

INTRODUCTION TO *POLAND UNDER FEMINIST EYES*
FEMINIST THEORY IN POLAND:
BETWEEN POLITICS AND LITERATURE

URSZULA CHOWANIEC

As this issue was being prepared for publication, Poland was celebrating the twentieth anniversary of its first democratic elections for over four decades. The period inaugurated in June 1989 has often been referred to as the “new” *Dwudziestolecie* [twenty-year interlude], strongly evoking the previous, or interwar *Dwudziestolecie*, which ran from 1918 to 1939 and saw the re-emergence of an independent Poland, until then partitioned by the Prussian, Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. The opening of a new *Dwudziestolecie* saw the end of communist Poland (Polish People’s Republic), and would find a purely arbitrary end in the present year. Whatever the actual historical validity of drawing an analogy between the new and old *Dwudziestolecie*, it offers a convenient comparative perspective on Poland’s recent history. The main parallel usually drawn between the two periods is, of course, their democratic character (real or perceived), which was interrupted after 1939 by the advent of World War II and communist rule, to be resumed only after 1989. In this way, the years in-between automatically take on the appearance of an unnatural interruption or historical *caesura*, while the post-1989 transition also presents itself as an effort to bridge all those wasted decades. The same kind of narrative is often deployed in women’s studies. The two periods are enshrined in the social memory as intervals of relative freedom for women, in contrast to the oppressive character of communist rule, which granted them constitutional equality and freedom, while laying on them the double burden of paid work outside the home and unpaid toil inside it. The interwar *Dwudziestolecie* was

without doubt a time of women's liberation: women gained the right to vote, obtained better access to education, and played leading roles in the nation's vibrant artistic, academic and political life. Women's writing underwent a time of real upheaval in these years and made an indelible mark on Polish literature, with key authors such as Zofia Nałkowska, Maria Dąbrowska, Maria Kuncewiczowa, Irena Krzywicka, Helena Boguszevska and many others. The questions immediately arising are: How does our new *Dwudziestolecie* fare in comparison? Is today's Poland a better place for women of all social classes? Are women's rights taken as seriously as they were in 1918-1939 in the sphere of politics, in the academy, and in social life at large? Do women play such an important role in literature and scholarship?

Coinciding with the preparation of this issue, the Congress of Polish Women took place in Warsaw (20-21 June, 2009). In her opening speech, Maria Janion, a Polish scholar and former anti-communist activist, expressed her disappointment with the new Polish democracy:

For years I was well aware of the clear division between serious and non-serious matters: in times of oppression the struggle for independence is considered a serious matter, and the fight for women's rights is not. Political persecutions affect the activists; but repression and violence against women remain their own business. I believed that freedom for the whole society should be achieved first, and then, together and peacefully, we would improve women's conditions. To my surprise, it transpired that a woman was to be a "family creature" in liberated Poland, a creature who—instead of engaging in politics—should take care of the home. It took some time before I realized that democracy in Poland has a masculine gender (Janion 2009).¹

¹ In: http://www.kongreskobiet.pl/readarticle.php?article_id=27 (Accessed: July 1, 2009). If not stated otherwise, Polish texts are translated and edited here by Urszula Chowaniec and Ursula Phillips. It is worth mentioning here an excellent publication by Elżbieta Matynia *Performative democracy* (2009), where the author elaborates: "The most emblematic poster of Solidarity's campaign was a full-size black-and-white picture of Gary Cooper from *High Noon*, walking alone to his final confrontations with the outlaws. On the poster the pistol in his hand has been airbrushed out and replaced with a paper ballot, and above the sheriff's star on his chest he wore a red-and-white badge with the familiar Solidarity logo [...]. The poster became an instant hit, and everybody revelled in how well it captured what people felt at this time: dramatic tension, affirmation of justice, a sense of agency, and the assurance of a successful performance. The message was right on target, and only from the perspective of time does it reveal the once discreet trait of the democratic transformation project: its maleness. In opposition to the gendered image of the nation, which has been always

This is quite a pessimistic view of contemporary Poland, but alas, impossible to dispute. Women are still overwhelmingly seen as belonging to the private realm, and not fit to be participants in the public domain. “Feminist” is an offensive or ridiculous label. In her essays on feminism in 20th-century Poland, Agata Chałupnik notes that a feminist in Poland is still seen as “a single woman (sometimes a lesbian) with no children and no bras. What’s worse, she does not wax herself or wear make-up, and she is ugly, aggressive, and joyless” (Chałupnik 2008, 77).² Obviously, no one would have to worry about this inane stereotype, if it did not capture the position of women’s liberation in Polish society as shown in many polls and reports.³ Polish women have only the most minimal abortion law; they are grossly underpaid in comparison to men in similar positions; enjoy a very limited access to the better-remunerated posts and carry out the lion’s share of domestic labour. Moreover, the Polish mass-media presents women as sexual objects or in their role as mothers. Roland Barthes’ short essay on women writers in *Elle* magazine,⁴ mocking the insidious association made between women and their role as mothers as part of sexist ideology, was published more than fifty years ago (originally published in 1957)! Following the huge feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, societies have not fundamentally changed their attitudes and representations of women: it is hard to

female, the gendered image of the newly institutionalized democratic state in Poland, the source of societal hope at the end of the twentieth century, emerged as unquestionably male” (from the chapter: *Provincializing Global Feminism*, Matynia 2009, 116).

² Agata Chałupnik’s essay “Feministka, czyli gwałtu co się dzieje!” is part of an excellent collection of essays on Polish social habits, lifestyles and collective behaviour. Among its many topics are: alcoholism, the mini-skirt, secular holidays, and Papal pilgrimages. All the entries, written in an eloquent and witty style, give a sense of Polish national idiosyncrasy. See: Małgorzata Szpakowska, ed. 2008. *Obyczaje polskie. Wiek XX w krótkich hasłach*. Warsaw: W.A.B.

³ See the report “Kobiety dla Polski. Polska dla kobiet”, Published by Fundacja Feminoteka, 2009: http://www.kongreskobiet.pl/downloads/raport_skrotwww.pdf (Accessed: 1 July, 2009).

⁴ “If we are to believe the weekly *Elle* [...]”—writes Barthes—“the woman of letters is a remarkable zoological species: she brings forth pell-mell, novels and children. We are introduced, for example, to Jacqueline Lenoir (two daughters, one novel); Marina Gray (one son, one novel), Nicole Dotreil (two sons, four novels); etc. [...]. In every feature of *Elle* we find this twofold anchor: lock the gynaeceum, then and only then release women inside. [...] Write, if you want to. Women, should be very proud of it; but don’t forget on the other hand to produce children” in Barthes 1993, 50-51.

avoid the conclusion that either feminist ideals have failed or that we are facing one of the biggest antifeminist backlashes ever...or both.

The set of articles presented in this first issue of *Women's Writing Online* offers an overview of women's writing, film, theatre and art as debated among both Polish and non-Polish scholars. Within the Polish contemporary context, it seeks to give an answer to Toril Moi's classic question "what is a woman?" (Moi 1999). The ambition of this volume is not to provide an exhaustive account of what is going on in women's studies in Poland, but to give a selection of academic elaborations on women's activities in the new *Dwudziestolecie*. The authors of this volume wish to examine Polish women in literature, art, film or theatre, and to look at them from various angles, among which the generational aspect will play an important role. Furthermore, many authors concentrate on the national aspect, in order to explain how the position of Polish women has been shaped by the ideological specificity of Poland's history and national development. In this way, the time span covered by these articles is not limited to the last twenty years, but reaches back to previous historical periods. Finally, the articles are connected by the theme of gender and concentrate on women's issues.

The feminist perspective is understood here as the social, cultural or political framework within which the authors examine women's concerns in their diversity, complexity, and controversy. We are fully aware of the fact that "feminist" is not an easy word, and that it is burdened with all the ridiculous associations that Chałupnik mentions in her text. Susan Sontag once said that for her "feminism was also a stupid word, an empty word like all big words that end in 'ism.'" Nevertheless, whether we like the word or not, it means something very important. "[I]t means"—continues Sontag—"being aware of the situation of inequality between men and women, of the oppression of women, and wanting to do concrete things to change that situation" (Sontag 1995, 158-159). Regardless of the place, whether it is Great Britain, Finland, the United States or Poland, feminism (as a word—the "*F-word*"—as a movement, as a political standpoint, or as a reading and interpretative strategy) has never been

popular with the majority. Indeed, many of us, identifying ourselves with feminism, do not like this word. We know very well how often we are compelled to explain what we mean by feminism and why it is important for literary, sociological or anthropological studies. We often have to defend it and insist that ours is not a “passé reading.” Finally, we are forced to clarify why feminism should not be seen as more “ideological” than other (allegedly “objective”) perspectives.

While acknowledging the rich variety of approaches and aspects covered by feminism and its reception in Poland, this introduction concentrates on the ways in which it has been adopted in Polish literary studies, starting in the 1990s. It will also make short references to other periods of Polish literary history, namely to the first publication of Simone de Beauvoir's writings in Poland. It analyses the three main strategies according to which feminist research has been applied and identifies the main reasons why feminism has met with so much resistance in the Polish context. There are many reasons for the cold reception suffered by feminism in other post-socialist countries; but here we concentrate on the specific dynamics of its adaptation to Polish scholarship.⁵

Women as a politically disadvantaged group are made to believe that their situation of limited freedom is their destiny, and “their destiny may even be shaped by the appearance that oppression is natural” (Scholz 2008, 6). This is the view of Simone de Beauvoir, a milestone in feminist research, whose centenary of birth we celebrated last year (2008). Beauvoir understood that a woman is a free being

⁵ Among the comparative elaborations of early feminist movements in Eastern and Central Europe, see: Łobodzińska, Barbara, ed. 1995. *Family, Women, and Employment in Central-Eastern Europe*, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group; Gal, Susan, Gail Kligman, eds. 2000. *The Politics of Gender After Socialism: A Comparative-Historical Essay*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Molyneux, Maxine. 1995. “Gendered Transitions in Eastern Europe”, *Feminist Studies* 21(3): 637-646; Watson, Peggy. 1993. “Eastern Europe's Silent Revolution: Gender”, *Sociology* 27 (3): 471-487; ;Watson, Peggy. 1997. “Anti-feminism After Communism”, in Oakley, Anne and Juliette Mitchell, eds. 1999. *Who's Afraid of Feminism*, New York: The New Press; Renne, Tanya. ed. 1997. *Ana's Land. Sisterhood in Eastern Europe*, Oxford: Westview Press; Funk, Nanette and Magda Mueller, eds. 1993. *Gender Politics and Post-Communism. Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, New York and London: Routledge.

mystified into believing that she is confined to certain, particular roles, and thus, a subject of limited freedom. Her freedom is constrained, in this way, by social expectations and reduced to the level of social oppression. It is, however, a very particular type of subjugation. "Women's oppression differs from [...] other forms of oppression insofar as there appears to be no historical starting point for it" and therefore the oppression may seem to be a "natural" state of things. Moreover, "women are oppressed as women, but separated from each other, and often have more in common with men of their class than they do with other women from a different class" (Scholz 2008, 6), which thus makes them reluctant to speak on behalf of all women. De Beauvoir, however, thoroughly deconstructs the notion of the "natural" provenance of the division between sexes:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman [*femme*]. No biological, psychological, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female [*la femelle humaine*] acquires in society, it is civilisation as whole which develops this product, between the male and the eunuch, and which one calls feminine [*féminine*] (Beauvoir 1989, 267).

This important recognition of the position of women was elaborated in 1949 in *Le Deuxième sexe* (The Second Sex). This timely text was translated into Polish in 1972. Yet, the Polish translation was a *curiosus* of the publishing market under communism, since communism was considered to be free from oppressive capitalist structures, and thus from sexist and patriarchal ideology. Beauvoir's book was therefore read as a highly bourgeois and characteristically western reflection, far removed from the Polish reality. Elżbieta Pakszys has examined the reception of the 1972 translation of Beauvoir's classic. According to her reckoning, the first five thousand copies of the first edition were produced for the consumption of snobbish Polish elites, eager to know what was trendy in the West. The reviews were mostly negative. The viewpoint of the book seemed out of date and out of sync with a society in which the unconditional equality between the sexes received at least a

constitutional guarantee.⁶ “Today that emancipation is a reality, the arguments of both sides [the advocates of and opponents of equal rights—U.Ch.], seem to be outdated”—argued Barbara Nowak in the *Tygodnik Kulturalny* review.⁷ Not surprisingly then, the 1972 translation met with a void in readership and had no actual impact on scholarly interest.⁸ Similarly, when in 1982 Dorota Hołówka published a collection of feminist articles entitled *One is Not Born a Woman*⁹ (*Nikt nie rodzi się kobietą*), which makes a direct reference to de Beauvoir, it had no real effect on shaping feminist consciousness among either scholars or activists. Hołówka intended to introduce to Polish academic circles the subject of the Women's Liberation Movement. In her *Introduction* the editor outlined the twenty-year work

⁶ 1952 Constitution: Article 78: (1) Women in the Republic of Poland shall have equal rights with men in all fields of public, political economic, social and cultural life. (2) The equality of the rights of women shall be guaranteed by: 1. equal rights with men to work and to be paid according to the principle “equal pay for equal work”, the right to rest and leisure, to social insurance, to education, to honors and decorations, and to hold public offices; 2. mother-and-child care, protection of expectant mothers, paid leave before and after confinement, the development of a network of maternity clinics, crèches and nursery schools, the extension of a network of service establishments and canteens; 3. The Republic of Poland shall strengthen the position of women in society, especially of gainfully employed mothers and women. Poland—Constitution 1952: http://servat.unibe.ch/icl/pl01000_.html. See also: “Konstytucja z 22 lipca 1952 roku uznawała równe prawa wszystkich obywateli bez względu na płeć, urodzenie, wykształcenie, zawód, narodowość, rasę, wyznanie oraz pochodzenie i położenie społeczne. Ponadto, ustawodawca nadawał kobietom i mężczyznom równe prawa we wszystkich dziedzinach życia państwowego, politycznego, społecznego i kulturalnego. Także zasada równej płacy za równą pracę, ochrona życia rodzinnego, macierzyństwa, prawo do wypoczynku, do ubezpieczenia społecznego, do zajmowania stanowisk publicznych i szereg innych gwarancji określało prawa kobiet” (in:) Zygunt, Agata. 2006. *Postulat różności płci w sferze zatrudnienia i pracy w krajach Unii Europejskiej i Polsce*, Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, p. 152. <http://www.sbc.org.pl/Content/4438/doktorat2665.pdf>.

⁷ I quote after Pakszys 2000, 178. The quotation is originally from *Tygodnik Kulturalny* 8 march 1978. Simone de Beauvoir's book was translated into Polish by Gabryela Mycielska and Maria Leśniewska. The small first edition was almost unavailable in Polish for a long time apart from in the main libraries. A second edition came out in 2003, published by Jacek Santorski & Co.

⁸ I thank Ursula Phillips who drew my attention to the fact that an interesting example of the depreciatory depiction of both Simone de Beauvoir and her book *The Second Sex* can be found in the 1998 novel by Antoni Libera *Madame Madame* (English translation by Agnieszka Kołakowska, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

⁹ Beauvoir's famous quotation from the *The Second Sex*: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” is seen as the introduction to the first deep elaboration of the distinction between sex and gender. See: Moi 1999 as well as Judith Butler's article: “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*” in Butler 1986.

of American feminism and presented the feminists' critical attitude towards commonsensical beliefs and the convictions of everyday life:

The targets of the theoretical attacks of present-day feminists are not certain social institutions, but rather certain fragments of the worldview of everyday life; those gendered divisions and roles that seem to be truisms. It is well known that women are not suited to politics or men to nursing. There is no doubt that prostitution is connected with female sexuality. It is obvious that the mother should take care of the children [...]

It is unknown to what extent popular thinking is aware of its hidden assumptions. It is known, though, that it is highly resourceful in camouflaging them. The popularity of the category of "nature" as used in commonsensical moral theory can be an instructive example of this camouflage technique. "The natural space for a woman is the home and family". "Nature has destined one sex for supremacy and the other for dependency." Only the activists of Women's Liberation were brave enough to question the soundness of the natural argument (Hołówka 1982, 6 and 16-17).

This interesting volume includes articles by Margaret Mead, Kate Millet, Sherry B. Ortner, Sally Macintyre, Christine Delphy as well as a valuable epilogue by Aleksandra Jasińska. Yet, it met with no interest among academics and social organizations. A vital and open feminist debate was initiated only at the beginning of the 1990s.¹⁰ Following the democratic transition, women started to gather themselves and organize within associations, circles and social projects. The first Polish feminist magazine *Pelnym Glosem* appeared in Kraków in 1993 and was later transformed into *Zadra* (from 1999). It was also a time of dialogue between women of various countries from the West and from other so-called post-communist countries. Nanette Funk remembers this time in one of her essays:

Since the breakup of the Soviet bloc, in 1989, women from the region of the former Soviet Union, eastern, southeastern, and central European states [...] engaged in dialogue with each other and with women and feminists who came to the region, especially from Western Europe and the United States. The latter initially arrived in many capacities: as volunteers in newly set up women's centers and organizations, as young women looking for a new, exciting, inexpensive place to which they could travel, as academics doing research, as founders and

¹⁰ See the elaboration by Ursula Phillips: "[A]n important landmark was Volume 4-6 (1993) of the literary critical journal *Teksty drugie*, which included translations of key texts of western feminist criticism [...] and voices who have subsequently become important contributors to the field of feminist and later gender studies: Toril Moi, Beth Holmgren, Grażyna Borkowska, Ewa Kraskowska, Inga Iwasiów and Kinga Dunin" (in Chowanec, Phillips, Rytönen 2008, 19).

supporters of new or expanding women's organizations, and as western women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) looking for partner NGOs in the region (Funk 2006, 218).

Indeed, the beginning of the 1990s saw a first wave of feminist publications in magazines and translations of feminist canonical texts. Western feminist scholarship became an auxiliary in re-reading, and re-inventing a women's tradition not only in literature but in other spheres as well.¹¹

The Polish scholar and writer, Inga Iwasiów, captivatingly recalls how she invented her own feminist strategy in literary studies in the 1990s:

I started feminizing my own world at the beginning of the 1990s. [...] My own feminism emerged from a candid reading style; I needed to identify with the characters of the fictional worlds. But this identification led to terrifying conclusions. I asked myself if I—the woman reader of the texts reproducing the patriarchal social model—was flirting dangerously with the Fathers? [...] Speaking directly, women deserve their own tradition. They worked too hard for it, always having occupied the subordinate position. But not everything should be thrown to the trash bin, and we shouldn't try to start from a scratch. I advocate, rather, deconstructing the old paradigms, deconstruction or “de-composition” and mediation (Iwasiów 2002, 9-13).

While inhabiting a feminist position, Iwasiów in her 2002 book *Re-vindications: A Woman Reading Today (Rewindykacje: kobieta czytająca dzisiaj)* advocates the need to invent women's reading but without completely dismissing the whole tradition of literary research. She recognizes, however, the importance of mediating between canonical reading (the Fathers) and a feminist revolutionary standpoint. Looking back at the past twenty years, we can see various modalities for such “mediations and de-compositions” of the literary tradition. It is useful to distinguish three general strategies, in which feminist methodologies and their devices have been present in Polish studies. There have been adaptations of western feminist theories

¹¹ The impact of western feminism and its adoption in so-called post-communist countries has been discussed and elaborated in various texts, which would now constitute quite a sizeable library, e.g. Watson, Peggy. 1993. “Eastern Europe's Silent Revolution: Gender.” *Sociology*, 27(3):471-487; Rueschemeyer, Marilyn, ed. 1998. *Women in the Politics of Postcommunist Eastern, Europe*. London: M.E. Sharpe; Coyle, Andrea. 2003. “Fragmented Feminisms: Women's Organisations and Citizenship in ‘Transition’ in Poland.” *Gender and Development* 11(3):57-65; Joanna Z. Mishtal, *The Challenges of Feminist Activism in Transition Politics: The Case of Poland* in: <http://www.federa.org.pl/dokumenty/manuscript%20MISHTAL.pdf>

(I), re-writings of Polish women writers' literary history (II), and the finding of Poland's own feminist critical voices, a kind of vindication of the Polish feminist voice (III).

I.

Still a bit intimidated by the long western feminist tradition, Polish feminism searched for the "canonical" feminist texts and authors such as Elaine Showalter, Toril Moi, Luce Irigaray or Hélène Cixous. The 1993 translation of the *Dictionary of Feminist Theory* by Maggie Humm became the omnipresent, most frequently quoted "textbook" ("podręcznik") for feminism as such. The interest in western theory during the 1990s, and frequently translated pieces in journals, became more visible in separate publications as full-length translations began to appear at the end of the 1990s, among them: Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, 1970 (*Kobiety eunuch*, 2001); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 1976 (*Zrodzone z kobiety: macierzyństwo jako doświadczenie i instytucja*, 2000); Luce Irigaray, *Le corps-à-corps avec la mère*, 1981 (*Ciało w ciało z matką*, 2000).

Furthermore, the need for a clear elaboration of western feminist scholarship resulted also in an encyclopaedic book by Kazimierz Ślęczka entitled *Feminism: Ideologies and Social Concepts of Modern Feminism* (*Feminizm: ideologie i koncepcje społeczne współczesnego feminizmu*, 1999), where he elaborates on the history of feminism and its various guises.

II.

The next and probably the most vital feminist literary strategy was re-reading and re-writing Polish women's history (also referred to as feminist literary archaeology). Scholars concentrated on re-interpreting literary history and the literary canon, taking into consideration women writers forgotten or marginalized until now. This strategy was also stimulated and inspired by the strong presence of women's prose (including feminist prose) in the 1990s (writers such as Izabela Filipiak, Manuela Gretkowska, Olga Tokarczuk, Zyta Rudzka, Natasza Goerke, Krystyna Kofta, Magdalena Tulli). The feminist re-reading of women's history has been approached from various

angles. Some writers tried to re-write literary history from a feminist point of view: for instance Maria Janion's writing on women and madness *Woman and the Spirit of Otherness (Kobieta i duch inności, 1996)*.

Another way of regaining women's literary heritage was writing about forgotten authors such as the modernist writer Maria Komornicka, interwar feminist Irena Krzywicka or the interwar Jewish poet, Zuzana Ginczanka. Especially worthy of note are the works by Izabela Filipiak, *The Regions of Otherness: On Maria Komornicka (Obszary odmiennosci. Rzecz o Marii Komornickiej)* published in 2007, and Agata Araszkiwicz, *I Am Expressing to You My Life: The Melancholy of Zuzanna Ginczanka (Wypowiadam wam moje zycie: Melancholia Zuzanny Ginczanki)*, likewise published in 2001. Irena Krzywicka was remembered by Urszula Chowaniec in *In Search of a Woman: Early Works of Irena Krzywicka (W poszukiwaniu kobiety. O wczesnych powieściach Ireny Krzywickiej, 2007)*.

Moreover, feminist-orientated academics have turned to well-known authors like Eliza Orzeszkowa or Zofia Nałkowska in order to investigate patriarchal structures, as Grażyna Borkowska does in *Alienated Women: A Study on Polish Women's Fiction 1845-1918 (Cudzoziemki: Studia o polskiej prozie kobiecej, 1996)*, translated in 2001; Krystyna Kłosińska writes about Gabriela Zapolska, the author of the canonical drama *The Morality of Mrs. Dulska (Moralność Pani Dulskiej)*, but interestingly she reaches for Zapolska's forgotten, highly feminist prose in *Body, Desire, Clothing: On the Early Novels of Gabriela Zapolska (Ciało, pożądanie, ubranie. O wczesnych powieściach Gabrieli Zapolskiej, 1999)*.

It is impossible to present a complete list of feminist literary publications that appeared in Poland during the last twenty years. Among the internet links to the websites and blogs relating to women's writing listed on the home page of *Women's Writing Online* there is the Polish feminist online bookstore Feminoteka, where one can find most of the published works. Nevertheless, I wish to mention here the first historical overview of Polish women's writing which appeared in 2000 as a general guide or a supplement to the canonical history, *Polish Women Writers from the*

Middle Ages to the Present Day: A Guide, 2000 (*Pisarki polskie od średniowiecza do współczesności. Przewodnik*), compiled by Grażyna Borkowska, Ursula Phillips and Małgorzata Czerwińska. The date of this publication can be seen as symbolic; two millennia had to pass before women's participation in literature was acknowledged in a systematic compendium.

III.

As discussed above, the strategy of re-writing women's history played a crucial role in feminist studies conducted over the past twenty years. Feminist scholars, by introducing a new way of looking at the literary heritage, aimed to describe the gaps and silences created by the classical, traditional canon which had marginalized women writers.¹² There was, however, another strategy that was introduced in order to pursue feminist issues in literary studies; this was to develop new reading schemes, adapted to the experiences and background of Polish readers, a kind of vindication of one's own voice. Here, the authors bravely expose their (feminist) point of view and vindicate their individual position as a woman, as an academic, and finally as a Pole, with its national, educational, geographical or religious specificities. It is crucial to note, however, that only a few books in fact do this: two

¹² Here I present a selected list of the recent publications on women writers, artists, or activists: *Polish Women Writers of Earlier Times (Pisarki polskie epok dawnych)*, edited by Krystyna Stasiewicz (1998); Joanna Partyka's *"Well-Trained Wife": The Writing Woman in 16th- and 17th-Century Culture ("Żona wyćwiczona": kobieta pisząca w kulturze XVI i XVII wieku*, 2004); Alina Aleksandrowicz's *Izabela Czartoryska: Polishness and Europeanness (Izabela Czartoryska: polskość i europejskość*, 1998); Karolina Targosz's *Polish "Savantes" of the 17th Century: The Intellectual Aspirations of Noble Women (Sawantki polskie XVII wieku Aspiracje intelektualne kobiet ze środowisk dworskich*, 1997) and *With a Nun's Pen: 17th-century Polish Chroniclers of Their Orders and Times (Piórem zakonnicy. Kronikarki w Polsce XVII w. o swoich zakonach i swoich czasach*, 2002); the series *Women (Kobiety)*, edited by Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarz; Barbara Umińska's *Figure with a Shadow: Portraits of Jewish Women in Polish Literature from the End of the Nineteenth Century to 1939 (Postać z cieniem. Portrety Żydówek w polskiej literaturze od końca XIX wieku do 1939 roku*, 2001); Kamila Budrowska's study, *Women and Stereotypes: The Image of Women in Polish Prose after 1989 (Kobieta i stereotypy. Obraz kobiety w prozie polskiej po roku 1989*, 2000); Grażyna Borkowska's study of Halina Poświatowska *Unthinking and Unromantic (Nierozważna i nieromantyczna*, 2001); Sławomira Walczewska's *Ladies, Knights and Feminists: Women's Discourse of Emancipation in Poland (Damy, rycerze i feministki. Kobięcy dyskurs emancypacyjny w Polsce*, 1999); Ewa Kraskowska, *By a Woman's Pen... (Piórem niewieściem. Z problemów prozy kobiecej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego*, 1999); Renata Inbrant, *From Her Point of View: Woman's Anti-World in the Poetry of Anna Świeterszczyńska* (Stockholm, 2007).

examples are Inga Iwasiów, *Revindications: Woman Reading Today (Rewindykacje: kobieta czytająca dzisiaj*, Kraków, 2002) and Kinga Dunin, *Reading Poland: Polish Literature After 1989 and the Dilemmas of Modernity (Czytając Polskę: literatura polska po roku 1989 wobec dylematów nowoczesności*, Kraków, 2004).

Inga Iwasiów explains her strategy as one of describing one's own particular standpoint and bearing in mind one's own background and way of speaking in a particular language. As she puts it:

It is time to search for "Polish feminism" beyond what is known from other languages and cultures. [...] But this is not chauvinism, from which I want to distance myself, just in case, given that chauvinism is possible wherever the nationalist note is heard, wherever one demands anything "ours" against "the foreign". [...] if I stand for the locality, I do so for the sake of variety/differences¹³ [...]. I believe in this variety (Iwasiów 2002, 9).

Inga Iwasiów advocates a diversity of viewpoints, stands for reading as a Polish woman with all the characteristics of her position in the name of other Polish women readers, thereby constituting a specific feminist identity reading pact¹⁴. Similarly, Kinga Dunin explains her own position as a woman reader. In her *Reading Poland*, the author openly declares: "the place from where I read is a place of national sentiments, familiar habits [...] a particular space, close and open at the same time. It can be re-interpreted again and again (Dunin 2004, 78).

The purpose of this brief overview of Polish scholarship on women's writing is to demonstrate that feminism has been strongly present in Polish academic research for some time now.¹⁵ However, it would be misleading to leave out any mention of the

¹³ In Polish "różnorodność" (Eng. variety) has the same roots as "różnica" (Fr. "différence" and Eng. "difference"), and may therefore be associated with the Derridian "różnia" (Fr. différance), I have therefore included in my translation both meanings: "variety/differences."

¹⁴ Other books that reflect this strategy include: Inga Iwasiów, *Gender for the Averagely Advanced (Gender dla średnio zaawansowanych*, 2004); Kazimiera Szczuka, *Cinderella, Frankenstein and the others (Kopciuszek, Frankenstein i inne: feminizm wobec mitu*, 2001); Ewa Kraskowska, *The Reader as a Woman: Literature and Theory (Czytelnik jako kobieta. Wokół literatury i teorii*, 2007).

¹⁵ Many other valuable feminist publications, which I have no space to discuss here, can be found at the feminist information service and bookstore Feminoteka: <http://www.feminoteka.pl/ksiegarnia/>. There is also the overview of Polish feminist scholarship in literary studies prepared by Ursula

difficulties involved in integrating the feminist perspective into academic research. Has feminism met its opposition (or was it “ill represented”¹⁶) in the Polish academy just as it was failing in the social and political spheres? A few key issues might help us examine this question.

The first key issue is feminism's connection with politics. Feminism has its roots in political struggle and is always associated with an ideological viewpoint. Feminism concentrates on exposing the inequality between men and women and the privileged position of the male sex. These relations of inequality, oppression and male domination are widely seen as an ideological fixation, even when they are supported by clear empirical data. Moreover, feminism, insofar as it vindicates the need for social change, is readily perceived as a potentially violent and radical form of political discourse. Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, called for a liberation from the restrictive effects immanent in the social concept of “femininity.” Perversely, however, this message of emancipation was widely taken as a threat by some women in Poland who feared that feminism might be out to equalize them with men, depriving them of their “nature”, and of their beauty. As far as academia was concerned, feminist interpretations were criticized because of their, “ideological subtext”, which was taken as biased, narrow and therefore not objective. In this way, many critics of feminism have mounted their attack on the basis of the dubious assumption that there can be non-political, value-free readings of literature. Opponents of feminism often point out that the perspectives offered by cultural studies or even gender studies (with their clear anti-essentialist postulations) are more “objective” (even politically correct). The strong ideological component in feminism has been regarded as particularly suspect in the post-communist context, in which progressive ideology has been associated with the despised Marxist theory.

Phillips for the book *Masquerade and Femininity: Essays on Russian and Polish Women Writers*, edited by Ursula Chowanec, Ursula Phillips and Marja Rytönen, published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2008.

¹⁶ “Żle-obecne;” the term used by Polish scholar Przemysław Czapliński (Czapliński 1997, Czapliński 1999).

Additionally, the Marxist background of many feminist theorists, including de Beauvoir,¹⁷ Juliet Mitchell, Kate Millet and Shulamith Firestone, was especially negatively received.¹⁸

Apart from its ideological tendency, feminism also came under fire for emphasizing the role of human sexuality and the physicality of the body. Feminist literature was linked to the themes of sexuality (the over-sexualized body, physiological motifs) used by feminists to expose the old, traditional order: these topics were misconstrued as scandalous by critics, who failed to notice the political message. The association between feminism and theories of sexuality has been taken as an excuse to dismiss it, for instance, by labelling feminist literature as “menstrual writing” and consequently pigeonholing feminist scholars as *agents provocateurs*, dealers in the most shameless and disturbing aspects of human existence. Krystyna Kłosińska explains the logic of such a backlash:

The writing of a woman appears to be arrogant; it disregards the humbleness that has been imposed on women throughout the centuries. Through writing a woman enters the public space of speaking and acting and emerges from silence. In this way, she disturbs both the traditional distribution of the social roles and the sense of a stable hierarchy. In a nutshell, she disturbs the power-relations (Kłosińska 2001, 95).¹⁹

The feminist attempt to deconstruct traditional hierarchies was then challenged by the reinvention of the category of “normality,” which was meant to describe life under democracy and capitalist production, and was therefore antithetical to life under communism (Kornhauser 1995; Nasiłowska 2006). Post-communist “normality” could only be threatened by the critical edge in the feminist texts of Izabela Filipiak, Manuela Gretkowska or Krystyna Kofta, which cut through many social taboos. These texts have been seen by some concerned readers (for instance, the literary critic Julian Kornhauser) as evidence that Poland’s newly found freedom

¹⁷ For example in post-communist countries, the paths suggested by Simone de Beauvoir’s to women’s liberation such as 1) work; 2) participation in intellectual activity, and 3) support of socialist society (Scholz 2008, 7) were not very popular.

¹⁸ See: Chowaniec 2007, subchapter “Society and Work,” “Społeczeństwo i praca,” 37-40.

¹⁹ Kłosińska 2001.

of speech is being abused: “Normality, but at what price?”—he asked.—“At the price of discounting all our tradition and laughing loudly at the sacred values, which will continue to shape our identity undisturbed?”²⁰ Here, Kornhauser is playing on the traditional and Catholic note, discrediting feminism because it allegedly stands against any values “sanctified” by Polish society. One does not have to be a feminist to see that opinions like that of Kornhauser spring from many false preconceptions and from a misreading or complete lack of acquaintance with feminist texts.

What is the role of feminism in Poland now? Feminism as a critical literary perspective still has to fight for its place in the Polish academy as much as in any other walk of life. It also has to fight to defend itself against the “more democratic”, less critical gender and cultural studies. As a strategy based on the assumption that women as a group should be identified, feminists (in Poland, but also in other countries) have much to do in terms of cooperation. They must double their efforts to share their experience and research (as we intend to do here) if they want to prevent women’s concerns from melting into postmodernist *differentiations* (which is often equivalent to *indifference*). To deny women their identity as a political, social and literary group is the easiest way to deprive them of their ability to have a greater political impact not only in Parliament but also in the academic hierarchy. One should always remember Susan Sontag’s words:

Anybody, man or woman, who says “I am not a feminist,” is already a feminist in comparison to what that person was twenty or thirty years ago because the centre has changed. [...] I think that the [feminist—U.Ch.] groups, the demonstrators, are a tiny minority that did things that are called excessive, but which do a great service for the majority, because they change the centre. That which is normal, conventional, conservative, changes a bit (Sontag 1995, 159).

This “excessive” yet great task has been carried out by feminist literary critics in Poland and it should be continued. The first volume of *Women’s Writing Online* is

²⁰ Polish original version: “Normalność, ale za jaką cenę? Za cenę przekreślenia całej tradycji i śmiania się w głos uświęconym wartościom, które nieprzerwanie kształtować będą naszą tożsamość” (Kornhauser 1995, 13).

evidence that much has been done within and across the fields of feminist literature, theatre and film studies. As editors of this volume, we present a selection of articles, most of them based on the papers delivered during the seminar “Poland Under Feminist Eyes,” which took place at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London in November 2008. The seminar was made possible thanks to the international cooperation between Ursula Phillips, Urszula Chowaniec and the *PURU* project at the University of Tampere²¹ as well as thanks to the financial support of The Centre for East European Language Based Area Studies (CEELBAS)²² and the Polish Cultural Institute in London.

All the articles aim to show the variety of feminist methodologies implemented in different fields: from re-reading women's texts of various historical periods by both literary scholars (Grażyna Borkowska, Agnieszka Mroziak, Asia Zgadzaj) and scholars specializing in cultural studies (Elżbieta Wiącek) to a reassessment of men's texts (Ursula Phillips on Adam Mickiewicz and Bolesław Prus). We are also presenting pieces on Polish cinema (Ewa Mazierska) and theatre (Elwira Grossman). We include shorter, and more personal accounts: Ewa Kraskowska writes about her experiences as a Polish feminist scholar and Dorota Hołowiak offers some reflections on the Polish language from the perspective of feminist studies. Most of the pieces concentrate on Polish contexts. However, we wish to keep open the comparative element by giving the readers an overview of Polish/Russian women's writing, and writing from other countries, and academic scholarship (Rosalind Marsh, Asia Zgadzaj). We have tried to bear in mind the tradition of dialogue between the women of so-called post-communist countries, and between this region and the West. This journal is the direct result of such a dialogue. To conclude this introduction let us recall Nanette Funk's hypothesis about the importance of international dialogue:

²¹ See: www.womenswriting.fi

²² <http://www.ceelbas.ac.uk/>

My hypothesis is that self-reflective East-West dialogue must continue if there is to be a constructive, just transnational women's movement that includes East and West women. I understand a just transnational women's movement to be one founded on recognition and understanding of the other and the issues of importance to them while engaging the issues in the world, ever sensitive to their gendered nature. It is committed to gender justice consistent with the demands of justice in general and is a movement mutually supportive of the efforts of others, especially other women, where possible (Funk 2006, 204).

This is a fine goal: *Women's Writing Online* aspires to extend and deepen an international dialogue between scholars of different fields and lands.

June-November, 2009

Bibliography

- Barthes, Roland. 1973. *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers. London: Paladin.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. 1989. *The Second Sex (Le Deuxième sexe)*, translated by H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage Books.
- .2003. *Druga pleć*, translated by Gabriela Mycielska and Maria Leśniewska. Warsaw: Wydaw. Jacek Santorski & Co.
- Butler, Judith. 1986. "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex." *Yale French Studies* 72:35-49.
- Chałupnik, Agata. 2008. "Feministka, czyli gwałtu co się dzieje!" In *Obyczaje polskie. Wiek XX w krótkich hasłach*, edited by Małgorzata Szpakowska, 76-86. Warsaw: W.A.B.
- Chowaniec, Urszula, Ursula Phillips and Marja Rytkönen, eds. 2008. *Masquerade and Femininity: Essays on Russian and Polish Women Writers*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Chowaniec, Urszula. 2007. *W poszukiwaniu kobiety. O wczesnych powieściach Ireny Krzywickiej*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Czapliński, Przemysław. 1997. *Ślady przelomu. O prozie polskiej 1976-1996*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.

- Czapliński, Przemysław. 1999. *Literatura polska 1976-1998. Przewodnik po prozie i poezji*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Dunin Kinga. 2004. *Czytając Polskę. Literatura polska po roku 1989 wobec dylematów nowoczesności*. Kraków: Universitas.
- Dunin, Kinga. 2002. *Czego chcecie ode mnie, Wysokie Obcasy?* Warsaw: Sic!
- Funk, Nanette. 2007. "Fifteen Years of the East-West Women's Dialogue" In *Living Gender after Communism*, edited by Janet Elise Johnson, 203-226. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Gal, Susan and Gail Kligman, eds. 2000. *The Politics of Gender After Socialism: A Comparative-Historical Essay*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hołówna, Teresa, ed. 1982. *Nikt nie rodzi się kobietą*. Warsaw: Czytelnik.
- Iwasiów, Inga. 2002. *Rewindykacje. Kobieta czytająca dzisiaj*. Kraków: Universitas.
- . 2004. *Gender dla średnio zaawansowanych*. Warsaw: W.A.B.
- Janion, Maria. 2009. *Wykład inauguracyjny Kongres Kobiet Polskich 20-21 czerwca w Warszawie. Solidarność—wielki zbiorowy obowiązek kobiet*, In http://www.kongreskobiet.pl/readarticle.php?article_id=27 (Accessed: 1 July, 2009).
- Jaxa-Rożen, Hanna. 2005. *Kontestacja i banal. Feminizm w kulturze współczesnej*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Atla2.
- Jaxa-Rożen, Hanna. 2006. *Feministyczna krytyka literacka. Krótkie wprowadzenie*. Łask: Oficyna Wydawnicza "Leksem."
- Kłosińska, Krystyna. 2001. "Kobieta autorka," In *Ciało i tekst. Feminizm w literaturoznawstwie—antologia tekstów*, edited by Anna Nasilowska, 92-116. Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich.
- Kornhauser, Julian. 1995. "Barbarzyńcy i wypełniacze." *Tygodnik Powszechny* 3.
- Łobodzińska, Barbara, ed. 1995. *Family, Women, and Employment in Central-Eastern Europe*. Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Matland, Richard E. and Kathleen A. Montgomery, eds. 2003. *Women's Access to Political Power in Post-Communist Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Matynia, Elżbieta. 2009. *Performative democracy*. London: Paradigm Publishers.

- Moi, Toril. 1999. *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Molyneux, Maxine. 1995. "Gendered Transitions in Eastern Europe." *Feminist Studies* 21(3):637-46.
- Nasiłowska, Anna, ed. 2001. *Ciało i tekst. Feminizm w literaturoznawstwie - antologia szkiców*. Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich.
- Nasiłowska, Anna. 2006. *Literatura okresu przejściowego 1975-1996*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Pakszys, Elżbieta. 2000. "Egzystencjalizm vs. esencjalizm albo *Druga Pleć* Simone de Beauvoir po 50 latach." In *Krytyka feministyczna. Siostra teorii i historii literatury*, edited by Grażyna Borkowska and Lidia Sikorska, 175-186. Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich.
- Polish Constitution 1952. Extracts: http://servat.unibe.ch/icl/pl01000_.html (Accessed: 2 November, 2008).
- Report "Kobiety dla Polski. Polska dla kobiet," Fundacja Feminoteka, 2009: http://www.kongreskobiet.pl/downloads/raport_skrotwww.pdf (Accessed: 1 July, 2009).
- Schulz J. Sally. 2008. "The Second Sex" *Philosophy Now* 69: September/October.
- Sontag, Susan. 1995. *Conversations with Susan Sontag*, edited by Leland A. Poague. Jackson: Mississippi University Press.
- Watson, Peggy. 1993. "Eastern Europe's Silent Revolution: Gender," *Sociology* 27(3):471-487.
- Watson, Peggy. 1997. "Anti-feminism After Communism". In *Who's Afraid of Feminism*, edited by Ann Oakley and Juliet Mitchell, 144-161. New York: The New Press.
- Zygmunt, Agata. 2006. *Postulat różności płci w sferze zatrudnianie i pracy w krajach Unii Europejskiej i Polsce*, Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 2006. <http://www.sbc.org.pl/Content/4438/doktorat2665.pdf> (Accessed: 2 November, 2008).