

**Alessandro Amenta, Tomasz Kaliściak, Błażej Warkocki (red.),  
*Dezorientacje. Antologia polskiej literatury queer*, Wydawnictwo  
Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2021, pp. 912.**

*Dezorientacje. Antologia polskiej literatury queer* (Disorientations: An Anthology of Polish Queer Literature) edited by a superb Polish-Italian team of scholars – Alessandro Amenta, Tomasz Kaliściak, and Błażej Warkocki – delivers a critical intervention we tend to associate with Krytyka Polityczna, which published it in 2021. This graphically handsome and enormous – 912 pages! – volume presents “not another authorial monograph, but a polyphonic work, which explores the crevices of the canon as well as reaches outside of it, and by doing this reflects the heterogeneity of Polish literature on otherness” (p. 76). “Otherness” is an appropriate notion since “queer” in the anthology denotes a broad range of gender and sexual nonnormativity, rather than just male and female homosexuality (p. 66).

The volume is mapped out in an ambitious and compelling 57-page introduction, which, while generously guiding the reader through the volume, constructs its own vision of otherness and deserves its own critical attention.

First, this is a fantastic and much-needed anthology. There is no anthology of Polish literature comparable to the scope, diversity, and critical vigor of this project. Its precedents (few and far between) focused on one genre and a limited time span (e.g., Jöhling, 1992; Krupska and Sikora, 2019; Stonawska and Fjorsigviss, 2020). This panoramic volume, in turn, spans from the end of the 18th century to the present and includes prose, poetry, drama, essays, and cultural criticism. Some of the sources are unique and would be difficult to access otherwise, such as a 1998 interview with Maria Janion on “homosexual motives in Polish literature”, which she gave to the gay monthly *Inaczej* (Differently). Symbolically marking a new junction of different types of knowledge and publics, the interview has so far been available only in the (now nonexistent) magazine.

A polyphonic take on source materials greatly advances the editors’ goals to bring to the fore “the diversity of Polish literature on otherness”, the “historically changing models of gender and sexuality” as well as the dynamic nature of “the very categories related to nonnormative sexuality and gender” (p. 71). Hence, although the editors playfully identify their audience as “Reading Persons” (*Osoby Czytające*), they should abandon modesty about the reach of their project. This anthology should be equally inspiring for readers curious about the topic, educators diversifying their syllabi, and scholars in broadly understood critical Humanities.

The anthology has four parts. The first ("until 1918") opens with a sentimental poem by Franciszek Karpiński from 1780. The second covers the interwar Poland and WWII (1918-1945), the third stretches over the era of the Polish People's Republic (1945-1989), and the fourth, "after 1989", maps the literary scene after the collapse of communism until 2018. Each of the 101 entries opens with a brief author's biographical note and contains substantial footnotes contextualizing, historically and culturally, the text. Most entries are assigned an evocative quote, a pointer from the editors where to focus attention. Hence, a fragment from Narcyza Żmichowska's 1858 novel *Biała Róża* (White rose) is introduced by "if I were a man, I would consider myself madly in love with her", while Tadeusz Różewicz's 1973 play *Białe małżeństwo* (White Marriage) by its heroine's words to her husband, "I am your brother". A great feature of the anthology is a selected bibliography following each entry and an extensive bibliography for the entire volume. Last but not least, the editors included a large addendum recommending further works and authors. The list includes many of the works they had initially planned, but, as they noted, were not permitted to include in the anthology.

Aesthetic qualities were not the decisive factors in the text selection, per the editors. Rather, they were chosen for their impact on emancipatory discourse. The introduction paints a picture of cultural developments, to which literature contributed often regardless whether critically acclaimed or not. It is also a picture of the community, which the reader is able to see as if "from within". What emerges is a cultural history of emancipation; or perhaps, given that the editors are writing the introduction in the less-than-optimistic reality of the pandemic and increasing intolerance, the introduction can be seen as a kind of "memory of history of emancipation" at a time when what we considered an accomplished emancipation is seriously threatened. From this perspective, the introduction gains a poignant dimension.

There is little to criticize in this carefully planned and executed volume, certainly not from the perspective of the readers familiar with Polish culture. But *Dezorientacja* is the kind of publication that could travel well beyond the borders of Polish culture. I would be delighted to have it accessible for my students in the US. Hence, allow me a few remarks from this transatlantic perspective.

First, I would like the editors to reclaim the difference in the very notion the anthology centers around, namely to historicize the notion of "queer". To engage "queer" in its original context helps us see more sharply the specificities of Polish emancipation. In the US, the history of resignification of queer from a homophobic identity slur into a nonnormative positionality (coexisting with development of the field of queer studies) includes a long story of domestic gay and lesbian activism that made emancipation possible in the first place (often shunned today as "homonormativity"). To explain the circulation of this notion in Poland where "queer" and "gay" are frequently used interchangeably or when they are placed inversely (as in "queer before gay") would allow placing Polish social and cultural reality in a comparative context and hence more accessible to the foreign reader who does not know how sexual minorities fared in the former Eastern Bloc. To give this notion more attention would also be an extension of the attention the editors already pay to the intersection of the local and the global.

Second, more attention could be dedicated to the criteria of periodization. Clearly, any project that involves history of literature requires heuristic tools, and the traditional caesuras of historical and political events are as good as any. But the editors are influenced by Kosofsky-Sedgwick's interconnectedness of the emergence of homosexuality as a social phenomenon with the emergence of systemic and institutionalized homophobia. Hence, it would be helpful if their discussion were anchored deeper in Polish reality by paying more attention to public and state institutions of homophobia in relation to the historical and political caesuras. The period of postwar Poland which is configured as a regress in an emancipatory trajectory initiated in the interwar period feels less sufficiently historicized than others. Readers would benefit from a more extensive treatment of the institution of censorship. Also, although I agree that we don't need to look far to find homophobic rhetoric in everyday media, to be able to trace its historical developments (if only in the introduction) could add another dimension to the way we read particular entries.

The introduction is wonderfully rich when it showcases the entanglements of Polish and world literature and when it engages theory. Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick feels like the anthology's *spiritus movens*. The editors stay faithful to her historicization of homosexuality, transsexuality and homophobia and her insistence on a nonlinear and not always progressive narrative of emancipation. They confirm this nonlinearity when in the opening (pre-1918) section of the anthology titled *Sercem bliscy* (Affinity of hearts), they include the unabashedly passionate expressions of same-sex friendship among the Romantics. These expressions seem light years away from the later pathologization and sublimation. Not to leave an uninitiated reader with a reason to identify the Romantic same-sex friendship with a suppressed homosexuality, the editors mindfully stress their fundamental assumption that "queering" literature does not involve investigation of writers' sexual orientation. What really matters is what literature does – and what it can do – culturally. In Polish national bards, for instance, we can find "a different cultural model of intimate and emotional relations which became in a sense a cultural institution of 'brotherhood' (*pobratymstwo*) and 'sisterhood' (*posiestrzenie*)" (p. 27). This different model has always been there; to queer literature means to allow ourselves to see what historically has been "simultaneously visible and invisible (because it depends who and when looks at it)" (p. 22). To follow the spirit of Kosofsky-Sedgwick more closely, however, would require to pay a bit more attention to genres and how they affect our optics. Kosofsky-Sedgwick's "axiology" of reading and her focus on desire meandering in language pertained, after all, to the modes of articulation as related to specific genres.

These minor wishes do not diminish the sense of gratefulness and admiration we should feel for the tremendous labor of Alessandro Amenta, Tomasz Kaliściak, and Błażej Warkocki in making this meaningful and brilliant anthology available to us. Their work delivers what the title promises. The image of Polish literature that emerges from *Dezorientacje* is, indeed, productively disorienting. It suggests that what we now identify as queer has "always already" been part of the literary canon and will continue to be so. To be part of the canon means that "queer" has already become Polish literature's "self-knowledge", as

German Ritz, another symbolic patron of this anthology has famously stated (p. 73). To “uncover this self-knowledge” is what the editors identified as their main task. And this is exactly what they did, to our common benefit.

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