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The Body and/of Slavic theory

Slavica CLIII. *Wielkie tematy kultury w literaturach słowiańskich 9. Ciało*. Agnieszka Matusiak, Ilona Gwóźdź-Szewczenko, Magdalena Koch, Ewa Komisaruk, Julia Rysicz, Anna Ursulenko (red.). ISBN: 978-83-229-3199-8. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2011, ss. 816.

This enormous volume, devoted to the subject of human body in Slavic literatures, is a result of an international scientific conference with participation of one hundred scholars that was held at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the University of Wrocław from 19-21 November 2009. The scientific director of the conference was Agnieszka Matusiak, Ph. D., Professor of the University of Wrocław, and the Head of the Department of Ukrainian Philology of the Institute of Slavic Studies. This volume is dedicated to the eminent scholar of Russian Studies, Professor Tadeusz Klimowicz. Remarkably, a piece of work on similar subjects and at the same time with such a broad range, covering several important areas of the Slavic literary map, until now has not appeared in the Polish language circle. Because of the subject, scale, and the richness of material, this volume is a unique compendium.

With regards to corporeality, the contemporary scientific discourse emphasizes the problems that have previously been unnoticed or treated as marginal, and therefore not fully developed by scholars. Corporeality has become an area of variously defined identity: gender, generational, cultural, racial, and even political. A few years have passed since the publication of – now classical in Poland – the collective work showing the gender perspective of the subject in the anthropological contexts titled *Ciało – pleć – literatura. Prace ofiarowane Profesorowi Germanowi Ritzowi w pięćdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin z roku* (2002). Other significant works has also been published ever since, such as *Słowo i ciało w literaturze. Barok – Lem – Myśliwski* (2001); M. Kanabrodzki's *Kaplan i fryzjer: żywioł materialno-cielesny w utworach Georga Büchnera, Witolda Gombrowicza, Mirona Białoszewskiego, Helmuta Kajzara* (2004); *Corporeal inscriptions: representations of the body in cultural and literary texts and practices* (2005); *Mity słowa, mity ciała* (2007); and G. Ceronetti's *Milczenie ciała: materiały do studiów medycznych* (2009). Referring to Richard Sheppard, we

can claim that the revaluation, which once again took place in Western culture, is associated with the postmodern breakthrough, along with the expansion of new patterns of life, as well as with globalization, and the entrance of the Internet to our culture and to our artistic and private lives, sometimes resulting in radical changes in the perception of corporeality. The reason lies in the changing meaning of the sense of reality, as well as in the change of the understanding of human nature, and the transformation that is taking place between nature and man. There is a necessity to redefine many of the seemingly indisputable categories, such as gender identity, physical integrity, biological development of humans from the time of conception and its ethical justification, and finally the fundamental category of life. Among the various publications on this subject, what has been missing was an evident voice of Slavic Studies, as a field specialized in comparative and territorial studies, embracing many ethnic and cultural perspectives.

The book opens up with an important and very interestingly conceived part titled *Fragments of the Slavic Corporeal Discourse (Fragmenty słowiańskiego dyskursu cielesnego)* preceded by Jozef Smaga's brief introduction of professor Klimowicz and this Russian Studies scholar's experimental, exceptional and provocative text *Could a Russian write "Lolita"?* (*Czy Rosjanin mógłby napisać „Lolite”?*) referring to postmodern intertextual games, and inspired by the works of V. Nabokov, U. Eco, A. Bitov, M. Pavić, M. Kundera. Appearing in this part of the book texts by V. Novotný, O. Demidov, A. Z. Violić, and T. Hundorova, create a Slavic choir that forms the awareness of how widely and variously this volume will continue to talk about the problems of corporeality. Dominant here is the belief that corporeality was, and still is, an area of various practices of creating taboos and demystifying, as well as the object of moral and artistic provocation. Understandably, it has been the subject of philosophical reflections, as well as the fundamental object of mass culture, and the icon of contemporary kitsch. In modern culture, people struggle not only with the awareness of their own consciousness (in philosophy, literature, and science). After all, an unusual experience, which is also visible in literature, is that of being aware of one's physicality caught up in situations of a ritual, sub-cultural and even political nature. The body is not important – more important is the category of corporeality, which is the main subject of the vast majority of the texts, included in this volume. Corporeality is also highlighted in art; it is this very prominent point in space, which is being placed over the value of a frail human body. Therefore, corporeality outweighs the body; it becomes the cultural, symbolic, and anthropological substrate of our biological materiality. The answer to the question whether the Slavs perceived, and still perceive, issues of corporeality in a unique way, and consequently

moved them to literature, has certainly been important in the context of this publication. However, it seems that there is a lack of any radically different and specific traces of Slavic otherness in the approach to the body and corporeality.

Unquestionably, the Christian Slavic culture is more conservative than the Western culture, mainly because Orthodoxy and Catholicism, as well as Protestantism, for centuries have forced conformist views on Eastern and Central Europeans. Surely even in the twentieth century they modeled human beings, constraining a reduction of the images of body, and stories of corporeality. Category of the sin, both original and conscious, the oppositions of physicality and spirituality, sensuality and austerity, beauty and ugliness, harmony and disharmony, the creation and degradation, suffering and happiness, immaturity and maturity, eroticism and sexual abstinence, physical ability and disability, continue to be valid for every European literature, including the Slavic ones. Maybe as a result of the extremely difficult collective experience in the twentieth century, these categories appear to have had a sharper and clearer impact on Slavic literatures? Hence, vital for the existence and development of the category of corporeality is here the experience of revolutionary destruction, of the Great Famine in Ukraine, the Holocaust, the religious wars and wars over territory – events that churned the tragic twentieth century, and that are all so clearly detectable in the reviewed volume.

The complex issues of body and corporeality, which touch issues far wider than the experience of an individual self, appear in the first – devoted to the Czech Studies – section.. Starting with the reflections of the scholars, who investigate the Old Czech period (until the era of national revival). This is indirectly signaled by texts covering the Old Czech literature, which form an interesting dialogue with the Ukrainian and South Slavic sections, especially the Serbian and Ukrainian Baroque and Mannerism that were under the sphere of Orthodox influence.

The strongest is the part devoted to the importance of the body and corporeality in the literature of Russian Symbolists, beginning with texts about Chekhov and ending with these regarding Nabokov. The second most interesting section is the set of works concerning Russian postmodernism, which begun with Nabokov's writing. The section of Russian Studies is impressive, it includes texts of eminent literary experts such as Galina Niefagina, Maria Cymborska-Leboda, Leszek Engelking, Tsuneko Mochizuki. The arrangement of the texts in this section, as well as in other parts of this volume, reflects the historical succession of the literary phenomena. This system is precise in each section, but it is not dogmatically historical. As a consequence of this way of arrangement, one can follow the "narrative mode

of the editor” that is undoubtedly important in the concept of the whole volume, which does not contain an introduction or an afterword that would explain the volume’s methodological assumptions. Body and corporeality appear in symbolism and postmodernism, as well as in Klimowicz’s text, as the traces of a sound nontraditional provocation, which disturbs the fundamentalist taboo issues of the conservative Orthodox and Catholic cultures that are undoubtedly also Slavic.

Special attention should be paid to remarkable texts of some of the most eminent scholars of Ukrainian Studies, such as Tamara Hundorova, Leonid Ushkalov. Interesting components of this section are the works devoted to folklore, which for a long time was the cultural background of an unlimited reservoir of attitudes towards corporeality, but which lately has been on the margins of literary studies. Many texts here refer to the Ukrainian avant-garde of the twentieth century, and to the literature of younger generations, who began their literary activity in 1989, including the members of Bu-Ba-Bu. Body, corporeality, eroticism, as well as the existential issues, appear here in the historical perspective of postmodernism, postcolonialism, gender studies and New Age. Moreover, very attractive and complex is the next part, which consists of works by scholars from Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria. These texts formulate the problems of corporeality in the anthropological, religious, philosophical, and aesthetic perspectives, consequently complementing the issues, which were somewhat absent in the previous sections. Hence, they complete, enrich, and consolidate the volume. Most attention in this section is devoted to the contemporary experience, which wide-stretched over the twentieth century. Even though prose and essays seem to be at the forefront in the Serbian and Croatian literatures, several authors have written about poetry, which is slowly being displaced by other types of literary activity. We can observe the traditional, lyrical perspective of corporeality and related to it eroticism and emotional behavior, move away, die in a tragic flood of individual and collective experiences. The works of I. Pachev, K. Pieniążek-Marković, D. Djurić, and D. Ajdačić are arranged in what appears as an almost lyrical story of change and transformation in the Balkans, of the marginalization of poetry in the context of Slavic background, in addition to the political and social transformations involving different groups of Slavic nations. Drama and richness of these experiences make the topic of corporeality, which for centuries has been a taboo, a controversial and threatened issue, a very current matter. This is the most interesting subject, and it is complemented by the voices about great post-Yugoslavian female writers such as D. Ugresić, S. Drakulić, and V. Rudan. Aggression of the themes of the body and corporeality in Russian and South Slavic literatures, contrast with the less extreme approach to the problem in Czech and Ukrainian

literatures. Obviously the existential-corporeal aspect increases its dramatic presence in the literature regarding the historical situation. Even though continually threatened, corporeality turns out to be a priceless value in the purely existential sense, then in the religious and eschatological backgrounds.

These processes still influence literature and leave it with great responsibilities. Literature, in this or other physical (corporeal) form, will have to continue to respond to the old and to the new questions. This volume summarizes what has happened in this area in the Slavic literatures, and announces many upcoming changes in the perception of corporeality, where it has previously been ignored or marginalized.

Translated by Mateusz Świetlicki, University of Wrocław