

Innovative and Inspiring Work with Some Unfortunate Lacuna

Sobolczyk, Piotr *Polish Queer Modernism*. Frankfurt am Main:
Peter Lang International Academic Publishers 2015 (252 pages)

LITERARY MODERNISM TODAY is a matter of history rather than a living tradition; nevertheless, we continually witness modernism's "life after life." As some "secret diaries" of major modernist Polish authors (Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Miron Białoszewski, and Witold Gombrowicz) have been published recently, we are forced to rethink our understanding of Poland's relation to this period and its presumptions. These documents are crucial for a new understanding of Polish modernism and drastically changed our image of this historical period and its movements; thus, we need to rethink Polish modernist aesthetics, hierarchies, and dynamics.

The "secret diaries" that are mentioned above are the starting point for Piotr Sobolczyk's new synthesis of modernism. Sobolczyk's *Queer Polish Modernism* follows in the footsteps of Benjamin Kahan's essay "Queer Modernism" (2013), but the Polish scholar, probably inspired by the queer content of the "secret diaries," adopts only the general idea that Kahan promotes and, instead of conforming to the schemes proposed, tries to invent his own theoretical devices.

One of Sobolczyk's points of departure is the division in queer modernism's literary field between *cognoscenti* (few, elite readers and often participants of literary life) and *ignoranti* (the rest, numerous anony-

mous readers). This division affects the process of literary communication, but it has also had a significant impact on the form of the literary text itself. Although this division and its importance have been discussed earlier by other scholars, Sobolczyk is nevertheless the first to define it as the crucial moment in the process of reading modernism. As our knowledge (due to the “secret diaries” edition) increases, modernism becomes more and more queer – indeed, even its “straight” texts often have a queer lining.

Sobolczyk’s work addresses an international public – it is a great introduction to the essentials of Polish modernism and its non-normativity. As such, *Polish Queer Modernism* is a groundbreaking book. The author is aware that Polish culture has been developing according to its own scheme and pace, and that theoretical devices elaborated elsewhere therefore have to be reworked or adapted critically: “My aim is not to copy and apply them unidirectionally. Many aspects of Anglo-Saxon theories with some references to French poststructuralism and psychoanalysis simply ‘don’t work’ here.” (Sobolczyk 2015, 7)

Two particularities of Polish queer modernism have great importance, Sobolczyk claims. Firstly, the scholar brings the linguistic aspects of non-normative sexuality to our attention. He argues that the artistic use of Polish language in queer prose represents and expresses queerness in a very particular and almost untranslatable way. As Sobolczyk tries to explain the meaning of sophisticated texts of Polish modernists to non-Polish scholars, his linguistic sensitivity also reveals that some ideas taken for granted by Polish readers are not the only ones thinkable. For example, he takes the word *pupa* [bottom] – a very important concept in Gombrowicz’s *Ferdydurke* (1937) – and expands on its “double” meaning:

Language contradicts – or betrays – the common ideology [...] “pupa” and its more “vulgar” equivalent “dupa” can be farther on divided into “buttocks” and “sphincter.” Apparently when Gombrowicz equates “pupa” with “innocence” and “unknowingness” he implies “buttocks” and the concealing of the “obscurely sexual.” (85)

But this “obscurely sexual” zone reappears in *Ferdydurke* many times; an observation that leads Sobolczyk to discover hidden S/M and homoerotic scenarios in Gombrowicz’s masterpiece.

Secondly, we have to consider the importance of economy. The status of material goods and – consequently – commodity fetishism within the frames of the communist “economy of shortage” diverts significantly from Europe’s Western countries. Objects of no, or little value, made in capitalist countries became objects of cult in communist Poland; thus, Western crap became a luxury in the East (207). Such economy as well as the Iron Curtain, which blocked the free exchange of ideas, resulted in Poland (together with the whole post-Soviet world) having to invent a camp aesthetics on its own. Without any contact with the Western homosexual subculture and its “camping” (an important discourse in queer modernism), Sobolczyk argues that Miron Białoszewski has developed his own “reparative” camp where “greyness” and misery of living under the communist regime are defined by the poet’s “camp eye” which celebrates and makes campy trivial objects.

Another important idea is the concept of omnipresent homoinfluence in Polish modernism. Sobolczyk argues that even straight authors were “homoinfluenced” – Czesław Miłosz among others. This Polish Nobel-prize winner was involved in many homosocial relationships with queer authors such as Józef Czechowicz and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz – relationships which, according to Sobolczyk, resonates in Miłosz’ own works, for example *The Captive Mind* (1953).

As an introduction to and presentation of Polish queer modernism, Sobolczyk’s book is expected to be very balanced and aspire to objectivity. Generally it meets these demands, but the advanced scholar easily detects Sobolczyk’s likes and dislikes. The abovementioned Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz is the great absentee in Sobolczyk’s book: only four pages are devoted to a discussion about Iwaszkiewicz’s queerness and homoinfluence. This is not enough – Iwaszkiewicz is generally considered one of the most influential authors of Polish modernism. Indeed, this prolific author of poetry and prose is such a key figure of literary and political life in pre- and postwar Poland that without analyzing him, the

image of Polish queer modernism is simply distorted. This omission can be (only) partly justified by the fact that Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz and his work were previously the subject of a separate monograph in German by German Ritz.

Unfortunately, I must warn *ignorant* readers that there are more “empty spaces” in Sobolczyk’s work. Although the author is well-oriented in literary theory, queer theory, and psychoanalysis, strangely enough he seems to ignore the output of Polish literary scholars who have been developing theory and describing Polish modernism’s queerness for the last fifteen to twenty years. In a range of articles, books, and essays, non-normative sexuality is put forward as a very important aspect of Polish modernism. I have in mind Tomasz Kaliściak’s book on queer catastrophes or Błażej Warkocki’s research on the queer aspects of passing from modernism to postmodernism. In this context, I must also mention my own research – I have developed the idea of “double-addressing” in modernist queer texts before Sobolczyk.

To sum up shortly, Sobolczyk’s work has undoubtedly a pioneering character – it is the first presentation of Polish queer modernism for an international audience (*ignoranti*). However, many of his analyses have such a pioneering dimension that advanced scholars (*cognoscenti*) can also recognize and appreciate it. Sobolczyk’s interpretations are very innovative and inspiring. What I regret the most is the fact that Sobolczyk has neglected works of other literary scholars interested in Polish queer modernism. It has to be said that the developed and informed content of the book would not be possible if it was not for the work that Polish scholars did on demonstrating queer dimensions of Polish modernism before Sobolczyk.

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