

Henryk Markiewicz

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Articles

Henryk Markiewicz

The Past and the Present Day of Polish Literary Studies

The development of literary studies in Poland has in principle been similar to that in other European countries. Gradually distinguished from bibliography, rhetoric, poetics and various forms of literary criticism, they gained a separate university status as history of literature as late as in the 19th century. It is well known that Poland, partitioned among three invading powers, did not at that time have political independence. This state of affairs strongly affected the humanities, which set as their chief aim the consolidation of national consciousness. The history of Polish literature was also regarded from this point of view. In the Romantic period literature was considered mainly as the expression of the spirit of the nation, in the time of Positivism it was evaluated in respect to its social utility and cognitive values; the personality of the writer was also the subject of such moral and patriotic estimation, whereas the artistic values were treated cursorily or subjectively.

But it was also in the second half of the 19th century that the methods of classical philology in the fields of textual criticism, biography, the defining of literary sources and influences were implanted in the studies of Polish literature. Numerous discoveries made in archives and libraries at the time enriched, or rather completely changed, the previous picture of medieval and baroque literature.

The accumulation of monographs and detailed studies enabled in the first two decades of our century many new syntheses of

a scholarly or popular character to appear, which (like the books of Piotr Chmielowski, Aleksander Brückner and Ignacy Chrzanowski) are still of value today.

At the same time the philological method was gradually evolving: the requirements of accuracy and scholarly precision were growing, the techniques of research were improving and the utilitarian and moralizing attitude towards writers was disappearing. The focus of attention began to move from the personality of the writer towards the literary text itself, from ideological problems towards artistic ones. These tendencies became still more conspicuous during the interwar period, the most representative achievement of which were the monographs by Juliusz Kleiner, aiming at an ever more comprehensive analysis of the works of the great Polish Romantic poets, Krasiński, Słowacki and Mickiewicz.

The first signs of an anti-Positivist revolt appeared in Poland as early as in 1910; there were discussions on the role of intuition and *Erlebnis*, postulates that studies should be concentrated on literary texts treated as a separate sphere of human reality, projects for an antipsychological poetics and for an intrinsic history of literature (Kazimierz Wóycicki, Juliusz Kleiner, Zygmunt Łempicki). These postulates were accompanied by interesting attempts to fulfil them, to mention only Stanisław Adamczewski's book on the imagery of Żeromski (1930), anticipating the contemporary French thematic criticism. But still, until the thirties, interest in the sources and ideological content of literary works continued to be dominant (e.g. Stanisław Pigoń, Józef Ujejski). Attempts to apply Marxism had appeared even earlier in literary journalism, but now were undertaken in a more synthetic manner by Leftist critics (e.g. Andrzej Stawar, Ignacy Fik) who, however, fell into the errors of vulgar sociology.

As may be seen from the perspective of time, the most important theoretical event in the interwar period was the publication of the works of Husserl's Polish disciple, Roman Ingarden, issued partly in German (*Das literarische Kunstwerk*, 1931) and partly in Polish (*O poznawaniu dzieła literackiego, On the Cognition of a Literary Work*, 1937). A detailed discussion of them would require a separate article, and would scarcely be necessary, since Ingarden's works in German (and recently also in an American version) are easily

available and more and more widely known in the world. I shall only remind briefly that Ingarden defined a literary work as an intentional object of a many-phased (i.e. developing in time and multistratified structure, where a stratum of verb sounds, a stratum of meanings, a stratum of schematized aspects and a stratum of the presented objects can be distinguished. The literary character of a text is mainly due to the presence of the so-called quasi-judgements, i.e. of sentences only apparently affirmative, which constitute a fictitious reality. Ingarden contrasted a literary work with its particular concretizations originating from its various interpretations. A literary work—he further asserts—is in all its strata a schematized construction containing various perceptions and places of indeterminacy which are filled in only in the act of reading.

Ingarden's theories which he sets forth in a very detailed and, for readers unfamiliar with phenomenology, difficult manner, slowly made their way into the consciousness of Polish literary scholars. Manfred Kridl played here the role of an intermediary. In his book *Wstęp do badań literackich (An Introduction to Literary Studies)* in 1936 he linked Ingarden's theses with the conceptions of the Russian formalists and protested violently against the emphasis laid on biography and psychology, against applying cognitive and ideological criteria to literature. He postulated that a literary work should be treated as a system having an aesthetic purpose, and that the history of literature should be built up as a history of the art of poetry. His disciples in Vilna endeavoured to meet these demands in their studies dealing with problems of literary genres, whereas in Warsaw another group of young scholars under the influence of the Prague Structuralists was engaged chiefly in problems of versification (Franciszek Siedlecki) and stylistics. The main contest between the adherents of the old and the new methods took place at the congress of historians of literature in Lvov in 1935. But soon the outbreak of the World War II put a brutal stop to studies and discussions.

During the war many eminent Polish scholars were killed in action or murdered in the extermination camps; others died prematurely of disease and poverty. Many valuable manuscripts, unique first editions and unpublished archival materials were destroyed.

Nevertheless, in spite of the occupant's persecutions the illegal university courses on literature were carried on, and many scholars continued their research. Its results came out in book form in the early post-war years.

By this time however, the Marxist trend had gradually developed and soon became dominant. Its representatives (Stefan Żółkiewski, Kazimierz Wyka, and others) were gathered mainly in the Warsaw Institute of Literary Studies. To put the matter quite openly: Marxist principles of literary researches of that time resulted partly from genuine conviction and interest, especially of the younger generation, but was also partly imposed by administrative means. In the publications of that time we observe a certain narrowing of problems as well as doctrinal simplifications, and especially the errors of the so-called vulgar sociology; literature was considered merely as a vehicle of class ideology, or as a true or distorted reflection of social conflicts; the Realism of the 19th century was regarded as the highest method of literature.

On the other hand, however, it was just then that interest in the relationship between literature and society was aroused and the understanding of the laws of literary development progressed. Some past literary phenomena, little known until then, such as the plebeian literature of the 17th century, revolutionary poetry or the realistic novel were rescued from oblivion or studied more thoroughly.

In the mid-fifties, once the suppressions and distortions of the Stalin period were gone, literary studies took a new turn. The previous restrictions on the freedom of expressing opinions disappeared, and so the scope of study widened and the number of scholars engaged in it, actively and with full right, increased; this applies both to the scholars of the older generation and to those younger authors who did not follow the Marxist path.

Polish scholars broke with the oversimplified evaluation of literary works made by means of such criteria only as the social commitment, closeness to the revolutionary ideology, or the observance of verisimilitude to life. Periods, trends and individualities which till then had been negatively estimated, depreciated or passed over in silence now attained a justified revaluation; and thus the literature of the Baroque, Romanticism and Symbolist Movement, previously neglected, was increasingly studied.

The new policy in culture and learning removed also the obstacles and difficulties in using the achievements of western literary scholarship. Great interest was aroused by the structural-semiotic methods, as well as by the French thematic criticism and American archetypal criticism; the German tradition of Neo-idealistic humanities was also remembered. The works of Ingarden, which till then had not been re-published or translated, regained their attractiveness. Naturally, we have also carefully kept track of the achievements of the Soviet literary studies (of which the works of the Tartu school and Bakhtin's books enjoy the greatest popularity) and of the works of those western authors who are more or less conspicuously inspired by Marxism (e.g. W. Benjamin, A. Hauser, L. Goldmann). It is worth mentioning that many of these foreign works appeared in Polish as separate books or in comprehensive anthologies.

Today literary studies in Poland make use of many methods and techniques which we consider neither competitive nor antagonistic to one another, but on the contrary, complementary. Literature, which is the main subject of our studies, is such a complicated and multi-dimensional phenomenon that the discipline aiming to embrace it in its entirety has to assume an interdisciplinary character; it must be a history of ideas as well as a history of linguistic forms, a history of specifically literary signs superimposed on these linguistic forms as well as, finally, a history of the functioning of works in social communication.

A considerable number of Polish scholars are convinced that Marxism, providing them with definite philosophical and methodological grounds, and with general theses on the development of society and culture, has contributed much to literary studies. The main tenets of Marxism: treating historical reality as an integral whole, the dialectical character of changes of this reality, the class differentiation of culture, the importance of the monothetic and typological tasks of the humanities, the active participation in the shaping of the Socialist culture—have become the firm and directing elements of the consciousness of many literary scholars.

At the same time it should be remembered that the theory of literature or the methodology of literary studies do not constitute an integral part of Marxism; in this respect literary studies are in a different situation than e.g. economics. In particular,

Marxism does not include statements on the specific character of literature, the typology of its structures, the specific laws of its development, or specific criteria of its value.

Hence, as many scholars, including the present writer, are convinced, literary studies based on Marxist foundations may and should critically assimilate not only particular observations but also certain general statements and procedures, worked out beyond the scope of this discipline. This refers especially to knowledge of the systemic organization of literary texts and to their typology.

As an example of Polish achievements in this field in recent years we can mention studies on the cohesion and delimitation of a text, the elaboration of a technique of statistical description of the vocabulary, a reorientation of stylistics under the influence of linguistic semantics, new descriptions of the basic systems of Polish versification (Maria Dłuska), and the setting up of the basic categories of historical poetics, such as literary convention, tradition, genre, trend, or style.

The Polish Structuralists (who, by the way, are unwilling to be termed so)—Maria Renata Mayenowa, Janusz Sławiński, Michał Głowiński, Kazimierz Bartoszyński—have taken from their Czech predecessors (chiefly Jakobson and Mukařovský) the basic theses: that a literary work and the wholes greater than the work itself, such as the genre or trend, have a systemic character; that the characteristic feature of the poetic language is the domination of the autotelic function, manifesting itself in “excess of organization” and resulting in the multiplicity of meanings of the text; that changes in literature are generated by the wearing out, and the consequent triteness, of the artistic devices. Like Tartu Structuralists their Polish colleagues attempted to build a theory of literature within the general theory of signs, i.e. semiotics.

But Polish Structuralism has also its own specific features.

First, it is attempting to work out a notional apparatus which would enable to make a unified description of the whole organism of a literary work, and would allow to overcome the dualism of stylistics and narratology.

Secondly, it analyzes very carefully the communicational aspect of a literary work, i. e. the modes in which the sender and the implied recipient are manifested.

Thirdly, it is also interested in the contact of a work with the actual reader, and endeavours to distinguish different styles or norms of reading, or in other words, the different historically and socially conditioned modes of concretizations of a literary work.

In the sphere of Marxist methodology in the strict sense, i.e. methodology implied by the assumptions of the dialectic and historical materialism, the notions connected with the social genesis and class differentiation of literature have been formulated precisely. We became fully conscious of the multiplicity of meanings and functions of a literary work and realized the active role of the recipient in the process of its concretization. This has enabled the ideological content of literature to be interpreted more subtly and with greater flexibility. The relation between fictitiousness and the cognitive function of literature has been analyzed, both the veristical and the sociological understanding of realism criticized, and the principles of evaluation deepened; consequently the area of the accepted literary tradition has been broadened.

The views characterized here have found expression not only in studies and monographs, but also in extensive theoretical syntheses and university textbooks. Among the older generation such syntheses were published by Julian Krzyżanowski and Stefania Skwarczyńska, whose theory of literary genres is especially valuable. M. R. Mayenowa's *Poetyka teoretyczna (Theoretical Poetics)* was written from the semiotic standpoint. A trio of younger authors — M. Głowiński, A. Okopień-Sławińska and J. Sławiński (in collaboration with T. Kostkiewicz) — published an excellent university textbook on the theory of literature, a dictionary of literary terms. The present writer has attempted to survey *Główne problemy wiedzy o literaturze (Main Problems of Literary Scholarship)* from the Marxist point of view. Mention should also be made of the great encyclopaedic publication "Poetyka" ("Poetics"), of which the volumes on versification and some literary genres have already appeared.

We have dealt so far with the theoretical assumptions and methodological orientations. How are these fulfilled in concrete studies? We may certainly boast of the precision and completeness of bibliographical documentation, both current and retrospective ("Nowy Korbuc"). Theory and practice of textual criticism are also of a high standard (e.g. the theoretical publications of

Konrad Górski), although many outstanding writers are still awaiting collected critical editions.

The art of interpreting particular literary works has also reached a high level (e.g. in the studies of Kazimierz Wyka); these publications are not inferior in their insight or subtlety to essays of the New Criticism or of the German "Kunst der Interpretation."

As far as the studies of the history of literature are concerned, Polish scholars are in general characterized by vigour and originality, but at the same time by haste, a tendency to formulate new propositions only in a sketchy manner, and finally by a sometimes undue hermeticism in exposition. The results of particular studies, valuable in themselves, are formulated in so different languages that they do not sum up into a coherent whole.

Hence there are certain delays and gaps as far as synthetic studies of various types are concerned, such as scholarly monographs on great writers or cross-sections of problems or genres through successive periods in literature. In recent years, however, there has been a remarkable change for the better in this respect, to mention only Jerzy Kwiatkowski's book on the contemporary avant-garde poet, Julian Przyboś, which can stand comparison with the best efforts of the French thematic criticism, Maria Janion's study on Romanticism, or Michał Głowiński's monograph on the Polish novel of the Symbolist Movement. The increased interest in the history of literary doctrines and in the aesthetic consciousness of particular epochs is also noteworthy.

The lack of a new university textbook on the history of Polish literature, suited to contemporary requirements, has evoked frequent complaints over many years. This neglect has been partially remedied only recently by the appearance of three volumes (by Jerzy Ziomek, Czesław Hernas, Mieczysław Klimowicz), the first of the series, covering Polish literature up to the end of the 18th century. They have been highly commended by expert critics, but as a university textbook they are too exhaustive. An abridged edition is now being prepared, as well as the subsequent volumes on the literature of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Besides that, the Polish reader has at his disposal several popular outlines, reference books and a great panorama of modern Polish

literature ("Obraz Literatury Polskiej XIX i XX wieku" – "The Picture of the Polish Literature in 19th and 20th Cent.") with essays on eminent writers and extracts of their works. The first encyclopaedia of Polish literature will appear in a few months.

We have not so far succeeded in preparing in any foreign languages an outline of Polish literature. The foreign reader has at his disposal, as far as newer books are concerned, a book in French by Maxime Herman (a poor effort anyway), one in German by Krejčí, a collective study in Russian, and an American work by a Polish outstanding poet, Czesław Miłosz.

So far our information concerned theoretical foundations and studies of Polish literature. The state of Polish comparative literature will no doubt also be of interest to our readers. In this field our scholars have a great patron—the greatest Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz, who lectured on Slavonic literature at the Collège de France from 1840 to 1844. Yet in Poland, apart from sporadic instances, comparative literature has not been till now a separate subject of university studies, nor has there been any formal specialization in this field. Hence these studies have mainly been carried out either by historians of Polish literature or by historians of particular foreign literatures. Formerly such works dealt mainly with literary sources and influences, and contained many valuable observations, though mechanical, trivial and exaggerated parallel hunting was also frequent. It was only in the interwar period that the studies became more sound and precise. The main emphasis came to be laid on the transformation of borrowed elements and on their function in the new artistic structure. Another trend—studies of the migration of plots and motifs, both in literature and in folklore—was represented by Julian Krzyżanowski.

In the post-war period, after an initial set-back, comparative studies became vigorous again. The historical transformations of the traditional literary *topoi* (Wacław Kubacki), the "affinities by choice," i.e. the activity of recipients in relation to sources, the functions of literary allusions, and typological similarities were of particular interest. These problems of comparative literature continue to be present in publications on Polish literature, in which heed is almost always taken of the comparative background, whereas many studies on translations and critical reception of foreign literatures

in Poland and Polish literature abroad appear separately. The comparative perspective is also taken into account in theoretical studies, though there is a lack of major comparative syntheses.

To characterize the study of particular foreign literatures would require a separate presentation. It is only natural that in the past, in the times of national bondage, the efforts of Polish scholars were chiefly directed towards their own culture. In spite of that, Poland has a very high tradition in Classical Philology (e.g. works of Tadeusz Zieliński). Scholarly studies on modern foreign literatures began on a larger scale only on the eve of the World War I and developed in the independent Poland of the interwar period. At that time Zygmunt Łempicki in the field of German literature, Władysław Folkierski of French, and Waclaw Lednicki of Russian gained an international reputation.

After the World War II, despite of the extermination of a great part of the scholars, despite the difficulties of various kinds, the reconstruction of studies of modern literatures has proceeded successfully, especially since 1956. As far as all the great literatures of the world are concerned, Polish studies, though not very rich quantitatively, are of standard value in international discussion. Here such names as Margaret Schlauch in the field of English literature, Marian Szyrocki of German, Mieczysław Brahmner of French, and Andrzej Walicki of Russian literature can be mentioned. The auspicious development in the fields formerly neglected for political reasons, i.e. studies of German and Slavonic literatures, is especially noteworthy.

Finally, coming back to our main subject, an important novelty of recent years is the turning of interest towards study of popular literature, bestsellers, the yellow press, and the literature popularized by mass media. At the same time we have laid down the theoretical foundations of the modern sociology of literature, recently termed "studies of literary culture" (Stefan Żółkiewski). They are to distinguish various functional models and the social circulation of literature, typical attitudes of authors and readers towards literary texts, and to describe the institutional infrastructure of literary communication.

Thus the new fields are opening before the literary studies, but new tasks are also arising. In the past they were chiefly

concerned with eminent authors and their works, then with literature and society, and recently almost solely with literary texts themselves. According to this new conception, literary studies should include within their range all the links of the system of literary communication and all value levels. They should also study the position of literature, its place in the hierarchy of culture as a whole.

For most literary specialists these are new and difficult demands, requiring new skills in study, and realizable probably only in collaboration with sociologists, theoreticians of culture, and semioticians. But results of such integral literary studies will be able to serve the needs of cultural policy and the prognosis of cultural progress to a much greater degree than previously.

Transl. by *C. Grèce Dąbrowska*