

**Tomasz Kaliściak, *Płeć Pantofla. Odmieńcze męskości w polskiej prozie XIX i XX wieku*, IBL PAN, Warszawa 2016, pp. 343**

Among Polish scholars specialized in gender and queer studies, Tomasz Kaliściak is a well-known and respected author. Together with such researchers as Błażej Warkocki, Piotr Sobolczyk, Maciej Duda, Piotr Oczko, Tomasz Basiuk, Tomasz Sikora, Kaliściak belongs to the generation which co-created in the first decade of 21st century a very important shift in Polish culture, when "something unusual, something exploding happened, the consequences of this shift aren't clear enough so far. We have reached the turning point. Unspeakable homosexuality became a subject of discussion [...] once *shibboleth*, it became a gadget of morning shows" (B. Warkocki, *Różowy język. Literatura i polityka kultury na początku wieku*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2013, p. 7).

Kaliściak's first book, *Katastrofy odmieńców* (The Catastrophes of the Queers, 2011) was an attempt to show the complex and diverse relations between a catastrophic imagination and the so-called "homosexual panic" stimulated by homophobically-oriented reality. It concentrated on the issue of a queer modernist identity. The Freudian interpretation of the case of Paul Daniel Schreber opened a set of interpretations of texts of Polish queer poets such as Józef Czechowicz. Theses and assumptions presented in the book enriched the traditions of existing studies and played a part in describing some various phenomena in literary history more thoroughly by establishing non-traditional link between catastrophic aesthetics and sexuality.

Contemporary Polish politics and social behaviour are challenging the situation described by Warkocki in the quotation above. Nowadays we face serious backlash in Poland: radical conservatism, militarization, homosexual panic, renaissance of romantic mythology and martyrdom are new hegemonic and desired masculine features of Polish men – the defenders of *Polonia* and Christianity, soldiers and uprisers are new-old models shaping stately supported masculinity. Popular culture, "patriotic" fashion, national media, Institute of National Memory, reconstruction groups and historical museums form a new discursive channel and transmitter for "masculine values" in their traditional version, where even a tiny deviation from normativity is severely punished.

Meanwhile Polish scholars have been developing and continuing projects aiming at deconstruction/denationalization of masculinity. The first was Maria Janion as early as in the 70s: her *Płacz generała. Eseje o wojnie* (The General's Cry: Essays about War, 1998), discovered non-heroic aspect of Polish history, accentuated civil victims and described male heterosexual, patriarchal, heroic set of values as central but oppressive for women and civilians. Almost 40

years later modern generation of scholars equipped with precise theoretical tools and well-acquired research tradition of masculinity studies has attracted attention to masculinity as a problem on many ways. Tomasz Tomasiak's book *Wojna-Męskość-Literatura* (War-Masculinity-Literature, 2013) drew upon R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and analyzed 20th century military experience of Polish men, later on Dawid Matuszek published Lacan-inspired *Imiona Ojców* (The Fathers' Names, 2016) where he analyzed the relations between subject(s) and his/their Father/father and my *Hegemonia i trauma. Literatura wobec dominujących fikcji męskości* (Hegemony and Trauma. Literature in the face of the dominant fictions of masculinity, 2017), where I follow Kaja Silverman's concepts to describe Polish masculine subjectivity as marked by masochism and impotence.

Against this background Kaliściak's book seems very original and distinguished. His book attempts to capture queer forms of masculinity in Polish prose of the 19th and 20th century, such masculinities that form an alternative to the dominant model of hegemonic masculinity that is particularly strong in patriarchal Poland. The parameters used by the author in order to distinguish queer forms of masculinity are: effeminacy, monstrosity, hybridization, homosexuality, anality, and autoimmunity. Analyzing a wide spectrum of dangers to which masculinity was subjected in 19th and 20th centuries, the author defines masculinity as a biopolitical problem that renders effeminacy as a threat to masculinity, monstrosity as a danger to humanity, hybridity as a threat to the natural division of races and sexes, homosexuality as a threat to procreation, anality as a threat to the public life and phallic order, autoimmunity as a threat to the body cohesion and world order. Such queer figures and plots demand their own aesthetic representation which is often provided by aesthetics of grotesque, sublime, gothic, and camp understood as a resistance strategy against normative gender and sexual identities.

Although Kaliściak's book refers to such strategic analyses as Judith Halberstam *Female Masculinity* (1998) or *Queer Masculinities, 1550-1800. Siting Same-Sex Desire in the Early Modern World* (2005), edited by Katherine O'Donnell and Michael O'Rourke, his research has pioneering character in the Polish context in its methodological approach (straight queer theory, anal turn) as well as the textual strategy (denaturalization of the category of masculinity, genderization of aesthetic categories – once: catastrophism, now: grotesque).

Kaliściak's book consists of 12 chapters which are "close reading" and contextually rich analyses of particular literary texts. Some of them focus on well-known, canonical texts of Bolesław Prus, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz and – above all – Witold Gombrowicz, while the others concentrate on rather forgotten authors as Ludwik Szyrmer, Zbigniew Grabowski or Chrystian Skrzyposzek. The common feature of these chapters is a theoretical frame proposed by Kaliściak. His theoretical approach is a very operational mixture of immunology and psychoanalysis. Robert Esposito as a theorist of immunology meets here Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan who represent psychoanalysis. The other theoretical languages used by Kaliściak are Michel Foucault's, Julia Kristeva's or Giorgio Agamben's ones. A very special role is played by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick whose concept of "homosociality" developed

in *Between Men* (1985) contributed in Kaliściak's description of power balance between hegemonic and other kinds of masculinity.

Apparently, Kaliściak reads marginal texts and/or marginal figures in canonical texts, but in fact his work sheds a new light on the history of Polish culture, imagination, society now and then: "The transformations of the meaning of effeminacy as described by Anglo-Saxon scholars refer also to the situation in Kingdom of Poland. Effeminacy is a particularly severe stigma for the Poles, who experience the subordinated role as defeated by invaders. The huge need for the literature reviving heroic characters of the past satisfied partly by the historic novel of the late 19th century prove the deficiency of masculinity as the nationwide problem" (p. 88).

The key-figure of Kaliściak's book is Witold Gombrowicz. He devoted three chapters out of twelve to discuss works of the author of *Ferdydurke*. It's rather easy to guess why Kaliściak positioned Gombrowicz as such: Gombrowicz is the author who established his own queerness as a platform for his critique of Polish culture, values and society, so he's queer and canonical at the same time.

Chapter 7, *Ship of Queers, or on Witold Gombrowicz's Marine Fantasy in the Story "Zdarzenia brygu Banbury"*, constitutes an interpretation of Witold Gombrowicz's early story where Kaliściak concentrates on an analysis of the phenomenon of an acute homosexual panic. A psychoanalytic analysis of the symbolism of the work in question proves that the main character's panic reaction is caused by the activation of a child anal eroticism distracting a stable sense of masculinity and maturity of the main protagonist. Chapter 8 is even more interesting and develops the ideas of anality as constitutive for Gombrowicz. This chapter, entitled *Gombrowicz from Behind: Project of Anal Critics on the Basis of the Novel "Ferdydurke"*, suggests an "anal" reading of the most known novel by Witold Gombrowicz *Ferdydurke* from a perspective of the so-called "rectal turn" in men's studies within queer theory. The author presents a theoretical review of perspectives in which anality is perceived as a repressed component of a male identity (among others Freud, Bataille, Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari, Hocquenghem, Laporte). Masculinity perceived from this perspective is based on a radical shift from phallogocentric positions to more spread, not central and because of that more difficult to define "anal" approach. In Gombrowicz it is reflected in the contemplation upon privacy. The subjectivity of *Ferdydurke*'s protagonist revolves not around a phallus but anus, and this new, radically shifted and decentralized subjectivity is called in Kaliściak's essay "private masculinity" (or "upupiona" – "anused") and is a reactivated, repressed anality. The author examines *Ferdydurke* also in the context of a theory of "anal work" in which a literary work is seen as excrement and writing as excretion. The author sees in Bataille's theory of the anal genealogy of laughter as the key to the reading of Gombrowicz's grotesque and parody of forms. His interpretation is at odds with traditional (more straight) ways of reading this classic novel, but the newest interpretations as presented by Marian Bielecki's *Widma nowoczesności* (Phantoms of Modernity, 2014) can also be enriched by Kaliściak, who convincingly proved that the Gombrowicz's novel is primarily very sensual and carnal, not – as interpretational tradition claims – intellectual and rational. While interpreting *Ferdydurke* Kaliściak refers to the "anal turn"

– although Polish scholars have been using the interpretational tools offered by such authors as Guy Hocquenghem, Dominique Laporte or Calvin Thomas (me included in my book *Homoseksualność i polska nowoczesność*, Homosexuality and Polish Modernity) traditionally linked with anality – no one has done it so consequently, creatively and politically relevantly (*Ferdynand* is probably the most important Polish novel of the 20th century).

Chapter 9, *Trans-male migrations in "Trans-Atlantic" by Witold Gombrowicz*, touches upon two different models of masculinity present in the novel by Gombrowicz. A confrontation between an anachronic, Polish and Sarmatian masculinity and modern, other masculinity of Southern American paves the way to a revision of a Polish national form making it possible to unseal the notion of masculinity closed in the Eurocentric definitions. Cultural otherness of an Argentinean man confronted with a Polish man proves to be possible to capture using post-colonial theories. The author analyses Gombrowicz's works using terms such as "hybridization of masculinity" (Eduardo Archetti) or "plebeian masculinity" (Pablo Ben). The idea of a homeland in the novel is strongly dependent on hegemonic masculinity and national ideology which was juxtaposed with the idea of a Son-land based on plebeian, hybridized masculinity model that is not subjected to normative and national discourses. Polish Sarmatian masculinity seen against the Argentinean background as excess allows the author to propose a thesis on male camp, or even Sarmatian camp. Kaliściak decided in this chapter to continue his anti-intellectual, anti-philosophical reading of Gombrowicz. He reminded us that the whole philosophy developed by Gombrowicz is a vitalist *lebensphilosophie* rooted in author's own life, sensuality and experiences.

Having read three chapters devoted to Gombrowicz I'm sure that the perspective offered by Kaliściak would bring very interesting effect when applied to other texts of this great author. We might hope that Kaliściak's next work will focus on Gombrowicz exclusively.

Instead of continuing his readings of Gombrowicz, Kaliściak in his newest work offers further analyses. One of them is a study of an episode of Jean Genet's *Journal de voleur* which takes place in a Polish prison in Katowice. Interestingly, he interprets this episode as crucial in further Genet's work and its apology of prison, subordination, anality. The whole Genet's *oeuvre* is rooted in this penitentiary experience, Kaliściak states: "Genet becomes saint thanks to his encounter with Poland" (p. 271). The confrontation with Polish otherness has prophetic accent: "Genet enters Poland as if he had to offer sexual reward for her sons tired with eternal struggling, as if he had to take mother's child away or to steal Sonland from the Fatherland, if we decide to use Gombrowicz's categories. Genet is a prophetic prediction of Gonzalo [*Trans-Atlantyka* main character], who tries to woo decent Ignac, but has to face the father's anger" (p. 263). Let me remind that beside Genet's Polish episode, another classic writer had his "Polish episode" – it was Michel Foucault, who was the head of Warsaw's Institute Française in 1958. After being spied by Polish secret police which revealed his homosexual behaviour, he was expelled from Poland. The biographer Remigiusz Rzyński in his *Foucault w Warszawie* (Foucault in Warsaw, 2016) retraces Foucault paths, meets his partners of that times, reconstructs

his experience behind the Iron Curtain. Similarly to Didier Eribon, who traced in *Reflexions sur la question gay* (translated in English as: *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, 1999) autobiographical and homosexual motivation for *Histoire de la folie* (*History of Madness*, 1961), Rzyński describes Polish experiences as crucial to Foucault's philosophical thinking.

So, both author's and deconstructors of masculine hegemony, Genet and Foucault, probably recognized its oppressive power, its overwhelming weight, its cultural prevalence when they came to Poland and had to face with Polish masculinity as Other's masculinity. Their experience is the reverse of the experience of the protagonist of *Trans-Atlantyk* and Gombrowicz himself as described in Kaliściak's book. This leads to conclusion that Polish masculinity as strong, patriarchal and hegemonic is underpinned by its grotesque *doppelgänger*. The tension, extraordinarily virulent, between them contributed to the two most important subversions of Western sexuality – the Genetian and the Foucauldian ones. In that sense, Kaliściak's book is more universal than one might think.

[Wojciech Śmieja]