Between the Centre and the Periphery. The Role of a Letter in Contemporary Polish Literature Created by Women

Tarp centro ir periferijos. Laiško vaidmuo šiuolaikinėje lenkių literatūroje

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Summary

The article begins with a study of the state of the letter as a literary genre and a utilitarian form in contemporary Polish culture and literature. It seems that it is an ambiguous place, although the long tradition of the genre might prove its well-grounded and stable position among literary works. Theories of the letter look at it from different perspectives; however, the autonomous character of the letter is seen through the utilitarian aspect of the text, the text’s written form, its tone of directness, the absence of a correspondent, the broad relations between subject matter (the aim of the letter), sender and the sender’s attitude towards the addressee. The importance currently assigned to the utility of the texts and the effort to condense the content have significantly altered the genre, which, until quite recently, performed numerous roles, from the highly-artistic form of the message to everyday communication. The author attempts to determine the place of the letter in contemporary Polish literature written by women. She highlights the short, laconic forms incorporated into novels, which play a secondary role, as well as the widely cited autonomous fragments of stories and novels that have a much higher function. The article indicates the creative value of the letter in the world depicted and justifies the writers’ reluctance to use a different form of expression in direct statements, stylization, monologue, quasi letter, and messages directed to a non-personal receiver. Along with traditional letters, she describes the functions of a modern form of communication – the electronic mail – used in the latest novels. Moreover, the article offers reflections on the femininity realized in the letters. For it seems that women writers often make use of the blessings of this form of statement to convey an intimate content and personal reflections.

Key words: letter; women’s writing, Polish contemporary literature.

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Esminiai žodžiai: laiškas, moterų rašymas, lenkų šiuolaikinė lietartūra.

As a form of writing, the letter is characterized by a multitude of forms. When directed at a definite addressee, it serves the purpose of bridging physical distances and maintaining relations between people. The letter is a conventional form, although its norms, rules and principles have been going through changes over the centuries. In analyzing the theories that have emerged, Stefania Skwarczynska distinguishes between a speech letter, a semi-dialogue, a discourse letter and a letter of confession. Although each of the concepts mentioned is approached critically (and separately), it is important not to omit any of them in order to obtain a set of the characteristics of the letter. The author remarks that the autonomous character of the letter, as a genre, is influenced by the utilitarian value of the content, the written form, the absence of a correspondent, the tone of directness (the addressee being a passive co-author), and the correlation between subject matter, sender, and the sender’s attitude towards the addressee (Skwarczynska, 2006). Contemporarily, we search for the roots of this form of statement in the ancient cultures; as for its character, we stress its dialogue-like aspect and propose the presence of a receiving person as the sine qua non condition of the existence of the letter. After all, the ultimate shape of the letter is largely influenced by the relationship between the sender and the addressee.

It is troublesome, sometimes thoroughly impossible, to mark the boundaries between utility and literariness. As Izabella Adamczewska writes, the main determinants seem to be the author’s intention and his or her way of shaping the statement (Adamczewska, 2012). In practice, this may mean the implementation of a distinctive subcode known only
to the two subjects. As a literary text, the letter usually functions outside
the framework of a conventional communication situation. It thus moves
closer to the belles-lettres form, a category of writing where the interpre-
tation depends on how it is read, on the competence of the reader, as well
as the methodology and the optical conditions implemented.

Independently of the times, both women and men readily use this form
of making statements. However, The Bloomsbury Guide to Women’s Lit-
erature and The Cambridge Guide to Women’s Writing in English both
devote a great deal of space to comments about the series of letters whose
authors are ladies and the receivers are husbands, brothers, and friends
of the household. These letters do not represent only personal attitudes.
They are a metaphor and a reflection of the times; they document historic
events and always show the character of man. An example of such mate-
rial is the collection of manuscripts held at the National Library – a set
of legal and property acts as well as personal and family materials of the
Romer family, including letters which reconstruct the family saga: the
creation of wealth, and the realities of life of the many generations of
Romers in Lithuania (Kamolowa, 1992). The epistolographic works of fe-
male poets and novelists are also of great value. We can look in their per-
sonal correspondence for signs of a growing talent; assess the evolution of
their writing skills as well as the ways of expressing one’s own inner life.
Quite frequently, letters are the background for the author’s creative work,
or, as in the case of Emily Dickinson, they perform such a major role that
it is impossible to refer to the literary heritage of a writer without a thor-
ough study of her letters (Salska, 1998).

The so-called cultural refinement of the letter is not a characteristic of
our times. We hurry more and more, and we are helped out by technology
to an ever greater and greater extent. We practically do not have to write
formal documents any more. They have been replaced with ready-to-use
forms, business documents, reports, document formulas. Instead of writ-
ing personal letters, we would rather talk on the phone; this is getting eas-
ier thanks to the fact that modern mobile phones offer us more and more
new options. The recurring general discussions on whether technology is
a threat to literature often include the question of letter writing. After all,
correspondence has a therapeutic function; it keeps in check the crisis of
trust: many people, for various reasons, feel that a personal letter would
needlessly reveal them. When they are in a mood for confession, they
write logs or diaries. Some use the Internet, nowadays undoubtedly the
fastest way of conveying information. In time, the e-mail might become a new form of letter writing subject to scientific research.

Is literature taking the same path? What literature? Whose literature and created for whom? How do letters function in contemporary Polish literature? I will try to present several theses and observations to settle the matter; however, I want to stress that this is not yet a closed issue. The catalogue of epistolary works is still being enriched by new pieces – previously, the choice was strictly limited to representative texts and placed Olga Tokarczuk’s output at the centre of attention. The thematic aspect is firmly connected with the structural one in the typology presented.

**A letter, a short letter, or just a note?**

Novels and stories written by contemporary Polish women writers contain a number of short forms, statements of a strange character which introduce distant contexts, thus enriching the world described. An example of such a text is the collection of annotations in the story entitled *Bar-do. The Christmas Crib* by Tokarczuk, the history of a human invention, is not only a story about people’s dreams and their fulfillment, about work and fighting against adversities, about the cultural merits of the town of Bardo and its inhabitants, but, more than anything else, about a certain female dweller of that town. This story, above all, shows the genesis of art, perhaps primitive art, but art which is very important for the identity of the small local community. The Commemorative Book is the only remnant of the crib; the entries in the book, though infantile (‘I’m from Cracow, I’ve already seen a lot of cribs, but this one is beyond all my expectations; Marysia from Gdansk: I’m eight years old. What I liked best was the bride and the wedding that danced’) (Tokarczuk, 2002) acquire the role of a document that testifies to the existence of the crib. This motif is similarly shaped in Bruno Schulz’s prose. Even if one comprehends the Book as a metaphor of literature, it turns out that, for Schulz, it is also part of the Authentic Thing and a way to show the idea that organizes the world. The story of childhood and youth and the metamorphoses of this motif are not only questions about the ontological status of a myth that does not lose its validity in the twentieth century, but also statements about the importance of human striving to discover the rules that govern the real world. The Book, even in its postponed form, constitutes a basic element of children’s imagination, which is gradually lost with the progress of rational thinking. The true sense of the Book remains hidden and
the two spheres of the world, the authentic Book and the apocrypha, are interpenetrable.

**Letters to the father**

Women write for various reasons. One of them is abandonment by a man they love. In this case, as in no other, the receiver is important. To whom can they write? In whom can they confide? Are such letters supposed to be answered? The story *Tancerka (Dancer)* by Tokarczuk shows the perspective of an abandoned woman who is not fulfilled professionally. It seems as if she is unfulfilled in all fields – a failure in her relationships, childless, unsuccessful as a professional dancer both because of lack of talent and because others got better roles; she is unfulfilled as a daughter. After moving to the country, every evening she sits and starts writing letters. She writes to her father, yet never finishes her letters; she throws them into a trunk.

She starts thousands of letters like this, with “*Dear Daddy,*” and even though in one of them we can discern the reasons for her loneliness, we find it hard to accept them. Our heroine writes:

Dear Daddy. I so much regret having argued with you and I think, dearest Daddy, that confronted with old age, we ought to be reconciled. What I regret most now is that you could never see me dancing. Those may not have been the principal roles; because of my spine, I did not become a prima ballerina, but I was quite known and applauded along with my group on many stages. You were not right, Daddy, in saying angrily to me that I did not have a talent when we saw each other for the last time. That was very unfair… (Tokarczuk, 2002)

Another letter reads:

After all, the first thing you threw back in my face, Daddy, was that I did not have an ear for music, not at all. You got irritated with my piano lessons, Daddy. And you ridiculed my dance classes. Me and mum kept that secret. […] It occurred to me many times that you might not like me, Daddy. But why? Because I was a girl? Can that be a sufficient reason? (Ibid.)

As we can see, there can be many reasons to write to one’s father, but the most transparent one seems to be nonfulfillment and questions about the reasons for the lack of love:
Dear Daddy, do you know how unloved persons feel? They feel that whatever they do is wrong, and even when they stop doing it, it is still wrong. They are all hopeless. They are a rag, a piece of paper cast to the ground. Such human beings will never find peace. They will do anything to deserve love, but they will never achieve it. (Ibid.)

This dramatic confession of a sixty-year-old woman shows that there are deficiencies which cannot be compensated for by anything or anyone. In this brief form, the letter becomes a source for a lot of information. First and foremost, what become clear to the reader are the reasons for the heroine’s separation from the outer world and why she strives to create her own ideal world in which all parental expectations can be met. Meeting these expectations becomes a guarantee of acceptance and of realizing one’s self-worth, which undoubtedly has a substantial impact on how an individual functions in adult life. Letters in this story introduce experiences already in the past that still hurt. Writing ‘for the sock drawer’ seems to be an attempt to settle accounts with the past as well as initiate a dialogue with an absent hero.

**Letters to the Police**

In the novel *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych (Lead Your Plough Through the Bones of the Dead)*, the main character is forced to write letters to the Police because of external circumstances. The action takes place in Kotlina Klodzka. The main character is Janina Duszejko. Previously a bridge engineer, she now works as a country teacher of English and geography and a supervisor of summer houses. Her passion is astrology, and all kinds of animals are her big love. When any harm is done to them, Janina defends them and demands respect for them. It is easy to foresee that nobody cares about a woman who thinks that the world is a reflection of what is written in the stars:

Basically, she does not say much. Her silent sign must be Mercury, in Capricorn, I believe, or at conjunction, a square, or perhaps in opposition to Saturn. It could also be Mercury in retrogradation – it gives secrecy then. (Tokarczuk, 2009)

In her free time, she crazily reads William Blake. Nearby, poachers start to die one after another, also other villains doing harm to animals. The number of deaths grows rapidly. Janina has her own theory about the
motive and the possible perpetrators of the crimes. However, the Police ignore her, treating her like a harmless weirdo. Then Janina Duszejko writes three letters:

To the Police
I am compelled to write this letter because I am worried about the lack of progress on the part of the local police in the investigation into the death of my neighbour last January and the death of the Commissioner a month and a half later. Both these sad accidents happened in my neighbourhood, you will not be thus surprised that I am personally touched and worried by them. I think that there is a great deal of obvious evidence showing that they were murdered. [...] I support my conviction that the deceased fell victim to a murder with two kinds of observations. Firstly, animals were present at the scenes of both murders. Secondly, I decided to take a closer look at some very revealing information that we can get from the birth charts of the victims. [...] I take the liberty of enclosing both horoscopes, hoping that they will be consulted by a police astrologist who will thus support my hypothesis. (Tokarczuk, 2009)

As can be predicted, the police did not answer Mrs. Duszejko’s letter. We do not know if they pursued the course of action suggested by her. We know one thing, though: Janina does not get discouraged and writes two more letters:

Since I did not receive an answer to my last letter, although, according to law, each public institution in the country is obliged to give such an answer within fourteen days, I am forced to repeat my explanations concerning the recent, highly tragic events in our neighbourhood. [...] I understand that the police have no possibility to answer citizens’ letters, for some very important reason. I am not going to delve into it, but I will let myself get back to the matter that I started in the previous letter. However, I do not wish the police or anyone else to be ignored like this. A citizen who is ignored by officials is somehow destined to a state of nonexistence. (Ibid.)

Mrs. Duszejko writes letters because nobody treats her suspicions in the proper way. She believes that, thanks to this kind of correspondence, her suppositions become more credible. In this case, letters are not only humorous, ironic statements of the heroine; they also contribute to the plot. Thanks to them, we learn that the investigation is indeed equivocal and that the crime is enshrouded in mystery. It seems that in a detective thriller this way of enriching the plot and the action can prove to be very valuable.
A whole book of letters! You have everything in one!

The book *Listy miłosne* (Love Letters), which includes works by Anna Bolecka, Natasza Goerke, Manuela Gretkowska, Inga Iwasiów, Hanna Kowalewska, Magdalena Miecznicka, Anna Nasiłowska, Joanna Szczepkowska and Monika Szwaja, contains many stories, but love is the subject that takes priority. Stories in the form of love letters are exceptionally sincere and full of unusual confessions. There is a different story hidden in every letter; and being different, means being varied. Known writers approach their topic in a way to reveal in each letter a different shade of love. Love letters bring together a famous dancer and a young admirer of ballet, a Chechen soldier and a beautiful Polish woman, also a couple of former lovers. An amazing letter, sent from beyond the grave, describes the unbelievable adventure of a nineteenth-century pastor and a woman publican. *Nieślubny list do męża* (An Illegitimate Letter to the Husband), by M. Gretkowska, shows how another love is created. Love that is [...] a delusion, a Fata Morgana in the desert of desires (Gretkowska, 2008) can appear at any moment of life, even when it seems that everything in this range of experiences is known to us. The heroine’s chosen one is characterized by preferences completely different from hers, preferences in music, ways of spending free time, everyday diet. Despite the differences, he is a good companion in life. All the letters speak about the most important human feelings. They lack neither the wisdom of life nor the distance of humour or irony. Many of them combine two perspectives – we read letters of both correspondents and take a look at their uncanny dialogues.

Letters to the … amputated leg

Novels by Polish women writers can be shocking. It is not my intention to analyze those elements that, independently of one’s sensitivity, appall all of us or, to a lesser extent, cause consternation. Letters to the amputated leg appear in one part of the latest novel by Tokarczuk. As always, they have thematic and structural functions. There is a famous professor, Filip Verhneyen, who devotes all his life to the study of human bodies. He learns from them what can later be useful in medicine. He studies them scrupulously, earnestly, working on preparations and passing his knowledge on to the students. We learn from one of them about the later life of the professor. The third person narrator relates stories of necropsies as well as the private suffering of the
professor who has lost a leg to gangrene. The leg is amputated, but the professor decides to preserve and ... keep it! Based on the current state of medicine, we can absolutely confirm that the pain caused by this illness is comparable to tumour pain, which presently requires the use of opioids, including morphine, applied in high doses. As we can see, the professor’s attitude to his own limb grows into an obsession. He works all the time, performs more necropsies, and teaches his successors. After his death, a student tidies up the flat and finds a lot of letters addressed to the leg. As we know, phantom pain usually appears at night. At this time, because of huge physical and mental suffering (after all the pain came from what no longer existed physically), the professor tried to come to terms with his life and scientific heritage. In *Listy do mojej amputowanej nogi (Letters to my Amputated Leg)* Filip tries to prove coherently and emotionlessly that if the body and the soul are indeed one thing, if they are the two attributes of an infinite and all-encompassing God, then there must be a kind of Creator-shaped congruence between them. He writes:

> What does really stimulate me when I feel pain and numbness because my leg has been separated from me and is soaked in alcohol? Nothing pinches it, there is no reason to be numb; no such pain is logically justified, yet it exists. Now I am looking at it and, at the same time, I can feel in it, in the toes, an unbearable heat, as though I had put them in hot water. This sensation is so real, so obvious [...] The body is something absolutely mysterious. The bare fact that we describe it in such detail does not mean that we know it. (Tokarczuk, 2007)

*Bieguni* is a novel about motion, about being on the move, about travel. Maybe the letters above are travel too, travel to the interior of one’s own body and consciousness?

**Retro letters – and not a trace of love!**

In the novel *Bieguni*, the structural part is represented by three letters written by Jozefina Soliman to Francis I, emperor of Austria. Emperor Francis I, just like his predecessor Joseph II, created a collection of peculiar objects in Vienna. Among the exhibits was a mummy of a black courtier. Tokarczuk stylizes the letters to look like a servile text typical of those times:

> I am addressing Your Highness in pain and great confusion caused by an iniquity that was experienced by my late father Angel Soliman, a faithful servant. (Ibid.)
Jozefina writes three times. The second letter resembles somewhat the letter of Janina Duszejko:

Since I did not receive any answer to my letter, I take the liberty to address Your Highness, this time more boldly. May it not be taken as too familiar an address – Brother. [...] I am not asking any more, I am begging: please let the family have the body of my father. (Ibid.)

In the third letter we see an escalation of anger and demands:

Your Highness stays silent, being surely busy with important state matters. I wrote the last letter two years ago, and I still have not received an answer. To have power over the body means to be king of life and death. That is why I am addressing you this way, tyrant, usurper, and I am not asking, I am demanding. Give me back the body of my father so that I can bury it. Even after I die, I will not let go. (Ibid.)

Jozefa Soliman’s letters were not effective. Joseph II did not listen to the requests made by the writer. It seems that her letters have mostly a communicative and informative function. The reader is more aware of the circumstances thanks to them. However, they do not have a direct influence on the development of the plot in the novel. Instead, they expose the patchwork composition of the text. A dramatic voice is heard from the past, which, for a brief moment, disturbs the ongoing narration and creates an alternative story.

The e-mail

Contemporary women writers use this means quite commonly. However, in my view, it cannot be assigned a major significance. E-mails usually perform the function of a story in apposition. They are situated in this very way by Małgorzata Kalicińska, in Dom nad rozlewiskiem (The House on the Flood Waters). The way she plans the novel allows the inclusion of this kind of statement, which shows the emotional attitude of women who write to one another – mothers and daughters and friends. The e-mail can also be an element of a fully validated function. In Love letters mentioned above, Hanna Kowalewska’s narrative contains several electronic letters. A characteristic moment is the turning on of the computer, waiting for a message, and disappointment along with a rebellious reaction:
Good night, Honey. I’ll write soon.
I don’t want soon. I want now, today, hear me? And you wrote in such a cold way. An E-mail from a freezer. I’m puffing my hands. I’m freezing. (Kowalewska, 2008)

The next stage is just a guessing game which produces statements that can turn out to be intriguing. The topic of this story is not only love but also lies, jealousy, and waiting, manifested not in statements directed at the hero but in the narrative parts.

Conclusions

A short selection of novels by Polish women writers shows that the letter is used as a form of message. It can have a formal character, or it can be completely personal. However, effective communication is not always achieved. The letter also has a therapeutic function; thanks to it, characters clear up their mind and get rid of negative emotions. Women’s writing also has something more – in each of these letters we can clearly see the need to express one’s deep feelings, show emotions, share problems. The forms are quite varied, just as varied as the world. Today’s rich and multifaceted world does not allow us to syncretize it. Instead, it remains cacophonic. Each of the voices comes into prominence at the right time, none of them tries to neutralize dissonances or dominate others, each strives to validate and reveal variety. This is the perspective from which we should perceive and interpret the newest Polish literature. The understated areas remain understated. However, does everything need to be explained?

Bibliography


