

RECIPROCITIES:

Essays in Honour
of Professor Tadeusz Rachwał



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Essays in Honour of Professor Tadeusz Rachwał

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...a grateful mind
By owing owes not, but still pays, at once
Indebted and discharg'd;...

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*,
Book IV, ll. 55–7

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inTRoduction

Professor Tadeusz Rachwał teaches at Szkoła Wyższa Psychologii Społecznej (the University of Social Sciences and Humanities) in Warsaw. He is in perpetual motion across northern Poland, using any means at hand (he has neither a car nor a driving license). It has not always been that way.

TR (he will excuse this) was born on the 12th of April, 1954 in Gliwice, southern Poland, to an itinerant family of mixed cultural roots. There, in the Upper Silesian region where Polish, German, and Bohemian cultural influences intermingle, he grew up and paid his dues, on the street and at school. What his intentions were when, in 1973, he enrolled in the Academy of Economics in Katowice is in retrospect difficult to say – but after a semester he changed his mind and the following year became a student at the Institute of English Philology at the University of Silesia, Katowice.

TR's interest in research goes back to his fourth year as a student, when for the first time he took part in a conference organized by the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin where he delivered a paper on phonetics and phonology in generative grammar, which may have been quite impressive because he was awarded a prize for it. His scholarly work continued to such good effect that his M.A. thesis, devoted to the topic of idiomatics in transformational-generative model of grammar, was appraised as outstanding, in recognition of which an abridged version of it was published in *Neophilologica*, an annual linguistic journal published by the University of Silesia.

After receiving his M.A. degree in linguistics, TR taught English for a year at a secondary school in Gliwice – Wittgenstein-like, one can say, though, TR being the mildest of men, there certainly was no ear- or hair-pulling involved. After testing his mettle in basic language teaching, in September 1980 he became employed as an assistant professor in the Institute of English Philology at the University of Silesia (a kind of misnomer in this case because the Modern Languages Department is located in Sosnowiec, which lies across the Brynica River and therefore technically not in Silesia but Zagłębie). At first his interest in theoretical linguistics continued, but gradually his research into the problems of semiotics led him to expand into literary semiotics and then into literary theory and philosophy, especially Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, which was scarcely known in Poland at the time. One of the results (or causes – one can never be sure and this is not necessarily a Derridean insight) of his interest in deconstruction was the beginning of a long friendship and scholarly collaboration between TR and Tadeusz Sławek, his older colleague at the English Institute. Soon they became a well-known academic duo, publishing a series of articles and finally three book-length studies (one with a third collaborator) devoted to English literature and culture of the 17th and 18th centuries.

At the beginning of the 1980s Tadeusz Rachwał and Tadeusz Sławek were among the four founding members of the "Er(r)go Seminar" research group (the other two being Wojciech Kalaga and the late Emanuel Prower) which made the Silesian "school" a recognized theoretical centre of English literary and cultural studies in Poland with an international reputation. By 1992 the group had published six volumes of studies devoted to the problems of interpretation theory. During this period TR quickly became one of the major Polish authorities on Jacques Derrida's thought, which found its culmination in the first Polish book devoted to Derrida, which he co-wrote with Tadeusz Sławek: *Maszyna do pisania. O dekonstruktywistycznej teorii Jacquesa Derridy*, published in 1992. TR's continual and intensive engagement with 18th century literary and cultural issues found printed form in the Foucauldian analyses of *Word and Confinement: Subjectivity and Classical Discourse* (1992) and the aforementioned books written together with Tadeusz Sławek: *Lines, Planes and*

Solids: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Writings (1992) and *Sfera szarości. Studia nad literaturą i myślą osiemnastego wieku* (1993).

The crooked ways of Enlightenment literary theory and practice have never ceased to engage TR, which is also confirmed by the large number of articles he has devoted to it thus far, and by yet another book, *Approaches of Infinity: The Sublime and the Social* (1993) dealing with the 18th century ramifications (and domestications) of the discourse of the sublime. It is this monograph in particular which perhaps best explains TR's constant fascination with the 18th century because, in its refashioning of the category of the sublime, the epoch seems uncannily to prefigure the problematics of the poststructuralist discourse in which sublimity itself becomes one of the most central concepts or even (in Jean-François Lyotard's thought) the foundation of postmodernity as such.

A separate but related sphere of TR's intellectual interests has been the work of Bruno Schulz, a Polish-Jewish modernist writer, whose sometimes surprisingly deconstructive intuitions have been very congenial to TR, witness the number of papers he devoted to this aspect of Schulz's work. Moreover, the issues encountered while struggling with the tightly-woven texture of this writer's ambiguous meanings turned out to lead further into translational problems (explored in further papers), therefore bringing TR back into the core aspects of deconstruction for which translation and linguistic multiplicity are very important theoretical issues.

Perhaps it can be ascribed to a deconstructive bent in TR's mind that he kept finding his thought roaming far and wide and finding new chances of international collaboration. Apart from the aforementioned long-standing joint research with Tadeusz Sławek, TR co-originated and co-published a number of papers together with his English friends and intellectual interlocutors (also sometime residents in Poland), Claire Hobbs and the late lamented David Jarrett, the latter a co-author with Sławek and TR of a fascinating analysis of the discourse of 17th and 18th century gardening *Geometry, Winding Paths and the Mansions of Spirit*.

A restless deconstructive mind, thriving on impurities, alloys, and cross-fertilisation, and fascinated by unseemly mixtures and monstrosities, is at home in Upper Silesia, a region of borderlands and cross-cultural interchange, which has been damaged by heavy industry, an

area full of waste matter and unexpected concoctions. TR's place under the smoke-veiled sun and the home of a certain theoretical attitude it seemed to be. But nothing lasts forever and as after twenty odd years the Er(r)go group – the foundation on which the Silesian “school” rested and which finally resulted in the founding of the Institute of English and American Literature and Culture¹ (of which TR was vice-director between 1999 and 2002) – finally crumbled, TR, a full professor by that time, renewed his peregrinations.

TR founded the School of English Language Cultures and Literatures at the University of Bielsko-Biała in 2002. He also moved from Silesia to the mountain region of Podbeskidzie where he divided his time between administrative duties, scholarly activities, and walking in the woods. For a couple of years he enjoyed living in a flat directly facing the mountains, but this idyll was regularly interrupted by visits to the holy city of Częstochowa where he also taught. Quite a bit of his educational and scholarly *oeuvre* of that time was devoted to representation of minority discourses in the academia. In 2005 he finally decided to test the charms of the capital of Poland and accepted the offer to become the chair of the School of Anglophone Cultures and Literatures at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities where he has since been teaching students at postgraduate levels.

The decision was followed by he and his family moving to the medieval city of Toruń where they live in an old apartment full of voluminous furniture wherein books vanish constantly. Intellectual reflection on the crooked matters of contingency and precarity, and their theoretical implications for living and reading in the world, are happily interrupted by a little gardening and biking, for which Toruń is well suited. In Toruń TR also engages in the work of the academic community, particularly supporting the development of British Studies at the Nicolaus Copernicus University (established several years earlier by his late friend David Jarrett) and serving as head of the Anglophone Culture Section in the Department of English (2007–2011), where he gave lectures and seminars, took part in the organization of conferences and co-edited collections of essays.

¹ Now the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures.

Presently TR divides his time between meditations on metaphysics as a supplement of finitude (whose seemingly transgressive operations contribute a great deal to the phantasmagoric nature of metaphysical considerations) and poetics (as well as every-day practices) of care and its power to overcome the deadly logic of ownership, appropriation and domination. In his current research he also continues to explore the themes of precarity in culture, nature, wilderness, and the wild.

Essays included in this volume² are written by TR's friends, colleagues and former students and bear witness to many intellectual affinities which can be shared, exchanged and enjoyed in mutual encounters. Every one of these texts also testifies to the possibility of reciprocity being materialized.

A.P., S.M.

² It has a companion collection entitled *Affinities* published concurrently by Peter Lang Verlag.

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