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**A LITERARY TEXT AS A WORK OF ART  
(BASED ON SELECTED PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS  
REPORTED IN POLISH PERIODICALS AFTER 1989)<sup>1</sup>**

**INTRODUCTION**

Janusz Połomski's article "Poezja a filozofia" ("Poetry versus Philosophy") was published in *Twórczość* in 1969. It did not—as far as I know—have any incisive reception; it was one of very many texts written in this period, and after almost thirty years it is noted only in bibliographies of Rilke's reception in Poland, as one of many commentaries to this Austrian poet; commentaries which grew out of the German hermeneutic tradition.

But this article had an intellectually strong voice, clearly different from other voices of that period on the issues of the elite nature of poetry (the art of using words); such an attitude was seen in almost

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<sup>1</sup> This sketch is not a treatise on aesthetics, final verdict on the state of contemporary consciousness of works of art, a systematic presentation of all, or even of, the majority of voices dealing with ways of presence of literature as works of art, which have been 'made public' (it would be impossible for obvious reasons).

It is, though, a piecemeal, symptomatic attempt to solve the problem presented in the title on the basis of the most important, although arbitrarily selected discussions. Yet, it is not, a result of fickle judgements and evaluations. I took—as most important—statements legitimised by intellectual and social authority of interlocutors and by their constant presence in public life.

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every sentence, and this article went far beyond more and more specific and narrowing specializations in the Humanities.

Połomski wrote:

In Greek, poetry means a form of preservation of human existence, 'creation'. Poetry as *poiesis*, is creation in the sense of making alive what has never existed in language, telling what has not so far been said—this phrase may sound as a banal generalization, but its sense is not banal, if, while trying to understand it, we differentiate speech from language and word from terminology, as the Greeks and Rilke did following Plato. In the same way as the classical concept of poetry exists, I have just attempted to define it tentatively. It is worth preserving it. It allows the differentiation of poetry from non-poetry, that is from so many poems of the so called *literary movement* (emphasis B.K.-Ch.), and finding out what is most unique in any authentic poet.<sup>2</sup>

Even if some short fragments of this quotation, so it seems, are directed towards this aesthetic and literary hermeneutics, which has already been worn out by long research and critical practise, this statement in general, placing in opposition “an art of poetry versus a literary movement”, creates an unusual axiological aura around the fact of a work of word art and around creative processes, behind which there stands a specific person defined by ennobling sentences.

We can say: we have a Modernist projection and continuation of such an idea in a Modernist poet, whose poetry is commented upon.

Would it not be possible to express this situation in one example used by Rilke himself (of course in slightly different contexts), when he in a letter to Balthus related how August Rodin had told him once that while reading *On Imitation of Christ* instead of each word 'God'

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<sup>2</sup> Janusz Połomski, “Poezja i filozofia”, *Twórczość*, 1969, 9, 72.

he put 'Sculpture'?"<sup>3</sup> It seems that maximalism explains the quality and level of the work. Maximalism is also crucial in attempts to define Modernism, but Modernism explains fully neither Rilke's poetry, nor the tone of Janusz Połomski's article, who while referring to Plato, in fact, as is clear from the whole of this fragment (at that time Połomski was planning to write the whole book entitled *Poezja i filozofia (Poetry and Philosophy)*, saw Rilke's works (analogically to Heidegger's philosophic writings), as a phenomenal (the only one, the peak one) point of the development of poetry in history. In this moment the features of the most perfect poetry ever became tangible and clear. It can be said that in "Poetry and Philosophy", so dense with meanings, consistent and logical, the absolute value of lyric art was caught. Which could be located in the special constitution of language, specific cognitive expansion in mysteries of existence, "brilliant understanding of what has not been understood so far",<sup>4</sup> the identity of poetic word with reality ("with being").

Poetry primarily is an ontological possibility of human existence; poetic works are its realization.<sup>5</sup>

It is fundamental and crucial that such a tone in dealing with poetry—an art of words, happened in the context of Rilke's works, which created (more or less consciously), some 'orientations' in literary life of the decades which followed, and also created the public discussions of poets themselves: those present in a 'literary movement' and, maybe, a few who were outside it. Most of these phenomena have been researched by Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany in the book *Rilke poetów polskich (Rilke of Polish Poets)*,<sup>6</sup> which is most probably about more than just reception, and maybe here some important problem is being formed: questions about what has happened with

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<sup>3</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Listy do młodego malarza Balthusa* (Schloss Berg-am-Irchel, 24 November 1920), „Zeszyty Literackie” 1998, no. 64, 43.

<sup>4</sup> Janusz Połomski, op.cit., 79.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 72.

<sup>6</sup> Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany, *Rilke poetów polskich*, Wrocław 2004

the understanding of a literary text as a work of art. What is really happening now to this formula? And does it concern only formula (language) itself, or something which really exists behind this formula?

The attempts to baptise a few scholarly conferences with the word 'beauty' (for example "Beauty of the 19th century", "Beauty of Słowacki"), which has been always considered to be a basic attribute of a work of art, has not been greeted with the applause of academics. Anyway, it seems that the organizers of these conferences were aware of this (even if, ultimately, they were prepared to defend this category). Erosion is a process to which these words are most susceptible which signify reality, in a way, most important to man, or this part of it, around which sensitivity would be most willing to build a wall of silence. It seems that the same fate is shared by other, key categories of erstwhile aesthetics. They are verified by the contemporary sensitivity of an individual man, and ultimately by social sensitivity. And this is visible in public conversations, exchanges in the media, and the criteria of judgements which are often non verbalized.

Therefore, we have this point of departure: an almost unnoticed sketch by Janusz Połomski, the Polish and international reception of one of the greatest poets (see the closing chapters of the book by K. Kuczyńska-Koschany) who till today has set the highest standard of expectations towards a literary (poetic) text, the standard which seems to exceed the claims set by the contemporary 'literary movement'. I do not want to claim that this is the only standard, but this standard is telling: it shows one pole of contemporary thinking—less offensive, at times even declining, but, nevertheless, still present. Apart from academic discussion which—and one gets such an impression—has decided everything.<sup>7</sup>

The formula 'a work of art' is evaluative. It implies a reality organized in such a way that the particularity of this organization fulfils, as Janusz Sławiński called it, "an aesthetic obligation" (structural

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Grzegorz Dziamski, *Postmodernizm wobec kryzysu estetyki*. Poznań 1996.

character, expressivity of organization of linguistic material, fictional character of the represented world, artistic originality).<sup>8</sup>

Sławiński's findings are, in a sense, minimalist; a slightly more evaluative definition of a work of art can be drawn from the works of Roman Ingarden, a classic of contemporary aesthetics, in which there appears, for example, the issue of the so called metaphysical values, which has reappeared in the recent debate in *Znak*: "Szukając pocieszenia. O Sztuce" ("In Search of Consolation. On Art") (12/2002).

But... a formula of 'metaphysical values', and particularly its first component, can be located in a category of words which have been devalued in common use, words which are now not unambiguous, although in some areas of scholarship they still retain value.

Let us try to find the second pole of a state of social awareness of a work of art, the pole antagonistic to the one marked with Rilke's name, which has been discussed above. This polarity is visible, for example, in the ways in which Lidia Burska, in her sketch "Miasto i poezja" ("City and Poetry") finds and describes the mechanisms and rules governing contemporary poetry. This text, because of accumulated observations and clarity of diagnosis, has qualities of an independent voice in a debate on—the most contemporary and also most exposed in the media—public awareness of a literary text as a work of art.

In the configuration of problems undertaken by Burska, there is certainly no room for such a work of art as defined by the synchronizing guidelines of Janusz Sławiński and Roman Ingarden.

Lidia Burska first of all described a phantom, unreal type of culture. She wrote about apotheosis of "arbitrariness, freedom and randomness of existence", which could be found in poets' manifestos, in the mixing of language, and:

[t]oday the problem of poetry is mixing of languages and levelling of all symbolic languages from the past and present; permanent

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<sup>8</sup> Janusz Sławiński, *Dzieło literackie*, the entry in: Michał Głowiński, Teresa Kostkiewiczowa, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, J. Sławiński, *Słownik terminów literackich*, ed. by J. Sławińskiego, Wrocław 1998.

buzzes, noises, whirs, which are negations of continuity and are used mostly as ‘marking’ of spaces excluded and overtaken for particular interests. Old languages of traditions no longer mark a common space; they are only emblems and borders of worlds extracted and appropriated by users of different ideas, religions, speeches, styles of life, models of culture, etc.<sup>9</sup>

These trends which Burska found—for all that, in a critical fashion—as a contradistinction to trends dominant in her observations, that is such poetic phenomena as Robert Tekieli and Wojciech Wencel; with all respect to their attitude, they do not seem to be writing great poetry or great literature. Therefore, Burska’s contradistinction does not explain much and does not help me in my search.

Anyway, generally, the people and phenomena discussed in the sketch of Lidia Burska are merely symptomatic and characteristic of the present period and they are not great writers. The fact that Tekieli and Wencel have a predilection for *sacrum*, metaphysics, and classical forms of poems does not alter the truth that their voices can be included within a certain literary and cultural debate; as a way of expressing aesthetic thinking, not necessarily within important literary events. And that is the way in which I understand the text of Lidia Burska: as very well written information about the status of literary text in the very recent period.

What can be, indirectly, drawn from this text, somewhat despite the astonishing vision of speed, change, flickering, amorphous lack of hierarchy, and an all-encompassing tendency to dazzling unity?

Burska, while dealing with phenomena of the “literary movement” and putting her lens to it, is forced, in a way, to talk about the “phantom” nature of culture, the “constant fictionality” of surrounding reality, but often also of the “selves” of authors, as fragments of this fiction. But, as it will turn out, poets are looking “for an exit from reality made and constantly reproduced, from the world of perfect imitations,

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<sup>9</sup> Lidia Burska, “Miasto i poezja”, in *Co dalej literaturo? Jak zmienia się współcześnie pojęcie i sytuacja literatury*, ed. by Alina Brodzkaj-Wald, Hanna Gosk and Andrzej Werner, Warszawa 2008, 271.

in which it is not only the memory of the original and the necessity to commune with it which are lost, but the very life becomes unreal".<sup>10</sup>

Unreality, a zone of artificiality, becomes the only form of the accessible world: and its truth is the only accessible form of truth. We could see a specific 'accumulation' of this way of looking at the world by the members of the generation described (Sosnowski, Wiedemann): the accessible reality becomes a possibility of a new realization of Aristotelian *mimesis*. The foundations of such a situation, I would say, are formed by eternal rules, of creative, artistic experiments.

Burska wrote: "I am interested in writers who bravely enter the unformed life of a city". She is right; it is almost the only point of departure for a writer, a poet: observation of a given reality, experiencing it—which for a long time has been the first and basic phase of a creative process. The problem is—I am extending this idea beyond Burska's text—that poets of the generation she writes about remain at the level of mirroring their city. Because, after all, Joyce in his *Ulysses* also "bravely entered the unformed life of a city", but what about the "aesthetic conclusion" of this text? "A city is reflected in the poems of these poets, but it seems to be too little, in the positive sense, transformed: individual visions or proposals do not possess this 'surplus' which would turn them into a separate aesthetic object, which is always a result of such special organization. As we know from the history of art, even in the case of the most realistic works of art, we have this 'surplus' (organization, order) to deal with.

Let us notice Burska's observations about the mixing in poets' language of 'low' and 'high' styles, 'common' and 'elite' elements (Burska writes a few times about it) about the ground for rebellion, being the result of behaviours 'in the name of truth'. These phenomena are obviously not new; as we remember, one of the basic mechanisms used by the Romantic poets was the so called lowering of the style, introducing into a literary text elements from 'low', 'common' life. Instead, we should perceive rebellion in our times as convention—*rebellion is convention*. This digression clearly leads to affirmation

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 256.

of the correctness of the road—established a long time ago—leading to the creation a work of art (truth, rebellion, mixing of styles and forms). This, however, does not always and not in all conditions lead to positive results.

There is no doubt, however, that the consciousness of a literary text—a masterpiece, subjected to tangible norms, consolidated by the centuries which came after, is present here—even if we assume that a precise definition of a work of art is open in character.<sup>11</sup>

If, in utterances about most characteristic symptoms of our literary contemporaneity, the stress is on the destruction of forms and norms, the all-encompassing factor of destruction in the name of unravelling an authentic picture of reality, then it is really a discourse about getting closer to a new *truth* about the world, although the truth of experience and truth of seeing become again, and not necessarily indirectly, a value which is directly denied the right to existence.

Poems, being reflections of remembered events, things or emotions, become epiphanies, gateways to inexpressible truth, a 'clearance' of being.<sup>12</sup>

Wrote Lidia Burska. After all, this is the artistic *credo* of Modernist writers and artists, but also pre-Modernist ones; of almost all the generations of titans of art who managed to leave something for posterity.

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It seemed earlier that these two poles, signed with the names of Połomski and Burska, have their arguments for differentiation. The first of them was connected with the maximum and elitism, the second with the minimum and common everyday approach in recognizing the place and role of a literary work of art. However, we might also ask if the second one is not connected with energy, which is almost adjacent to chaos, while the first one, the elite one, is not

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<sup>11</sup> Grzegorz Dziamski, *op.cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Lidia Burska, *op.cit.*, 226.



connected with some stagnation (this term refers to a potential ground out of which a work of art grows) in expectation for some positive results, maybe with some narrowness of these expectations and with stubbornness referring art (its essence) to a potentially growing 'existential man'?<sup>13</sup> The variant of chaos with energy is devoid—in such a configuration—of a direction; an element of destruction is not balanced by an attempt to overcome itself. This energy seems to be blind, and therefore diffused, and permanently diffusing itself.<sup>14</sup>

The conclusion to all this is quite simple: it leads to a somewhat fickle—as it seems—statement about the 'schizophrenic' split in thinking about art (a literary text as a work of art), if some 'therapeutic', unifying actions are not found.

#### THE ILLUSIVE NATURE OF POLES?

Two debates may be located in the nebulous proximity of these two poles. The first one (already mentioned) in *Znak* (December 2002), the second one in *Res Publica Nowa* (winter 2006).

The participants of the first debate tended, generally, towards a more integral and positive (from the more traditional point of view) vision of art, most often leading to a direction of an elitist revealing of the nature of beauty, while the participants of the debate in *Res Publica Nowa* to a larger extent accepted what is happening in art at the present moment (mostly happening in the reality accessible through mass media).

The debate in *Znak* was opened by Karol Tarnowski, a philosopher from Kraków, a member of this periodical's editorial board. Tarnowski drew a wide perspective, starting from the situation of contemporary philosophy and summing up its post-metaphysical condition.

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<sup>13</sup> See Mikel Dufrenne, *Phenomenologie de l'expérience esthétique*, Paris 1953, v.1-2. His aesthetics, and particularly the concept of a similarity between an aesthetic object and a structure of a human being, is discussed in Eugenia Basara-Lipiec in *Arcydzieło. Teoria i rzeczywistość*, Warszawa 1997, 55-59.

<sup>14</sup> This is a problem well known to the 'old' aesthetics, although it has appeared in various configurations.

Ordering his pronouncement—maybe he attempted to be systematic—he sentenced himself to a certain lack of balance in stressing different themes and judgements. Following Jean-Luc Marion, Tarnowski introduced the division of contemporary art into ‘idolatry’ and ‘iconic’, and then he made an evaluative act, of presenting ‘high’ art in some opposition to contemporaneity. Such a starting point of someone who opens the debate might be questioned, as Krystian Lupa did, who saw a seed of error in this stiff transformation of criteria from a somewhat earlier period to the most contemporary one.

[...] the material given to individual periods is exhausted and results in the radical efflorescence of crystallization, which have included in them both a cryptic genetic code, as well as cancerous structures of error. This error has lately been growing in geometric progression. These are structures of the old, declining phase of the period [...] The present period cannot be, in any way, regarded as ‘post-metaphysical’ (it is only an illusion seen from a top of a withering tree). This period is not only metaphysical, but, what is more, it is a period of metaphysical upheaval. Only the form of the manifestation of metaphysical content, which we can observe today, is not congruent with the old criteria—and therefore epigones of the past ‘metaphysical period’ do not perceive this content as metaphysical at all. And that’s the hitch.<sup>15</sup>

Was Lupa’s attack too strong? Exaggerated? Maybe yes, maybe no. Tarnowski, while stating his own expectations towards a work of art (also of a literary art) started from quite basic questions and distinctions; questions which have been asked at least for several centuries, above conventions and fashions, but he put them in such a way as if he had expected an answer along the lines he had predicted. Indeed, among many others, we find in his text observations which are binding, placed here besides a row of ‘systematic’ references. When he introduced the notion (already mentioned here) of Ingarden’s

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<sup>15</sup> *Walka trwa. Z Tadeuszem Sobolewskim, Martą Tarabulą, Mieczysławem Tomaszewskim, Teresą Walas i Adamem Zagajewskim rozmawiają Krystyna Kwaśniewska i Łukasz Tischner*, „Znak”, (12) 2002., 60.

metaphysical values, he turned towards a specific seat of experiences from the field of art's reception, although Ingarden's aesthetics is fundamentally empirical. The formula of a metaphysical value was constructed in the context of a creative act and a receptive act treated in a 'maximalistic' way. Metaphysical values are inseparable from the 'how' of a work of art (Tarnowski called it a key fact), that is from its concrete aspect formed by artistic values and mastery: they are both transcendent and immanent in relation to a work of art.<sup>16</sup>

Tarnowski went on to deal with the iconic aspect (a term with a positive value) of these works of art "which elevate us through their form".<sup>17</sup> In this way he drew attention to the basic component of a work of art, which seems to disappear as a criterion or argument for the success of a work of art, particularly of a literary work of art; disappear in a context of conversations on aesthetic themes and of the expression of awareness of writers themselves.

Other participants in this debate (Tadeusz Sobolewski, Marta Tarabuła, Mieczysław Tomaszewski, Teresa Walas, Adam Zagajewski) questioned almost in unison, although from different points of view, Tarnowski's introductory idea of art as consolation. This agreement in non-acceptance of Tarnowski's idea is puzzling. The idea of consolation, apart from the fact that it creates tangible parallels with philosophy of yesteryear, weakens the 'maximalistic' perception of art (art of words). It introduces a kind of halftone, a lowering of functions, which these participants, maybe, had in mind, although they did not name it in a straightforward way.

Zagajewski did not agree that the results of an artist's work are 'only' consolation. He saw a depreciating analogy to art in the allusion to Boetius's *On the Consolation of Philosophy* (Boetius wrote it while in prison).

I would not like art to refer to human life in the same way as philosophy to the situation in which Boetius found himself. That means that I would not like art to be only consolation. The results of treating art in this way are very grave—it would mean that

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<sup>16</sup> Karol Tarnowski, *O pocieszeniu, jakie daje sztuka*, „Znak”, (12) 2002, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

the whole of human existence is prison-like, black. My objections are not purely terminological. They are connected with a certain vision of man's condition.<sup>18</sup>

Zagajewski, who elsewhere is a 'classical' poet, defended here a vision of art which would be not 'consolation', but meaningfully referred to man's life and the space which is transcendence of this life; important, connected with 'salvation'. Tadeusz Sobolewski, who earlier also had not accepted 'consolation' through art, said in a straightforward way: "I have a feeling that you may descend with art to hell, but that art does not lead to salvation".<sup>19</sup> However, he found such functions of art ("of the creation of antibodies") which undoubtedly located it in fairly high regions of human activities.

'Consolation' is the concept with which other participants of this debate, for example Teresa Walas, Mieczysław Tomaszewski and Krystian Lupa (mentioned earlier), also did not agree. Almost all participants seemed to be against a formula belittling in some way the functions of art, maybe through narrowing of the meaning of the term. This almost unanimous agreement is worth noticing (the only exception was Czesław Miłosz); it was not necessarily suggested in a straightforward way that art should be elevated and elevating, while the idea of consolation lowers its image.

But the utterance of Karol Tarnowski seems not to be uniform, at least in terms of ideas, character. The idea, which also appeared there, about art as a possibility of understanding fate, is to some extent at odds with 'consolation', so eagerly objected to by panellists. However, it should be taken into consideration that in the formula about the understanding of fate, there returns the philosophical background of Tarnowski, and more specifically his knowledge of phenomenology.

What kind of terminology is used by panellists, and does this terminology point to anything in the context of the issue debated? We observe here one more return into areas of Ingarden's metaphysical

<sup>18</sup> *Walka trwa...*, op.cit., 28.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

values (Tomaszewski), but also statements compromised after Gombrowicz: great art creates wonder, admiration, brings joy. It also returns to the issue of an aesthetic experience as a moment verifying a work of art. Tadeusz Sobolewski, while stressing the value of 'a contact with reality' in a real work of art, in a sense brought again to life, but in a different way, an old Aristotelian category. For all that, when he spoke, while explaining the problem of evil ("great art creates antibodies within us")<sup>20</sup>, paradoxically (because he seemingly distanced himself from the attitudes of other panellists, claiming that art does not lead to salvation), he brought to mind Aristotelian *catharsis*. However, what is the difference between Tarnowski's "metaphysical values" and the potential *catharsis* of Sobolewski? Primarily, the description of Ingarden's category can be easily fitted into a wide field of identity with the phenomenon described by Aristotle. It seems that Sobolowski covered a wider spectrum of contemporary experiences in his reflection, as if he went a bit further in the weakening of a sharp border between 'high' and 'low' art. It should be noted that we return quickly to very old, primordial codifications to deal with this elementary problem. A similar situation occurred with a brilliant formula of Sobolewski, which was strengthened by his personal experience from the borders of aesthetics.

When I discover some value I feel more free than when I have to deny it.<sup>21</sup>

It may be claimed that we can hear in this statement an echo of Polish aesthetic theories from the nineteenth century, and maybe something else. But the context in which this statement was made suggests that the statement was constructed as if from scratch, according to new reality and new experience.

It is characteristic that in this conversation there returned (directly and indirectly) and were strengthened determinants of the situation

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 39.

of aesthetic perception: so, firstly, the category of beauty—as if it was still valid, as if it had not been shattered by contemporary ideas—and of contemplation (so important in aesthetics ever since Shaftsbury), an icon (art as introduction, initiation); necessity (in relation to the constructive requirements of a work of art); truth and falsity of art (relations with reality experienced by man).

Let us sum up our observations: This debate gave an impression of the tower of Babel: each of the participants, despite an illusion of an exchange of ideas, was, at best, stigmatized with their own individualized view of art and system of ideas, being the result of their own aesthetic experience, as if a bit hermetic in the context of the experiences of others. At worst, they were locked within their systems. This debate, against primary assumptions, as if returned to the regions of the considerations: what is art (and what is literary art) in general, rather than, in what way its image is changing today. For sure, almost all participants *hide in themselves a direction 'upward' in thinking about art—as if little* had changed, although some situations showing that more than a little had changed were recalled.

The debate revealed longing for 'great art', great works of art—also literary works of art—and a hope that *maybe everything remained unchanged*.

It is important that *awareness of the so called form, that is the ways of constructing works*, existed for participants as an inalienable fact.

The whole debate seemed to be dominated by the voice of Wiesław Juszczak, conceived by the editors as a summing up of the debate, which clearly took the debate into axiological heights in the context of the understanding of art *and its nature*.<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting that earlier participants many times stressed ideas connected with the communicative character of art, and this feature was presented as constitutive for works of art. Wiesław Juszczak,

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<sup>22</sup> *Na progu tajemnicy. Z Wiesławem Juszczakiem rozmawia Janusz Marciniak*, „Znak”, op. cit.

already in earlier debates<sup>23</sup> and works, excluded communicative character from the field of reflections on art. He perceives a work of art as reality transcending the sphere of social entanglements. He answered the question about what is and what is not a work of art in this way:

Today it is very common to assume that we cannot or that we do not have to answer this question in a straightforward way. Or that there is no answer to it. Such a form of escapism (typical of critics and historians of art) deepens the chaos of criteria used to put these phenomena in order, which mark the field of art or which we include in this field. Because there is no doubt that such a field exists.[...]

As the result of it we arrive at a conclusion—obvious to me—that the state of what is now considered to be art does not allowed for its definition. To answer the question of what art is, we have to forget about what is happening to it now. The culture of today has marginalized art, and that which is considered art usually only fakes it. This fake nature of art is repulsive. One needs to allow to be 'repulsed' in order to arrive at such a distant spot, in which another, authentic image of art can be found. Such spots exists even today, but they get lost in the general chaos.

[...] in order to define the essence of art, one must reach for firmer ground than the shifting sands of today. Such a spot can be located at the chronological beginning of activities which we call art. Because each artist, whom I would call so without hesitation, stands at the beginning of art. In the same way as each believer stands at the beginnings of religion, and each philosopher at the beginnings of the question "how does what exists exist?". In their essence all their areas form a unity. Man is placed in all these areas beyond civilization—confronted by questions which are at the same time the first and final ones.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See *Nietolerancja (rozmowa z Wiesławą Wierzchowską)*, in Wiesław Juszcak, *Fragmety. Szkice z teorii i filozofii sztuki*, Warszawa 1995.

<sup>24</sup> *Na progu tajemnicy...*, op. cit., 76-77.

Keeping up this tone of radical (and to certain extent common-sense) thinking, he concluded:

[...] reason acts as it should only when it knows the borders of its acting. These borders are very narrow and cover only fragments of reality. Art reveals truth about the fact that reality is an unfathomable mystery. The more it reveals to us the borders of cognition, the closer it takes us to a threshold of a mystery, the greater it is, the more authentic. [...] art is in showing the limits of the senses *through what is sensual*. Its goal is to show the limits of perception, not to rave incoherently and irresponsibly. That would be the beginning of a provisional definition of art.<sup>25</sup>

The whole utterance of Wiesław Juszczak, including fragments not quoted here: firstly—corresponds well with the statement with which I started this sketch, treating the role of poetry as the highest initiation into reality using the example of the unique poetry of Rilke; secondly—is in agreement with the most classical definitions of art (art of words) starting from the oldest ones, through the expletive motives growing over centuries till the nineteenth and twentieth century (phenomenology). Thirdly, this thinking about art and defining it, seemingly authorized by tradition, correlated with the maximalist perception of the very early periods and those which immediately followed them, turns out to be perceptively observed, formulated afresh, profoundly deepened.

It is interesting that an expert in the exquisite and brilliant paintings of Witold Wojtkiwicz, when asked about literary masterpieces, listed, among others Dostoyevsky, but also Orzeszkowa's *Nad Niemnem* (*On the Niemen*), skilfully dodging (in the case of the latter writer) the label of didactic literature and gradual disgrace of this type of literature through the ideas, attitudes and fashions of the present times. In this case, as can be indirectly implied, Juszczak was confronted with primordial criteria: non reducible questions about man and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 77.



the means (level) of transformation of creative material, the project of the coherent artistic whole accomplished in this novel.

When asked about relations between culture and art, Juszcak answered:

Art has not separated itself from culture. European culture has developed in a way which has pushed art to the margin. It became the national culture and broke with religion as its primary source. I do not treat art as an absolutist category. I would rather say that art is an absolute pursuit. It is an attempt to get closer to the mystery of the Absolute (in the religious and ontological sense), deeply rooted in human nature. It is an attempt to show an impassable threshold of cognition of higher things than those accessible to the senses and the mind. It would seem that this approach is, in the context of our times, isolated. Indecently extremist, full of very suspicious (from the point of view of so called post-modernism) arbitrariness, moving in the direction of old intellectual means of captivating others—as it is customarily referred to now.<sup>26</sup>

It would seem that yet another situation occurs: that Wiesław Juszcak presents here the so called 'metaphysical concept of beauty', which is not necessarily debatable on the ground of aesthetics, because it moves on its own into a very different field—theological-metaphysical.<sup>27</sup> But a clear counter argument here is the peak moment of the aesthetics of Ingarden (mentioned here several times): the theory of metaphysical values was derived by Ingarden from real aesthetic experience. It was reality which served as a point of departure. Similar terminology was also used by earlier, 'empirically' oriented panellists, referring to various arts, and not only to literature. For example, Tadeusz Sobolewski stated: "I am searching for films which would lead me towards the mystery located beyond the territory of art".<sup>28</sup>

It should be noted how Juszcak's utterance was treated by the editors. Juszcak is an expert on Wojtkiewicz and Modernism in

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>27</sup> See Grzegorz Dziamski, op. cit., 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Walka trwa...*, op. cit., 35.

painting, a philosopher of art—his opinion was put as a summing up of earlier voices of such people (besides those already mentioned) as Zygmunt Kubiak, Czesław Miłosz, Jacek Sempoliński, Tomasz Stańko, Zbigniew Werpechowski, and Adam Wiedemann.

Wiesław Juszczak was also a participant in an important meeting which had been organized slightly earlier (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 24-25 May, 1998) and which had been very polarized.

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The debate which I would like to see as the other pole (in regards to the debate in *Znak*) was recorded by *Res Publica Nowa* (winter 2006). The following people participated in it: Lidia Burska, Andrzej Chłopecki, Małgorzata Dziewulska, Piotr Gruszczyński, Maria Poprzęcka, Adam Wiedemann (again) and Marek Zaleski.<sup>29</sup> The specific ‘polarity’ of this conversation is to a large extent the result of the small distance towards the appalling experiments of the so called artists which happened recently, and which with full respect to artists’ freedom have been received by the media as accomplished works.

It seems that the authors of these utterances, as critics, are deeply involved in the reality of new art; the smaller distance to these events implies a bigger capability to understand individual situations. However, it may make generalizations more difficult. At the same time (and very strongly) the longings for more traditional criteria of works of art were expressed. Critics spoke quite similarly to the panellists from *Znak*, but their attitudes were more approving of nostalgia. Even if it had not been expressed explicitly, we could still speak about some helplessness as far as the accepting of the present state is concerned.

Marcel Duchamp, in the *Znak* panel, was treated with detachment (to use a euphemistic phrase), and in the debate in *Res Publica Nowa* was treated as a serious caesura (Maria Poprzęcka). The problem of transgression was treated in a somewhat analogous way, although the fact of transcending borders in art was commented on with more

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<sup>29</sup> *Nie ma wyjścia*, „Res Publica Nowa”, zima (winter) 2006.

details in the second debate: it was recognized as a phenomenon which is not new and which is devalued.

Taking to account the immediate results of the debate (*Res Publica Nowa*) and its summing up, we must notice a strong shadow on the open vision of a work of art (including literature), indirectly connected with tradition (also the tradition from the period before 1989). But even if the fact that such a conclusion is pessimistic (pessimism being the result of the majority of voices), it testifies to the expectations of critics different from those situations and examples they have just finished dealing with.

It is extreme events which were noted and given a question mark; for example an actor's decision to film his own expected death—as in the case of Kraków's actor Jerzy Nowak—as a creative act, an accomplished work of art. This led to a question: is it possible that an unlimited gesture of an artist (one gesture—here we return to the figure of Marcel Duchamp) creates a work of art? Is the situation of a public scandal (always? usually? rarely?) conducive to the confirmation of the authentic materialization of a creative act? Some of the speakers seemed to adapt pessimistic attitudes (treated very seriously); they were convinced that the specificity of the commented on events is typical for our times, and that it will, most probably, remain as such in the future. A work of art becomes something *easy*, a caprice of imagination, a plaything, even if it concerns an existentially important (serious) Problem. As if the Modernist labour (of Rodin or Rilke) had somewhere disappeared; labour which led to works of art of different types.

But even in the conversation about 'extreme' artistic situations there appear such sentences (about some of the newest works):

[...] perfectly executed great work, [the work] is closed, finished, it has a great power of expression, it grows out of a creative dialogue with tradition...

These are totally traditional criteria.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 98.

So, this potential model, which is not often realized in practice, is present in the mind...

But the 'ontological crisis' of a work of art was still discussed (Chłopecki), as well as loss of originality replaced by sampling (in literature) and about the 'mass nature of being an artist' or wishing to be one; about the aspirations of all arts to be turned into commodities. Do these phenomena decide that a real change has taken place, that there is no longer social awareness about the existence of a phenomenon known as 'a work of art'?

Still, it seems that it is not necessarily so. Małgorzata Dziewulska spoke about the "flattening of the reality of a work of art, which is dealt with by the media in a nightmarish language of commentaries".<sup>31</sup> The very conversation in *Res Publica Nova* seems to be overwhelmed by the media's image of art.

But after all, in somewhat earlier periods, instead of, for example, sampling, we had plagues of imitation unimaginable today (for example the fashion to write sonnets after Mickiewicz's sonnets...); while being an artist has been ennobling for some time—that is how the situation is perceived by the majority of societies—therefore the huge number of contemporary poets should not be surprising. Here we had only a somewhat 'natural' condensation of the problem. It is worth noting the condition of art criticism, judgements of which seem to be changing under pressure of reality (in the debate the only person who raised the question of criteria was Marek Zaleski), although even in this conversation there appeared symbols (symbolization) and metaphor (metaphorization) as notions representing the extraordinariness of *an organization* which decides about the independent reality of a work of art.

When, in the debate in *Znak*, Tarnowski referred to Ingardern's metaphysical values, he stressed that they are only possible exclusively thanks to the 'how' of a work. So, the way in which it was organized—the so called formal level, remains 'organically' connected with what

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 101.

'shines' through it. This issue was also raised in the debate in *Res Publica Nowa*. Adam Wiedemann stated:

It is not artists, but critics who are guilty. They have fixed themselves on a thematic criterion. What matters is the theme and its social importance. Both art critics and musical critics, and most spectacularly literary critics, are directed by the thematic criterion.<sup>32</sup>

Who knows if it is not the most serious and most adequate of accusations directed at the ways in which literary criticism functions nowadays; it is probably connected with the mass nature of artistic production, the huge number of proposals. The more is left to be read, the more the 'average level' is enough (there is no time to listen to the depth of a 'construction of an individual voice'), the rest will be completed by such and such theme, solved in this or that way, more or less attuned to tumid social quarrels, different world views and various socio-political allergies. A literary work of art becomes more and more an element of a discourse, as if against the judgements of Wiesław Juszczak.

Tadeusz Sobolewski stated a bit earlier (it is true that he spoke about visual arts, but the rule seems to be more general):

The press defended the freedom of an artist, trying to prevent her from receiving a penalty for insulting religious feelings. However, many of us, journalists, had ill feelings about it—in the name of a just cause of freedom and tolerance we all succumb to blackmail, we defend an ordinary trifle. While defending freedom we ourselves gag our mouths, not being able to give an uninhibited evaluation of an incriminated work. Exactly like in the period before 1989, when 'a tough ideological war' was being waged and it was necessary in the name of world peace, at all costs, to be on the side of progress and against obscurants. Fearing an attack of conservative forces we could not say that the emperor was naked.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>33</sup> *Walka trwa...*, op. cit., 43.

Thematic criteria also point to a social awareness of a work of literature as a work of art. Features which discriminate literary works of art, particularly of poetry, go down and down.

Essentialist language is limited or non-existent. It seems that the attitudes recurrent in the debates in *Znak* and *Res Publica Nowa* and verbalized and non-verbalized expectations embedded in them; if we probe deeper into them, would undermine an earlier attempt of a hypothesis about the 'schizophrenic' nature of social views on art.

#### CROSS-CUTTING, FROM A DISTANCE...

The debate in *Ethos* (no. 40/1997) had a similar tone, but even more radical axiological contours. It was meaningfully entitled "Sztuka na rozdrożu" ("Art at the Crossroads"). The participants included, among others, Bohdan Pocij and Stanisław Rodziński. I do not know if an analogy between literature and music could be drawn, but Bohdan Pocij stated as regards the latter:

Classical music, being created today within civilization which used to be called Western, in my opinion can be divided, or falls apart, into two main spheres: in the first one [...] there exist form creating forces, while in the second there exist factors dismantling form.<sup>34</sup>

Form creative forces have deep roots in European tradition, those dismantling it are pressing from elsewhere. It seems that in the case of literature such a generalization would be too wide; it would not have much sense. Although, maybe this reflection of a music critic could be used as a tool (key) to order perception in the field of literature.

The dominance of the thematic perspective, communicative-social-discursive would be placed alongside—these factors dismantling form; although in both debates analysed before we could recognize some resistance and often hidden protest against such a state of affairs.

The condition of literary art (awareness of it) could also be detected from conversations dealing with apparently different themes. The state of affairs connected with the contemporary awareness of literary

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<sup>34</sup> Bohdan Pocij, *Co się stało z muzyką w naszym stuleciu?*, „Ethos” 1997, no. 40, 32.

works was revealed clearly in the last debate in *Tygodnik Powszechny* (22, 25, 27, 29, 30 32, 35/2009). I am recalling this debate because despite its different main theme, it creates a very good perspective from which to see the problem, which is so interesting to me. A debate of teachers of Polish literature about teaching literature becomes a kind of source of knowledge on the theme: what has become with the understanding and ways of perception of literary works? In the debate we had academics from departments of Polish and literary critics (among others: Paweł Próchniak, Dariusz Nowacki, Piotr Śliwiński, Ryszard Nycz, Michał Paweł Markowski, and Henryk Markiewicz). If we ask the question: what, for the participants of the debate, is a literary work? the answers to this question (marginal to their discussion) would turn out to be a bit surprising.

After all, it would seem that philology in general (primarily 'knowledge of language and its monuments')<sup>35</sup> and contemporary Polish philology in particular, over the last century, has become a discipline which puts together scholars of works of art materialized in language: the discipline is analogous in a way to the history of art for example, which analyses and teaches us to understand works expressed in the languages of the visual arts.

Participants having in mind (they should have had) what was accomplished in the twentieth century and earlier, in the field of the understanding of the language of expression of literary works (and the basic fact that the theme, the message of a text, is something different than this very thought expressed within discourse, but outside of a work), really were moving at the margins. The voice of Dariusz Nowacki<sup>36</sup>(which was polemical with the vision of Paweł Próchniak) was in fact a demonstration of a conviction that nothing new can be said about literary masterpieces in the context of schools (and maybe also generally?), particularly of masterpieces from the past; everything

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<sup>35</sup> Michał Głowiński, *Filologia*, entry in: Michał Głowiński, Teresa Kostkiewiczowa, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, Janusz Sławiński, *Słownik terminów literackich*, ed. by J. Sławiński, 1998.

<sup>36</sup> „Tygodnik Powszechny”, no. 25 (3128), 21.06.2009.

has been said about them (“really, there is nothing to be merged and understood, because everything was merged and understood a long time ago”—he was referring to the works of Mickiewicz). Even if we take into consideration the fact that the debate was centred on teaching Polish literature in schools, we could still see that in this approach we have a holistic degradation of the idea of a work of art, which is, of its nature, the result of a creative process, and a process of its perception is simply its repeated actualization, and it requires a creative attitude which Nowacki could not understand. Particularly doubtful (I use the perspective of the perception presented earlier) were the judgements of Michał Paweł Markowski, both judgements he formulated on his own and those which were the result of the critical remarks of Henryk Markiewicz. Markowski defended the rights of students to discover during their studies the problems of the world in which they live; being exposed to themes conducive to self-understanding. And again—he disregarded the fact of the uniqueness of an accomplished work of art. After all, Polish philology should provide tools to recognize such texts. Markowski stated:

Polish philology should be first of all a school of close reading [I agree with this B.K.-Ch.], regardless of whether it is Grochola or Heidegger who is being read.<sup>37</sup>

But Markowski had in mind a discursive type of reading. Let us put aside the fact that the understanding of Heidegger as such is positive for any mind, and for any attempt to understand man in the world, yet it calls for a different attitude, different perceptive skills, than the understanding of a literary work of art. What would happen if a student of literature lost a conviction about the different quality of the organization of a text of Grochola and, for example, of Chwiniak?

Obviously, the caesura of Gombrowicz should have put people responsible for literary education on the alert. They should focus on such problems as, for example, the creative process, which is in a way an analogon of a real perception of a work; they should reveal

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<sup>37</sup> „Tygodnik Powszechny”, no. 35 (3138), 30.08.2009, 47.



all the phases of an aesthetic experience, etc. Generally, they should prepare solid arguments to prove the masterpiece nature of a literary work. In the debate in *Tygodnik Powszechny* the problem of a literary work as a work of art was practically non-existent, even in an indirect way, even in a very indirect way. Masterpieces are cumbersome. They may be treated in terms of clichés, as one of the participants claimed. No one was speaking about mistakes in the teaching process. It was the subject itself which is wrong, and according to some participants this subject could be excluded. For example, Mickiewicz's sonnets—they were the topic of the discussion. After all we know everything about Mickiewicz [sic!].

Markowski critically stated (while writing about the fields of interests of literary scholars):

'True' Polish literature scholars laugh or shake their heads with compassion when they hear the word 'perversion', but they nod with appreciation when they hear the word 'tradition'. At the same time this looks very different a few storeys lower: the best students are more willing to talk about perversion [which is used as an example] than about tradition, because they still see a chance of connecting their interest in literature with the problems which concern them most: from existence to politics.<sup>38</sup>

Maybe yes. But perversion as an extreme form of man's experience 'gets exhausted'; the possibility of accomplished artistic expressions calls for a more efficient 'organization of form'—let us look at how Faulkner wrote about perversion, and who else?

Tradition, on the other hand, may appear to be in some academic treatments fossilized, but it is still an important threshold in acquiring tools for a deep analysis of, even contemporary, works and their language of artistic expression...

Generally the participants of the great debate were dealing with contexts, themes, fashions. The awareness of a literary work of art

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<sup>38</sup> „Tygodnik Powszechny”, no. 32 (3135), 9.08.2009, 34.

with its extraordinary type of existence—organization and expression generating a type of aesthetic experience—got lost.

Interesting results can also be achieved when one reads the latest issues of *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* (2009), where some of the answers to the questionnaire were really extensive: “Po przełomie—najważniejsze książki dwudziestolecia” (“After the Watershed—The Most Important Books of the Last Two Decades”). Michał Głowiński (1/2009) wrote about intimate journals; they have dominated his perception of literature in recent decades. It is characteristic that he mentions, among others, the journals of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Stefan Kisielewski, Miron Białoszewski, Zygmunt Mycielski, Jan Józef Lipski, Wiktor Woroszyński; that is the journals of people well known (also for their literary achievements) to the general public.

Generally, one gets the impression that there is no search for books (and this would imply constant reworking of criteria to deal with this discourse); there is just the bolstering of the confidence of well-established authors. As if in an ostentatious, unwritten way there grew difficulties with choice (an anxiety connected with it). Within this typology there appear: Zbigniew Herbert (*Elegia na odejście*) (*Elegy for the Departure*), Czesław Miłosz (*To*) (*It*), Wisława Szymborska (*Koniec i początek*) (*The End and the Beginning*); that is most often the names and book known very well, mostly thanks to mass media, press campaigns, sometimes thanks to competitions. Of course, it is not that the volumes listed here did not deserve to be listed, but that the well-known names are safe, they allow, maybe, for less radical work of a perceptive apparatus.

The presence of ‘classics’, of ‘old writers’ in the typologies of *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* is a testimony to a longing for these aesthetic norms, which point to their nature as masterpieces. Ewa Sonnenberg spoke about a young generation of writers with reluctance:

There appears a sort of new type of a poet and a new attitude to the creative process: what matters is a cheap effect, flashiness, plays with intelligence and careless trivialization—these are key features necessary to be a poet of our times.[...]There disappears

individuality, originality, identity, and they are replaced by identical aesthetic positions, that is mutual imitation of poems, metaphors, ideas. The last two decades have brought victory for mediocrity over greatness, randomness over purpose, mangling over solid work. [...] Distortion, deformation, shifting, destruction are all ....cool! Had Gombrowicz sensed it, he would have disposed of his talent differently, [...] Creation [...] is not some 'five minutes', as Warhol wanted it. Instead it means arduous formulation, transformation, development of form and content. Creation means disintegration and rebuilding on a new, higher plane. The way of creation is like stages in initiation.<sup>39</sup>

Through the nostalgia of this utterance, we can clearly see 'hard' criteria. Very old ones like 'individuality, originality, identity', which resemble the nineteenth century reflections of Stanisław Witkiewicz, who spoke of intelligence, talent and identity as conditions for a masterpiece to be created. Sonnenberg asked for a work of art as a testimony of struggle with the resistance of the creative material.

While Andrzej Zawada stated: "Maybe, however, as many symptoms indicate, the age of Gutenberg is really drawing to an end, and then literature will have to be an extinct genre."<sup>40</sup>

Generally speaking, however, it is the debate in *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* which showed the awareness of a literary text as a work of art to the greatest degree—some participants mentioned it *verbatim*, and the presence of 'old poets' in this debate could be explained in this way.

#### AN ATTEMPT AT GENERALIZATION

A work of art (a phenomenon, a certain fact, the understanding of which grew deeper over the centuries and phases in culture) is in its 'proto-point of exit' a result of the choice of specific elements (fragments, parts,...etc.). Therefore the key activity of an artist is the decision to keep or reject certain elements which abundant

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<sup>39</sup> „Kwartalnik Artystyczny” 2009, no. 3, 125-126.

<sup>40</sup> „Kwartalnik Artystyczny” 2009, no. 2, 147.

reality has to offer. The structure of a work is therefore the necessary hierarchy of its components—to put it in a simple, elementary way.

Therefore, a work of art cumulates and specifies the activities of selection and evaluation. The clearest basic nature of a work of art can be observed in music, but it exists in all arts. It seems that a work of art, if we remember its ‘natural tissue’, exists in some crucial conflict with some ‘rule’ of contemporaneity: lack of hierarchy, amorphous nature, unification, allergic attitude to all authorities. This conflict is not a clash with theories, an area reserved for phenomena of artistic character. It is a fusion, in which on the one hand we have a work of art created as a result of activities which are unchangeable and universal to the point of transparency, and on the other, the aggressive anthropology of contemporaneity.

It seems that over recent decades works of literary art have been less and less works of art and more and more sites for exchange of ideas, of social discourse.<sup>41</sup>

Critics, although only sporadically, seem to discern this problem, and they either accept the version of contemporaneity proposed by mass media (also in cooperation with them), or return to nostalgic areas of conversations about classics, ‘old poets’, finding (or attempts at finding) in very contemporary texts “a perfectly executed work, a closed work, finished, of great power of expression.”

The judgements of the participants of the debates described here are located between convictions that something is ‘declining’, that no one really knows what is a literary work of art, and elite, ‘narrow’ certainty that not much has changed, that changes and dislocations more and more point to some *constans*. This can even be discerned in the ‘wishful’ mode of expressing remarks.

But at the same time this is criticism which is a bit timid. It happens that everyday social (or political) problems weaken and shake its aesthetic awareness and sense of criteria (even if these criteria were

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<sup>41</sup> Similar conclusions, although drawn from different example, are presented by Maryla Hopfinger in *Literatura między sztuką a komunikacją* (awaiting publication).

to be treated in a very open way). This criticism is weak, manipulated by the power of mass media, diffused by the plethora of stimuli.

It can be so that this criticism, determined by a new sensitivity towards man and the conviction of the necessity to defend man's rights, is still not able—at the level of its engagement—to reveal some necessary conditions dictated by art, seemingly in conflict with new anthropological values. During the initial reconstructions conducted in this sketch, during the analysis of the description of the 'youngest' poetry, there appeared, at the margin, the problem of a possible opposition: more 'elite' expectations towards a work of art meet with new chaos, new commonality. This situation is complex and unstable, and like any such situation, it might become a field of intensive, dynamic creative activities. Old configurations will be transformed into new values. History is banally repetitive.