

Literature on Trial

The Emergence of Critical Discourse in Germany, Poland, and Russia, 1700–1800

By **S. D. Chrostowska**. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2012. 273 pages. Bibliography and Index. ISBN 978-1-4426-4356-7. Hardcover.

Matthias Rothe

After reading S. D. Chrostowska's book on the literary criticism as genre, I had to think carefully about writing this review. How to balance out information, description, positive and negative evaluation, and polemic remarks? How to justify my findings? Finally, how will these implicit rules shape what I am going to say? *Literature on Trial: The Emergence of Critical Discourse in Germany, Poland, and Russia* invites all of these questions.

The title of the book is somewhat misleading. S.D. Chrostowska's study inquires into "the *genres* [my emphasis] of emerging literary-critical discourses" and sketches their "trajectory" (190), which is different from an inquiry into the *emergence* of genres (literally the reverse project). Additionally, there is also no reference to the juridical position of the critic ("literature on trial") evoked by the title. Instead, the author tells the story of the "coming of age" (48) of literary criticism, its path to institutionalization and to relative autonomy. The book begins with a lengthy discussion of the relation among discourse, genre, and history, making a case for the employment of the term "genre." Each of the following three chapters is dedicated to a different state, or rather to a different cultural-linguistic region (the distinction between state and region demands further discussion), and each chapter is structured in a similar way. An account of the eighteenth-century socioeconomic, cultural, and political history of the region/state in question frames a detail-driven analysis of individual examples of literary criticism. These examples in turn are ordered chronologically, and hence lend themselves to be read as supporting the

coming of age narrative. The book conveniently offers an index of names and topics.

Chrostowska's discussion of the relation between genre and discourse in the introductory chapter is very thoughtful and makes a persuasive case for genre as a category that is too easily dismissed. Her understanding of genre in terms of "generic relations" in "continual flux" (16) appears to be applicable to many forms of textual analysis and is apt to provoke further discussion. The concept of a "discursive form" (15) as a mediator between discourse and genre is promising, yet not sufficiently elaborated. It is as if the author does not sufficiently trust her own insights and so does not follow through with them.

In the course of her analyses she understands "genre" less in terms of ever-changing relations, but instead employs it as a ready-made tool, a relatively fixed form. "Genre" becomes "the frame through which to study successive phases in a discourse's history" (15), or "a lens through which to examine discourse" (22); genre is set up to function "as a prism through which to view . . . discursive features" (6). But the lens of genre makes discourse dissolve into a series of discrete texts; each text still fails in its own way to meet the criteria defining the broader genre. What should have become visible as "successive phases of a discourse's history" (15) ends up being a mere collection of texts whose belonging to one and the same discourse remains at the level of assertion. In other words, these individual texts are not able to represent what they are supposed to: a developmental trajectory. Hence the connection between the book's analytical section and its historical section remains weak. Since the author seems to be most interested in the description of the formal qualities of individual texts, she often resorts to traditional narratives in the historical part. She too easily accepts traditional periods such as "Sturm und Drang," "Classicism," and "Romanticism," and simply takes as given what was itself subject to emergence and change. More importantly, she also presupposes what is in its history most intimately connected to the business of criticism, namely literature in the modern sense of the word (although her theory

chapter has, with a view to Foucault's concept of episteme, acknowledged these intricacies (32)).

This is not to say that the historical section is without merit. Especially for someone who is not familiar with eighteenth-century Eastern Europe, her comparative approach—Germany, Poland, and Russia as cultural and linguistic regions—offers a highly informative introduction, all the more so because the author resists any temptation to understand Germany as the model case. For example, her account of the formation of literary institutions in Poland (125–133) is a very convincing case study.

At the end of her book Chrostowska proposes a variety of future research projects such as an inquiry into the “adaptations” (191) of Horace and Boileau in different cultures, or a study of “the role played by French literary-critical forms in the early formative stages of German, Polish and Russian critical discourses” (191). She sees these future endeavors along with the study discussed here, as contributions to the “history of the present” in Foucault's sense (10), that is, her ultimate goal is to question the “givenness” of contemporary critical discourses by shedding light on the contingencies of their becoming. To be sure, these projects are original and interesting enough to achieve this goal. However, their realization is not very likely if the inquiry into the makeup of texts and their formal features still remains largely disconnected from the materiality of the field—the institutions, communication media, persons, practices, and habits of reading and writing, the functioning of schools and universities, and so on. The challenge at hand, I would think, is to conceptually think together the emergence, makeup, and transformation of a critical discourse. Such an approach would also allow the author to critically question the seeming “givenness” of cultures, literature and progressive developments. She would not run the risk of presupposing what might only be a retroactive projection from the perspective of a prevailing discourse. It might be worth looking into the work of scholars such as Friedrich Kittler or Albrecht Koschorke who draw on media-historiographies, or even take inspiration from Bruno Latour's actor-network theory. After all, the “idea of generic relation . . . in continual

flux” (16) seems quite compatible with these perspectives. △

Poezje zebrane

[Collected Poems], by Janusz A. Ihnatowicz. Toronto-Rzeszów: Polish Publication Fund in Canada and the Literary Association “Fraza,” 2012. Edited with an introduction by Aleksandra Jakubowska-Ożóg. Index of poems. 526 pages. ISBN 978-0-921724-83-4. Paper. In Polish.

Agnieszka Gutthy

Janusz Artur Ihnatowicz is a Roman Catholic priest, émigré poet, playwright, and translator. He is also professor emeritus of theology at Saint Thomas University in Houston. He has published poetry both in Polish and English, and has authored several dozen scholarly articles. He is a recipient of the Kościelski Foundation Prize in Literature (1973) and the Union of Polish Writers Abroad Prize (2012).

Poezje zebrane is a comprehensive collection of Fr. Ihnatowicz's poems culled from different volumes and organized chronologically, from the earliest 1972 book *Pejzaż z postaciami* through *Wiersze wybrane* (1973), *Niewidomy z Betsaidy* (1991), *Czas, co pochłania* (2002), *Epigram o nadziei i inne wiersze* (1992–2003), to *Od czasu kto nas wyzwoli?* (2007) The poems in the 1975 volume *Displeasure* have been written in English. The book also contains poems that had been dispersed in various journals, as well as previously unpublished texts. The volume closes with translations into Polish from Hebrew (“Song of Songs”), Latin (two poems of Venatius Fortunatus), and from such English poets as Gerald Manley Hopkins, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, Dame E. Sitwell, John Crowe Ransom, W. Owen, E. E. Cummings, H. Crane, R. Eberhart, L. MacNeice, W. H. Auden, Steven Spender, and Dylan Thomas. The chronological organization of the book allows the reader to witness the poetic development of the author, as well as foregrounding of the recurrent motifs in his work.