue that to “fully appreciate” Polish literature, “we must read it as belonging to the periphery,” others remain sceptical.⁸ Skwara, for example, points out that the classification of Polish literature as “minor” is often linked to a schematic perception of East-Central Europe as a mythologised region of “hidden ‘potentiality,’ and is rarely grounded in in-depth scholarship.”⁹

To resolve this critical impasse we might perhaps try to find a more productive way of writing about Polish literature within the fields of world and comparative literature in these very fields’ recent attempts at reconceptualising their identities and methodological paradigms. Comparatist Galin Tihanov argues for a move away from the term “minor literature,” viewing it as a “construct of literary history” that has become less useful in an age of transnational literary studies

⁵ T. D’haen, “Major Histories, Minor Literatures, and World Authors,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 2013, vol. 15, no. 5; T. D’haen, *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics*, op. cit.; M. Skwara, “Between ‘Minor’ and ‘Major’: The Case of Polish Literature” [in:] *Major versus Minor? Languages and Literatures in a Globalized World*, ed. T. D’haen, I. Goerlandt, R.D. Sell, Amsterdam 2005, pp. 259–270; A. Klobucka, “Theorizing the European Periphery,” *symplokē: a journal for the intermingling of literary, cultural and theoretical scholarship* 1997, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 119–135.

⁶ T. D’haen, “Major Histories, Minor Literatures, and World Authors,” op. cit.

⁷ A. Klobucka, “Theorizing the European Periphery...,” op. cit., p. 127.

⁸ P. Florczyk, K.A. Wisniewski, “Introduction” [in:] *Polish Literature as World Literature*, ed. P. Florczyk, K.A. Wisniewski, London 2023, p. 7.

⁹ M. Skwara, “Between ‘Minor’ and ‘Major’...,” op. cit., p. 230.

whose focus has shifted away from national literatures and their “majority” or “minority” status.¹⁰ Indeed, Tihanov views transnationalism as “a powerful and much-needed antidote to the increasingly embarrassing – yet still vociferous – mantras of national literary historiography.”¹¹ More recently, the editors of the 2023 special issue of *Comparative Critical Studies* have called into question world literature scholars’ optimistic embrace of globalisation at the turn of the twenty-first century. They have aptly pointed out that certain strains of world literature scholarship run the risk of “reinstating the very national and imperial hierarchies” that world literature had set out to challenge in the first place.¹² To address this some scholars began to use the term “post-global” to refer to the “exhaustion of the globalization-paradigm” without “losing sight of new constellations of global relatedness.”¹³ These attempts at revisiting the methodology of world literature studies have led to proposals to write transcultural and planetary literary histories with “no predetermined national or temporal limitations.”¹⁴ Such scholarship would present a perfect opportunity for Polish literary studies to review its position on the world literature scene, perhaps calling into question its categorisation as “minor” or “(semi)peripheral,” and to reimagine its identity in an ambitious and expansive way.

For Polish literature to enter into the field of transcultural or planetary literary studies means to be written about in the English language. This, of course, presents a unique set of challenges that require proper critical attention. While English has been criticised as a homogenizing language of globalisation, one cannot deny the fact that it is also a democritising *lingua franca* of literary studies.¹⁵ Writing about Polish literature in English is a precious opportunity to reach readers who otherwise would not have been able to engage with Polish literary studies scholarship and would not have been in a position to appreciate the multiple ways in which Polish literature can be seen to enter into a transnational dialogue with writings originating in other languages. At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that such scholarship, to a large extent, relies on translation. As Lawrence Venuti has pointed out, translations into English have historically been sites of manipulation and appropriation that frequently contributed to the

¹⁰ G. Tihanov, “Do ‘Minor Literatures’ Still Exist? The Fortunes of a Concept in the Changing Frameworks of Literary History” [in:] *Reexamining the National-Philological Legacy: Quest for a New Paradigm?*, ed. V. Viti, Amsterdam 2014, pp. 169–190.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹² J. Blakesley, A. Mangalagiri, R. Mucignat, E. Segnini, “How We Compare: Introduction,” *Comparative Critical Studies* 2023, vol. 20, nos. 2–3, p. 135.

¹³ B. Loy, G. Müller, “Towards a Post-Global Age: Introductory Notes about the End(s) of Globalization and World Literature” [in:] *Post-Global Aesthetics: 21st Century Latin American Literatures and Cultures*, ed. G. Müller, B. Loy, Berlin 2023, pp. 2–3.

¹⁴ A. Pettersson, “Transcultural Literary History...,” *op. cit.*, p. 463.

¹⁵ For a critique of English as a language that can lead to the erosion of literary scholarship grounded in close textual analysis by promoting “distant reading” instead, see, for example, J. Arac, “Anglo-Globalism?,” *New Left Review* 2002, no. 16, pp. 34–45.

“othering” of foreign cultures.¹⁶ Thus, one has to be mindful of the critical and theoretical concerns relating to the use of translated texts that originate in particular historical, cultural, and political circumstances, and whose production might involve numerous stakeholders, from authors and translators, to literary agents, publishers, and state and cultural institutions.¹⁷ Appreciating the complexity of translation as a process and its creative potential as art will allow us to address these concerns in a nuanced manner and avoid the pitfall of treating English as a neutral and transparent medium of communication. Placing the issue of translation at the heart of Polish studies scholarship is an important step towards appreciating Polish literature’s translational and transcultural iterations and the creative potential of translations into and from Polish. It is also an invitation to think about Polish literature in an expansive way that might include both texts produced in Polish and works written in other languages, including Yiddish, German, Lithuanian, or Ruthenian, as well as adaptations, rewritings, reappropriations and translations from and into Polish seen in their transnational contexts.¹⁸

Theo D’haen contends that “for European literature and European comparative literature studies to matter in the world of the future they have to become ‘worldly.’”¹⁹ It seems to me that writing about Polish literature in a “worldly” manner, but with an awareness of the critical pitfalls associated with it, will make it possible to shed light on its often under-studied yet rich transnational history and, thus, open new promising areas for future research.

¹⁶ L. Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, 2nd ed., London 2008.

¹⁷ See, for example, J. Rzepa, “Translation, Conflict and the Politics of Memory: Jan Karski’s *Story of a Secret State*,” *Translation Studies* 2018, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 315–332.

¹⁸ While the editors of *The Routledge World Companion to Polish Literature* chose to focus on works written in Polish, in their introduction they acknowledged the importance of texts composed in other languages. T. Bilczewski, S. Bill, M. Popiel, “Introduction: Polish literature and its worlds” [in:] *The Routledge World Companion to Polish Literature*, ed. T. Bilczewski, S. Bill, M. Popiel, London 2021, pp. 1–5.

¹⁹ T. D’haen, *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics*, op. cit., p. 161.