

Theorizing Post-Communism: The Polish Case

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Abstract

Recent political changes in Eastern Europe open up space for new readings of Marxism, feminism and deconstruction. At the same time, however, we witness a powerful resistance against all kinds of politically-committed critical practice: provocative questions concerning the 'dangers' of methodological permissivism often appear in the context of this discussion. The issue at stake seems to be the earlier antagonism between Marxism as official state ideology, on the one hand, and Marxism as radical theoretical practice which seeks to subvert dominant ideologies, on the other. Thus, although the advance of politically-committed critical projects seems inevitable, the anti-historical and allegedly apolitical concept of culture, which in the past helped to protect Polish higher education from the oppressive state apparatus, still prevails in our Academia. The tensions and paradoxes implicated in this process are certainly worth a closer analysis, perhaps not only in the Polish context. They show that historically-oriented criticism (which I draw on extensively in my Shakespearean studies) can itself fall a victim of history: that no theoretical discourse exists beyond time.

Until quite recently nobody in Poland would have had doubts about the political import of literary and dramatic canons. Both the censors and the audience scrutinized printed texts and theatrical productions in search of 'dissident' meanings, and thus constructed such meanings themselves. One can recall, for instance, the 1968 ban on a Polish Romantic play, which only reinforced the text's anti-Russian overtones. Similarly, Andrzej Wajda's 1983 production of Sophocles' *Antigone* was interpreted as a protest against the shooting of shipyard workers in Gdansk in 1970, and a condemnation of martial law, introduced in 1981. Likewise, Shakespeare's plays seemed a perfect reflection of everyday reality.

After 1956, the majority of leading Polish intellectuals renounced the principles of socialist realism and became involved in the production of dissident meanings. As a result they started using the literary canon to articulate their resistance against the official ideology. It has been noted, for instance, that Jan Kott's first collection of essays published in 1961 represents the Shakespeare of the Polish intelligentsia, which "had suffered from the bites of Hegel's philosophy and was recovering from Marxist pox" (Majchrowski 1993, 23). In this new context, old texts acquired new meanings. For instance, "Denmark is a prison" became synonymous with the call 'Freedom for political prisoners'. Published three years later, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (Kott 1965) still held, as it were, a mirror up to our world. Shakespeare our contemporary became, thus, "political" Shakespeare (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985).

However, the construction of political Shakespeare was not followed by a

reflection on the process in the course of which meanings are continuously contested. Even in this situation of conflict there was no awareness that these meanings were produced rather than 'found' in an 'original', 'unitary' text; that Shakespeare's texts were being used rather than simply read. Too little attention was paid to the hesitant 'as it were' clause of Shakespeare's text, which could render the meaning of Shakespearean mimesis a lot more complex and interesting. Instead, the director was expected to draw a black-and-white picture of the totalitarian state. The audience expected Hamlet to perform the role of "a born conspirator" even if this meant that in order to perform this role he had to be "contaminated with politics, deprived of illusions, sarcastic, passionate and brutal" (Majchrowski 1993, 23).

In 1994, thirty years after Kott published his seminal book, critics ask 'Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary?' (Elsom 1990; Kott 1992, 5-13). This question gains wider relevance, and not only for Renaissance studies, in the context of the recent political changes which have swept through Eastern Europe, where the demise of the totalitarian state may seem to have exhausted literature's and drama's political appeal. For the first time in post-war Poland the audience watches plays and reads texts which, as it were, signify nothing, or which have once again become reflections of some 'universal' aspects of human nature. One can even conclude that Hamlet's involvement against the secret agents and the riot police has begun to act against him after their defeat.

Such a retreat from political commitment can also be observed in Polish academia. My own experience does not differ much from what one of our British colleagues described in the following manner:

Politically, most of the Polish university staff seem[s] disengaged and even passive ... Political disengagement seems to be quite characteristic of many Polish students, too. Over the past year I have found myself in the bizarre position of having painfully to persuade intelligent young people, in the land of Czesław Miłosz and Zbigniew Herbert, that poetry is not necessarily sullied and debased if it addresses contemporary social issues. (Rainsford 1993, 296)

It is not hard to trace a direct link between this quite unexpected lack of political involvement and the status of literary theory in the Polish academy. This is also the reason why I have chosen to quote Dominic Rainsford, as I find his reference to Miłosz and Herbert very telling in this context. Although nobody can overlook the subversive, anti-authoritarian overtones of their works, one should also remember Miłosz's violent, almost hysterical attacks on the "corrupt", "leftist", "destructive", "satanic" theories imported to Poland from the West, and his dramatic appeal not to let feminism, Marxism and deconstruction contaminate Polish universities.

The insistence with which Miłosz rejects these "trendy" (as we are often told) theories might suggest that their growing popularity poses an imminent threat to traditional and established ways of reading. As a matter of fact, quite the opposite proves to be true. Our canon of literary theories still ranges from Eliot, New Criticism,

formalism, structuralism, hermeneutics, and narratology, through psychoanalysis, to some forms of 'domesticated' (which means de-historicized and de-politicized) post-structuralism. Theories which raise the question of political commitment (and which question the myth that some forms of critical practice can escape the grasp of ideology) are constantly marginalized.

This resistance to analysing the politics of literary production and the political agenda of the educational system is not a new phenomenon. In the past, the official ideology made sure that any potentially subversive implications of such debates were quickly dismissed. The state exercised a firm control over curricula, carefully censored all publications and kept a vigilant eye on theatrical productions. On the other hand, Polish universities struggled hard to create a semi-utopian space, which would allow free articulation of dissident opinions. Once this apparent autonomy of Polish academia seemed to have been achieved, it effectively suppressed any awareness of the fact that universities were also important elements of the ideological state apparatus. Consequently, it was possible to represent literature "as something outside (and above) the process of education" (Balibar and Macherey 1987, 86). A critical practice that openly admits its political commitments, and which reflects on the ideological contradictions involved in the production and dissemination of meanings, could pose a serious threat to this status quo. Hence the irresistible temptation to play down the importance of Marxism, feminism and cultural materialism. In paradise regained, people still yield to temptations.

The consequences of this process for teaching practice are enormous. Students are not encouraged to raise fundamental questions concerning the status of canonical texts and their moralistic interpretations. At the same time, we encounter powerful resistance against all attempts to introduce courses which would make it possible to analyse literature as a product of social practice, or which would foreground the constructed nature of literary meaning. Options such as 'Medieval Culture', 'Renaissance Culture' and 'Drama in Performance' were finally accepted at Warsaw University after a series of long and painstaking efforts. The issue at stake was obviously the unwillingness to give up the myth of the autonomous (and transcendental) status of a literary work.

Similar difficulties occur when we want to extend the scope of the theoretical canon. To begin with, various forms of feminism(s) continue to be marginalized to the effect that the majority of our predominantly female students (in fact, over 85% of our students are women) do not want to engage openly with feminism, even when their instinctive responses happen to drift towards the analysis of gender relations. Dominic Rainsford writes: "I do not know of one of my ... female students who would not be unnerved by being called a feminist. Many would be positively insulted" (1993, 296).

When somebody asks me 'Are *you* a feminist?', I always prefer to explain first that feminists are not ugly women who do not like children. Statements such as "half the feminists want to be raped but there is no-one who wants to do it" and definitions according to which all feminists are "bored wives and dissatisfied mistresses" are not uncommon (Watson 1993, 71). (You would be surprised to discover that the last of these 'illuminating' remarks is a direct quote from a well-known politician and intellectual from

Eastern Europe.) It seems to me that people who voice such opinions never reflect on the fact that their hostility towards feminist critical practices must have its roots in the past. This debilitating influence of the past has been described by Peggy Watson in her incisive account of "The Rise of Masculinism in Eastern Europe" as follows:

Under state socialism, the lack of civil society and private property had an ambivalent significance for gender relations. On the one hand, the constraints on the scope for autonomous public action which this entailed brought a substantial levelling of relations between women and men. This dimension was later reinforced by the encoding of legal rights for women based on the assumption of full employment. (Watson 1993, 71)

Having noticed that, Watson does not dwell on the conflicting implications of the officially approved manifestations of socialist feminism. The official socialist feminist ideal was to turn Polish women into effective tractor drivers and bricklayers (a perfect combination of class and gender revolution). This quickly turned into its own caricature. In addition, one should not forget that the full-employment policy was often executed through economic pressures, which meant that many women were left with no choice as to whether or not to take up jobs on offer. On the other hand, state policy allowed many women to reach leading positions, including in the universities. Unfortunately however, the assumption that the very fact of granting women some power could immediately influence the development of women's studies proved as misleading as the belief that Thatcherite Britain should be a paradise for women. At the same time, writes Watson:

... the absence of civil society also fostered the neo-traditional organization of society, one aspect of which was the valorization and entrenchment of traditional definitions of gender. (Watson 1993, 71)

The advance of the officially approved women's movement did not weaken the strong position of the Church and the conservative model of the Polish family. Thus, women had to reconcile a professional career with their traditional occupations at home. Consequently, some of them are now willing to associate the newly acquired freedom with "the freedom to more fully enact a traditional feminine or masculine identity, untrammelled by the constrictions of the socialist state" (Watson 1993, 72). The social Darwinism preached by the Polish liberal party works to the same effect. "The entire development of the human species", claims one of our politicians "depends on specialization—only the society where men and women fulfil different roles can win" (Watson 1993, 72).

But, as Watson suggests, the future may look brighter than it seems now. Paradoxically, although not unexpectedly, the 'rise of masculinism' in Eastern Europe should open new prospects for women's studies in Poland. The growing interest in courses devoted specifically to women writers, which we may now witness at Warsaw University,

could be the first step in that direction.

Another controversial issue which emerges in connection with the place of contemporary literary theories in Polish academia is the status of new historicism and, especially, cultural materialism. In the first place, we often refuse to acknowledge the fundamental differences between cultural materialism and Marxism, and then identify both with the official ideology of the *ancien régime*. In one sense, then, this rejection of politically-orientated critical practice dates back to the powerful and often effective resistance of Polish universities against the pressures of the official ideology. This should explain why any traces of Marxist nomenclature render a critical text simply untranslatable. (I myself recall the confusion in class when I first started talking in Polish about 'base', 'superstructure', 'materialist perspective', 'bourgeois ideology' and 'class struggle'. All of a sudden I realized that the students would associate these concepts with the official state propaganda of the past, and that they would simply miss the subversive implications of the critical projects which utilize these terms.)

Discussing with my colleagues and my students the premises of cultural materialism I also discovered that a fundamental misreading of cultural materialism can even lead to the assumption that the project postulates some form of cultural imperialism. This issue came into the foreground when we discussed *Political Shakespeare*, edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield. I was told then that the cover photograph shows the Warsaw Grand Theatre, bombed in Warsaw in 1944, only in order to reinforce the marginalization of Poland. My opponents argued that the new Globe Theatre which German bombs cracked 'open' in the capital of Poland is so fascinating for the British critics only because they associate the city with the margins of Europe (an idea which can hardly help us join the future European Commonwealth).

Of course, one can interpret the same image in a completely different way. The publishers' choice to draw readers' attention to a theatre bombed 'somewhere at Europe's end' would then be indicative of the cultural materialist attempt to resist the arbitrary hierarchies of space. Notably, the cover photograph of *Political Shakespeare* reminds us also of the coliseum, where the Roman Empire constantly exhibited its predatory power. In this manner, radical criticism can be said to analyse the emblems of power, on the one hand, and to highlight the possibilities of subversion on the other.

Following on from this, one can argue that the Marxist overtones in cultural materialism relate also to the fall of the Marxist state, especially in the context of the 1989 political upheaval east of the Berlin wall. This is so because, as Michael Ryan points out:

Marxism, as a historical mode of theory and practice, is from the outset undecidable, that is, open to extension according to what history proffers ... history is another name for undecidability as the ever-open possibility of extending an axiomatic system. (Ryan 1982, 21)

I have no argument with this statement, but I want to point out that one must draw a sharp distinction between Marxism as a historical mode of theory and the states which

resulted from it as a historical mode of practice. In other words, it is a distinction between Marxism as an official state ideology, on the one hand, and as a radical theoretical practice, on the other. The difference may be obfuscated when one quotes Mao Tse Tung and Lenin alongside Althusser, Gramsci and Foucault (as, for instance, Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey do in their essay on literature as ideological form), but this does not mean that one can easily dismiss the problems which this contradiction entails.

In a communist state, both the 'official' and 'dissident' uses of a literary theory aspire to transcendental validity or truth, which means that they both seek to ignore or even reject theoretical Marxism. This would explain why both Eliot's search for the Great Canon and Lukacs's communist liberal humanism were so much more palatable than, say, Althusser's analysis of the ideological state apparatus. (The same mechanism underpinned the French Communist Party's response to Althusser.)

Paradoxically then, post-communism can prove to be an extension and continuation of the past, rather than a radical rejection of old habits of thought. (Needless to add, the very term post-communism implies the same kind of ambivalence as post-modernism, or post-structuralism.) In order to understand the present, we must re-think the past. In the first place, we should break with the illusion that universities are not institutions of power, where officially accepted meanings can be constructed. This radical change of the way in which we perceive the university should make our discussions concerning literary canons and curricula a lot clearer and far more productive.

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