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Teaching American Literature in Poland

The aim of this article is to look at some aspects of the teaching of American literature in Poland. Attention is given to the change in the educational situation in Poland since the 1990s and its implication for the study of English and teacher education. The last fifteen years have brought opportunities, hitherto unimagined, for introducing American literature to Polish students, but also new challenges to the academic profession. Investigation into the teaching of American literature seems a worthwhile and topical issue, at the crossroads of Polish and American cultures.

After the Fall of the Berlin Wall

Poland's turn towards democracy exerted influence on various areas of life connected with American studies. The 1990s saw a dramatic increase in the numbers of students interested in studying English, with freedom for creating institutions of higher education and, as a consequence, an unprecedented increase in the number of various types of English teacher training colleges (often attended not by prospective teachers, but simply by students wanting to learn English). This has been part of the general phenomenon of an increase in the number of students in Poland. In 1980 the number was around 100, 000, while by 2005 it reached almost 2, 000, 000 (Czapliński).

Thus what before the Fall of the Wall had been a mere few hundred students of English, annually entering several prestigious Polish universities, has, since the early 1990s, gradually turned into thousands of students each year receiving training as English teachers, in every major city and in numerous towns all over Poland.¹ Although these institution can hardly compete with the academic standards of English at the universities, the core curriculum once established for the study of English is followed in each institution which is entitled to award the student a BA (*licencjat*) in English. The curriculum is built around several main areas of study:

¹ The city of Białystok (Eastern Poland), with the population of 300 000 inhabitants, can serve as a good example here. Before the political transformation of 1990 it was not possible to study English in Białystok at all. Now an interested candidate can choose among four institutions of higher education offering BA degrees in English and qualifying the graduates as teachers of English.

- British and American literature
- British and American studies
- theoretical linguistics
- applied linguistics (including practical preparation for the teaching profession)
- practical skills of using English.

There have been some changes in the curriculum to adapt it more strongly to the needs of the teachers of English, emphasizing a pragmatic attitude to pre-service teacher education. Also, instead of the previously offered five years of study, most colleges offer only three years of education ending with a BA, which obviously means the curriculum is more limited than it used to be. However, the core subjects, traditionally connected in Poland with the notion of philology, have remained and thus American literature has been an obligatory presence in each institution offering English as a degree. As a result of these formal changes in the educational system, we have been observing an unprecedented phenomenon of American literature becoming, alongside English one, the main literature taught in Poland after its own national literature. The spread of English teacher training colleges creates a unique opportunity to bring American literature to young people in Poland and to influence their reading patterns.

The New Student

The population of the students of English in Poland is an example of quantity not necessarily turning into quality. What once, under the *ancien regime*, was a prestigious field of study, a window on the West for the selected few, has become a mass opportunity for anyone willing, often being a second or third option to studying more prestigious subjects such as business, law or psychology. English studies have come to be perceived as merely a means to improve one's language skills, or as a way to find employment and security in the teaching profession (which, however, has a relatively low status in Poland and thus does not attract the most brilliant and ambitious young people). So the candidates for studying English are not exactly the *crème de la crème* of the student population.² The situation is further complicated by the fact that training is done in English, which more often than not results in a situation where students' language skills are insufficient to understand literary texts, not to mention participating in a discussion or the

² It ought to be stressed that there are enormous differences in the educational background and language skills of the candidates, particularly taking into comparison big city tuition-free universities (which have many strong candidates and highly selective procedures) and private vocational colleges, which, in general, accept anyone who is willing to study and prepared to pay.

ability to express ideas in writing. Achieving the goal of immersion in the language study is done at the expense of the student's intellectual development.

A still further complication in the teaching of literature stems from the general decline of reading. Even though a statistical Pole reads two books a month (Kochanowicz) and the readers are mostly young people, foreign fiction accounts for only 19% of all books read. What is more, the relatively good statistical result of "two per month" is created by those Poles who do read, while about half of the population cannot claim to have read a single book per month. Analysis of reading habits of Poles suggests that reading remains a certain elitist privilege, acquired at home, through private cultural traditions rather than through the efforts of institutions such as schools or libraries. Although it is impossible to determine whether the non-reading section of the population is more or less likely to become students of English – there has been no research to this effect – the statistics are not without relevance to the cultural background of our students and their reading experience.

The average student of English nowadays differs from his predecessor in the previous era. This average student today no longer comes to study English with a broad general background of participation in the mainstream culture. There is a number of American writers who have been a recognized presence in Polish culture, such as Edgar Allan Poe, James Fenimore Cooper, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, Jack London, John Steinbeck, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Kurt Vonnegut, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. These are the names that most people in Poland, once representing the now increasingly elusive formation of intelligentsia, would have known about and have read. The mainstream culture, however, is not always embraced by the candidates to study English today and neither do schools at pre-college level teach the students much about America, as has been noted by Franciszek Lyra in his observations about candidates for American Studies programs:

In Poland the knowledge of the United States imparted to students below the university remains spineless. Candidates for the American Studies programs continue to flaunt glaring gaps, seemingly unaware that American Studies demands not only a competent command of English, but also a degree of knowledge of the United States beyond splintered cognizance derived from outside the classroom, the mass media, indiscriminate self-education as it might be by genuine interest in America. ("American Studies" 158)

Thus today, to an increasing number of students entering various institutions obliged to teach them American literature, the subject is a *tabula rasa*. If we were to teach those students for example Serbian or Uruguayan literature (neither of which is a well estab-

lished presence in Polish culture) there would be little difference. American literature is a *terra incognita* to many students entering colleges and departments of English. They approach the subject called American literature as a large mass of totally new pieces of information which cannot be pinned onto the canvas of the earlier acquired general knowledge because this canvas does not exist. Often there is so much new information that it is against the human memory capacity.

This problem might be illustrated by a selection of students' responses in the test on American literature.³ The misinformation quoted indicates the ignorance which stems not so much from the inability to learn but, most of all, from not having any background knowledge when approaching the study of American literature. The selection comes from one part of the American literature exam testing students' knowledge of key names and titles in American literature. The other two parts of the examination included writing an essay on a novel and the recognition of styles characteristic of epochs and some of the main American writers. The errors are interesting because, contrary to those items in the test that students simply left unanswered, they indicate the degree of confusion of the student.

- "Murder in the Cathedral" – Edgar A. Poe's drama
- Charles Brockden Brown – 21st century author of fiction
- "For Whom the Bell Tolls" – a novel written by Mark Twain in Spain
- "For Whom the Bell Tolls" – a poem by Emily Dickinson⁵
- "For Whom the Bell Tolls" – a short story by Ernest Hemingway
- "For Whom the Bell Tolls" – the title of a poem by T.S. Eliot
- "Farewell to Arms" – short story by Ernest Hemingway
- Sylvia Plath – post-modernist writer
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow – 20th century American Jew writer
- "Leaves of Grass" – an anthology by E.A. Poe
- "Leaves of Grass" – Robert Frost's poem from the period of post-modernism
- "The Calling of Lot⁶ 49" – a contemporary poem which uses typical flight phrases; ment to be performed together with music

³ The students from whose examination papers those quotations are taken are graduates of teacher training colleges and thus hold BAs (licencjat) entitling them to teach English. They took this examination while studying towards MA, after an additional survey course in American literature.

⁴ Any erroneous use of English is authentic.

⁵ In reference to this particular error (and a few others as well) it is tempting to quote what Franciszek Lyra wrote several years ago: "Might there come a day when young Poles would not recognize Faulkner's name? We need not fear such probability, however, as long as for name and prestige Emily Dickinson successfully competes with Danielle Steele, as is presently the case among Polish students of American literature" ("Is Poland Being Americanized?" 35). Apparently, the day has come when some students confuse Dickinson with Hemingway.

⁶ "Lot" in Polish means "flight."

- “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” – a book by Melville
- “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” – a novel by Mark Twain
- Margaret Fuller – Beat Generation poet
- “Call me Ishmael” – poem by a Jewish writer Saul Bellow
- “Slaughterhouse Five” – a novel written by Roderick Usher (by the same student: Roderick Usher – an author of “Slaughter Five”)
- Kate Chopin – the author of “Ahab”
- “Leather-Stocking Tales” – a modernist work

One of the most surprising findings in this field of confusion is that contemporary young people are so unaware of Ernest Hemingway’s fiction. As Jerzy Durczak observed, analyzing American literature in Poland in the 1970s, the three most popular American writers then were Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and John Steinbeck and “the most popular of the three was no doubt Hemingway who, along with Faulkner and several European writers, became necessary reading for those who were interested in literature and who wanted to be considered intellectuals” (45). There are two possible explanations why so many young people nowadays do not recognize the titles of major novels by Hemingway – either he ceased entirely to be a noticeable presence in Polish mainstream culture, or the students no longer aspire to being considered intellectuals. In 2001 Michał Głowiński, a famous Polish critic, claimed that, while in the 1950s the question about a great American writer would certainly be answered with the name of Ernest Hemingway, today he would probably be only mentioned in this position by those who are sentimental about the fascinations of their youth (22-24). However, in 1999 the publishing house MUZA prepared a 13-volume edition of Hemingway’s selected works. Thus perhaps the failure of many young people to aspire to be intellectuals should be blamed to the fact that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is sometimes taken for a poem by either Emily Dickinson or T.S. Eliot?

Faced with this new type of student, often full of good-will but without the background of participating in the mainstream world culture, how do we set out on our educational mission of bringing the student closer to American literary culture?

The Objectives in Teaching American Literature in Poland

What are the objectives of the syllabi of American literature courses in Poland? There are certain assumptions of the purpose and content shared by Polish lecturers of American literature, although, as far as the student body is diverse, so are the lecturers’ teach-

ing and research experiences. But formulating some key assumptions as to what guides the teaching of American literature in Poland might be attempted.⁷

I. The specificity of American literature.

American literature is taught in two ways: on the one hand it demonstrates literary forms in general and universal tendencies in the development of literature, while on the other it focuses on the specificity of American literature and the cultural heritage it belongs to. The second aspect seems essential because it allows the presentation of the United States as a country unique in its self-creation of nationality and statehood. The focus on the unique attributes of American literature is also a good starting point for the discussion of the processes of Americanization of the world culture and the worldwide spread of the notion of the American Dream. The study of American literature from the realm of high culture facilitates an understanding of popular American culture, such as the Hollywood cinema. Through high literature we may negotiate students' orientation to popular culture and, equally importantly, help them to understand the phenomenon of the Polish fascination with America.

The historical development of the United States brings in another topical issue today – the perception of the Other (in terms of ethnic, racial, religious or gender differences). In American literature the Other has been present since the early colonial texts. Today the relation with the Other and diverse concepts of multicultural society have become dominant problems of the European Union and the sooner Poles learn to understand them, the easier it will be to deal with the inevitable development of Poland in the same direction. In this sense the study of American literature not only helps in understanding America, but also the ongoing changes within one's own culture.

American multiculturalism is rooted in the specific historical development of the United States. The significance of the issue of multiculturalism today, however, coincides with the often uneasy development of the European Union towards a multicultural society. The concepts once reserved for describing American society are now being used to discuss issues of intercultural education in the context of European regions and European/regional identity, as when Jerzy Nikitorowicz uses the metaphors of the melting pot and the salad bowl to discuss the ideas of tolerance, integration, acceptance, open identity and the dialogue concept of multicultural education.

There are several specifically American themes which may be shown through the study of literature: the wilderness, the concept of open spaces and colonization, the Fron-

⁷ This part of the article to some extent refers to the interviews conducted with several eminent Polish lecturers in American literature: Tomasz Basiuk, Andrzej Ceynowa, Zofia Kolbuszewska, Agata Preis-Smith, Agnieszka Salska, Tadeusz Sławek and Marek Wilczyński. The interviews were presented and discussed in my book *Literatura amerykańska w kształceniu nauczycieli języka angielskiego*.

tier, the absence of the centre, the misogyny, the dichotomy between the South and the North, the individual, race and religion. These themes are either absent or pronounced differently in Polish culture.

II. Reflection upon native culture and own identity.

The reading of American literature with attention given to the presence of the Other may serve a better understanding of one's own identity, nowadays often in a state of flux. Even if Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity" is not as yet a metaphor to be applied to Polish society, the changes are inevitable and continuing, while multicultural society, with its impact on the sense of self and identity, looms around the corner. Through the study of a foreign literature it is possible to acquire a better sense of the host culture and one's own identity.

The processes of Americanization and globalization are not always accepted by Polish students and can be perceived as a threat to local culture. The fears of McDonaldization, perpetuated by the media and politicians, may be rationalized by the study of American literary culture. The teaching of American literature creates a unique opportunity to comment on the events of the day, from the realm of mass culture as well as economy and politics.

Certain texts are particularly useful in providing a window to look upon important themes of Polish culture. The reading of Jewish American writers is a good example of the way American literature may serve as a place of reflection on a related theme of Polish culture. There are other texts which enable Polish-American intercultural study, such as Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person," William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* or Susan Sontag's *In America*.

The study of American literature, for example through books such as *Moby Dick* or *The Grapes of Wrath*, permits the role of the Bible in American culture to be shown and thus displays the differences between the Polish and American approaches to religion. Poles are often unaware of the deeply religious quality of American culture, as the perception of America is dominated by Hollywood productions, for example action films, horrors, comedies and sitcoms. The study of literature may not only demonstrate this essential aspect of American culture, but also help reflect upon the dominant Roman-Catholic religion in Poland.

III. The function of literary texts in the development of language proficiency.

One of the main arguments brought forward in the call for the presence of literature in language studies is its beneficial influence on the development of students' language skills. Studying literature improves all skills, primarily reading and writing. Literary studies involve both extensive and intensive reading practice. Writing tasks connected with the study of literary texts develop students' ability to organize writing in an effi-

cient way, thus assisting them in the acquisition of the essential skill nowadays of being able to express oneself through the medium of a written text.

The study of literature teaches the decoding of texts, demonstrating that what is on the surface is not always the main message or content of the text. The realization that texts have multiple layers is a way of learning to understand the reality better.

IV. Post-modernity.

The presentation of post-modern texts and, in general, of post-modernity as a concept, stems not only from the importance of the issue for American literature, but is also needed due to low understanding of the topic by young Poles. The secondary school curriculum does not contain references to post-modern type of discourse and a young Pole is unlikely to have heard of post-modern writers. The whole concept of post-modernity is a confusing topic in Poland, not only because of post-modernity's inherent ambiguity and plurality, but because it is not taught at pre-college level. When used in the media, it sometimes comes with an air of suggestion that post-modernity constitutes an area of conflict with Polish national values. This view may be modified through the presentation of postmodern texts within the context of American literature courses.

Polish students benefit from learning of the ways post-modern texts criticize the capitalist society and that formal experiments in prose may be combined with an involvement in social and political issues. Post-modernity, both as an historical phenomenon of the 1960s and also a recent phenomenon, may serve political discussion, which should not be ignored in the institutions of higher education. Post-modern American literature leads into the issue of Americanization and "soft power." The politicizing of literary study serves a useful purpose of turning students into better, more critically thinking citizens.

V. Interdisciplinary approach.

The teaching of American literature can be successfully done through an interdisciplinary approach. To start with, American culture is visually oriented, and film, painting and photography can be merged with literary texts (e.g. *The Grapes of Wrath* with photographs of Dorotea Lange and the John Ford film version of the book). American poetry, contrary to Polish, has a strong oral tradition and this can be demonstrated through the recorded versions of poets from Ezra Pound to Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac or Anne Sexton, to Laurie Anderson and Emily XYZ. Harlem Renaissance poets and Toni Morrison can best be studied with jazz music, which for Polish students would mean bringing the unfamiliar literary text through a somewhat more familiar medium of music. Studying historical texts along with belletristic literature of the epoch is another possible interdisciplinary approach.⁸ Particular opportunities are created here for the

⁸ There have been many calls for interdisciplinary approach in the teaching of both British and American culture, and integrating literature with courses in history and cultural studies. Somehow it seems that even

study of drama, where the text can be combined with a video version of the play. The main constraint here is that this methodology is time-consuming. In general, however, an interdisciplinary approach to the study of literature should certainly be advocated.

VI. American literature and the graduate.

In the choice of an approach to the teaching of American literature we cannot remain indifferent to what we expect of the graduate. There is no one predictable career path for graduates of English, be it a small town BA programme or Warsaw University English Institute. A young urban graduate has various job opportunities: translating and interpreting posts as well as teaching are particularly available, but also work in business sector, corporate structures, media, cultural institutions, publishing houses and advertising. Graduates in smaller cities and towns are most likely to work as teachers or self-employed translators.⁹

Whatever the career path, a good command of the language is a key competence. The more the student has read in English, the higher the language skill. On the other hand, no matter what the specific place of employment will be, the graduate will be expected to function in the capacity of an expert on Britain and America. Not knowing that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is a novel by Ernest Hemingway may seriously undermine the assumed expert knowledge!

As a teacher the graduate should be able to influence his learners' reading preferences, to intensify their intellectual development and to comment on the presence of American culture in the students' own world. Knowing the limitations of any individual knowledge, a good teacher should be able to guide his learners into the realms of literature hitherto unknown also to him.

Another important thing the graduate should learn from his literature courses is that usually there is no one single interpretation of a text and that individual approach to a literary text should be respected. This the graduate will have learnt most of all from the way s/he was taught, which brings in the issue of the importance of the lecturer's personality and the style of teaching. If the lecturer imposes upon the student the attitude that literature requires a process of understanding and that diverse approaches to the text are possible, it is likely that the graduate will apply the same attitude in his/her own teaching.

though lecturers agree with the concept, there are always practical difficulties in integrating the courses and the idea often remains wishful thinking.

⁹ My own research on students and graduates indicates that during their studies most students are not particularly attracted to a teaching career, while later on most do become teachers (Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pedich, "American Literature in the Curriculum," and Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pedich and Ewa Lewicka-Mrocze, "Dziesięć lat później").

The Content of American Literature Courses

The starting point for the study of literature is the choice of texts to be studied. Once this is done, the inevitable happens: the lecturer creates the canon. This is true for native literature, but for a foreign one even more so, especially if we deal with students whose knowledge of American literature outside the classroom is non-existent. In Polish educational reality the canon created for a given course is rarely, however, the result of the ideological position of the lecturer – the practical considerations are often equally influential: the availability of the texts, the length of the course, students' linguistic and intellectual skills. It is essential to explain to the student the rationale behind the reading list.

In general the content of American literature courses in Poland reflects both the traditional concept of the canon as well as the changes to the canon brought by the sense of inadequacy of the reflection of American society and culture by the traditional F.O. Matthiessen's canonical concepts. The Polish teaching of American literature has not remained impervious to the debate about the canon. The concept of class, race and gender has its definite impact on the selection of the content for American literature courses.

The texts which remain pillars of American literature courses in Poland, however, represent fairly traditional composition of the canon. Thus the student is most likely to be asked to read something by white male authors such as E.A. Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Kurt Vonnegut. There are attempts to present the new canon reflecting the diversity of American culture, with particular emphasis on multiculturalism and multicultural texts. The university lecturer faces, however, many painful dilemmas resulting from the short duration of the course. Can I teach Alice Walker at the expense of *Huck Finn* or a Faulkner novel? How can I introduce Raymond Carver if they have never read anything by Hemingway? Can I spend time on Louise Erdrich and skip Melville? Can I bring in Annie Dillard if they haven't studied *Walden*? These dilemmas grow with the awareness that many of the students will only learn about American literature on the basis of the "canon" which the teacher has designed for the course.

A pluralistic approach is usually attempted. The teacher of American literature in Poland makes his (or her) contribution to the preservation of great works of American literature, but remains aware of the expansion of the canon. The reading lists reflect mainstream cultural texts, but hint at the presence of the non-canonical (or newly canonical) in American culture.

To conclude, there seem to be several assumptions guiding the selection of texts in the teaching of American literature in Poland:

- to reflect the traditional concept of the canon and to present, at least generally, the established corpus of American writing,
- to present literature responding to the issues of race, class and gender,
- to respond to the existing reading preferences of young people (particularly such popular writers as H.P. Lovecraft, Philip K. Dick, Ursula LeGuin or William Gibson¹⁰),
- to show the developments in American fiction not reflected by related counterparts in Polish literature, particularly post-modern texts,
- to comply with the problem of the availability of the texts and students' reading ability (nineteenth century texts are easier and cheaper to obtain, short stories take less time to read, Vonnegut is easier and faster to read than Pynchon, poetry is easier to handle in the classroom conditions than the novel, etc.),
- to reflect in the choice of texts the research work of the lecturer.

The Practical Solution

Designing the syllabus the lecturer is torn between the necessity to provide an elementary knowledge of the history of American literature, taking into account the fact that the basic knowledge is no longer drawn from the student's background of participating in mainstream Polish culture (even though it has room for key American writers¹¹ such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Henry James or Kurt Vonnegut). Considering the time limitations and the likelihood that students' out-of-the-lecture-hall knowledge may be highly limited, a survey course of American literature including the most important facts in its history, a basic sample of styles and a reading list containing the number of texts that students can be reasonably expected to learn, is a necessity. This can then be supplemented by a semester course focusing on selected aspects of American literature, which could be American Women Poets, the study of a single novel (e.g. *Moby Dick* or a Pynchon novel), Afro-American writers, Native-American writers, Jewish urban novels, Gothic fiction, twentieth-century short story; the list of choices is practically unlimited. Usually such focused courses are related to the lecturer's research interests. This seems to be the most reasonable solution: a survey course followed by a focused presentation of a selected area of American literature.

¹⁰ Interestingly, these writers, so popular among young Polish readers, have little, or no, American referentiality (as also observed by Franciszek Lyra in "Is Poland being Americanized?").

¹¹ This can be demonstrated by the action carried out in 2005 by the most popular Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* of systematically adding to the newspaper a copy of a book from the canon of world literature, including, among others, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, William Faulkner, Vladimir Nabokov, Ray Bradbury.

Towards a Conclusion

The above discussion does not give an answer to the question of how to teach literature in the post-modern electronic society and how to take the best advantage of the crossroads of Polish and American cultures while teaching American literature at college level. The important issue of methodology of teaching literature has been left out of this discussion, although the method of teaching is of high relevance to the final effectiveness of bringing students closer to the pleasures of reading and to a better understanding of America. The exact content of the syllabi, most frequent items on reading lists, the notion of a hidden curriculum in the teaching of literature, the transfer of the students' academic knowledge into their later practice as teachers of English – these are just a few of the many issues that might be discussed in connection with the teaching of American literature in Poland.

Perhaps teaching American literature is not only a task, but a Mission? It may offer a unique way to bring both the Text and a better understanding of America to those large numbers of young Poles whose educational choices are determined by the domination of English as the *lingua franca* of the contemporary world.

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REVIEWS

Charles Altieri. *The Particulars of Rapture. An Aesthetics of the Affects*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. x and 302 pages.

How do we come to understand possible ways in which the arts can move us? In what sense could we be changed by what we feel when we allow works of art to generate modes of perception helping us to express our desires and satisfactions? How can we come to understand better how these modes may engage our fellow participants in a culture? What kind of language could do justice to expressive intensity and to values immanent in our responses to the aesthetic?

As Charles Altieri convincingly argues in his fine book, when sought in the realms of cognitivism and those Enlightenment perspectives that stem from rule-oriented and criteria-based practices, possible answers to these queries are likely to blind us to expressive subtleties shaped by the arts. He claims that both cognitivism and rationalistic philosophy provide interpretive frameworks the acceptance of which makes literary theorists prefer contexts to texts, which results in literature's subsumption under rubrics of philosophy or moral psychologism. In order to honour texts outside sociopolitical and ideological contexts, the author proposes to consider the role of elemental feelings in our response to the aesthetic that, as he argues, condition and mould our ways of being moved.

In Altieri's opinion, if we view emotions generated by the arts from the perspective of traditional cognitivism or Cartesian representationalism, in static classificatory terms, we then sacrifice the particularity and subtlety of the elemental response that does not easily lend itself to aprioristic interpretations. However, when acknowledged by our sensibilities not for the sake of judgment or systematic knowledge, but for the sake of expressive value that can direct our attention to certain forms of desire and thus can make us better aware of who we wish to be, elemental feelings are not an object of knowledge (as they are in contextual models of interpretation), but a source of knowledge. Only by allowing our motivation for talking about the arts to step outside those domains of philosophy and theory that seek explanation by subordinating the aesthetic to the first-order impersonal claims of knowledge can we assert that "the arts inspire accounts that make affective experience not just something we understand, but something that we pursue as a fundamental value" (4).

Instead of the category “emotion” that in the cognitivist model is inevitably associated with particular beliefs and thus links emotional response to dictates and projects of reason, Altieri proposes to use the term “affect” because it provides “a means of referring to the entire range of states that are bounded on one side by pure sensation and on the other by thoughts that have no visible or tangible impact on our bodies” (2). He then divides affects into four primary categories of feelings, moods, emotions, and passions. In his categorization, a basic theoretical tension is established by juxtaposing feelings and emotions. Emotions arise whenever an attitude informed by a belief or a set of beliefs happens to situate the agent in a particular narrative or an action-oriented or cause-governed account of behaviour or identification. In this context, emotions are treated as theological instruments of knowledge aiming at explanation. Contrasted with emotions theologically understood, feelings may be then seen as unmediated elemental responses that can modulate the agent’s consciousness in ways that invite description, yet which defy a criteria-based explanation. The book’s emphasis is on affective experience that manifests itself in particular elemental modulations of the agent’s consciousness and reveals areas of salience beyond the claims inherent in cognitivist views.

Asking for serious forms of attention paid to feelings, Altieri is more interested in ways of being available through art rather than in modes of knowing which need the arts as their epistemological ally. The critical orientation the author wishes to honour allows him to focus on those affects that do not form as emotions and cannot be explained in terms of what he identifies as “belief-judgment nexus” and, more important, it provides him with a theoretical stance from which works of literature can be viewed as texts beyond the dominance of historical, political, and philosophical contexts (9). In ways that cannot immediately be defined but which can nonetheless be practiced, the stance offers a critical scrutiny of relations between the agent and works of literature that come to bear on our ethos as exemplars of particular existential states. Focusing on their power to engage our consciousness, the author reflects on how they can bring us closer to our understanding of what and how we value. And it would be difficult to deny that in order to be able at all to meditate on our sense and process of valuing, we cannot ignore the role elemental affects play in our relation with literary texts and with the world as it stands.

The book powerfully demonstrates how it is possible to make philosophy bear on how we engage in works of art without making it a framework that may always become a temptation to make literature a means for rehearsing philosophical truths. When contrasted with recent critical attempts to read literature from the heights of philosophy, as is the case of Martha Nussbaum’s Neo-Aristotelian position, for example, Altieri’s model seems to be even more interesting for what it promises. In his attempts to bypass epistemically driven attitudes toward the psyche and the arts, he shows that in our deal-

ings with how texts move us philosophy may have its important place without becoming the arbiter of what we are to find in them.

Altieri is right to point out that in the mainstream cognitivist approach emotions are predominantly viewed as states of the psyche to be pegged on an adjectival scale of gradation and intensity where complex responses of consciousness become reduced to such categories as “sad,” “jealous,” or “angry,” for example. He claims that adopting the adjectival line of scrutiny cannot do justice to the more fluid and fleeting aspects of our affective lives that invite our awareness of ‘how’ rather than ‘what’ affects may modulate our desires and aspirations in culture. Instead of seeing emotional responses pursued as adjectival categories, he wants to understand them as adverbial modes of intensity, modes that can make us aware of certain possibilities of self and ethos that the adjectival orientation tends to suppress. In this respect, he may be said to be insisting on the value of adverbial “hows” and on their theoretical superiority over adjectival “whats.” He emphasizes a process of being moved, not a category under which one would wish to sum up aesthetic experience.

The book’s central achievement resides in its making us freshly aware of the distance between texts and their audience moulded by ambitions of epistemically guided concerns of literary theory. It enables us to see that, by responding to works of art from the adverbial stance, we can tap into modes of salience that come to bear on reflexive consciousness outside ambitions of discursive knowledge. Although the author does not entirely deny the role reason has to play in our making sense of human experience, he is suspicious of treating the domain of the arts as merely supplementing what philosophy and science may sponsor as knowledge. He honours those interpretive positions that can see the arts not as processed by impersonal knowledge but, most important, as processing the world and providing us with self-knowledge through what moves us.

In his reflection on the advantages of the adverbial approach to the arts, he draws on Spinoza, Kant, and Heidegger. Showing how philosophy can become an ally of literary criticism without subsuming it under epistemic rigour, he demonstrates how literary studies can make use of philosophy without making literature dependent on its dogmas. If he decides to see phenomenology as “central to my argument,” this is only because it “insists that there has to be some kind of intuition or noncriterial judgment through which we register the possible rightness of our descriptions” (34). The phenomenological perspective can serve theoretical purposes just because “it offers means of seeking generalization without relying on either induction or deduction” (34). Making admirable use of those aspects of the Enlightenment thought that acknowledge ways of talking about human value different than project-based and cause-oriented forms of reason, Altieri shows how Kant’s idea of “purposiveness,” Spinoza’s concept of “conatus” or

Heidegger's discussion of the significance of mood can become tools that can help us refine our sensibilities as we try to come to terms with the elusive and the enigmatic in our affective response. They do not serve as master scenarios here; rather, they are lines of description in our attempts to make sense, in the elemental, adverbial fashion, of the affects generated by the arts.

As he applies his critical model to an impressive range of art works, the author reflects on how they can be read as texts outside contexts, as entities engaging consciousness on deeply personal levels unacknowledged by forms of attention circumscribed by conceptual reason. Reading texts as texts (not as con-texts), as autonomous art forms bearing on our psyche without our appeal to a distinct ideal of knowledge, may indeed be said to constitute the book's central preoccupation. That literary value does not have to be collapsed into the philosophical, or political, and that we are better off caring not about ways in which theory moves us, but about modes in which works of art can redirect our attention as for who we aspire to be, is not only a most important statement Altieri has to make; it is first of all a critical practice that he successfully implements as he dwells on examples from both literature and visual arts.

Reading poems that range from Henry King Bishop and Matthew Arnold to Sylvia Plath and Robert Creeley, looking at pictures from Caravaggio and Titian to Paul Cezanne and Edvard Munch, he meditates on how value may reside in how these works of art move us. In order to acknowledge the affective modes of interpretation, he proposes to analyse three basic subjective states that he thinks "afford significant affective satisfactions in relation to the manners by which we pursue investments even though the values involved are very difficult to fix or to assess in the terms provided by the practical understanding" (186). Identifying these states as "intensity," "involvedness," and "plasticity," and, discussing them in the context of poems, he illustrates how intensity may come to modify our subjectivity; how involvedness may make us aware of an extension of our personal boundaries toward other lives; and, finally, how plasticity can engage the psyche as it rehearses various rival imaginative demands. In Altieri's model, the three states, and with them our standing in the world, can become modified through particular engagements in the aesthetic. The three states are by no means conceptual carriers that the arts are supposed to equip with a meaning. Rather, they designate forms of attention that can be shaped by our serious dealings with art works. Most important, they are not lines of explanation to be followed by the ambition of reason but paths of description to be practiced in our hopes to do justice to expressive behaviour nurtured and sustained by the arts.

That the adverbial approach to the affective states generated by our encounters with literature may provide us with broader and richer interpretative fields is best illustrated in an impressive reading of Yeats's "Long Legged Fly." Altieri's discussion of the lyric

focuses here on intensity as an organizing feature and shows how the poem's structure participates in shaping a concern that eventually escapes any practical orientation and makes the agent acknowledge an existence of powers that set limits for historical consciousness. He isolates particular moments of crisis for consciousness that the poem brings into focus and proposes "to ask what form of concentration the poem asks of us if we are to raise ourselves to the modes of intensity that bring the various moments into conjunction" (192). Dwelling on intensity as a value actualized by the lyric's structure, he points to possibilities of interpretation that make attempts to thematize, allegorize, or historicize look insignificant in view of what texts reveal and how they bear on our consciousness (as well as on our ways of talking about how they achieve that) when we look for value in the literary from first-person or elemental angles. In this interpretation, Yeats's famous lyric becomes an arena where the forces of history are juxtaposed with a psychological reality acting as a limit condition of historical consciousness. By pondering on how intensity enters the lyric's drama, Altieri shows how we can fruitfully reflect on the affects as energies bearing on our sense of who we are. His analysis convinces us that "we may be able to isolate an imaginative force enabling us to treat what history imposes as if it were a challenge rather than a sentence" (192).

Overall, the book's argumentative power, its lucid and engaging style along with a trim index and informative division into six chapters will surely have their specific rewards for the reader. Although its "envisioned audience is primarily those concerned professionally with philosophy and those who study the arts," the book may be of great interest especially to those literary critics who are wary of the cognitivist approach to value, and who, in their dealing with the literary, wish to seek and practice ways other than rational appraisal guided by philosophy. As the author claims, the books "can be considered an effort to modify how we talk about literary works" (33). And with its fine emphasis on subtle qualities of texts that escape the ambition to place them in the domain of rational assessment, *The Particulars of Rapture* achieves this aim by restoring the significance of text through its emphasis on the role played by affective modes in our appreciation of why and how literature matters.

Rafał Dubaniowski

Grzegorz Kość. *Robert Lowell. Uncomfortable Epigone of the Grand Maîtres*. Frankfurt a. Main: Peter Lang, 2005. 338 pages.

After Robert Lowell's bright star faded almost completely before the end of the eighties, the story of his life and achievement quickly hardened into academic common knowledge. Much like its more general equivalent, academic common knowledge, dis-

seminated via textbooks, seminars, lectures, and anthologies, is inevitably selective, prone to didactically expedient simplifications, and resistant to novelty and change. In the case of Lowell, this common knowledge rests upon a handful of facts and near-facts: he was the last American Puritan, alienated, tormented, and self-centered, ruthlessly exploitative of the world and others in his poetry; he was a renegade New Critical prodigy, who in *Life Studies*, a volume central to his career, turned his back on his modernist masters to join the ranks of the confessional poets; he was one of those prominent American intellectuals who in the troubled times of the sixties supported with their authority the anti-war protests and the student revolts.

To see common knowledge occasionally shaken up is a refreshing and energizing experience. Therefore a book like the recently published Grzegorz Kość's *Robert Lowell. Uncomfortable Epigone of the Old Maitres* cannot be overrated. Kość not only revises much of the mythology that has encrusted the poet, offering at the same time a re-examination of his work, but also redefines Lowell's relation to the two literary epochs he straddled – modernism and postmodernism – with his feet, the author argues, planted equally insecurely in both.

The argument Kość presents in his book can be summarized as follows. Except in his earliest years as a poet, Lowell never felt entirely comfortable in the role of a latter-day Modernist. Although not until the end of his life did he manage to divest himself of vestiges of his early, grandiose modernist ambitions, such as to make of art a shield against the world's contingency or to impose the imperial mind's control upon its chaos, much of the poetry he wrote in the sixties and seventies witnesses his efforts – irreducible to a continuous development, erratic, contradictory, half-deliberate, and often frustrated – to articulate an alternative poetics to that which he had inherited from his modernist masters. "For the lack of any other convenient term" Kość writes, "I shall call [the poetics] *post-modern*" (10). In that long process, meticulously traced and documented by Kość, Lowell's *Life Studies* of 1959 does not mark any particularly important breakthrough. It is, the author claims, in many respects a product of the same mind (albeit more mature and less secure) that expressed itself in *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946); the poems communicate the same aloofness on the part of the speaker, and are marked by the same ironic distancing which, by then, had become the poet's habitual response to the evident unfeasibility of the modernist project to represent in language all of reality, the world's as well as the self's. Far from being genuinely confessional, the volume is "crypto-modernist," and is best read as a "rhetorical performance," disclosing nothing of the real Lowell and persistently "insinuating that all this verbal junk bears no relation" to its author (36).

It is in the notorious *Imitations* (1961) that Kość discerns the earliest signs of Lowell's attempts to move beyond the confines of the modernist narcissistic and control-

ling self. In these rather liberal “translations” of various European poets, often unmistakably “Lowellized” in tone and imagery, he sees, paradoxically, Lowell’s first tentative efforts to empathize, to hear what others (rather than himself) have to say, and to see the world through their eyes. This new interest becomes more pronounced in *Notebook 1967-68*, then wanes in the *Notebook* of 1970, is altogether abandoned in *History* (1973), only to resurface again in *The Dolphin* (1973) and *Day by Day* (1978). The unauthorized inclusion of Lowell’s second wife’s personal letters in *The Dolphin*, much criticized when the book first appeared for breaching fundamentals of human decency, when viewed in the context of this wavering evolution, appears to Kość to have been only another of the poet’s efforts “to break away from the cultivated garden of his mind,” an effort which “ambiguously reflects his ambition to do justice to the universe beyond his own projections” (93).

Increasingly weary of his poetry’s self-absorption, in the sixties Lowell not only sought ways to open it to the Other, but also started looking for a poetic idiom more adequate to communicate the world’s contingency than his customary language of irony and silence. Interestingly, the chapter in Kość’s study that documents that aspect of the poet’s erratic evolution focuses on Lowell’s brief flirtation with politics, his involvement in the anti-war protests of 1968 and the McCarthy campaign. While the episode revealed to the poet (extremely ill at ease in the role of political spokesman) the inadequacy of ironic evasion of self-disclosure and commitment in the political realm, it fostered his reliance on the unexpressed and implicit in his public poetry, and thwarted the transformation which he sensed his language needed. But in the convoluted story of Lowell’s struggle to depart from the models he absorbed in his youth, almost every setback coincides with a step forward, and the experiment given up on in one set of poems is returned to in another, not infrequently only to be again abandoned, even in mid-text. And so, by the end of his career, Lowell had experimented with prose, with the loose, undisciplined, associative, clichéd colloquial speech, laboriously adjusting in this way his aesthetics to the demands of his (and the time’s) growing sense of reality’s fluidity and resistance to forms.

Tracing the evolution in the poet’s metaphysics and aesthetics, Kość discusses several striking similarities between the attitudes and propositions Lowell articulated (or only half-articulated) in his last volumes, *Day by Day* especially, and the thought of Martin Heidegger, the philosopher whose ideas make the foundation of the post-modernist literary project. Although never a student of Heidegger in the literal sense, Lowell was not unaware of his revolutionary theories and their aesthetic implications. And so ever since *The Dolphin*, Lowell begins to distance himself from the modernist ambition to freeze life’s flux into permanence, seeking instead to reflect temporality and change. Even

earlier, in *Notebook 68-7*, he starts showing awareness that the modernist goal of objective description is unfeasible, and that what we see is always colored with what we know, assume, and believe. Increasingly discernible in his late work is a Heideggerian humility about human chances to grasp and tell the truth. As understanding is always incomplete, and – moreover – communication of what we have understood always falls short of our intention, there is no other way for a poet but to accept failure, error, approximation, and to construe an aesthetic mindful of these limitations. This insight goes hand in hand with the recognition, again paralleling Heidegger's, that language is more than *logos*, i.e. a means of representing and making sense of the world; that there is an aspect to language – *phûsis* – “which is pronouncedly the other of *logos* – ‘raw and raw,’ wayward, and excessive, invariably resistant to mastery” (224). It is precisely that aspect of language that, as Kość argues, Lowell explores with considerable interest in *Day by Day*, loosening his habitual control over words, letting language “speak for itself,” and thus opening his poetry up to language's surprises and mysterious otherness.

A question that Kość's study endlessly provokes is what would have happened had the poet not died an untimely death in 1977. If by the end of his life he had come to the brink of envisaging a poetics that was postmodern in several of its aspects, if he had come to contemplate the postmodern proposition that language, rather than being a tool of describing reality is a medium of creating it, what kind of poetry could have resulted from that? The logical implication of Kość's argument (though not articulated in the study) is that Lowell probably would *not* have made the plunge his post-modernist explorations entailed, or that the plunge would have been – as was his wont – half-hearted. The poet's age aside – and radicalization in old age is less probable than reverting to the well-entrenched positions occupied in one's youth – Lowell's testing of new ideas never guaranteed that his commitment to them would last. This is precisely the sense in which his evolution was erratic. Besides, the grip of modernism on his mind was comparable to the grip of New England from which, as the author argues in the book's third chapter, there was no easy escape. Boston could be left – first for New York and later for England – but not so the Boston state of mind. “Sad friend you cannot change,” Kość quotes Elizabeth Bishop remarking in “North Haven,” her elegy for Lowell (234). But then other questions immediately come to mind – Would we have *cared* to see Lowell changed, transformed dramatically into somebody like Ashbery or like Olson? Isn't what we cherish about him precisely his imperial, tortured vision, his all-devouring solipsism, his maddeningly multiplying ironies, and his inimitable, violent, emphatically non-pedestrian language? The late Lowell can be mistaken for some other poet; the mid-career cannot.