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Measures of Time of Literature

Review of Rafał Pokrywka's book titled *Współczesna powieść niemieckojęzyczna*, Universitas, Kraków 2018

Ever since Günter Grass was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1999, German has been the second most popular language among Nobel laureates in literature – five years later the prize was awarded to Elfriede Jelinek, and in 2009 to Herta Müller. Other German authors have also been recognised internationally by critics, readers, and literary scholars – some of the world's best-sellers were *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink, *Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald, and the lesser known in Poland *Measuring the World* by Daniel Kehlmann. There is not a shadow of a doubt about the importance, also in the Polish context, of this major European literature. When discussing the current German literary scene, Rafał Pokrywka in his study titled *Współczesna powieść niemieckojęzyczna* (Kraków 2018) also indicated that many of the works he referenced have an extra-national character – by dint of both the topics they discuss and the origins of the writers themselves. The method applied in the discussed book is, as the author himself stated, a combination of the interpretation of individual novels in cultural contexts and an analysis “of the literary field and the forces which exist in it understood in sociological terms”¹, and the outcome of the description of the selected area of literature is supposed to be “a set of statements regarding the functioning of German-language novels at the beginning of the 21st century in the German, Austrian and Swiss (German-language) literary fields, statements

¹ R. Pokrywka, *Współczesna powieść niemieckojęzyczna*, Kraków 2018, p. 8. I shall reference consecutive quotations from this edition by providing the page number in parenthesis after the quote. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish].

surely non-definite and non-revolutionary, which, however, could be used as an element of a general history of modern literature (...)” (p. 11). Rafał Pokrywka’s book has found an interesting place between two others collective works (also prepared by the Universitas Publishing House), namely: a volume published two years prior edited by Monika and Stephan Wolting, titled *Zrozumieć obcość. Recepcja literatury niemieckojęzycznej w Polsce po 1989 roku* (Kraków 2016), in which Rafał Pokrywka discussed the Polish reception of the novels by Daniel Kehlmann, Wolf Haas, and Daniel Glattauer; and the volume titled *Zaangażowanie. Reprezentacje polityczności we współczesnej literaturze niemieckiego obszaru kulturowego*, which was edited by Ewa Jarosz-Sienkiewicz and Monika Wolting, and was published in May 2019.

Pokrywka began his work with a discussion of the limits of the titular word ‘współczesność’ [modernity] (as well as of the terms ‘postmodernizm’ [post-modernism], ‘post-postmodernizm’ [post-post-modernism], and ‘ponowoczesność’ [post-modernity]), which is useful for later analysis. He referred in short to the studies by, e.g., Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Umberto Eco, stressing that the purpose of his study was not to define modern literature within the categories of an absolute, of an era-defining nature, or other general concepts of periodisation (p. 12). It was between specific texts – and the author discussed more than sixty of them, not to mention those not specified in the subtitles of chapters – that the major questions of the book were posed, without the danger of unfitness of using words which seemed not from our times. In the introduction, the researcher also challenged the utility of the popular opinion on the polyphonic (and, at the same time, the dynamic and non-obvious) nature of modern literature, as well as the conviction that the supposed quality could enable one to differentiate modern literature from non-modern literature. Next, he analysed several elements that are significant for the current literary field, i.e. social, media, political, and aesthetic factors.

The author discussed the assumed period within another perspective, this time by analysing the phenomenon of the turn of the century, along the symbolic year 2000, which could also be considered as a turning point in the history of literature. The importance of that date was indicated in works of literature and major German-language volumes in literary studies. At the same time, the period saw a generational change, which is present in the reflection on the history of literature also by dint of the fact of awarding the Nobel Prize to Günter Grass – “generations of those born in the first half of the 20th century, the children of the interwar period and the time of the Second World War become the past (...) Just as well as a certain ethos of a writer perceived as a moral guide and an authority figure” (p. 29). He did stress, however, that the change did not mean that the new literature abandoned the problem of settling the accounts with Nazi forefathers. He saw in that gesture also a broader dynamics of German-language prose, which “assumes a continuous return to the same topics with a new set of experiences, with a new perspective, and, finally, with new writing skills (...)” (p. 32). In the incessant “reminding modern works of themselves” (p. 365), the author recognised hope for literature, which is more and more dominated by “the

social time" (p. 364). The consecutive subchapters of the introduction focus on the limits between the national literatures of German-language countries, the processes of universalisation, and the reflection on the validity of using national keys, and the researcher emphasised a still exceptional role of the works by Austrians in the discussed literary output. One should mention at least the works by Robert Menasse, Elfriede Jelinek, and Josef Winkler, who share a critical attitude to Austrian nationalism and the revealing of "invisible structures" (p. 271), which is specific for the the nation's literature, at different moments in its history. When mentioning these authors, among others, Pokrywka developed a reflection regarding the dynamics of creating literature of a political nature and its currently different pathways, among which one of the most noticeable movements is a conservative movement, the outcome of, *inter alia*, "the retirement of the generation which formed German literature of the post-WWII years and the disappointment in the ideals of 1968" (p. 41²). That generational change has also left a trace in the form of a decline of the ethos of "a writer and a critic as a moral institution" (p. 43³) and, in turn, a much smaller number of literary groups and manifestos, and it partly resulted in writers having functioned in the state of "loneliness by choice" (p. 43). The author concluded that part of the introduction devoted to the turn of the century with a discussion of the factors which determined the classification of literature at the beginning of the 21st century, and a reflection on the modern practices of using the categories of high and low literatures, as well as the importance of "the context, dictionary, and the actors of the field, conducting a typical for them operations on a genre" (p. 53).

In continuing with the introduction of German-language novels of the past two decades to his original overview, the researcher focused on the central word of the title of his work, namely *the novel and its actors* (producers, actors of distribution, professional and non-professional recipients). He discussed both the elements of the definition of the novel and the sociological theory of the genre by Werner Michler, which enables one to assume "distance towards the existing and forming genre classifications" (p. 56). He stressed, though, that in his work he was not creating new typologies, and the applied notions functioned in his typology as non-verified axioms.

Despite the conviction of the instability and blurriness of the lines of the term 'modernity', Rafał Pokrywka composed in an interesting way the main portion of his study surrounding the consecutive dimensions of time: the past, the present, and the future. These divisions did not, however, define, in this case, the division into old, new, and the most recent books – in other words, they did not refer to the categories of literary history – but, rather, they indicated "positions from which texts start off into modernity", "the contexts of reading" (p. 68). The first group of novels – according to the assumed temporal structure and the importance for German-language

² As the original Polish version reads: "odejście pokolenia formującego literaturę niemiecką lat powojennych oraz rozczarowanie ideałami 1968 roku".

³ In Polish: "pisarz i krytyk jako instancja moralna".

writings⁴ – was, therefore, defined by a look behind oneself, which is often an action of the “angel of history” (one might find it surprising that the entire volume lacks any reference to texts by Walter Benjamin, even more so considering the fact that Pokrywka has used in his work the achievements by various philosophers and theoreticians of literature and culture). The central position of this first part of the analytical volume (titled *Przeszłość [The Past]*) “is occupied by the culture of memory and remembrance” (p. 68). As Jerzy Kałużny wrote in the article titled “Who does history belong to? A reflection from a literary scholar”⁵, published in an issue of the *Przegląd Zachodni* journal with the theme ‘The past – memory – the present’, “The problems of modern recollective literature remain strictly bound with other fields of the social discourse”, and as such constitute a backdrop of various topics and writing strategies. Today still, which is particularly significant for Austria and Germany, “Recollective novels have remained for the last twenty years in central focus of the intensive discussions by scholars and politicians on this subject”⁶. This part includes (meta)historical narratives – including the ‘self-negating’ ones, which Andrzej Kopacki discussed in his book titled *Literatura samonegacji*⁷ (which is similar to Rafał Pokrywka’s research, though it posed different reading objectives) – as well as the reflection on historiography or the myth-forming qualities of the historical novel, which Daniel Kehlmann exposed in his famous *Measuring the World* (Pokrywka compared the author’s status of a “literature celebrity” to the case of Szczepan Twardoch), thus opening a well-known though somewhat dusty genre for new inspirations. Despite the fact that the researcher did not focus in his discussion on the notions of translation and the Polish reception, in the fragments in which this seems justified he referred to the experiences of Polish readers and the domestic (Polish) literary scene. This applies to Kehlmann’s novel, which in Poland did not open the backdrop for the required associations and experiences, which is why its international success and minimal domestic perception had to be at least roughly explained by the author of the study. The other new historical novel selected by the author is Thomas Hettche’s *Pfaueninsel* (not translated into Polish), which constitutes an example of the dominance of everydayness, building the narrative through small stories, and giving a voice to marginalised figures. Further in his publication, Pokrywka referred to post-colonial themes, without which, as he put it, “the modern historical novel would not be possible” (p. 84). At that point he discussed, e.g., Lukas Bärfuss’ *Koala* – published in Poland in 2017 by Ossolineum and translated by Arkadiusz Żychliński,

⁴ The author of the study emphasised that “today, historicity is one of the main, if not an absolutely central, determinants of writing (and reading) literature in this area. Historicity can also be defined as a receptive category, as directing readers towards a certain reading mode, in which a text assumes the characteristics of narration about that which was or about that which could have been, often for the benefit of political interpretations trying to take possession of «facts»” (pp. 72-73).

⁵ The original Polish title reads: “Do kogo należy historia? Refleksja literaturoznawcy”.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

⁷ A. Kopacki, *Literatura samonegacji. Postawy narracyjne w prozie niemieckojęzycznej przelomu XX i XXI wieku*, Warsaw 2009.

with an afterword by Grzegorz Jankowicz – which was warmly received by Polish critics. When discussing the colonisation of Australia, the bloody “devouring of land and creatures, about desire and aggression, about *libido* and *destrudo*” (p. 97), the Swiss writer created a painfully valid account of today’s world. This is because, as Pokrywka put it, it is impossible

to overestimate the analytical value of the historical novel, especially in its post-colonial variant. The conviction that it offers an account of only the sad and closed past is immensely naive. (...) Texts about the past which discuss conflicting cultures, seizure of land, and rejection and racial branding strike time’s nerve, they want to be read together with the modern literature of migrants and on migration, as well as with new texts about women (it is impossible to separate colonisation and sex). Furthermore, those novels, though founded in past ages, introduce readers into the tragedies of the 20th century, they may reach even deeper than political analyses or historiography as they do not know – and at this point justice should be given to Bärffuss’ method – the limitations of academic discourse, the disciplines of academic genres, or the clumsiness of statistics. Read together with the accounts of personal tragedies in the 20th century, they reveal new levels of reflection, each time less sentimental or obvious.

(pp. 97-98)

In the subsequent chapter, Pokrywka combined the record of a nomadic state (also present in most of the previously discussed works) with, first, the story of the fortunes of two women (Helene, the protagonist of *The Blind Side of the Heart* by Julia Franck, and Katalin in the novel *The Swimmer* by Zsuzsa Bánk, a writer of Hungarian descent) and, second, the stories of the characters of *The Emigrants* by W. G. Sebald [an author whose works are important to Polish readers by dint of Małgorzata Łukasiewicz’ translation, and yet they are more difficult – as they were most influential in the 1990s – to classify within the landscape of modern German-language literature, as Pokrywka indicated (p. 104)]. In this fragment, the researcher referenced the literary output of Thomas Bernhard, who was close to Sebald, as he did when he discussed the experience of suicide present in Bärffuss’ book, tackling Austria’s past and “familial ecosystem” (p. 157), and returns to the province. Despite the fact that the Austrian’s works had been written before the temporal limit line assumed by Pokrywka, their impact does not diminish as the time passes. The texts referenced by the author of the monograph in this chapter – but not only this one – often raise the topic of Jewish history, yet it would be best to treat the topic separately and to isolate it within the book’s structure, if only considering the space it occupies in the discussed literature.

Pokrywka continued his discussion of individual fortunes within the figure of peregrination by acquiring an insight – via the works by Günter Grass (*Crabwalk*), Herta Müller (*The Hunger Angel*), and Lutz Seiler (*Kruso*) – “into totalitarian mechanisms through the symbolic enclosed space with a utopian or heterotopic nature” (p. 110), but also into “opening literature to

the notion of the «German fate»” (p. 121). Within the group of books important for the area of literature discussed by Rafał Pokrywka – books that are unique and available for Polish readers only in their original versions – one should highlight the novel *Der Turm* by Uwe Tellkamp, which was a literary reaction to the fall of the German Democratic Republic (DDR) and the unification of Germany (this topic is also represented in Pokrywka’s anthology by the work titled *In Times of Fading Light* by Eugen Ruge). In the following chapter, the researcher examined generational memory and family narratives, a surprisingly high number of which was written around 2003, which was considered a literary turning point, a change of the old, mainly accusatory, paradigm of remembrance. Yet according to Pokrywka, significant strategies had already appeared in the 1990s (e.g. Martin Walser’s reminiscing on his childhood or the search for the Jewish identity in Robert Schindel’s *Gebürtig*), but he chose later novels as special examples: *Es geht uns gut* by an Austrian writer Arno Geiger, and *The Eighth Life (For Brilka)* by Nino Haratischwili, who was born in Greece. *Returns to the Province*, which I have already mentioned in the fragment regarding Bernhard’s works, is similar in terms of the topic to this chapter, which includes, *inter alia*, an interpretation of the novel *Kino Muza* by Artur Becker, a Polish emigrant in Germany, as well as a context of the Polish literature of little homelands. The part of the volume titled *Przeszłość [The Past]* which includes all the topics I have mentioned concludes in two chapters devoted to the “palimpsest nature of love literature” (p. 160) and the authors who represent the fading generation of people born in the interwar period, i.e. Martin Walser and Peter Handke.

In order to enable readers to gain a more detailed look into the consecutive parts of the discussed publication on their own, allow me to outline only the main threads in the remaining two periods. In *Teraźniejszość [The Present]*, which covers the most current affairs “of a high discursive potential” (p. 68), the author discussed the young adult novel, in which the coming-of-age experience comprises, e.g.: the fact of being on the road (similarly as in the case of the novels analysed in the initial chapters of the part titled *Przeszłość [The Past]*); texts which are a proof of the impact of the theory of evolution and the coexistence of a human being and nature; various ways of problematising corporeality (not only in the feminine variant); previously tabooed aspects of motherhood; love or geopolitical narratives; and the literatures of migrants and on migrants (in the context of the modern migrant crisis, but also of the search for home as a paradigmatic experience of modernity). These narrative works are filled with eccentricities, quotations, and covert quotations, as well as a risk of temporariness. Then, the *Przyszłość [The Future]* part, potentially directed towards the New, begins with the uncompromising sentence: “Disappointing: the fact of entering the future does not bring any radically different topics, only an expansion of the potential of the already discussed ones” (p. 295). A further discussion includes, however, projected tasks for works directed at that which is to come, and the point would be to provide an answer to questions such as: “what will happen to a world in which the final

sentiment, i.e. compassion, is lost?”, “why doesn’t humanity commit a collective suicide after all?”, “how are urges going to be satisfied?” (p. 304).

The manner of grouping modern German-language novels proposed by the author of the volume is not flawless, just as any other is not. Despite the differences in the sizes of all three main parts (not considering the introduction and the short chapter concluding the whole), one might get the impression that they apply at a similar extent to important topics often raised in this kind of literature. However, one should underline that the book is a systematised narrative conducted by a single author, which enables readers to view the discussed literature from a uniform perspective. Such an option is not available in the case of collective works – valuable for other considerations – in which individual articles differ in terms of, e.g., the approach to a topic, the level of specificity, or their initial assumptions, while their selection is limited to the most valued or most widely accepted works and it depends even more on personal preferences and on how extensively a specific output has been studied by researchers. The compositional strategy applied by the author and the character of individual interpretations are related to two concepts of time: a linear concept (through the accepted analytical categories which define three main parts of the volume), and a periodic concept (expressed in the recurrences of texts and topics).

Furthermore, the discussed publication is invaluable considering the intention to discuss various novels for readers for whom access to modern German-language literature hinges on the selections made by publishing houses and translators, or who have the option to read selected books in their original versions yet do not wish to follow publishing blurbs, best-seller listings or even the lists of laureates of literary awards. The author of the study – despite addressing Polish readers and discussing the most recent literature, which quite often has not been translated yet – has not based his narrative on a much more familiar foundation of reception and translation. This does not mean, however, that he did not utilise the achievements of Polish literary critics or texts on the history or theory of literature, including these which do not strictly apply to German-language literature. The extensive bibliography references, e.g., books by Przemysław Czapliński on prose since the 1990s, books by Adrian Gleń on the most recent phenomena and literary texts, and works by Grzegorz Jankowicz on the Polish literature after 1989. Obviously, it also includes works on German-language literature, which, however, unlike in Rafał Pokrywka’s assumptions, focus on reception and translations. These are volumes such as: *Literatura niemiecka w Polsce. Przekład i recepcja*, edited by Eugeniusz Czaplejewicz and Janusz Rohoziński (Pułtusk 2009), and *Zrozumieć obcość. Recepcja literatury niemieckojęzycznej w Polsce po 1989 roku*, edited by Monika Wolting and Stephan Wolting (Kraków 2016), as well as the volume similarly devoted to that which happens at the meeting point of two linguistic and cultural areas, namely *Teatr – Literatura – Media. O polsko-niemieckich oddziaływaniach w sferze kultury po 1989 roku*, edited by Małgorzata Leyko and Artur Pełka (Łódź 2013). In the latter one, the most important article for Pokrywka was the one by Wolting: “The Polish reception of works of the most recent German-language

literature rewarded with the *Deutscher Buchpreis*⁸ (pp. 197-207). However, I feel that the volume lacks – even if only in footnotes – references to a few books, e.g. essays and studies by Andrzej Kopacki⁹ (*Współczesna powieść niemieckojęzyczna* only mentions the volume titled *Literatura samonegacji*, which I have already indicated) or articles by Hubert Orłowski¹⁰.

Apart from the extensive source material (the researcher may have analysed a single literary genre, yet he did not select only these texts that are considered by critics as highly artistic literature), the topic of the discussed publication is associated with the challenges specific for the attempt at creating a synthesis *in medias res* – from the centre of literary modern times. Rafał Pokrywka seems to be moving within this field with much ease, which enabled him, first, to offer an original multidimensional overview of the titular area of the novel which utilises the tools of, e.g., another cultural theory of literature, but also, second, to develop intertextual references to prose works in various languages and from various periods.

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SUMMARY

The article is a discussion of a study by Rafał Pokrywka titled *Współczesna powieść niemieckojęzyczna* (Kraków 2018). The author of the study analysed selected works written at the turn of the 21st century, and – in an interesting manner – developed his discussion around a progression of three dimensions of time: the past, the present, and the future, which constitute the contexts for reading individual narratives. The interpretations of German, Austrian, and Swiss novels, both these which exist as Polish translations and these which have not yet been translated, are

⁸ In Polish: "Polska recepcja dzieł najnowszej literatury niemieckojęzycznej wyróżnionych nagrodą Deutscher Buchpreis".

⁹ Vide A. Kopacki, *Spod oka. Eseje o literaturze niemieckiej i nie tylko*, Warsaw 2002, and *Musze w kapeluszu*, Wrocław 2012.

¹⁰ Vide H. Orłowski, *Zrozumieć świat: szkice o literaturze i kulturze niemieckiej XX wieku*, Wrocław 2003.

accompanied by cultural and sociological contexts, while the (re)definitions of the words used in the title of Pokrywka's volume presented in the introduction enable one to place this original overview in the context of modern studies on the most recent literature.

Keywords

German-language literature, novel, modernity

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