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Towards Social History of Literature

Book Review: Paweł Tomczok (2018).

*Literacki kapitalizm. Obrazy abstrakcji ekonomicznych
w literaturze polskiej drugiej połowy XIX wieku.*

Katowice: Wydawnictwo UŚ

Abstract

The article is a critical review of Paweł Tomczok's book *Literary Capitalism: Images of Economic Abstractions in Polish Literature of the Second Half of the 19th Century* (2018). It focuses primarily on the theoretical part of the monograph, analyzing the empirical part to a lesser extent. The article situates Tomczok's book in the area of social history of literature.

Keywords: economy of literature, Marxist literary criticism, capitalism, Polish literature, second half of the 19th century, social history of literature.

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Paweł Tomczok's book (2018) was published as part of the author's research project entitled *The Economics of Literature*, conducted between 2013 and 2017 and funded by the Polish National Science Centre. *Literary Capitalism* is therefore the outcome of many years of research on the economics of literature, as a result of which literary studies in Poland have been enriched not only with this valuable analysis and interpretation of Polish literature from the second half of the 19th century, but also with four extremely important collective works proposing a theoretical rethink of the concept of the economics of literature, not only in the Polish context (Kłosiński & Tomczok, 2017; Cymbrowski & Tomczok, 2017; Tomczok & Wolski, 2017; Milenkowicz & Tomczok, 2017).

Tomczok's research project and book are part of a broader trend of research in the field of the economy of literature, which in the last five years has also become popular in Polish literary studies. Within this trend, as a result of another grant devoted to the issue in question, the first Polish translation of Marc Shell's (2015) book was published. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning a book on the relationship between economy and literature in the work of Aleksander Wat (Baron-Milian, 2015), economics in the work of Zbigniew Herbert (Ruszar, 2016) and a monograph on love and economy in literary biographies of women (Szumlewicz, 2017). Topics related to the economy of literature are also present in publications resulting from a major research project on Polish literature after 1989 in the light of Pierre Bourdieu's theory (Jankowicz, Marecki, Pałęcka, Sowa, & Warczok, 2014; Jankowicz, Marecki, & Sowiński, 2015; Jankowicz & Tabaczyński, 2015). Apart from the aforementioned monographs, many interesting and important academic papers have been published in Poland in recent years, among which it is worth mentioning those devoted to the economy of literature and the Holocaust (Wolski, 2014), the economy of digital literature (Marecki, 2015), links between economics and poetry (Jeżyk, 2015), and socioeconomic history examined in terms of literature (Cymbrowski, 2017).

The monograph under review consists of two parts, not formally separated in any way, the first of which (Chapters I-III) focuses on theoretical, methodological and contextual (historical) issues. Chapter III is also a bridge between some theoretical considerations and the analysis and interpretation of specific literary works. In the first chapter, the author discusses the traditions of the economy of literature, emphasizing that "... it is not a coherent research tradition which would have a specific methodology and ideological implications - it is, rather, a mosaic of different approaches to different economic topics, discourses or theories that are present in

literary texts”¹ (Tomczok, 2018, p. 35). The author himself, despite the common belief that such ambivalent research paradigms are problematic, aims to “... present the paths of the economy of literature in such a way as to combine divergent traditions into a dialectically complementary opposition” (Tomczok, 2018, p. 36).

The reflection on Marxist literary criticism is particularly interesting and challenging in this part of the monograph. On the one hand, the author explicitly criticizes traditional Marxism and its fetish of reality in literary research, according to which “the life of the writer and his views are immediately reduced to a class position, and thus to a life without the complicated history, contradictions and uncertainties that determine the dialectic of the biographies of most modern individuals” (Tomczok, 2018, p. 62). In fact, the author strongly resists replacing dialectics with determinism, which he identifies as the most problematic in the context of the economy of literature in traditional Marxism (Tomczok, 2018, p. 61). On the other hand, he tries to reinterpret the classic Marxist approaches which claim that literature has to reflect reality. He explains, for example, that Lenin, in his postulate of truthful representation, seeks rather “an affective component of the historical process”. The reflection of reality, therefore, would be more about “recognizing the contradictions in literature that correspond to historical contradictions” (Tomczok, 2018, pp. 54-55). He also interprets Lukacs in a similar way (Tomczok, 2018, pp. 57-58). Regardless of whether such an interpretation is accepted or not, it is remarkable that the author has attempted to reinterpret these concepts in a new and deeper way, since Marxist literary studies is rather a taboo subject in Poland.

Tomczok deliberately devotes so much space to Marxism, since for him it is the main point of reference in the interpretation of literary capitalism and capitalism in general. The author even declares that:

If the weakness of traditional Marxist literary studies is based on a mistaken vision of Marx’s work developed in Marxism itself, there is nothing left but to work out a model of literary studies, and more broadly: cultural criticism, which will refer to Marx, but interpreted in a different way. (Tomczok, 2018, p. 82)

Tomczok dedicates almost the entire second chapter of his book to this different interpretation of Marx, which invokes the reflections of Stanisław Brzozowski, Hans-Georg Backhaus, Helmut Reichelet, Werner Bonefeld, Harry Cleaver and his own. In Marx’s new reading he seeks, first of all, a shift from the exploited concepts of base and superstructure (with excessive focus on base) to the concept of real abstraction, under which one can understand

¹ This and further translations of quotations were prepared by the author of the article (KRR).

such economic categories as goods/commodity, value, money, or capital (Tomczok, 2018, p. 87). These are, therefore, categories which are certain constructs but which have real realizations and influence on people through their social validity or socio-ontological character (Tomczok, 2018, p. 87) and, most importantly, according to Tomczok, literature is the place where these real economic abstractions reveal themselves (Tomczok, 2018, p. 147).

In his *Literary Capitalism*, Tomczak aimed to study the histories of real economic abstractions and ways of subordinating individuals and groups to these abstractions (Tomczok, 2018, pp. 11-12) in Polish literature of the second half of the 19th century in the Russian partition of Poland. The author definitely achieves this goal and does it confidently and even with bravado. One can admire works that are as complete as this, extensive and at the same time not boring, clear and logically organized. However, this monograph includes several very important and relevant statements that, for some reason, the author does not support theoretically, although he suggests that such justification is very important to him (hence probably more than 200 pages of important theoretical argument in the first part of the book). For example:

The subject in capitalism has to struggle with his constant relation to money, which not only affects his body, mind and relationship with the community, but also threatens to convert its value into a certain amount of money or promises to be satisfied when he gets that amount. ... Economic abstractions engage and control basic affects, making them instruments of their control over individuals. (Tomczok, 2018, pp. 13-14)

or: “Individuals become personifications of capital Forced to modify and adapt their own minds, desires and affects to the requirements of the new economy, they conduct various phenomenological and psychoanalytical experiments on their subjectivity: reduction, suppression, transfer, sublimation” (Tomczok, 2018, p. 17). It would be worth referring to theories that are located somewhere at the intersection of psychoanalysis and Marxism; e.g. the publication by Krzysztof Świrek (2018) could be useful. Apart from the fact that Świrek studies theories of ideologies within the framework of these two paradigms, he also problematizes the subject that must deal with capitalism in various ways (Świrek, 2018, pp. 203-306).

At the same time, despite the lack of theoretical roots, Tomczok does not make these aspects of his work shallow. The whole fourth chapter devoted to the category of the subject of capitalist desire, and the fifth chapter devoted to subordinated groups and the mechanisms of enslaving these groups are, in fact, very valuable parts of the extensive empirical work the author has done in the second part of his monograph (Chapters IV-VIII), devoted to

the analysis and interpretation of specific literary works. Chapters four and five discuss a whole panorama of literary texts. The last three, on the other hand, are devoted to the interpretation of the economic issues in the most important novels of the period: *The Doll* by Bolesław Prus, *The Promised Land* by Władysław Reymont and *Homeless People* by Stefan Żeromski, which present “psychopathologies of capitalist personification” (Tomczok, 2018, pp. 25-26). Stanisław Krawczyk discusses the merits of the empirical part extensively in his review; I fully agree with him that “Paweł Tomczok’s book proves that if we want to know the roots of capitalist subjectivity and class structure in the Polish variant, different from French or English – then positivist literature is a necessary source” (Krawczyk, 2019). Another advantage of the empirical part is the fact that the author refers to a very large body of texts from the period in question, including those less well known to readers. This is particularly visible in chapters four and five, where the author really tries to use the tool he developed in the theoretical part. As for the last three chapters, I have the impression that they, although very interesting in themselves, are less linked to the theoretical perspective the author worked out earlier.

However, the greatest credit should be given to the author for the general direction of the entire study he chose. I consider *Literary Capitalism* to be a step towards strengthening the social history of literature in the Polish humanities, which would cross the fixed and sometimes artificial divisions between different disciplines, treating equally those areas that can cooperate excellently in the process of learning about a specific social phenomenon, as in this case where literary studies and economics work together. The author gently and easily draws ideas and concepts from specialists in literary studies, theoreticians of capitalism (economists, philosophers) and sociologists. Not only does Tomczok bring out “the understanding of the economic situation of the time and its legitimacy in common consciousness” (Tomczok, 2018, p. 17) from literary texts, he also, thanks to the dialectic approach, shows the critical dimension of the whole issue.

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W kierunku społecznej historii literatury

Recenzja monografii Pawła Tomczoka pt. *Literacki kapitalizm. Obrazy abstrakcji ekonomicznych w literaturze polskiej drugiej połowy XIX wieku*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo UŚ. 2018

Artykuł jest krytycznym esejem recenzyjnym książki Pawła Tomczoka *Literacki kapitalizm. Obrazy abstrakcji ekonomicznych w literaturze polskiej drugiej połowy XIX wieku*. Skupia się przede wszystkim na części teoretycznej monografii, w mniejszym stopniu analizuje zaś część empiryczną. Artykuł umiejscawia książkę Tomczoka w obszarze społecznej historii literatury.

Słowa kluczowe: ekonomia literatury, marksistowska teoria literatury, kapitalizm, literatura polska, druga połowa XIX wieku, społeczna historia literatury.

Note

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