



WOJCIECH ŚMIEJA

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3080-0837>

University of Silesia in Katowice, Faculty of Humanities, Institute of Literary Studies
ul. Uniwersytecka 4, 40-007 Katowice
e-mail: wojciech.smieja@us.edu.pl

KATARZYNA LISOWSKA

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2715-0370>

University of Wrocław, Faculty of Philology, Institute of Polish Philology
plac Nankiera 15b, 50-996 Wrocław
e-mail: katarzyna.lisowska@uwr.edu.pl

Gender Non-Fiction — Preliminary Notes

Abstract

The introduction to the thematic issue of “The Problems of Literary Genres. Forms of Culture and Theory,” focuses on gender-oriented interpretation of non-fiction literature (reportage, biography, autobiography, essay, etc.) and consists of two parts. In the first, we present the theoretical background for undertaking a gender-sensitive reading of non-fiction literature, highlighting that the nature and status of the research questions is somewhat different from that of literature identified as fiction, due to the characteristics of the factuality/fictionality relationship in non-fiction genres, as well as the specific evolution of this literary subfield. In the second section, we analyse various — often fragmentary — examples of readings and interpretations in which the gender status of the author/character and even the genre itself was questioned and debated. We note that these readings and the disputes that have also occurred do not accumulate into any compact interpretation. We briefly discuss the themes of the essays presented in this issue and emphasise the need for more research and gender-oriented readings of non-fiction literature.

gender; non-fiction literature; referentiality; performativity

Gender, along with other tools within the poetological repertoire (metaphor, narration, rhyme, stylisation, etc.; cf. Łebkowska 1995: 83), can be applied to analyse works of literature. While the interpretation of fiction from a gender perspective has become firmly established in Polish gender- and sexuality-sensitive literary studies, non-fiction genres are only just beginning to be reassessed using this approach. Nevertheless, a gender-based analysis of non-fiction entails a number of additional issues that are either absent (or present less often) in literary analysis of fiction. Some of these are outlined below.

Considerations should begin with the concept of gender as such. If, in the spirit of constructivism, one deems it an artificial, fictitious construct, could the distinction between gender analysis of fiction and non-fiction still be sustained? Or will the considerations within this issue of “The Problems of Literary Genres” simply be an exploration of an uncharted territory but on the same research map, with no qualitative difference? We feel that the first question should be answered affirmatively, while the second not, and below we present the rationale behind this conviction.

Let us begin with the referentiality of non-fiction. Obviously, there is no room in this editorial for a detailed theoretical discussion on literary fiction and its representation in literature, but it will suffice to briefly define fiction as “statements which, from the author’s presumed perspective, are not true judgements or strongly justified hypotheses, allowing us to recognise their non-assertiveness (i.e., they are neither the author’s opinions nor expressions of their beliefs), and therefore cannot be treated as false judgements or unjustified hypotheses” (Markiewicz 1970a: 122).¹ By contrast, works of non-fiction enter into — to use Philippe Lejeune’s concept — a “referential pact” with the reader, i.e., they are “supposed to [...] provide information about reality and submit themselves to verification” (Lejeune 2001: 47). The distinction outlined above seems to imply a different ethic of reception.

We shall examine this distinction through the example of literary characters. While they are, as Henryk Markiewicz once argued, anthropomimetic creations (Markiewicz 1981) and the author’s success depends on convincing the reader that they are virtually

¹ After Roman Ingarden, one can speak of quasi-judgements in this context (cf. Ingarden 1960; Markiewicz 1970: 131–133).

real, fiction still imposes a sense of distance between the reader and the experiences portrayed. Clearly, when analysing works of non-fiction, it is difficult to speak of a direct conversion of events into a story, as the issues presented are also modelled and processed through literary means.² However, the absence of the said distance renders it somewhat difficult to ignore or downplay the experiences portrayed. This condition is particularly relevant for the gender-sensitive approach to literature. By way of example, let us consider the representation of sexual violence. Since the aim of non-fiction “is not to show mere probability but a reflection of the truth, not an illusion of reality but its genuine image” (Lejeune 2001: 47),³ the reader knows that the violence depicted is real, which deprives them of the safety buffer that, in fiction, separates them from the brutal nature of the experiences portrayed. Analysing such matters inevitably involves contemplating experiences and events that we assume actually occurred, and writing about which may cause severe discomfort in those directly affected. This in turn raises a number of issues, including (self-)censorship, the unavailability of sources and witnesses, and the adequacy of the language. Is the author really presenting the “truth”? What has been concealed or exaggerated? What does the language of the text cloak? Similar questions arise as regards literary analysis. What are we allowed to write about? Is there any point in defining boundaries in that matter? Is the purpose of our effort to get to the “truth” or to respect the suffering of those affected by the experiences we are addressing? What language should we use to write about traumatic experiences?⁴

Going a step further, it also seems fair to ask whether exposing the fact that “the author and their output rely on cultural clichés and/or is caught *lying* about gender and sexuality” (Iwasiów 2004: 10) is an effective strategy for (re)interpreting non-fiction. The obvious response seems to be “yes”. After all, a sceptical, deconstructionist approach can have a wide range of applications. At the same time, the issue of how reality is modelled arises (an oblique reference to the well-known notion coined by the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School). Does fiction process cultural clichés differently? Are they delivered more directly in non-fiction (albeit also in a mediated way; see Nycz 1995) and thus become “more truthful”? These questions seem relevant in the context of gender performativity in non-fiction. Correlations between femininity, masculinity and non-binary in a work of literature and the knowledge of gender and gender-related norms at the time the work was written or the period it covers have already been discussed in relation to fiction. However, these issues also deserve analysis in non-fiction, since it is not only the characters portrayed who “perform” their gender but also the author’s and/or the narrator’s voice. The latter proves particularly interesting as regards autobiographical works. Although we identify the literary persona with the author pursuant to the referential pact mentioned above (Lejeune 2001), the authorial self-creation is a multifaceted process aimed at presenting a particular vision of the self to the reader. Certainly, these issues are widely recognised and addressed, e.g., by Ryszard Nycz in his concept of *syllapticity* (cf. Nycz 2013),

² After all, facts have lost their status of being self-evident and obvious in contemporary non-fiction studies (as shown later herein).

³ Lejeune’s observations apply to biography and autobiography but can also be applied to other genres of non-fiction.

⁴ See similar questions posed with regard to *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* by Miron Białoszewski; cf. Sobolczyk 2024; Lisowska 2024.

but when gender performativity on the one hand, and the referential pact on the other, come into play, additional issues must be considered. What strategies of presenting their gender identity does the author choose? How much are these a matter of individual choice and how much do they stem from the pressure of prevailing norms or — to use Judith Butler’s criterion — to what extent are they a manifestation of performativity and to what extent of performance?

Another aspect that deserves examination is genealogical categories. Since gender in the different genres of fiction is being analysed and revisions to our understanding suggested, these can be raised in relation to non-fiction, e.g., what are the correlations between the different genres of non-fiction and gender issues? Reportage appears to be an ideal research field in which to explore this matter. Are there any reportage topics that are more “feminine” and “masculine”? Although this question inevitably relies on stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, such clichés must be taken into account if the socio-cultural dimension of gender is emphasised; after all, numerous definitions of women’s literature have been based on clichés, especially those referring to its (postulated) somaticity (cf. Świerkosz 2017). To nuance this issue, one may ask whether a given topic can be covered in a more “feminine” or “masculine” manner, a question often posed in reference to war correspondence (*vide* Svetlana Alexievich; cf. Szewczyk 2024). Another major aspect is the said gender performativity of the author/literary persona. Different genres seem to create different possibilities in this regard. For instance, autobiography allows for self-creation (within the confines of syllepticity and the referential pact), while biography depicts the hero’s/heroine’s gender seen through the author’s eyes. This is different still for reportage, where the author can employ a variety of means to introduce their own and other characters’ subjectivity into the text. Finally, in line with a growing tendency to abandon gender binarism (as observed in engaged humanities) one should consider what non-fiction literature has to offer to identities that go beyond femininity and masculinity as regards the issues addressed herein. Do certain non-fiction genres (e.g., advice literature; cf. Iwanicka 2024) prove particularly relevant (useful) from the perspective of gender issues?

The criteria for applying a gender- and sexuality-sensitive approach to evaluate non-fiction literature are also worth considering. If one defines *value* as “the ability of an object to perform a particular purpose to satisfy a specific human need” (Markiewicz 1970b: 324), and *valuation* as “a verdict stating the presence of certain values in a work (of literature) that make it either more or less valuable to the recipient than other works of the same type, and that it also corresponds to a greater or lesser degree to the ideals and standards accepted by this recipient” (*Słownik terminów literackich* 2002: 606 [Dictionary of Literary Terms]), one must also inquire as to which factors are most relevant for the topic in question. These can be “cognitive-evaluative and postulative values” (Markiewicz 1970b: 335), referring, on the one hand to scientific discourse (e.g., current knowledge about gender and sexuality), and on the other hand to a general worldview (Markiewicz 1970b: 335). The latter pertains not only to the perspective adopted by the author but also to the relationship between the text and the most widespread (i.e., partly academic and partly non-scientific) approaches to gender issues in a given place and time. Thus, these aspects appear to be similar to those applied to fiction. However, as stated above, the referential pact evokes (or may evoke) different

expectations in readers than those aroused by statements based on quasi-judgements. What does it mean, however, to truthfully portray women living in large Polish cities in a 21st-century reportage? Or to convincingly depict Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's gender and sexual identity in his biography? Or to tell the "truth" about one's sexuality in an autobiography? These are just a few topics among those worth addressing for the different genres of non-fiction.

The issues revolve around the referentiality and "credibility" of gender constructs. Naturally, these also arise in the context of fiction, where they, however, appear somewhat "deferred," if only because of the power of fiction to model reality. Although one cannot assume that "there will be only the truth"⁵ in non-fiction, it is still relevant to examine what the "truth" of gender and sexuality is like there.

"So don't dare dismiss my gender as a construct, drag, or a performance, because my gender is a work of non-fiction," reads the most provocative statement in an essay published over a decade ago by Julia Serano, a transgender activist, writer, biologist and musician (Serano 2013: 108).

Being both transgender and extremely active in the field of non-fiction, Serano had — above all others — the right to make this powerful assertion, which is essentially a metaphor here. In line with the classical definition by Aristotle, a metaphor is an application of a name from one thing to another by analogy. In this sense, Serano constructed an analogy of gender (in culture) — non-fiction. In the same way that non-fiction contradicts fiction, Serano's experience of gender contradicts a number of applications of the concept of gender performativity as portrayed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), particularly those applications that have reduced gender to matters of ornament, performance or fad. For Serano, a trained biochemist, what matters is the tangible, the material: a direct and enduring experience, while for Serano, an author and activist, it is the opportunity to tell a story. However, one must bear in mind that today facts are no longer treated with Positivist naivety. On the contrary, "facts have become an object of speculation on an unprecedented scale, which is quite a new situation," argues Justyna Tabaszewska in her essay on the challenges of contemporary reportage (Tabaszewska 2019: 14), and non-fiction literature — especially reportage, which Przemysław Czapliński calls the "orientation genre" of Polish contemporary literature — "portrays more than just reality; it portrays the emergence of reality" (Czapliński 2019: 36).

The idea behind the monographic issue of "The Problems of Literary Genres" emerged from our conviction that gender and non-fiction are not often contemplated together in Polish literary studies, which — perhaps somewhat seduced by the concept of "performativity" — focus on gender interpretations of fiction and texts documenting literary life (letters, diaries, memoirs), thus neglecting non-fiction despite its popularity with readers. For instance, in a recently published résumé of the transformations of Polish reportage after 2010, Bernadetta Darska (2023) recognises and analyses the ways in which female and male authors are present in texts, but gender is hardly taken into account in this

⁵ This is stated by Miron Białoszewski in the opening of *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* (Białoszewski 2015: 3).

otherwise most interesting study. Reportage, as regards both its poetics and pragmatics within the field of literature and the media, is also not subjected to an in-depth analysis from the gender perspective.

Nevertheless, there have been a number of developments and studies showing how promising this research field is, thus seemingly heralding an intensification of interest in gender issues in non-fiction (both concerning the poetics of texts and the pragmatics of how the literary subfield operates). Let us mention them here. Perhaps the first worth mentioning was the debate sparked off by Artur Domoślawski's book on the prominent Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński entitled *Kapuściński Non-Fiction* (2010), in which he questioned the reporter's legendary status by exposing the deceptions and abusive behaviour often associated with gender performativity ("machismo," "risk-taking," "daredevilry," or "bromances" with Che Guevara and Patrice Lumumba). Domoślawski also indicated that the cultivation of Kapuściński's enduring professional image came at the expense of his private life, more precisely, the women in his life: his wife isolated at home and the daughter struggling with addiction. Even the fiercest opponents of the book and its author had to admit that following the publication "it is no longer acceptable to write about Kapuściński as we did" (Nowacka, Ziątek 2013: 9).

A controversy was also sparked by the 2017 volume called *Polski esej literacki. Antologia* [Polish Literary Essay. An Anthology], compiled and edited by Jan Tomkowski as part of the monumental *Biblioteka Narodowa* [National Library] publishing series issued by the prestigious Ossolineum Publishing House. The book was criticised for constructing a false image of the tradition of literary essayism, i.e., its masculocentrism. As Renata Lis wrote: "It is quite sad how Jan Tomkowski entrenched himself in this obsolete standpoint of his, as if he refused to acknowledge that the essayistic agent has long since ceased to be exclusively European, patriarchal and white. The genre today is pursued by women, misfits and the colonised, for whom Athens, Rome and Jerusalem are not always and necessarily the focal point of reference" (Lis 2017, n.p.). Lis also voices objections against Tomkowski's strategy, arguing that since the publication is part of *Biblioteka Narodowa*, an authoritative series establishing the canon in Poland, he should have sought objectivity and neutrality, not just a semblance of these. Instead, she claims that he is so subjective and biased in his choices that "there are, in fact, only two women in this anthology: Szymborska gets a page and a half, and there is Maria Kuncewiczowa's essay on Joseph Conrad. How bizarre, weird even. Especially if we consider how much space the author has allocated for texts that are perhaps only of interest to researchers today" (Lis 2017, n.p.). Lis supports her stance with a striking example, stating that if it had really been the author's intention to compile a fair anthology of Polish literary essays, Tomkowski would never have ignored Jolanta Brach-Czaina, who — as Lis argues — would have "blown this anthology apart from the inside," thus completely deconstructing the canon he had so painstakingly constructed:

Who I have in mind here is Jolanta Brach-Czaina with her *Szczeliny istnienia* [Cracks in Existence], a groundbreaking book published in 1992 (i.e., already within the anthology's timeframe and well established in our literary tradition), which addresses the themes of the existential experience of childbirth, the philosophical value of everyday hustle and bustle,

brainwaves one may have while making dumplings, etc. Just Brach-Czaina alone would have blown this anthology apart from the inside, letting in the much needed fresh air along with the despised second half of the human experience. (Lis 2017, n.p.)

One must also mention the fallout from the Nobel Prize for Svetlana Alexievich, i.e., a debate held on the website of *Nowa Europa Wschodnia* [New Easter Europe], including an essay by Ludwika Włodek (importantly, an actual reporter, not a theoretician) on the gendered and orientalising patterns of writing about Russia and the former USSR states, which — for stereotypical “male” reporters — have become not so much a field of in-depth inquiry, but a space for male gender performativity and orientalising: “[W]e all orientalise, but women seem to orientalise less. Men see themselves as intrepid conquerors who embark on a quest into the unknown, just like the heroes of 19th-century adventure fiction for boys” (Włodek 2017: 35–41). Later, she characterises this style of writing by claiming that “men are in space, women are in the East” (Włodek 2017: 39–40).

In recent years, the bimonthly “Teksty Drugie” [Secondary Texts] has devoted a number of monographic issues to non-fiction (biography, autobiography, reportage), in which certain articles have yielded valuable observations and suggestions for a gender- and sexuality-sensitive literary analysis. Kinga Siewior’s (2019) interpretation of Mariusz Szczygieł’s reportage strategy may be considered particularly interesting in this respect.

Another noteworthy affair is the high-profile case of the reporter Marcin Kącki, who published a text in *Gazeta Wyborcza* in an attempt to justify the sexual abuse he had allegedly committed, and which ultimately ended his career. The article, initially praised for being a bold “confession” by his fellow male and female journalists on social media, was soon to become the swansong of “machoism” and an unmasking of “invisible” gender abuse, both at the level of institutional privilege and textual strategy. It elicited so many responses from female reporters and journalists that it would require a separate study.⁶ Just for the record, below is a quotation from Marta Nowak’s article, indicating the anachronistic nature of the poetics of Kącki’s confession:

For him, women are a hazy collective, ghosts hovering over the waters, or at best a string of clichés. There is the ever-worried mother. There is the sister who demands money from her brother. There is the girl he meets in the pub and makes pregnant, a commitment he cannot face (yet she can, strangely enough). There is the lover who seeks the “illusion of love” in his eyes. There are the girls from the escort agency, with hearts of gold and eyes painted like butterflies. There is also the current partner who has healed him with her love, as this is apparently the role of women in this world: to cuddle heroes badly bruised in the war against their own demons. Who is supposed to cuddle and heal women who fight their demons remains unknown. (Nowak 2024, n.p.)

⁶ Today, the link that once led to the reporter’s “confession” takes the reader to an apology note entitled *We apologise for the publication of Marcin Kącki’s article. It has been removed from the web*, signed by Roman Imielski, Aleksandra Sobczak and Bartosz T. Wieliński: wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,3056147,6,zadzwonilem-do-wszystkich-kobiet-ktore-skrzywdzilem-wlacznie.html [access: 26.09.2024].

Despite the above, no article or debate on non-fiction writing has provoked in-depth studies from female and male researchers,⁷ which strikes one as curious. Before we start beating our chests over such negligence and backwardness, however, one must note that the overlooking of the gender aspect in studying non-fiction is by no means a Polish peculiarity. Suffice it to say that although the UK-based Women's Prize Trust has been awarding the prestigious Women's Prize in Fiction since 1996, it was not until the early 2020s that the validity of recognising gender difference and its implications for non-fiction reached the consciousness of active agents in the literary field, when the Trust finally decided that a Women's Prize in Non-Fiction to promote women's non-fiction was also needed. The prize was inspired by the 2021 publication of Mary Ann Sieghart's book *Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and What We Can Do about It*, which addresses the issue of the authority gap faced by women. One of the most widely discussed chapters there depicts the situation on the literary market, where the authority gap is particularly acute for female non-fiction authors. Not only do Sieghart's findings clearly indicate that female authors are viewed as less credible, but she also provides female writers who only provide their initials on book covers so as to be gender-neutral, e.g., the bestselling thriller author L.J. Ross.

We believe that the time convergence between the launch of the Prize (the inaugural edition was awarded to Naomi Klein for *Doppelgänger. A Trip Into the Mirror World*) and the decision to publish the monographic issue of "The Problems of Literary Genres" is by no means coincidental and therefore should be emphasised in this editorial, if only by briefly reporting on the rationale behind the Prize.

When interviewed by *The Guardian*, Kate Mosse, the originator of the Prize, stressed that when it comes to non-fiction literature there is "this idea of a neutral voice, and that's even more strong in non-fiction, the idea of *the expert*" (Shaffi 2023, n.p.). However, these two values — expertise and neutrality — are male by default (N.B., this may have been the root of Jan Tomkowski's cognitive bias):

[...] there's a huge amount of amazing narrative non-fiction being written by women that is simply not getting any attention at all. It matters because readers are missing out. Research carried out by the trust found that 26.5% of non-fiction reviews in national newspapers was allocated to books by female writers, while 35.5% of books awarded a non-fiction prize over the past 10 years were written by a female writer, across seven UK non-fiction prizes. (Shaffi 2023, n.p.)

However, it is not just how women writers are perceived that engenders inequality in non-fiction. There are also more every day, practical, obstacles for women, aptly outlined by Rachel Hewitt, an award-winning author of numerous non-fiction books, in her commentary on the Prize:

⁷ Agnieszka Mrozik's *Architektki PRL-u* [Women Architects in the People's Republic of Poland] (2013) is a commendable exception. The Warsaw-based researcher traces the careers of prominent female communist writers, pointing out that after the Polish Thaw many found a niche on the publishing market, writing advice, and later also, autobiographical books.

Writing non-fiction tends to involve research and travel, including visits to archives and interviews, and the freedom and disposable income necessary to conduct that research are hugely shaped by gendered gaps in pay, leisure time and domestic responsibilities such as childcare. (Knight 2023, n.p.)

As this short editorial reveals, virtually any research perspective — be it historical literary or interpretative-critical — which focuses on the sociology of literary life or the reception of a work of literature while also taking gender issues into account, seems promising and worth pursuing. Obviously, we had no illusions that we could exhaust the topic here. Our aim was rather to stimulate and embolden all researchers to approach more courageously not only “gendered,” but also (why not?) queer analyses and interpretations of non-fiction when defined in the broadest possible meaning of the term (reportage, biography, popular science or travel literature, etc.). This ought to include the analysis of this subfield, both as it exists today and the historical developments that have shaped it. What we also had in mind was the other extreme of the gender “asymmetry” associated with non-fiction. Researchers indicate that the perception of non-fiction as more “masculine” and intended for men is the result of a somewhat reductionistic reader socialisation, which adversely affects boys’ sensitivity and imagination, yet is still often unwittingly implemented by schools and parents (cf. Merga 2017).

The articles written by both female and male authors that ultimately comprise this issue of “The Problems of Literary Genres” do not entirely concur with the expectations outlined. While some fit in different ways, others are still situated beyond the boundaries, which only reinforces our conviction that this field is broader than we at first imagined. And we must confess that it delights us.

Enjoy your reading!

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