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Queer Contexts of Polish Literature

Abstract

The text concerns the application of concepts and terms created within queer studies to a Polish context, especially in literary studies. The issue discussed by participants in the debate on the possibility of assimilating queer studies into the Polish cultural tradition is the question of the differences between the ground on which it was created and Polish political and social conditions. After 1989, and later after the publication of Michał Witkowski's *Lubiewo* (2003), many texts describing the experience of non-heteronormativity were written in Poland. Equally important was the parallel discussion around queer studies and various conceptions of queer itself. No matter how controversial these issues remain, the volume of "The Problems of Literary Genres" ["Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich"] is a testimony to the usefulness of using the conceptual apparatus of queer studies to analyze specific works of Polish literature — both the newest ones and those created in the first decades of the 20th century. This usefulness comes down not only to the reinterpretation of canonical works of Polish literature but also enables the analysis of texts that were created as an expression of the queer sensitivity of their authors.

queer; gender; Polish literature; literary canon

In the introduction to the second edition of *Dezorientacje. Antologia polskiej literatury queer*, the authors of the anthology (Błażej Warkocki, Alessandro Amenta, Tomasz Kaliściak) note that the volume they have prepared is — as evidenced by the book’s reception — a challenge for readers who want to supplement the list of texts contained in it. They see the reasons for this need for corrections both in the fact that the corpus of texts that can be fit into the queer category is growing (what is characteristic, this term is not written in italics, as it has already become established in Polish literary studies and, more broadly, in the humanities), as well as in the growing need to make revindication, in this context, of the canon of Polish literature of the last three centuries (*Dezorientacje...* 2021: 19).

According to the literary scholars mentioned above, this ongoing change in the perspective from which native literature is viewed also clearly shows that the queer tradition in Polish literature has existed for a long time, but also that it has never been on the fringes of the mainstream (*Dezorientacje...* 2021: 20).

Wojciech Śmieja, a researcher of contemporary prose, considers this last issue — the positioning of texts that can be included in the queer framework concerning the canon of Polish literature — to be non-obvious. He does not, of course, question the position of works by, for example, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Witold Gombrowicz, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Wilhelm Mach, or Miron Białoszewski within the mainstream of Polish culture. However, he claims that they do not exist there as works that touch primarily on the sphere of otherness (Śmieja 2008: 96–97). He writes:

Post-war “homosexual literature” is, on the one hand, at the center of the canon (as opposed to “women’s literature,” which is always placed on its periphery), but on the other hand, the homosexual threads appearing in it are subject to such far-reaching sublimation, concealment, marginalization, that this calls into question the use of the classifying adjective “homosexual” to describe it, not only when measuring it with exemplary measures used for Western European and American literatures, but even when limiting itself to the description of its internal dynamics assuming the dominance of “high,” ethical themes, which results in turn, the devalorization of psychological, social and moral creativity, etc., i.e. the one within which the homosexual/gay trend was born in different socio-cultural conditions. (Śmieja 2008: 100)¹

¹ Unless otherwise noted in the references, the English translation of the quotes — A.I.

Of course, these comments apply to the literature of the interwar period and that created after 1945. After 1989, and above all after the publication of *Lubiewo* by Michał Witkowski in 2003, a lot of texts appeared describing experiences related to non-heteronormativity. At the same time, there was also a discussion on the wisdom of applying various findings emerging within queer studies, which have already gained the status of an academic discipline in the English-speaking world, to the Polish social and literary tradition. As Błażej Warkocki writes in his book *Pink Language. Literature and cultural politics at the beginning of the century*, these controversies concerned, among other things, whether the “queer project” should be treated as separate from LGBT-related phenomena (Warkocki 2013: 11). In the background, of course, there was a fundamental issue: the approach to gender identity as an essentialist entity, or one subject to the principle of fluidity. At the same time, a linguistic problem arose: how to Polish the term queer and include it in the Polish tradition. This is how the term “changeling” appeared — with the context of the iconic figure of Piotr Odmieniec (Maria Komornicka) for Polish culture outside the heteronorm. However, Warkocki emphasizes that “[...] the meanings and connotations of queer-as-queer are changing dynamically. And that’s good” (Warkocki 2013: 11).

This issue, i.e. the issue of the reception of queer theory in the context of Polish cultural realities, was discussed at length by Joanna Mizielińska in a text written almost two decades ago, but still disturbingly current (see Mizielińska 2006). The author asks whether such an application is possible, whether it is possible to skip/skip certain stages of the struggle and the visibility or assimilation that took place within this movement in the USA or Western Europe and fully accept, by definition, open to any otherness and reluctant identity strivings, queer theory and practice? (Mizielińska 2006: 123–124). All the more so because, as Jolanta Brach-Czaina, quoted by Mizielińska, writes: “[...] the value of gender is unrecognized and hidden in Polish culture” (Brach-Czaina 1995: 347). Although these difficulties in assimilating queer theory in Poland are expressed, it is impossible not to agree with Mizielińska that “perhaps the strength of queer theory in Poland lies not in deconstructing what has not yet been fully constructed, but in influencing to this structure, warn, be alert to mistakes made, etc.” (Mizielińska 2006: 140). The collection of texts included in this issue of “The Problems of Literary Genres” [“Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”] somewhat illustrates the implementation of these postulates in Polish literary studies. Although there is also a deconstructive and re-vindictory thread in them.

Therefore, the texts presented in this volume concern both Polish works created before the first decade of the 21st century and works published in the interwar period. Some of them use an interpretive procedure that Śmieja described as “double” and at the same time parallel reading (Śmieja 2008: 107). However, most of them are devoted to a reflection on lesbian literature (however it is defined) as less present in literary studies compared to the extensive list of texts on the representation of the experiences of male homosexuality in Polish literature. Moreover, although these articles focus on the analysis of specific texts, each of them also thematizes methodological and terminological issues, such as the concept of identity-based on the subject’s sexuality and sexuality.

The author of the article *Lesby, gejki, postlesbijki. Konstrukcje tożsamości lesbijskiej w polskiej prozie najnowszej* [Lesbian, Gayes, Postlesbians. Constructions of Lesbian Identity in Contemporary Polish Fiction], Małgorzata Tarnowska, joins the already extensive discussion on queer identity. Although the text is primarily an analysis of two works:

Renata Lis's autobiographical essay *Moja ukochana i ja* and Olga Górska's novel *Nie wszyscy pójdziemy do raju*, Tarnowska treats them as an excellent starting point for reflections on how constructed or perhaps deconstructed models of this identity are placed with the Polish socio-historical context, the main trends in lesbian studies in the second decade of the 21st century and the idea of women's solidarity. The author reports on the discussion around the essentialist approach to identity and all attempts to dismantle such a model that appears within queer studies. Transferring this discussion to Poland, Tarnowska also notes that, given the spectacular success of Michał Witkowski's *Lubiewo*, "[...] the sign of the non-heteronormative history of Polish transformation is a homosexual man, and the focal point of identity dilemmas of that period is the line of tension between a gay man implementing global patterns of homosexuality," and the native "twat," not between the global "lesbian" and the native "lesbian" (see Tarnowska 2024). In such a context, Tarnowska reconstructs two different approaches of both authors to the title issue: Górska, who in her novel makes the heroine's adoption of a lesbian identity an element of the initiation process to which she undergoes, and Lis, relativizing this identity in the name of showing the subversive potential of queerness.

In the next article, *Życie poza heteronormą — "Pustostany", "Cukry" i "Czerwony młoteczek" Doroty Kotas* [Living Outside the Heteronormativity — "Pustostany", "Cukry" and "Czerwony Młoteczek" by Dorota Kotas], its author, Karolina Lewińska, presents the novels mentioned in the title, but also analyzes the relationship between the social oppressiveness of the heteronorm and the limitations related to the construction of gender. Lewińska also draws attention to how in Kotas's novels various patterns of exclusion intertwine, creating a network from which the heroines and narrators of these novels are unable to escape. The author of the article, citing one of the reviews of *Czerwony młoteczek*, but without entering into a discussion on the evaluation of both literary and critical texts, points to the transgressive potential of "giving voice" to people who are outside the norms, even if — and especially when — it is recognized will become irritating and obsessive (see Lewińska 2024).

Anna Artwicz's text is devoted to lesbian prose of the interwar period, and its title, *Międzywojenny rozkwit prozy lesbijskiej w Polsce? Analiza powieści „Przygoda w nieznanym kraju” Anieli Gruszeckiej, „Anetka” Marii Modrakowskiej i „Źródło samotności” Radclyffe Hall* [Is the Interwar a Blooming Period of Lesbian Prose in Poland? An Analysis of Novels "Przygoda w Nieznanym Kraju" by Aniela Gruszecka, "Anetka" by Maria Modrakowska and "The Well of Loneliness" by Radclyffe Hall], suggests that this flourishing is not perceived as obvious. The author writes about the diverse reception of these works and their different presence in contemporary literary studies, proving that Polish modernist lesbian literature of that time was more closely inscribed in the tendencies present in this aspect in world literature than previously thought. Analyzing the three texts mentioned, Artwicz shows their similarities. All of them are a kind of *Bildungsroman*, they also talk about the developing romantic relationships of their heroines and use elements of the Gothic convention. The author also draws attention to the fact that Gruszecka's and Modrakowska's prose, published in 1933, shows female non-heteronormativity in a way that will appear in Polish literature again only in the 1990s (see Artwicz 2024).

The topic of the previously mentioned articles is continued by Piotr Sobolczyk in the text *Spirala i narodziny. O wczesnej poezji Izabeli Morskiej* [The Spiral and the Nascence.

Izabela Morska's Early Poetry]. It concerns several threads that appear in the volume *1983. Maszynopisy*, published in 2023. The author considers this work to be important, among other things, because it contains works from the 1980s, a time when the writings of young women authors had little impact on mainstream Polish literature. Thus, this "recovered" voice of Izabela Morska (Filipiak) gives the opportunity to reinterpret the literary history of recent decades. Moreover, the analysis of these early poems allows us to look at the writer's entire work from a different perspective. Moreover, Sobolczyk puts forward the thesis that examining Morska's old texts allows us to more clearly reveal the autotherapeutic dimension of her writing (see Sobolczyk 2024).

Weronika Żyła looks at Polish literature from a slightly different perspective. The article is titled *Queerowanie pamięci. Doświadczenie obozu jenieckiego w perspektywie osób queer w dramacie Julii Holewińskiej „Katyń. Teoria barw”* [Queer History. The Prison Camp Experience of Queer People in Julia Holewińska's Drama "Katyń. Teoria barw"] concerns literary representations (or rather their lack) of the experiences of non-heteronormative people in stories about Polish history. The drama analyzed by the author concerns a highly mediatised and mythologized event: the murder of Polish officers in the Katyn forest. The narrative around what happened there is firmly embedded in the Polish martyrdom discourse, which does not take into account any individualization of the victims in terms of their identity defined by gender and sexual preferences. Holewińska's drama makes Józef Czapski the main character of this story and brings out what was marginalized in the official constructs of the past. The author of the article places her analysis in an extensive methodological context, reporting, among other things, the discussion around the concept of counter-memory, a key term for her argument [see Żyła 2024].

Finally, this volume of "The Problems of Literary Genres" also includes an article by Dezydery Barłowski, *Poza normą. Queerowe elementy wczesnej prozy Romana Dmowskiego* [Beyond the Norm. Queer Elements of Roman Dmowski's Early Prose]. The author presents the evolution of the views of not only the creator of National Democracy, but also a politician who, together with Józef Piłsudski, significantly influenced the way of constructing the identity of the Polish national community in the state reborn in 1918. The author of the text analyses two early stories by Dmowski, but focuses mainly on the second of them, *Wędrowka do idealów*, subtitled *Bajka wschodnia*. Barłowski shows the transformation taking place in these stories in the perception of the relationship between the characters of misfits and the community in which they live. This change goes from social approval to conflict and exclusion. The author of the article does not decide to what extent both of Dmowski's texts contain autobiographical threads, but emphasizes, following Błażej Warkocki, that homophobia appears in them as violence directed "[...] by men against men to mark the boundaries of masculinity and the ways of its expression" (Warkocki 2013: 230; see Barłowski 2024).

The articles announced above illustrate both the vitality and usefulness of queer theory in Polish literary studies and, more broadly, in the humanities. Although it arises from experiences different from Polish ones, it seems to be a way of thinking assimilated in our culture, and perhaps, above all, a useful tool for recognizing and describing not only the processes taking place in literature but also the recovery of non-obvious obviousities in literary studies.

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