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A Manly Artefact and a Mysterious Poet. Around Queer Theory

In 1894, the readers of *Ateneum*, a highly regarded opinion-forming monthly for many years headed by Piotr Chmielowski, were able to read a poem entitled “Posąg” (“Statue”).

1. The statue naked, a marvel
Like an echo of Greek dreams,
In the phantasmal fog it shone
And into rapture I sank.¹
2. On a raised hill,
On a granite base,
It stood before a dazzled gaze
Free from any cares.
3. Today, when I squint my eyes
It gleams before the eyes of the soul
My little cherub sweet;
Longing swells in my breast.
4. O! Let me close to you,
Wrap my arms around;
In the lifeless marble
Let a burning heart beat;
5. With parched lips
Let me throw ardour into your bosom
And admired by the earth
Let me bring you to life.

¹ Translator’s note: as with the other poems cited later, rhyme has been sacrificed for the sake of accuracy. The original verses use an ABAB rhyme scheme.

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6. Your radiant whiteness
Divinely shaped contours
Gleam like a priceless pearl
In nature's ocean;
7. And I humbly kneel
And stretch out my arms
As if to an evening rose
The flower's trembling crown.
8. If once I held you
To this breast full of desire
From the breast would spurt song
Like a hot lava spring.
9. And the world perhaps once
A song of happiness would hear
And – remembering Eden –
For a moment it would breathe joy too.
10. Ha! Do my eyes not deceive?
At my humble pleas
Your divine temple bows,
Some tremors have shaken you;
11. Through your body of stone
It seems there are tangles of nerves,
Some ardent life
Beats in your being;
12. With your marble arm
You summon to your bosom
My breast caught aflame,
Longing for your charm.
13. My miracle! Fulfilment
Of the artist's greatest dreams!
I fly at your call
Ideal pristine!
14. Air! Air! My chest bursts...
O mercy! Could it die
Whose happiness, for beauty
Is to embrace to its bosom?
15. Here I am. – Come to me,
With your embrace return my strength!
What is this? On this column
Stone of an unfeeling lump
16. Still the same, unchanging
In its heavenly beauty
Stands the stone statue
In Olympian cheer.
17. And this temple that came alive?
A glimmer of colour and movement?
Did I make it myself,
Implore it in my soul?

18. The despair of the breast burns me
But the sleep will no longer come
It will linger on
And resound in my song.
19. Pain, tears or inspiration,
Its raptures or turmoil –
I am bared by suffering,
And I shall tell the world.
20. Yes, when the world was wild
The song was first to go down
Eurydice's seer wept
And from the tears a song was shed.
21. And here the myth of Orpheus
Goes on being told:
You wish a new hymn to create
First you must wound the bard.²

I would like to use “Statue” as a starting point for presenting several reading strategies which are, to put matters in general terms, “sensitive to gender,” for showing how certain poststructuralist theoretical discourses (concerning gender and sexuality) work in their encounter with the literary text, and what interpretations this encounter can produce. I would like, though, to start by presenting a simulation of reading that is not sensitive to gender, meaning that in which the gendered marking of a text is not taken into account and exhibited – which does not mean that this marking does not exist. Reading that avoids categories of gender and initiates contextual reading allows us not only to point to the philosophical tropes of the text, but also to see how reading sensitive to gender can influence interpretation and complement it.

Non-gender-sensitive reading

The title of the poem alone suggests that ekphrasis will be at work: i.e., that it will be a text about an artistic object. Using the distinction proposed by Sophie Bertho and presented by Michał Paweł Markowski, we can say that “Statue” is an example of the variety of ekphrasis that is based mainly on narrativisation, since “in widening the field of description by unrepresented events, it refers the interest of the spectator/reader outside of the picture.”³ In this poem, the lyrical situation is based to a large extent on playing with oppositions, for example: the vertical opposition that appears in the second stanza (the statue is on top, on the granite base), temporal opposition (past/present) from the third stanza, and others: dead/living, observer/observed, work of art/not work of art. “Unrepresented events” are what the speaker undertakes with the aim of removing distance. This can be seen most clearly in the opposition that is crucial to the text: that of the real world and the ideal world. The speaker, who belongs to the true world, says: “My miracle! Fulfilment/ Of the

² *Ateneum*, 1894, vol. 1: 89-91.

³ Markowski, Michał Paweł. “Ekphrasis. Uwagi bibliograficzne z dołączeniem krótkiego komentarza,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* (1999a): 2.

artist's greatest dreams!/ Ideal pristine!" The statue belongs to the world of ideas, is perfect beauty, the ideal artistic object. The protagonist of the poem desires to realize an idea, allow it to become embodied, to exist in his world. He desires this manifestation because at first he believes that creation is possible only thanks to the smoothing of distance: "If once I held you/ To this breast full of desire,/ From the breast would spurt song." This shows that the source of the writing is fulfilment of desires, realization of ideas. And indeed, at a certain point the statue comes to life. The singer is filled with joy at the satisfaction of his desire and the possibility of closeness. This results in the ecstasy presented by stanza 14: "Air! Air! My chest bursts.../ O mercy! Could it die/ Whose happiness, for beauty/ Is to embrace to its bosom?" And yet he soon realizes that this was not something coming to life, but an illusion of it. Because with art it is always a creation of some kind that takes place, rather than coming to life, a phantasm and not a real object. And because this is the case, fulfilment is impossible. The speaker desires manifestation, but what he gets is a mere substitute. This is where the self-referential reflection concealed in the text surfaces. It turns out that the source of the creation is unfulfillment. "Statue" is therefore a record of the process of realizing that at the origin of writing lies unfulfillment, lacking, and also suffering and a wound. This is most evident in the final stanzas, in which one critic found a postulate of "Promethean" poetry, "profoundly felt and suffered." It is from this "wounded song of the bard" that poetry takes its beginning, from his tears that the "song was shed" in which his despair resounds. This distance, which consigns the speaker to lacking and longing for the ideal, is the true source of creativity. Beauty is perfect and worthy of desire when it is unattainable. Ideal beauty always remains in the world of ideas, which is why desire is never satisfied and it is this lack of fulfillment that gives rise to art.

This evident Platonic characteristic in thinking about creation, with the fundamental, strong distinction into art and not art, the spiritual and the material, ideal objects and real objects, is characteristic of modernist literature as a whole. This is shown, for instance, by the following excerpt from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, which came several years after "Statue":

What discipline, what precision of thought was conveyed by that tall, youthfully perfect physique! Yet the austere and pure will...to bring the godlike statue to light – was it not known to him, familiar to him as an artist? Was it not at work in him when, chiselling with sober passion at the marble block of language, he released the slender form he had beheld in his mind and would present to the world as an effigy and mirror of spiritual beauty? A model and mirror! His eyes embraced that noble figure...and in rising ecstasy he felt he was gazing on Beauty itself, on Form as a thought of God, on the one and pure perfection which dwells in the spirit and of which a human image and likeness had here been lightly and graciously set up for him to worship...Cupid, indeed, does as mathematicians do, when they show dull-witted children tangible images of the pure Forms: so too the love god, in order to make things visible, loves to use the shapes and colours of young men, turning them into instruments of recollection by adorning them with all the reflected splendour of Beauty, so that the sight of them will truly set us on fire with pain and hope.⁴

⁴ Mann, Thomas. *Death in Venice, Tonio Kröger and Other Writings* (trans. Frederick A. Lubich). New York: Continuum, 1999: 133.

This aging artist is Gustav von Aschenbach, enraptured by Tadzio's beautiful body. For him, the boy constitutes the embodiment of perfect – and therefore unattainable – beauty. This is why the writer will only look, observe, follow the object of his desires, but never take the step of removing the distance and pursuing a direct relationship. His love remains ideal, spiritual, non-carnal. It is a love which – like Plato's spiritual Eros – will mean a desire to commune with Beauty in itself. And without the existence of such love, cognition of the idea would be impossible. It is worth emphasising that Aschenbach, observing Tadzio and realizing that he is doomed to distance from his object of desire, starts to write:

What he craved...was to work on it in Tadzio's presence, to take the boy's physique for a model as he wrote, to let his style follow the lineaments of this body which he saw as divine, and to carry its body on high into the spiritual world [...]. Never had he felt the joy of the word more sweetly, never had he known so clearly that Eros dwells in language, as during those perilously precious hours in which...he used Tadzio's beauty as a model for his brief essay. (Mann 1999: 135)

Similarly, in the poem "Statue," the distance between the artist-singer and the object of desire-statue is clearly underlined. And it is this distance and unfulfilment that is the source of the writing. The difference here is that the artist desires the impossible, overcoming this distance. Furthermore, he desires the embodiment of perfect beauty and a direct, carnal relationship. This observation opens a space for the second reading strategy, one sensitive to gender.

Gender-sensitive reading

In the most general terms, a gender-sensitive reading strategy places the main emphasis on a text's gender meanings. It therefore seeks an answer to the question of the author's gender identity shown by the text, as well as the protagonists' gender conditioning. With "Statue" we can venture the thesis that its homoerotic potential is evident and unarguable. Of course, it is not an erotic work in the strict sense – although it could be regarded as one. It is rather a text about the desire triggered in a male persona by the male "body" of a statue. In other words, it is an example of ekphrasis in which the male protagonist of the poem is enraptured by the beautiful male "body" of the statue. The artist, recalling a Greek statue, speaks of the beauty of the sculpture and of his rhapsody evoked by its sight. From the outset, the description takes on the features of a love monologue, imbued with eroticism and desire of erotic fulfillment. The gender of the speaking "I," as well as the "gender" of the object of desire, are clearly signalled here. The reader is left in no doubt that this is essentially a description of the rapture evoked by the body of one man on another. The subject is fascination with carnality, desire of contact with this body. The speaker wishes to bring the statue to life, experience him in all his carnality in its gender and erotic meanings.

From a reading perspective, this extremely expressive homoeroticism is "weakened" and "undermined" by the fact that the reader is continually mindful that the object of

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adoration is a marble statue, an artefact, an artistic creation. To put it metaphorically, the accusation of sodomy is distanced by the ekphrasis used in the text.⁵ On the other hand, in “Statue” – as narrativist ekphrasis – the observer-observed relation is clearly exhibited. The marble statue becomes a body-to-watch, body-to-admire, and finally body-to-desire. But the speaker, recalling and longing, changes into a gaze – the gaze of the watcher, admirer, and above all, desirer.

As a digression, we might add that in Young Polish poetry there is a similar lyrical situation in Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer’s poem “Dyskobol” (“Discus Thrower”):

A crowd of spectators. Calmly he fixes on the finish –
Straightens, strains his arms
Raises his head, digs his feet in, his legs taut,
In his hand a round disc – the first of the swordsmen to rise.

One more moment – he swings the disc, before hitting –
Left arm moves, hips, turns, contracts,
On his right leg all his weight is placed –
He throws – and a fresh laurel on his temple will come.

On his marble, naked, slender body,
Rubbed with oil, golden, gleaming
Falls the radiant, smiling Greek sun.

He bends – the disc in his steel fingers gripped by ticks –
Women’s hearts in their white breasts skip a beat,
And go aquiver at the divine sweet thighs.⁶

The speaker – probably one of the spectators – describes the body of the Greek sportsman in minute detail. S/he is sensitive to every movement of this body, every tensing of a muscle. The athlete is reduced to his corporeality alone. His body becomes an artefact, an object not only of description, but also of rapture. The beautiful male body begins to become a text, speak textually, or rather the text begins to exist carnally, exhibiting the male body to the interpretation of the spectators.

The third stanza, in particular, expresses the tension of erotic fascination. Just as in “Statue,” the naked, sporty, oiled body of the discus thrower, gleaming in the southern sun, becomes a body-to-watch, body-to-admire, and finally body-to-desire. The speaker meanwhile, the spectator, once again turns into a gaze.

And it is this relationship between the object of description and the desiring subject that is often seen as crucial for a homotext. As German Ritz writes:

In homosexual desire a man receives a body, but this is not an artistic representation of the former *virtus* or another social function of the man, but rather a sexual body. However, he only receives a desired body when the desirer becomes entirely a gaze... This absolute, still

⁵ An obvious association here is Winckelmann’s famous (homoerotic) description of the beauty of the Apollo Belvedere’s torso.

⁶ Przerwa-Tetmajer, Kazimierz. “Dyskobol,” *Poezje*. Warszawa: PIW, 1980: 388.

uninstrumentalised corporeality demands aestheticisation, and reaches for the classical ideal of beauty.⁷

The exceptional role of the gaze in homoerotic texts has also been highlighted by Robert Cieślak:

The particular way of looking at the picture of the “Other,” the skilful extraction of the components that make the subject into the object of inspiration from its construction, makes us pay attention to the specific type of sensitivity of the eye ascribed to the subject of the lyric statement – the specific visual observation and its orientation, which allows the intention of the poetic text to be interpreted as a homoerotic text.⁸

This therefore means constituting the image of the body-to-watch in such a way as the spectator is inspired, the desirer renounces his own identity and becomes only a gaze. A gaze marked by gender, eroticism, desire, and moreover, a gaze that is entirely governed by the logic of desire. The subject of the homoerotic text goes beyond the boundaries of its own identity, entering the space of the identity of his phantasm, becoming an element of this phantasmal identity of its own object of desire, entirely dependent on it. This is why the “representation of a body always says more about the construction of the sexuality of the gazing subject than that of the observed object.”⁹ The identity of the subject deposited in a homoerotic gaze is expressed in the phantasmal image of the body (and in the carnal, sexual identity) of the object of desire. Desire always says more about the desired than the desirer.

The role of this phantasm is worthy of note. It is detailed by Krystyna Kłosińska:

The phantasm represents a particular reality which distances us from perceptual reality. The subject imagines, and succumbs to illusion. But this illusion... is stable, persistent and subordinate to one's own logic: for the subject this is the reality of his desire.¹⁰

From this angle, a beautiful, desired body takes on the characteristics of the lyric persona's homoerotic projection since, as Jacek Kochanowski writes, homoeroticism is thinkable

⁷ Ritz, German, “Między histerią a masochizmem. Utopijne koncepcje ciała mężczyzny” (trans. Krystyna Krzemieniowa), in: Gosk, Hanna (ed.), *Codziennie, przedmiotowe, cielesne. Języki nowej wrażliwości w literaturze polskiej XX wieku*. Izabelin: Świat Literacki, 2002a: 152.

⁸ Cieślak, Robert, “Cielesne gry wzrokowe. Estetyczne aspekty tematu homoerotycznego w poezji polskiej XX wieku,” in: Borkowska, Grażyna and Liliana Sikorska (ed.), *Krytyka feministyczna. Siostra teorii i historii literatury*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2000: 318. See also idem, “Pragnienie Innego. Język pożądania we współczesnej poezji polskiej,” in: Hornung, Magdalena, Marcin Jędrzejczak and Tadeusz Korsak (ed.), *Ciało, płęć. Literatura*. Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 2001.

⁹ Ritz, German, “Literatura w labiryncie pożądania. Homoseksualność a literatura polska” (trans. Andrzej Kopacki), in: idem, *Nie w labiryncie pożądania. Gender i płęć w literaturze polskiej od romantyzmu do postmodernizmu*. Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 2002b: 56.

¹⁰ Kłosińska, Krystyna, *Fantazmaty. Grabiński – Prus – Zapolska*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2004: 18.

and expressible only in relation with a phantasm.¹¹ However, when we reverse this formula, it turns out that a gaze is only possible thanks to a phantasm, and as such belongs to it. Furthermore, the identity of the gazer is destabilized, becoming an identity on the edge. Threatened by non-being, it attempts to defend itself, paradoxically searching for an escape by maintaining distance. It is a gaze which will never change into a touch. As Ritz writes, “The desired person is watched, but does not constitute an element of the interaction” (Ritz 2002a: 152). The speaker remains a longing artist, desiring the marble body gleaming in the sun. The text remains just an example of ekphrasis. Incidentally, the aestheticization of the object of desire, its being given the characteristics of an artefact, is what points to and underpins this distance and impossibility of interaction.

Returning to *Death in Venice*, I would like to note that Aschenbach too is only a gaze, governed entirely by the logic of desire. His decision to remain in the city overrun by epidemic, by which he condemns himself to death, can be interpreted as a renunciation of his own subjectivity and own identity in favour of the object of desire.

Let us gather together what has so far been said about the poem: 1) the described body is given the status of artefact, so the male body undergoes aestheticisation, ascribed to the image of the – apparently meaningless, unmarked homosexually – Greek sculpture; 2) the speaker becomes only a look, a gaze, governed solely by the logic of desire; 3) this Greek sculpture is a phantasm of the speaker, a visualisation of his desires; 4) interaction is impossible, because the man’s body is a statuesque body, unembodiable, and homoerotic desire, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, is inexpressible in heteronormative language.

“Statue” can be treated as a story of a homoerotic interaction. The text is therefore a lyric description of the attempts made by a man (the “I”) to bring to life a desired male body, and as a consequence, the expression in homoerotic language of male relationality. For this reason, the lyric “you” is the marble sculpture. The statuesque male body becomes the recipient of a love monologue, the amorous request of the speaker. The protagonist, the desirer, is therefore both the gaze and speech. It is in his speech – which is a love spell meant to turn the statue into a living body – that the whole homoerotic potential of the poem is deposited. The singer dreams of just once being able to hold the animated statue to his breast. At a certain moment the sculpture comes to life, bows his temple to him, and summons him with a longing arm. The desiring man is filled with inexpressible happiness. Yet a moment later it turns out that there has been no coming to life, but only a trick of colours and the light. In despair, he asks, “Did I make it myself,/ Implore it in my soul?” It is at this point that the phantasmal character of the situation becomes clear. Interaction is something impossible, inexpressible in heteronormative language.¹² A response based in love to homoerotic speaking is possible only in relation

¹¹ On the role of the phantasm and the constitution of gay or phantasmal identity see Kochanowski, Jacek, *Fantazmat zróżNICowany. Socjologiczne studium przemian tożsamości gejów*. Kraków: Universitas, 2004.

¹² This is expertly discussed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

to a phantasm. Homosexual looking and speech, meanwhile, is possible only under the mask of ekphrasis.

“Statue” provides a relatively representative example of modernist homosexual literature – sometimes described as pre-emancipatory homosexual literature. This is a kind of literary statement in which the homosexual identity of the narrator (or speaker) is concealed in the text (terms used include “unspeakable desire”) and comes to light only during a specific reading strategy (with its source in gay studies). The most frequently discussed writers in this context include Wilde, Proust, Gide, Iwaszkiewicz, Gombrowicz, and Andrzejewski. However, the standard-bearing research texts for this interpretational position are the works of German Ritz, who states:

The starting premise of the homosexual text is not the author’s biography, but the gender construction of the author in the text, which for various reasons does not have to coincide with the construction of the private biography, although it can be motivated by it. A text becomes homosexual...only when differently structured sexuality actively becomes a part of the texture of the text. (Ritz 2002b: 54)

The starting point is therefore the assumption that there is a strong, stable (albeit not necessarily apparent and exhibited) homosexual identity, one characteristic of a certain group: people with a similar, “male” gender, who desire people of the same sex and have a common experience of oppression. Meanwhile, critics are interested in how this common, stable identity is masked, concealed in the text. A classic and much discussed example of this is *Death in Venice*, about which Ritz writes the following:

That which goes unsaid comes...with two (secret) signs: reading of Plato’s *Symposium* and the encounter of Eros and Thanatos...*Symposium* is for the initiated reader always a double-sided text: an apology for homosexual love and a sublimation of Eros as a force serving the attainment of perfection and beauty. In the culture of modernism, in the first vigorous attempt to “speak the unspeakable,” the homosexual Eros is usually conceived as death.¹³

I will just add as an aside that in emancipatory and post-emancipatory (also known as “gay”) literature, the homosexual identity of the author in a text (and also the identity of protagonists) is openly demonstrated and affirmed. We can mention here such writers as White and Burroughs, and in Poland Pankowski, Musiał, and recently, Witkowski and Żurawiecki, as well as the theoretical works of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Sexuality-sensitive reading

Up to this point in the interpretation, I have consistently passed over the issue of the author of the text, one that is after all important for gay criticism. I must stress that it is of course not the case that every gay person who is also a writer always creates homoerotic texts and his biography is a crucial interpretive key; neither must every homoerotic text necessarily be written by a gay person. However, the author’s biography – even traces of it – does provide an interesting and often useful interpretive context.

¹³ Ritz, German, *Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. Pogranicza nowoczesności* (trans. Andrzej Kopański). Kraków: Universitas, 1999: 98.

“Statue” is signed with the pseudonym “Adam M-ski,” which did not present too many problems to people at the time, as it seemed easy to decipher as “Adam Mańkowski.” This poet was born in 1847 and died in 1911, belonged to the generation of the antipositivist turn, and was valued mostly as a translator, and only secondly as a poet. Critics stressed in particular his connection to the French Parnassians. Mańkowski prepared one volume of poetry for print (*Przebrzmiałe akordy* / “Past notes”), but no collection of his texts was ever published. Instead, his oeuvre remains dispersed in magazines, especially *Ateneum*, *Prawdzie* and *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*. Among those who rated him highly were Zenon Przesmycki and Antoni Lange, with whom he was a regular correspondent. Yet (probably) only Piotr Chmielowski was privy to Mańkowski’s greatest secret. And this greatest secret was not the poet’s homosexuality...

For the person behind the pseudonym “Adam M-ski” was never “Adam Mańkowski,” but none other than Zofia Trzszczkowska (Mańkowski’s de facto daughter). Throughout her life, Trzszczkowska remained in the margins of literary life, contacting publishers and editors only by letter. Even in private correspondence (such as with Przesmycki) she remained “Adam.” In numerous poetry anthologies, her name was also given as Mańkowski.¹⁴ We should emphasize, though, that this transgenderism was solely a literary project, and did not have such a significant influence on her private and family life as with another poetess of Young Poland, Maria Komornicka. At the age of just 17, Zofia married Wacław Trzszczkowski. Since her husband was an officer in the Tsarist army, she spent many years in Russia, and in 1877, dressed in a male soldier’s uniform, she went to the Turkish war. From 1889, the couple lived in their family’s home town of Dorohowica. Initially, Zofia tried to conform to the role of “wife” and “Eastern Marches woman” imposed on her by stereotypes and social conventions. However, her letters show that she was not a happy wife, and felt lonely and unfulfilled. She often mentions that her early poems were destroyed by “friendly hands” – doubtless those of her husband.¹⁵

¹⁴ E.g. Jan Kasprowicz’s *Album współczesnych poetów polskich 1863–1898* from 1899, or Kazimierz Królikowski’s *Antologia współczesnych poetów polskich* from 1908.

¹⁵ For more on Zofia Trzszczkowska see: Chojnicka-Skawińska, Wanda, “Adam M-ski (1847–1911),” in: Wyka, Kazimierz, Artur Hutnikiewicz, and Mirosława Puchalska, *Obrazy literatury polskiej. Literatura okresu Młodej Polski*, vol. 1. Warszawa: PWN, 1968; A. Baranowska “Ja się nie skarzę” (Zofia Trzszczkowska), in: idem, *Kraj modernistycznego cierpienia*. Warszawa: PIW, 1981; Olech, Barbara, “Samotność i Kresy. Wokół biografii i twórczości Adama M-skiego (Zofii z Mańkowskich Trzszczkowskiej),” in: Feliksiak, Elżbieta and Elżbieta Sidoruk (ed.), *Wilno i ziemia Mickiewiczowskiej pamięci. Materiały III Międzynarodowej Konferencji w Białymstoku, 9–12 X 1998, w trzech tomach*, vol. II: *W kręgu literatury i sztuki*. Białystok: Towarzystwo Literackie, 2000; Olech, Barbara, “Zmistyfikowana tożsamość Adama M-skiego (Zofii Trzszczkowskiej),” in: Wiśniewska, Lidia (ed.), *Tożsamość i rozdwojenie. Rekonesans*, Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Akademii Bydgoskiej, 2002; Legutko, Grażyna, “Maska i twarz. Rzecz o autokreacji Zofii Trzszczkowskiej,” in: Stepińnik, Krzysztof and Monika Gabrys (ed.), *Kresowianki. Krąg pisarek heroicznych*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2006; Skucha, Mateusz, *Jako cień byłam i jak cień odchodzę. Poetyckie maskarady Zofii Trzszczkowskiej* [forthcoming].

Trzszczkowska is today counted among the female poets of Young Poland, her works placed alongside those of Komornicka, Ostrowska, Wolska, Zawistowska, and Grossek-Korycka. As a result of this position, her texts are of course read as “women’s lyric poetry.”¹⁶ Yet there is no doubt that she was treated by her contemporaries as simply a poet and translator (rather than a female one), concealed behind the pseudonym “Adam M-ski.”

There is now one problem with which we must deal: does this news – that the author of “Statue” was a woman – change something in our earlier interpretation? Theoretically, it should not. After all, we were talking about the persona or speaker of the poem, meaning the character coming out of the text, rather than from the author’s true biography. This is a speaker who is a homosexual man and is dependent on his fascination with the visualization of another man’s body, and therefore, becomes only a gaze and speech, and it is in this gaze and speech that his subjectivity is realized. Finally, we were talking about a speaker who does a series of things to mask and “soften” the homoerotic potential of the text. The starting point of our reading was therefore the same as that of the readers of *Ateneum* in 1894: i.e., the author of the poem is a man.

And yet... knowing about the “true sex” of the author changes our approach to the text. I suspect that “Statue” in part loses its homoerotic load and its authenticity. Its foundation ceases to be the – previously tacitly assumed – homosexual desire of the actual author. The reader now basically has two ways out of this situation: 1.) a “gay reading” – with Derrida’s famous *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*, one can comment on the poem in categories of homoeroticism, looking for a homosexual subtext and ways of masking homoerotic desire, remembering at the same time that it was a female poet who constructed the male homosexual speaker. This is (more or less) the type of reading which I presented above. 2.) A “feminist reading: the starting point here is the biography of the author (unknown to her contemporary readers). Yet the reading itself would have to concentrate on the heterosexual desire masked by male authorship and the male lyric “I.” It would prove that the actual speaker of “Statue” is a woman who desires the body of a man, but must assume a male identity, since – as French postfeminists headed by Irigaray and Cixous have written – female *jouissance* is inexpressible in phallogocentric language. Such an interpretation of the poem could of course be equally fascinating and valid.

However, I have doubts as to whether I really have to choose one of these paths and at the same time reject the other: whether I really have to assume such a reading strategy, and not another. Perhaps there is a third way? Note that both of the above assumptions (“gay reading” and “feminist reading”) concern the constitution of the speaker (homosexual or female respectively). The direction of the reading is therefore dependent on the recognition of the “I” persona. Incidentally, such a recognition is elementary for both feminist and gay criticism. Both reading strategies attempt to describe the strong identity (female or homosexual) attached to the text. They are interested in how this identity comes to be incorporated, and then uncovered or demonstrated.

¹⁶ For example Jerzy Świąch in his unpublished 1968 doctoral thesis entitled *Twórczość poetycka Zofii Trzszczkowskiej (Adama M-skiego)*.

In “Statue,” the speaker’s identity is weak, unstable, unspecified and shifting. Our ideas about it need to be supported by our extratextual assumptions. It is an identity that is always moving, constantly on the edge – floating between man and woman, woman and man, from homosexual to heterosexual desire, heterosexual to homosexual desire. An identity that escapes all classifications. As I said above, it is an identity dependent on the subject of the desire.

In such a situation – when the problem of gender, and subsequently the problem of the desire (hetero- or homosexual, generated by determining this gender identity) moves away from centre stage – “Statue” becomes a text about rapture in itself. Utter and all-encompassing carnal rapture beyond any binary opposition of gender. Rapture in which the identity of the enraptured person ceases to exist, is washed away, becoming rapture alone. And finally, the rapture that can be aroused by a beautiful, sexual, male body. After all, one of the sensational things about the poem is that what is being watched and desired is a man reduced to his carnality.

In addition, this is erotic rapture, full of desire. That is why this is also a text about desire of a male body, wishing for closeness and touch. Wanting to touch therefore means wanting a carnal response, relationality. This is therefore a desire, as the poem says, that is a desire of another desire. The attempts to bring the Greek sculpture to life conceal a wish to attain an answer, a will to be desired. And the stake in this game of desires is high, because “it is Wanting that allows a person to say ‘I,’¹⁷ and thus contributes to the constitution of the identity. “Wanting another want, we want recognition of ourselves. It is thanks to the recognition from others that we will ultimately be able to say I, which means that I am constructed from information given in return reflected from other wanting. In other words: I attain my identity thanks to the recognition of others” (Markowski 1999b). In trying to bring the statue of the man to life, the protagonist of the poem is essentially looking for his/her own identity, own I. An I which desires male desire, an erotic requited touch. And it is in this moment that all the tragedy contained in the poem emerges: the sculpture remains a lifeless stone. No requited desire exists. Touch is impossible. The I who desires the male body – irrespective of whether this is a heterosexual female I or a male homosexual I – is impossible, cannot exist in the textual space. In other words, both the heterosexual female *jouissance* and the homosexual male *jouissance* are inexpressible in the phallogocentric, heteronormative language, as the man as body, as sexual object is unthinkable in this language. This is why the unattainable body of the statue remains an unattainable body of a statue. The speaker remains an erotic, enraptured gaze.

This third interpretive path, which I have been following since a certain point, and which allowed me to read “Statue” as a text about crossing the boundaries of subjectivity, about rapture and desire, is a queer reading strategy. To generalize, queer studies has two sources: gender studies and gay studies. In order to understand the essence of

¹⁷ Markowski, Michał Paweł, *Dyskurs i pragnienie*, introduction to: Barthes, Roland, *Fragments of discourse* [A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments] (trans. Marek Bieńczyk). Warszawa: KR, 1999b: 12.

queer theory, then, we need first of all to ask about its relations with these two fields. In gender studies the overriding problem is the gender difference, whereas in queer studies it is the sexual difference that becomes the most important matter. To be more specific, we should say that the gender difference is based mostly on the performativity of the genders, the imitation of gender models, striving for the (unattainable) gender ideal. This leads to the study, contesting and deconstruction of the male-female, men-women oppositions. The sexual difference, meanwhile, is always relational, assuming the existence of an Other, and connected to desire. This is why the main opposition (undermined, destabilized here) is the heterosexuality-homosexuality opposition. We must remember, however, that these conclusions are rather a question of which problems are accented more in a given moment: male-female oppositions and the deconstruction of gender norms (gender studies) or the hetero-homo opposition and deconstruction of sexual norms (queer studies).

If we consider the difference between gay studies and queer studies, the simplest point to make is that in the former case, scholars are especially interested in how the sexual difference refers to male gender identity, while queer studies theorists study – as stated earlier – the sexual difference per se, detached from gender. At the basis of gay studies, then, is the connection between gender and sexuality, where the key role is played by the heterosexuality-homosexuality distinction. As a result of this, a description of identity common to a certain group appears. We therefore speak here of essentialism: “some kind” of essence exists, the foundation common to the whole group. This essence is the identity which is common (i.e. “group”), cohesive and stable. In the case of queer theory, meanwhile, there is no specific group, because this theory is about deconstructions of the (fundamental to gay studies) hetero-homo opposition. In other words, in queer theory there is no model of a common and stable identity conditioned by the choice of object of desire, since queer theory problematizes and places in doubt homosexual identity. This is why the following is said about constructivism: everything (including gender, identity, the body, sexuality) is a socio-cultural construct which – as it is constructed – can also be deconstructed.

Two theorists were particularly important in the development of queer theory: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler raises the status of the very term “queer” to the level of a concept of discourse defining identity, showing that queer does not force through any specific identity, but rather only criticizes all normative identities, demonstrating the internal instability of gender identities. As its starting point, queer theory therefore questions the existence of stable (gender) identities, at the same time emphasizing the movement of these identities, escape from the power of discourse and avoiding restricting categories. This is therefore a theory of non-identity concepts, or (more strongly) anti-identity ones.

In addition, to draw from the ideas of Michel Foucault,¹⁸ queer theorists aim to destabilize the meaning of such words as “femininity,” “masculinity,” “homosexuality,” and

¹⁸ A particularly popular issue among queer theorists is that of the subjugation of the individual, i.e. very generally, the creation in the individual of such an I whose

“heterosexuality.” By showing their functioning in the social discourse as constructs, they prove that these are a source of violence.

One of the most interesting queer theorists is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). The “closet” in question is a symbolic representation of the situation in which gays and lesbians find themselves, imprisoned and enclosed. Marginalized people who wish to come out of the closet and function in the space outside of it have available to them only the categories (mostly linguistic ones) of those from “outside” the closet. Yet these categories are oppressive to them, since they were developed by the system (social discourse), which – to employ these same categories – pushed them into the closet. Therefore, as Joanna Mizielińska writes, scholars dealing in queer theory

Proposed that identity categories be scrapped owing to their instability and exclusive character. According to them, the dominant discourse always assumes and is based on the existence of a margin [...], while the social production of identity is always recompensed by the logic of exclusions, creation of hierarchies and normalisation.¹⁹

Returning to literature and reading strategies, we can say that gay critics are interested in a strong, stable homosexual identity that is part of – and is often masked in – the text of culture. Queer criticism, meanwhile, attempts to grasp in texts that weak identity, non-identity, that is in eternal motion. To summarize, I would like to cite five quotations that illustrate how different theoretical positions concerning queer are today. Diana Fuss: queer theory examines the mutual links “of identification and desire, of sexual difference and sexual differences, of heterosexuality and homosexuality, and, finally, of inside and out.”²⁰ Alexander Doty: “‘queer’ would be reserved for those films and popular culture texts, spectator positions, pleasures and readings that articulate spaces outside normative straight understanding of gender and sexuality.”²¹ David Halperin: “queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence.”²² Jacek Kochanowski: “queer theory can only be post-theory (as a reflection not aspiring to any complete description) and at the same time anti-theory (as a reflection striving for destabilisation of ‘scientific’ gender and sexual theories).”²³ Inga Iwasiów: for queer theory, “more important is the disturbance than the result itself. The movement is more

constituent basis is the internalisation of the norm, thanks to which normative identities arise – with the norm working almost from within – susceptible to the effects of the power of discourse (see Kochanowski 2004).

¹⁹ Mizielińska, Joanna, “Poza kategoriami. Kilka uwag na temat queer theory,” *Furia Pierwsza* 2000 no. 7: 9.

²⁰ Fuss, Diana, *Inside/Out*. New York: Routledge, 1991: 8.

²¹ Doty, Alexander, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993: 223.

²² Halperin, David. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997: 62.

²³ Kochanowski, Jacek, *Bardzo skromna zachęta do teorii queer*, www.republika.pl/queer.

important than the identity.” This is because queer is a discourse, movement going beyond, an explosion of the movable limits of experience.²⁴ For queer, what is important is breaking, crossing, deconstructing those qualities that are connected with gender, sexuality, and desire.²⁵

To conclude, I would like to add that the three reading simulations I have presented are not mutually exclusive, but rather complement one another. They are more a question of emphasizing and extracting certain contents hidden in a text than an attempt to make sharp and distinct divisions and classifications, which in the postmodern reality were long ago placed in doubt.

Translation: Benjamin Koschalka

²⁴ Iwasiów, Inga, “Gender, tożsamość, stereotypy,” *Ruch Literacki*. 2002 no. 6: 553.

²⁵ I write more on this subject in the article “Gender. Queer. Literatura” (*Ruch Literacki*, 2005, issue 6).