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Polish Narratology on Non-Fiction*

The aim of this paper is to present the attempts of Polish narratology to come up with effective analytical tools for coping with non-fiction or even explicitly non-literary texts – and borderline cases, which of course predominate. I believe it to be a specific trait of our – also specific – local version of narratology which has never been particularly interested in story/plot (following the Propp-Barthes-Greimas-Todorov-Bremond tradition of thinking), concentrating instead more on the level of discourse, narrative devices, and point of view. Certain problems that provoke vivid discussions today have their record in the history of our discipline, certain contemporary questions were posed some time ago which makes this part of Polish literary criticism at least an interesting case study, interesting *per se* and also interesting as it can provoke some general observations and remarks. One of the most important problems is the relation between the condition of literature and narratology. There are always particular literary works standing behind the narratological concepts – it is no coincidence that certain titles keep recurring. Other general issues raised by this case study are the historical circumstances that affect narratology, the links between narratology and poetics; in a nutshell: the context of narratology's development. Of course I use the term 'narratology' in its contemporary meaning, being aware of the fact that it was coined in the 1960s.

I shall begin with a personal reminiscence: I remember my genuine astonishment when first reading Gérard Genette's *Fiction et diction*¹ (published in French in 1991). The author noted that narratology so far

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¹ Gérard Genette, *Fiction et diction* (Paris: Seuil, 1991).

had consistently favoured works of fiction, being so far rather helpless towards non-imaginative texts. Genette said *mea culpa* and came up with his theory; then many others followed. Today we have an abundance of concepts relating to the divide; the opposing pair fiction – non-fiction can be traced at the level of paper and dissertation titles (certain problems are now observed concurrently in fictional and factual narratives. However, it is a matter of the last two decades. Genette's remark struck me, as I could not sense this kind of inequality in Polish narratology before 1990. This initial intuition became a strong belief when I looked into the matter thoroughly – and this proclivity for non-fiction is one of the distinctive features of Polish narratology. I will try to present some of its achievements in that field and try to come up with some possible explanations of the phenomena of that special interest in non-fiction.

I will allude only briefly to contemporary Polish achievements in the field for two reasons: their merit will be seen from a certain distance and, above all, its subject matters and their treatment do not differ so substantially from what is nowadays done elsewhere. The difference I would have pointed out a couple of years ago was the focus on verbal narrative and a certain reluctance to consider other media, but things have changed.

The most important texts I am going to refer to date back to the early 1970s and 80s and were the output of Polish structuralism, the so called school of literary communication. But the roots of this way of thinking date back to the interwar period, with concepts brought into being before World War 2. Also in this field it is useful to rethink the sources of Polish theory and show its origins in ideas developed in the first decades of the 20th century.

There were certain reasons for the theoretical consideration of non-fiction. One of them was the establishment in 1933 of a literary group called *Przedmieście*; a short quote from its programme written by Krystyna Kraheńska gives the idea of its aims:

The Group shall found its oeuvre on new methodological assumptions, so far unfamiliar to Polish literature: we shall refrain from fantasy when tackling true life stories, consider direct, reliable, probing observation the fundamental element of our artistic activity.²

² Krystyna Kraheńska, *Preface, Przedmieście*, Warszawa 1934, p. VII (my translation). See also Kazimierz Ptak, "O zadaniach społecznych faktografii (wokół programu literackiego grupy literackiej *Przedmieście*)", *Ruch Literacki* 5 (1967).

Those ideals (not far from naturalism) of documentarism were to enable the plausible, precise rendering of life using methods of sociology. Literary conventions traditionally associated with fiction were considered superfluous. The writers renounced plot, psychological portraits of characters, stylistic experiments. The anti-aestheticism of this approach resulted in ignoring the issue of the artistic values of prose, which became subject to numerous polemics.

The “reportage issue” became one of the most vividly discussed literary matters of the 1930s. The Przedmieście group was not entirely responsible for that. Another reason was the flourishing of travel literature which became a popular genre in the inter-war period. Dozens of books were published annually, some of the authors are still considered classics of Polish literature. In his early works Arkady Fiedler focused on Canada and Southern America, Alina and Czesław Centkiewicz on the Arctic. Ferdynand Ossendowski, called the Polish Karl May, became popular world-wide, his works being translated into 20 languages. Reportages by Aleksander Janta-Pończyński (correspondent of *Wiadomości Literackie*) or Mieczysław B. Lepecki are now rather forgotten, but in the 20s and 30s their reports from remote countries galvanised the reading public. The writing strategies of the authors mentioned above oscillate from formal restraint to conventions deeply grounded in fiction – the latter were preferred by common readers as well as critics. Describing “bare facts”, ‘pure reality’, refraining from selection, ‘literary’ devices and subjective comment was considered unartistic. Critics like Ludwik Fryde, Karol Wiktor Zawodziński, and Stefan Kołaczkowski opposed reportage to the realist novel (the 4-volume epic novel *Noce i dni* [Nights and Days] by Maria Dąbrowska were a recent example). From this point of view the reportage mode, labelled “expressionist” or “naturalist”, limits itself only to raw observations, provides insight into the chaotic magma of life, and serves as material for further treatment. The realist epic mode also bases itself on observation, but transforms it into art, brings a carefully considered image of the world depicted, and provides order, also in terms of morality. Needless to say, the second element of the opposition is valued higher as a more refined, more mature approach to reality. With more theoretical profoundness and without easy valuation this way of thinking was expressed by Konstanty Troczyński in *Estetyka reportażu literackiego* [Aesthetics of Literary Reportage]: “the order of elements of the artistic vision is determined not by the rules of the structure and demands

of the literary genre, but by the factual randomness.”³ Reportage is beyond literary convention, and also the realist convention, is – paradoxically – unrealistic.⁴ It is worth stressing that the most prominent non-fiction writers of the interwar period, Melchior Wańkowicz and Ksawery Pruszyński, used “literary” techniques abundantly. Wańkowicz started his brilliant career in the 1920s. with reportages from Mexico and Soviet Russia, in 1936 he published the famous “reportage-novel” *Na tropach Smętka* [On the Trail of Smętek]. Ksawery Pruszyński’s book on the Spanish civil war, *W czerwonej Hiszpanii* [Inside Red Spain], was considered a masterpiece in its genre and this opinion prevails until today.

An even more heated argument developed after the publication of *Pamiętniki chłopów* [Diaries of Peasants] A few words may be useful here, as the project had a great impact – not only in Poland – on the thinking about the boundary between literature and document and by the way it is somehow precursory to what is being done today by Philippe Lejeune, and to the anthropological turn in narratology. The *Diaries* were written for a contest organised by the Collegium of Socio-Economics, a research institution founded in 1920, just after Poland gained independence, and still existing today. The Collegium was mainly interested in collecting data for research (other projects included diaries of the unemployed and emigrants), but it turned out that the reception of the texts concentrated also on other aspects. Almost 500 diaries were submitted, 18 received awards and 2 volumes were published: one comprising over 50 short entries and another comprising 10 selected for their special “literary values”. The project was broadly discussed and forced the readers to reconsider the limits and the boundaries of literature.

One of the reactions was an article entitled *Dokument i literatura* [Document and Literature]⁵. The author was not an academic, but the renowned Polish novelist mentioned already, Maria Dąbrowska. Her text was an answer to controversies after the periodical *Wiadomości Literackie* awarded the *Diaries* with its prestigious literary prize in 1937. Dąbrowska felt obliged to defend the choice as she made the motion and was also the author of the preface to the volume in which she wrote: “The *Diaries* have extraordinary artistic qualities, though they were not intended as a work of art.” She praises their epic ability to depict the social

³ Konstanty Troczyński, “Estetyka reportażu literackiego”, in *Od formizmu do moralizmu. Szkice literackie* (Poznań: Jan Jachowski Księgarnia Uniwersytecka, 1935).

⁴ See also Łukasz Wróbel, *Hylé i noesis. Trzy międzywojenne koncepcje literatury stosowanej* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2013).

⁵ Maria Dąbrowska, “Dokument i literatura,” in *Pisma rozproszone*, vol. II, ed. Ewa Korzeniewska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1964).

milieu, their philosophical deepness, and their power of observation. In *Document and Literature* she was even more radical. “A document can become literature if it possesses features thanks to which it can be read as a literary work” (141) – she states. Dąbrowska refutes the criterion of intention, but considers the criterion of reception important. She is not a theorist and comes up with historical and commonsense analogies (the source of art is suffering and loving life, she claims) but tries to answer the question of the literary value and aesthetic (poetic) function – without using those terms. She notes a paradox: on the level of style the chosen texts are rough and banal, but they manage to capture the dramatic intensity of events better than conventional literary devices. Dąbrowska writes about the poetical force of those naive biographies and uses the term “plot” meaning the sequence of everyday life incidents. This is an extraordinary concept, though it is hard to say whether Dąbrowska was aware of its originality: plot is not the arrangement of events, their sequence based on the cause-effect order, but it is an aspect of reality.

Dąbrowska’s ideas resonate strongly with the theoretical assumptions by Stefania Skwarczyńska (though there is no evidence of any intellectual relations between them). Skwarczyńska’s monograph *Teoria listu* [Theory of the Letter], also published in 1937, could be labelled narratological – with its diachronic emphasis, historical background, and functional approach. It is here that she develops her idea of “applied literature” (the term was used for the first time in 1931⁶). Applied literature, opposed to pure literature – with only aesthetic function – is in Skwarczyńska’s approach a vast area, comprising autobiographical texts (memoirs, diaries, etc), genres with an addressee (pamphlets, letters, dedications), research (monographs, articles, studies), rhetorical texts (sermons, speeches), entertainment (charades, improvisations). Works belonging to the kingdom of applied literature have a special status: they are “symbolic manifestations of acts of will,” subjective experiences in the domain of practical reality, fragmentary representations of bits and pieces of reality. There are two aesthetic criteria valid for applied literature: the literary work should above all fulfil its functional aim and it should appropriately use “ornament”, always subjected to the practical aspect of the genre. Skwarczyńska provided effective and carefully considered tools for coping with the field of literature neglected so far by literary criticism.

So this was the background, then came the war, which brought problems more burning and urged to redefine literature, its obligations

⁶ Stefania Skwarczyńska, “O pojęcie literatury stosowanej,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 28/1/4 (1931).

and needs, reinterpret the notion of document, rendering, witness, and testimony. That has been elaborated on in detail – in accordance with Polish and Jewish literature. When the war started, Michał Głowiński, the main protagonist of the second part of this paper, was five years old. He managed to survive – and many years later he wrote about it in autobiographical texts of high literary merit. Głowiński's non-fiction works can be read together with his theoretical accomplishments, as they approach our subject matter in complimentary ways.

In 1988 at the annual Literary Theory Conference (a very important institution for Polish structuralist literary criticism) Głowiński presented his paper "Poetyka wobec tekstów nieliterackich" [Poetics versus Non-Literary Texts]⁷. It serves as a methodological declaration, resulting from previous numerous analytical attempts. Głowiński's credo can be summed up as follows: poetics is the key discipline in the field of literary studies as it has developed effective devices to cope with all sorts of texts, not only literary texts. Głowiński modestly claimed that the job is to be done, but his earlier book on the history and theory of narrative forms – *Gry powieściowe* [Novel Games], 1973⁸) contain two outstanding examples of such an analysis. Both are essays on war documents. One concentrates on the published diary of Zofia Nałkowska, a renowned Polish novelist. The other, "Wspominki z Sachsenhausen" [Memoirs from Sachsenhausen], focuses on a book written by Stanisław Pigoń (the English word "memoirs" is not a good equivalent of the original trivialising diminutive "wspominki" in Pigoń's title). Pigoń was a professor of literature at the Jagiellonian University when in 1939, during the so called Sonderaktion Krakau, together with almost 200 other academics, he was arrested during a meeting with a Nazi officer at the university. Most of them were transferred to the Sachsenhausen death camp, some perished there.

Głowiński analyses the narratological dimension of both accounts, focusing on common matters. The distance towards the events is different, different are the standpoints – past and present and the modes of presenting events: telling versus showing. Głowiński starts with an observation that in an authentic diary the composition of discourse is a consequence of the composition of biography and history (this is a point similar to Dąbrowska's remark about plot). The construction constructs itself; the situation is of course different in memoirs or autobiography, where the composition is based on the selection and arrangement of facts.

⁷ Michał Głowiński, "Poetyka wobec tekstów nieliterackich," in *Poetyka i okolice* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1992).

⁸ Michał Głowiński, *Gry powieściowe: szkice z teorii i historii form narracyjnych* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1973).

Głowiński shows, how Pigoń and Nałkowska adopt the perspective of the individual. Pigoń does it extremely consequently and consciously, restricting himself (and declaring it overtly) to events and observations not reported by others who were imprisoned. That is crucial – I refer here Głowiński's argument: Pigoń omits incidents of great importance and dramatic capacity, like the absurd death of a famous professor, a prominent public figure in prewar Poland, whose life could have been saved by a routine medical procedure. Pigoń finds it needless to narrate on facts that have been already described by others in published texts. This is not only a sign of modesty. It shows the aim of the factual narrative: testimony, not rendering one's experience, emotions, and thoughts. This of course does not exclude comment; Pigoń treats his account as another proof of the barbarities of the war.

The second crucial issue of Głowiński's essays is style: he analyses the subtleties of linguistic choices in the documents. A very interesting passage is devoted to the intersection of natural Polish and unfamiliar, oppressive German. He shows the certain bilingual dimension, where the same expressions – German words and Polish synonyms in parenthesis – are not equivalent, but serve as a double voice, and have different connotations.

I will not go further into the details of Głowiński's argument, but it seems clear that he preaches what he teaches: his analytical practice supports, or even comes before his methodological assumptions. A text that combines the two is "Dokument jako powieść" [Document as Novel]⁹ focusing on a text outside Polish literature and not a war document. Głowiński's starting point is the analysis of the anthropological books by Oscar Lewis, author of *The Children of Sanchez. An Autobiography of a Mexican Family*, a sociological account of what he later called the "culture of poverty". Lewis recorded monologues of the members of the Sanchez family and selected them – which is important – to tell a story. The case study is for Głowiński a pretext to develop a concept of the impact novelistic devices have on factual narratives. He distinguishes "novelisation" and "beletrisation", the latter meaning the accidental, occasional influence of fictional techniques, the first – a consequent, global modelling, patterning of the factual narrative upon fiction. He shows convincingly what mechanisms of novelisation are used by Lewis: precise composition, careful montage, an abundance of detail, the point of view technique enabling a juxtaposition of monologues, quoting vast

⁹ Michał Głowiński, "Dokument jako powieść," in *Studia o narracji*, ed. J. Błoński, J. Jaworski, and J. Sławiński (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1982).

dialogues based on the novelistic convention of perfect memory. Those devices do not undermine the plausibility of the account, it is still a work of sociology, but not a pure, intact document.

A similar point was made by Zofia Mitosek's in her *Semantyczne aspekty literatury faktu* [Semantic Aspects of Non-Fiction]¹⁰, based on *Rozmowy z katem* [Conversations with an Executioner] by Kazimierz Moczarski, a book published in Poland in the 70s, translated into English¹¹, German, French, Czech, and Ukrainian. The subtitle added by the editor of the English version unexpectedly illustrates Mitosek's point: "An incredible 255-day-long interview with the man who destroyed the Warsaw ghetto." On some websites Jürgen Stroop is even considered the co-author of the book (sic!) Those misunderstandings result from ignoring the literary devices used by Moczarski, who of course spent those 255 days in a prison cell with the Nazi criminal, but did not conduct or record an interview. His book uses the collected information, but arranges it logically into a plot. It mimics Stroop's way of expressing himself, but also bears evident signs of Moczarski's later interventions. He selected and arranged the material and commented on it, sometimes as subtly as using quotation marks for certain of Stroop's phrases. Disagreement, irony, parody are evident, though Moczarski does not overtly comment on Stroop's words. They are possible thanks to the composition of the factual material. Mitosek does not question the documentary value of the *Conversations*, but she convincingly shows how literary devices work in the book.

Głowiński's methodological postulates were realised also by other scholars, becoming a commonly acclaimed methodological approach.¹² It is worth noting that elements of this mode of analysis can be traced back even earlier: a good example is Roman Zimand's book on Adam Czerniaków's diary.¹³ Zimand stresses the discrepancy between the moderate, reserved tone of the diary and the horror it describes. Understanding the true meaning of Czerniaków's impassive, brief entries requires knowledge about

¹⁰ Zofia Mitosek, "Semantyczne aspekty literatury faktu," in *Mimesis. Zjawisko i problem* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1997).

¹¹ Kazimierz Moczarski, *Conversations with an Executioner*, ed. Mariana Fitzpatrick (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981).

¹² See e.g. Jacek Leociak, *Doświadczenie graniczne. Studia o dwudziestowiecznych formach reprezentacji* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2009).

¹³ Roman Zimand, *Dziennik Adama Czerniakowa: próba lektury* (Paryż: Libella, 1979). Czerniaków from 1939 to his suicide in 1942 was head of Judenrat in Warsaw, Jewish Council responsible for implementing German orders in the Jewish community. His diary was published in Polish: *Adama Czerniakowa dziennik z getta warszawskiego*, ed. Marian Fuks (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1983) and English: *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow: Prelude to Doom*, ed. Raul Hilberg, Stanisław Staron, and Josef Kermisz (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999).

the situation of Jews in the ghetto. The unintended poetics of the diary is the source of its impact on the reader.

What is interesting, in his autobiographical books Głowiński is rather reluctant to borrow literary devices from the novel. It is most evident in his first non-academic book: *Czarne sezony* [Black Seasons]¹⁴ (published in Polish in 1998). It is a collection of images, notes, memoirs rendering the dramatic childhood: Warsaw ghetto and the fortunate, miraculous escape. It is a book totally, consequently deprived of “literary techniques”. In the author’s note he writes about gaps in memory: “filling them with fiction, conjectures, or even information drawn from other sources available in various forms would be highly inappropriate and a departure from my intent here”. In another place he adds: “yet my story contains no fiction, no invented scenes, and if ‘literature’ does emerge, it is merely derivative, inadvertent, unintentional.”¹⁵

Głowiński, perfectly aware of the mechanisms of novelisation, consciously refrains from it in his testimony.

One of the possible explanations of the special interest Polish narratology had – and still has – in non-fiction, which is apparent even after the short overview I have presented, is the urgent need to tackle texts which refer to the World War II trauma: those that have a clearly testimonial value as well as those blurring the border between the referential and non-referential. It becomes not a theoretical issue, but a problem crucial for reception, for critics and – of course – for scholars. The need to give testimony during the barbarities of the war was natural and resulted in thousands of diaries, memoirs, and chronicles. Very instructive here is the table of contents of the volume *Literatura wobec wojny i okupacji* [Literature towards War and Occupation]¹⁶ edited by Głowiński and Janusz Sławiński. Half of the ten texts are devoted to non-fiction, three – to poetry, and two to general matters. Not even one tackles the problem of the novel. Sixty pages are devoted to Maria Janion’s study entitled *Wojna i forma* [War and form]. Fiction was considered in a way inappropriate, irrelevant. The problem was to find the language to narrate the unimaginable; literary conventions were insufficient. Those remarks sound like truisms today, 65 years after Adorno’s famous phrase, but in the decades after the war they were a matter of actual artistic choices to be made. The question of plausibility was crucial and the problem

¹⁴ Michał Głowiński, *Czarne sezony* (Warszawa: Open, 1998). English translation: *The Black Seasons*, trans. Marci Shore (Evanston/Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Głowiński, *The Black Seasons*, 3; 59.

¹⁶ Michał Głowiński and Janusz Sławiński (ed.) *Literatura wobec wojny i okupacji: studia* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1976).

of how to write after the Shoah was also the problem of narratologists: how to write about what was written. Verse theorists had to cope with the syntagmatic verse of Tadeusz Różewicz, narratologists with the war literature – Miron Białoszewski's *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* [The Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising]¹⁷ and short stories by Tadeusz Borowski¹⁸, set in Auschwitz, with the narrator Tadek bearing features of Borowski, but not irrefutably identified with him.

Another issue is that, for many reasons too complicated to explain here, Polish postwar literature also drew back from fiction. Essay, autobiography and autofiction, reportage: those genres predominated, and the condition of the novel was and still is a cause for concern. One of the giants of Polish literature was undoubtedly Ryszard Kapuściński; his oeuvre had to be interpreted and certain general conclusions had been drawn. A good example is Głowiński's review of Kapuściński's work prepared on the occasion of granting him an honorary degree of the University of Silesia. In the speech delivered there on November 15, 2001 Głowiński came up with the concept of literariness:

The literariness of the reportage is above all founded on a specific way of constructing the narrating subject.

The reportage is in this regard a somehow paradoxical genre: the author cannot speak about himself, but he also cannot be absent; he cannot assume that the related events take place without him; he cannot present things from a distance. He has to take part in them. Sociologists speak of participant observation; I believe that this notion can be perfectly adapted to reportage. The reporter does not have the right to refrain from speaking about his own experience. He does not speak about himself, he is not in the foreground, but he has to be there [...].¹⁹

Polish postwar narratology did not come up with models of narration of the Stanzel or Genette type. It did not develop theories of fictionality (although it has come up with a prominent theory time in the novel by Kazimierz Bartoszyński). But it constantly tested, with success, and perfected the tools of poetics on non-fiction texts, proving that there is actually no need to come up with new notions, as the old ones can be adjusted and work well. Genette eventually came to the same conclusion.

¹⁷ Miron Białoszewski, *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*, [1970], trans. Madeline G. Levine (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977).

¹⁸ Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, trans. Barbara Vedder and Michael Kandel (London: Penguin Books, 1976).

¹⁹ <http://kapuscinski.info/ryszarda-kapuscinskiego-sztuka-reportazu.html>.

Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the accomplishments of Polish narratology in the field of non-fiction. For certain reasons, including the condition of literature itself, it was particularly inclined to tackle the problem of documentary and come up with effective methods of analysing referential texts. Early discussions on reportage and interwar theoretical concepts form a background for the structuralist approach to non-fiction texts. The focus is on Michał Głowiński's fundamental studies. In the analytical practice he realises his main methodological assumption: to use the traditional tools of poetics to cope also with non-fiction.

Key words: narratology, non-fiction, document, reportage

