

Michał Głowiński

A few preliminary remarks

Literary Studies in Poland 11, 7-13

1983

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Articles

Michał Głowiński

A Few Preliminary Remarks

The literary researcher engages in reflection upon his own activity, his own situation as a theoretician, historian or critic. Not only does he wonder why in fact he selected this particular subject to examine, rather than that one, or who the addressee of his texts may be—he also considers the question of how the language at his disposal influences the results and nature of his work. Language—in the most literal sense of the ethnic or native tongue—not only largely determines the accessibility of what he writes; it also affects the very essence of the activity he pursues. In this respect the literary researcher, like any other humanist, finds himself in a different position to that of a representative of the natural sciences. A different situation, for he is unable to proffer the results of his efforts in the form of a dry-as-dust communiqué, couched exclusively in the register of a report. A physicist, a biologist or a doctor is able to convey in the simplest manner both the results of his laboratory work and his theoretical concepts: all the more so since he is aided here by the international systems of symbols and models. Looked at from one point of view, the representative of the exact sciences couldn't care less whether his texts are written in his native tongue or in a foreign language accessible to scholars throughout the world. And it is this aspect of the matter that particularly interests us here. Whether composed in his own or in a foreign language, a text by a naturalist has in fact to fulfil one fundamental condition: it must be comprehensible, has no right to violate the rules of grammaticality. Everything else is of lesser importance, or even—totally beside the point. He is under no obligation to adopt a rhetoric, a stance *vis à vis* the stylistic tradition, or even a minimal care

for the literary elegance of his excursions. Such a position is of its essence unattainable for the humanist—except for those rare and exceptional occasions when he wishes, say, to report on a document that has been discovered or to pass on a piece of information of purely factual interest (e.g. a writer's date of birth, which he has managed to pinpoint). For after all these are special cases, peripheral to our discipline.

If the literary researcher, philosopher or historian were to present his findings in the same manner as the naturalist, he would in fact be condemning himself to obscurity—even when he had important and original ideas to convey (in this respect perhaps only logicians and sociologists summarizing the results of their empirical research are in a different position). His texts would simply go unread, and this is because he is committed to a certain rhetoric, respect for stylistic traditions, construction of his argument, which constitute a peculiar embodiment of “academic literariness.” Unlike in physics, chemistry or biology, here a poverty of “form” would be construed as entailing poverty of “content.” Advocates of methodological purism might conclude on this basis that the humanistic sciences, for which the modes of writing are of such importance, are not sciences at all, or at least not sciences in the strict sense—but we are not concerned here with that side of the issue.

With the rare exception of those who are ideally bilingual, people only write well in one language: their own, the one they have grown up with. (Joseph Conrad is an unusual exception.) Anyone who sought to make pronouncements about the work of the great Romantic Słowacki on the basis of the few texts he happened to compose in French would be bound to declare him one of the numberless second-rate poets of the period; similarly, anyone who used the two verse cycles Leśmian wrote in Russian as a yardstick for his poetry would have to place him among the lower divisions of the Symbolists. The language one assigned may be of less ruthless significance for the science of literature than for literature itself, but nevertheless it represents a phenomenon with weighty and multifarious consequences. Let us take a closer look at them.

A researcher writing in Polish, Danish, Hungarian or Dutch has a smaller public, and for obvious reasons, than one who employs a language to which the world has general access (there are surely

no researchers nowadays who do not read English and French). However, quantity is not the issue here. Another fact appears to be far more important: that of a restriction in the degree of participation in a certain communicative community, and even—in particularly harsh cases—of exclusion from it. For communities of this kind come into being in every discipline and manifest themselves in the exchange of concepts, experiences and ideas. How often is participation in this community reduced to merely adopting what has been written out there in the wide world! At times the characteristic complexes of the province make themselves felt: for everything that derives from that world is treated with a minimum of criticism and sometimes even—received in the odour of sanctity. This sometimes assumes grotesque proportions, yet they are not what I wish to write about. What matters is something else: something I would define as the feeling that communication is one-way. I know that I can be writing in Polish and be a fascinated or a critical, an approving or a disapproving reader of the things that are brought out in the world; but I myself do not have the wherewithal to speak to those who—by making their statements in a universally accessible tongue, with world-wide resonance—are also talking to me; nor do I have the wherewithal when I think I have something to say, something of equal moment or perhaps even more important or original. All one-way communication is to some extent unnatural communication — and thus leaves the mark of its iron branded on all condemned to it.

This brands them with a multiple iron, since it causes various and sometimes contrasting reactions: all the way from extreme humility to extreme arrogance. I have already mentioned the humility. It means that anything formulated in Paris, New York or any other centre of learning appears to take on the colour of a revelation, arouses interest and, often, a tendency to snobbish fascination. Considered in this light, one-way communication lulls criticism to sleep. In the case of extreme criticism it can magnify it, blowing it up to enormous proportions: I could not care less what they write out there in the big world, I move within the round of my own tradition and consider what lies within its bounds to be quite sufficient; I have no need of novelties, which so often are passing fashions, forgotten as soon as the new season comes along bringing further

discoveries and further notions, each with a life-span as short as that of its predecessor.

In depicting these two consequences of one-way communication— and how diametrically opposite they are!—I have painted them in their most lurid forms. Nevertheless, they deserve to be taken seriously, since they represent important components of a certain intellectual situation. Paradoxically, each of them has its good points, albeit for different reasons. The first attitude, although it stems from a provincial complex, sometimes allows this complex to be overcome. For the greedy interest in everything that occurs in the world in one's own discipline does not just make it possible to take one's bearings and speedily to assimilate theoretical and methodological novelties; it also allows one to develop and enrich them—on the condition however that one's attitude is not limited to that of the apostle, raptly attentive to the distant voice of the master; on the condition, that is, that the attitude becomes one of partnership. Under certain circumstances the second attitude can also have its positive side: namely, when the revulsion against concepts imported from the outside world permits one to notice and do justice to the things that have been created, and continue to be created, on one's own line of latitude. For it can happen that something that passes for a novelty turns out to be something with which one's own tradition in particular is acquainted. At such times one both feels satisfaction because the idea can be found in the classic studies of Zygmunt Łempicki, of Manfred Kridl or Juliusz Kleiner, and reflects that due to the linguistic barrier these concepts are not generally known, are inaccessible to those who have no Polish. Thus one-way communication can persuade one to adopt the characteristic postures of superiority or inferiority: attitudes which, in certain circumstances, after all, coexist.

Up to this point I have written of only one aspect of one-way communication: of the position of the researcher who does not employ those languages which, for the modern world, have become the fungible equivalents of Latin. But the issue also has a profounder resonance. In the humanistic sciences, unlike in physics or biology, language is not just a relay system which can be replaced, undiminished, by an artificial language; it is not just an object of research, since whatever one says of man one also says—directly or indirectly—of

language; and language is (from one viewpoint, is *above all*) the primary bearer of tradition, an element embedded in a given culture, and one of the coauthors of that culture. For literary science is not just the analysis of linguistic facts structured in a certain manner, divided up according to principles accepted in a given culture; it is also a particular way of deploying language which—let us repeat—cannot be limited to a drily edited communiqué. Like literature the humanistic sciences have their own specific varieties of utterance. And each one of these varieties has its own “literariness,” albeit largely different from the one that is characteristic of literature. It finds its expression in the permitted ways of structuring a scientific discourse, and these are not justified solely in terms of their subordination to certain universal methodological directives, which by their nature transcend the boundaries between cultures and languages. They also express themselves in those things that may, in so general a perspective, appear to be particularist, embedded in a specific national tradition. These particularist elements are manifest for instance in reference to the literature of which one is writing, to that which connects it with a language and a history.

It is a fact that literary researchers trained within the sphere of European culture have a good deal in common, since there exist regions which engender a broad *universum* of statement within our cultural sphere. They include the Judeo-Christian tradition, and above all—the Bible; they include the traditions of the classics, which form the magnificent foundation stones of Mediterranean culture; and, finally, they include the traditions of European thought and culture in all their diverse manifestations. Obviously, this is a lot, a very great deal. And, last of all, they include the individual literary works, the universally known texts that make up the fundamental canon of masterpieces. Whatever his language or subject, a writer can rest assured that allusions to such lyric masterpieces as *Ueber allen Gipfeln*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* or *Le Bateau ivre* will be grasped immediately and without any difficulty. How different is the situation of the man who wishes to allude to *Nad wodą wielką i czystą*, that magnificent poem by Mickiewicz, in a study addressed to a non-Polish audience. Obviously, the allusion will not be understood, despite the fact that this poem too is a masterpiece. I do not write this in order to bewail the fact that even the

finest texts written in languages which are without world-wide currency will remain unknown outside the language of their origin. I do so rather because this fact represents an important component of the communicative situation in which the researcher finds himself: because it is one of the elements that makes for what I have termed one-way communication.

Kazimierz Wyka, one of the finest historians of Polish literature, once remarked jokingly that literary historians are able to understand each other by means of a wink and a nod, for, whatever the case, they will comprehend immediately, and grasp what is at stake and adopt their stance in a flash. All explication would be redundant. And when I am referring to the verses of Goethe, Keats, or Rimbaud, irrespective of what reader I may be addressing, I really do need only to give a wink or a nod; but when I summon up a poem by Mickiewicz, I can only wink and nod when addressing my words to an historian of Polish literature. Let me draw on my own experience. When, a few years ago, I lectured on Polish literature at the University in Amsterdam, I had to provide explanations for basic matters (among other things, literary allusions that are immediately comprehensible to a Polish reader), and yet I had students who were not merely quick on the uptake, but also genuinely interested in the subject. And yet somehow or other, matters that seemed to me to be far more complicated, and far more in need of explanation, did not need to be cleared up. When a Pole writes for a foreign audience of Kochanowski, Mickiewicz or Leśmian--that is, of our greatest poets--he is compelled to change his viewpoint completely; the Englishman who writes of Shakespeare, the Metaphysical Poets or Dickens is certainly under no compulsion to do so. He can assume in principle that his winks and nods will be comprehended, easily and correctly, even on the continent.

An additional area that hinders the achievement of understanding is that of terminology. This may appear paradoxical, since terminology ought not in fact to depend upon the characteristics of a given language and ought--by its very nature, as it were--to represent an international phenomenon. And of course to a large extent it is international, though not completely so (the methodological purist would doubtless deem this fact a sign of the dubiousness of the "scientific character" of literary study). What matters from our point

of view is that terminology is also a constituent of a particular tradition, and can thus hamper communication. It is both an element in a literary and philosophical tradition and—in addition to this—the result of the specific development of a particular discipline within a given culture. Thus one peculiarity of Polish literary study, for instance, is the fact that the terminology devised by Roman Ingarden in his phenomenological aesthetics has been adopted universally: adopted even by those researchers who keep their distance from phenomenology or who even have nothing in common with it. In the course of recent decades this terminology has become something of a “given” for Polish researchers, something self-evident, albeit in most cases it has none of the philosophical implications it held for Ingarden. This will obviously not be apparent to a reader of Polish studies who is ignorant of this peculiarity—and thus it points his attention in a direction that was far from the intention of those studies.

The particularity of the nature of a terminology also stems from its origin in individual invention; as a result of this, certain terms come to be at home in one language which have no direct equivalent in others. For instance, a quarter of a century ago the term “autotematyzm” [translator’s note: to be literal, “auto-thematicism”] (coined by Artur Sandauer) well-nigh entered the colloquial language as a way of defining certain characteristics of the contemporary novel (a novel that speaks of itself, of its own rules, of its own genesis etc.). The subject is of importance for researchers of contemporary literature in general, but whereas the term has entered into the Polish tradition it seems to have no direct equivalent in other languages, despite the fact that it is both felicitous and handy.

As we can see, many elements combine to make for one-way communication. Let us reiterate: all one-way communication is crippled communication. Perhaps it cannot be done all at once, but one has to strive to remove the one-way character from understanding—from the understanding without which there would be no science. It is not for us to draw a balance of the results, but all the same we can state that this is one of the aims of the journal we publish. Of course, we are aware that we cannot count on immediate results, but as the old Polish proverb says—“Cracow was not built in a day.”

Transl. by *Paul Coates*