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COMPASSION AND LITERATURE. NEO-SENTIMENTALISM IN LITERARY THEORY

ABSTRACT

In our paper, we present a review of recent developments in literary theory especially in the theory by Martha Nussbaum focusing on a role of compassion in literary studies. Our main thesis is that neo-sentimentalism is visible in three areas of Martha Nussbaum's thought: first, in her views of emotions (she try to persuade readers that this stance is neo-stoicism, but it should be properly called neo-sentimentalism); secondly, in her theory of the literary genres, in which she represents the anti-formalist turn in literary studies; thirdly, in her theory of compassion and love in the reception of literature, in ethics and in social thinking. In order to characterise Martha Nussbaum's literary theory, we try to summarise the motive of empathy occurring in 18th century sentimentalism and in many forms of the later aesthetic sentimentality. We interpret so called ethical criticism (involving, besides Martha Nussbaum, Stanley Cavell, Wayne Booth, Martin Price) as a political movement using, as its rhetorical device, reference to sentimental motives of absolute empathy (G. Lakoff and M. Johnson's concept). We also argue that in the current era we should abandon an ideal of apolitical criticism and theory of literature. Literary scholarship has many ethical and, subsequently, political dimensions and empathy is a basic term in literary studies which associates itself with other sociological and political issues. But recent developments in cognitive science make us to

treat empathy as a basic term of understanding human behaviours and language, so the neo-sentimentalism has a solid grounds in science. Compassion, empathy and literature It seems paradoxical that the literary issues around a notion of compassion are nowadays the toughest to theorize despite of the fact that the issues were present already in Aristotle's Poetics and Rhetoric, which could be regarded as the first truly systematic approach to language and literature. However, terms included in the semantic field of compassion such as sympathy, pity, love, friendship, and solidarity remain, up to now, the most important problems in moral philosophy. Recently, they occur in the reflection on literature among scholars from the cycle of the so called ethical criticism and some others: Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum, Noel Carroll, Stanley Cavell, Martin Price, and Richard Rorty.

Moreover, when we look into deeper strata of the current trends of literary theory, the whole directions of the literary scholarship such as Marxism, feminism, eco-criticism or queer theory may reveal a new face and could be interpreted as compassionate, empathetic and engaged in mending of the corrupted world that causes suffering. We are convinced that such possible interpretations should be thought over. The last proposal by Roger D. Sell called *mediating criticism* also seems to be worthy to consider: it uses empathy as a basic mechanism.

At the beginning of our paper we should note that a notion of compassion takes many different terminological forms in different languages: for instance, in Polish, we discriminate sharply between pity and compassion, however in philosophical English you can find in many contexts *empathy*, *compassion*, *sympathy*, *fellow-feeling* and *pity* as more/less synonyms. Many terms has got a historical feature, they now do mean something else than they did in the past, see for instance English *sympathy*. It is therefore necessary to say that we will hereafter deal with a notion close to compassion understood as true (proper) empathy (Preston, de Waal). Empathy is an imaginative and emotional reconstruction of the experience of another person, regardless if the experience is good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant. We can talk about compassion when the subject of empathy regards the situation of another person as directly bad. (Nussbaum, *Upheavals...*, 302).

It should be noted, however, that the term compassion has been always at hand in the history of literature. For instance, at the beginning of the seventies in the 20th century, James Gordin wrote even on the tradition of compassion, but he, at the same time, stated the fuzzy character of the term, historical determination of it, and dependence on

conventional tastes and ethics. The tradition was dated quite painlessly in 1875 (Gindin 13).

In the longest possible tradition of talking about the compassion, a special characteristic has a definition of pity in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: he gives us hope for some universality of the notion, although he counts also subjective elements as important. He writes that our own suffering or the suffering of our relatives predispose us to the feeling of pity. The most important condition of pity according to Aristotle is a believe in existence of noble people in the world. (Aristotle 173) All what brings about suffering, pain and devastation, namely death, bodily pains, old age, illnesses, deprivation of food, and of friends, ugliness, impotence, deformity, all those factors can evoke pity (Aristotle 173-174). They all form a kind of universal archetypes of the human experience, such as the seasons. But we should be alert: the universality does not have to lead us to a-historical reflection: what is ugly or ill in a given culture depends on many culturally dependent factors.

So, in the history of literature we can find historically determined literary and artistic phenomena which cannot be properly analysed without a notion of compassion. Especially, when we are doing research in the literature of 18th and 19th centuries, literature of sentimentalism and romanticism. Jerome McGann writes that among values of the literary sentimentalism were self-consciousness, refined taste and sympathy for others (McGann 34). In the English theoretical literature, it is common to understand empathy as at least partially identical with a term sensibility, understood as *sensibility* in front of other's suffering and sensibility to the beauty of the world and love. (Cuddon 856-857) This notion of sensibility appeared in the cultural domain as a reaction against the stoic and Hobbes' theories. Sensibility was a characteristic of a man who could react to the sufferings of the others with a tear in his/her eyes. The literature of the 18th century was full of trembling and tears: we can find them in Young's *Night Thoughts*, Richardson's *Pamela*, Gray's *Elegies*, and Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*, to name a few characteristic examples. Even at the beginning of the 20th century, Thomas Stearns Eliot could not define poetry without sensibility. (Gibson 185-187) Sentimentalism and sensibility are certainly historical notions describing phenomena which are not strictly tied to one cultural period. For instance, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstien*, a novel regarded as romantic, cannot be properly understood and interpreted without a sentimental notion of sensibility. Jerome McGann directly derives romanticism from sentimentalism (McGann 1, Motooka) and it is not a controversial thesis, if we

are aware of the intellectual atmosphere around emotions in the 18th century Britain. Jean Hagstrum even claims that sentimentalism is a deepest heritage of the Age of Reason. McGann agrees on that claiming that traditional opinions about the reason and the mind has been regarded as not "sensible" anymore. (McGann 2 and 5). Many other literary phenomena in the 18th century can be interpreted as making "the sentimental revival" or "the revival of feeling", namely: the tradition of the sublime (see Płuciennik, *Retoryka...*, Holmquist, Płuciennik, *A Short Biographical Guide...*), graveyard poetry, poetry of ruins, the gothic revival, the gothic novel (Punter 10-27), Macpherson's *Ossian*. It is also not an exaggeration to derive the aesthetic of effusion from the aesthetic of sensibility (McGann 21), and yet effusions are the core of the literary genre of the lyric. However, we cannot underestimate the role of effusions in the new born western literary kind: novel.

This artistic revival of the feeling could lead to religious and political reforms, and even directly to revolution. McGann writes that idiots, children, peasants, primitive folks, women were perceived in the 18th century as sentimental, as humans who think by feeling. (McGann 13) David Denby goes even further when he claims that the French revolution was the ultimate sentimental event. (Denby 96) According to William Reddy the influence of the sentimentalism in England was as wide as in France, but in the second country the social consequences of it were much easier accepted (Reddy 155).

The most interesting phenomena for literary critics in this context are narrative forms which played a huge role in preparation of the French revolution. According to Denby, a big deal of 18th century Europe wept over narratives about miseries of the "common" people. Sentimentalism, in Denby's view, is defined as a popular narrative structure dealing with the fate and sufferings of characters and, at the same time, presenting reactions of an observing subject. In this sense sentimentalism was a touchstone or an experimental area for moral and linguistic theories of the Enlightenment. It was also a way to elaborate such notions as equality and democracy (according to the standards of the time) (Denby 1).

At the same time, sentimentalism had also religious elements. Barker-Benfield confirms mystic character of the sentimentalism and sensibility. (Barker-Benfield xix) Without these religious atmosphere one is unable to interpret such phenomena as the Werter cult or Rousseau cult all over the Europe. In England, the additional element was a revival of feeling and enthusiasm in the preaching of John Wesley and the

Methodists. (Barker-Benfield xix, Knox 422-548) Such intellectual atmosphere in 18th century Europe, at the one hand, was causing effeminacy in men and, at the second hand, made aware women of their inferior function in the society. It is worthy to notice that the first feminist critical text, *A Vindication of Rights of Women* by Marry Wollstonecraft criticises sentimental upbringing referring to sentimental novels such as *Pamela* by Richardson (Wollstonecraft 394-399).

Hence the literary texts were evoking and were a part of cultural and social-political phenomena; they accompanied the development of some philosophical and social ideas. We must bear in mind the philosophical writings by David Hume, who, in spite of the fact that he was one of the main propagator of the Enlightenment, ascribed a huge role to play in humans to emotions and empathy, understood as sympathy and emotional resonance. Emotions take a special place in all morality. He, together with Adam Smith, developed the theory of moral sentiments. In this theory, the ability of empathy plays a huge role. (Solomon, *The Philosophy of Emotions* 7-8, Hume, Smith, *Teoria uczuć moralnych*) Empathy in Hume's treatise plays an analogical role to imitative behaviours in the contemporary anthropological theories. (see for instance Sperber) Hume sees empathy as not only characteristic of humans but he finds it also in the animal world (Hume 121). He calls human minds mirrors for each other. (124) Both Hume and Smith apply their theories to the literary phenomena. Smith explicitly identifies characters in a tragedy with real human beings (Smith, *Teoria uczuć moralnych* 47).

So, all analysis of sentimentalism as a literary current in 18th century literature cannot proceed without a notion of compassion. But in order to characterise this problem properly, we have to move beyond one literary era and one literary current. Beside sentimentalism, we have also to deal with sentimentality as a general aesthetic term. We often use it to stigmatise some negative literary and aesthetic phenomena. It is not rare that we associate also just sentimentalism with pejorative terms such as popular culture or stereotypes. Sentimentality, on the other hand, is associated with kitsch. (Knight, Higgins, Solomon) Sentimentality is defined as a quality tied to sensitive, pleasurable and tender feelings such as compassion, affection, sympathy, sensitivity, tenderness, fellow-feeling (Knight 411). Sentimentality is seen as an error and the sign of a moral and aesthetic fall. The most important for sentimentality seems to be feeling of extra pleasure from experiencing those all sensitive affects. We have also to agree with Robert Solomon who, when defending sentimentality, pointed out the probable reasons of the general

rejection of sentimentality: first, the romantic prejudices against all mild and gentle feelings, and the second, philosophical general reluctance to all feelings after the fall of the theory of moral sentiments (Solomon, *In defence...* 304-307). The other possible reasons here could be, if we agree with Deborah Knight, a reluctance to effeminacy and feminism in philosophical and scholarly discourse (Knight 420-421).

2. Martha Nussbaum and neo-sentimentalism in literary theory

Many aspects tied to sentimentality can be found in a special revival of sentimentalism in literary theory, namely in the so called ethical theory. It is striking, especially in the context of empathy, that Martha Nussbaum is reporting her violent cry and weeping as reactions to the death of her mother. This makes for her a point of departure for subtle considerations of love, compassion and friendship (Nussbaum *Uppeavals...* 19-22). This special manifesto of traditionally feminine and effeminate ways of reacting can be understood if we remember that Nussbaum is engaged in the liberal feminist movement. She is an American philosopher and theorist of literature and law. She can be regarded as the most important and representative proponent of the ethical criticism in literary theory. She is notorious from her interpretations of ancient literature, especially of Aristotle's writings. In our view, her neo-sentimentalism is apparent in three areas:

- 1) neo-sentimentalism in her views of emotions, so called neo-Stoic theory of emotions, a cognitive theory of emotion
- 2) neo-sentimentalist theory of genres of discourse and of literature, anti-formalist turn in literary scholarship
- 3) neo-sentimentalism in ascribing a special role to compassion and love in reception of literature, in ethics, and in personal and social development.

2.1 Neo-sentimentalism in theory of emotions

Martha Nussbaum writes directly about cognitive aspects of emotions (Nussbaum, *Uppeavals...* 2-3). So, we can call this theory a cognitive theory of emotions. According to Nussbaum, emotions, together with narration, have a complex cognitive structure, which means that they form a part of intelligence of a human being (3). If we are intelligent we also use emotions in order to get some orientation in the world. This is obviously an anti-Cartesian way of thinking. Cartesian thinking

in philosophy and in semantics separates mind and body, mind and image, intellect and emotions, language (*logos*) and emotions (*pathos*). Instead, the main trends in contemporary anti-Cartesian movements in philosophy and semantics propose a holistic point of view: a theory of mind that is in a way embodied. However, Nussbaum's holism is not a radical one, because when talking about intelligence of emotions, at the same time, Nussbaum seems to propose a functional theory: a given emotion, for instance fear in front of a lion in a desert, has its goal in a frame of cognitive system of a human being. Fear in this case causes the human being to flee and, in this way, serve a human being as an intelligent way of preserving life. This function is independent of substance: many not cognitive factors such as amygdala and its behaviour are indifferent.

There are several tenets of a cognitive approach in science and philosophy (we are following here Hogan 29-58). All cognitive approaches want to express their problems in terms of information processing. And Nussbaum does it. Second, they want to define a cognitive architecture that could resolve the problem (structures, contents, processes). Nussbaum is a functionalist, so she claims that it does not matter which architecture we want to use. Third, they articulate a cognitive analysis as algorithmic sequence. This is, of course, quite far from Nussbaum's way of dealing with philosophical problems.

In other way, we can speak here about representationalist approach to cognitive problems of emotions. Mental states of a human being can be compared to a computer. We do not know if Nussbaum would agree on that, but this seems to be a consequence of her stance. It does not matter, what kind of material we use to build the computer. It is quite far from the famous conception of emotions by James and Lange, for whom bodily feelings were essence of emotion. For Nussbaum such elements of emotions as high blood pressure, quick pulse, trembling, weeping etc. are extra-cognitive elements and not necessary to emotion (Nussbaum, *Uppheavals...* 50-60). She appreciates sensory riches surrounding emotions (Nussbaum, *Uppheavals...* 65). And here, in this functionalist approach to emotions, she is not consistent: when writing about the death of her mother, as we already noted, she talks about sobbing which overwhelms her. In this talking she signals that the bodily reaction is in a way relevant to her life.

Nussbaum sees her forerunners in the ancient Stoics, but she denies their normative point of view: they acknowledged a huge role of emotions in a human life but they tried to avoid them (Nussbaum,

Uppeavals... 12). According to the Stoic view, Nussbaum states that emotions are value judgments, which ascribe to objects and humans outside a given subject a huge meaning. She agrees also with Darwin, disagreeing with Stoics in this point, viewing emotions as common for humans and animals.

Nussbaum also criticises Stoics, because they did not deal with many important factors around emotions: for instance they could not describe a role of imagination in different emotions. They denied emotions from a normative point of view, because in emotions human being reveals his/her dependence to the outer ever-changing world. Nussbaum is also an intentionalist: she sees that emotions as always about something (Nussbaum, *Uppeavals...* 25). This can help us to discern emotions and mood or disposition. So, she is against reductionism in psychology and she does not eliminate intentions from her model of a human being. She is also a constructionist: she appreciates partial social construction of emotions (Nussbaum, *Uppeavals...* 140-142).

2.2 Neo-sentimentalist theory of genres of discourse and of literature

At the just beginning of the first chapter of her *Love's Knowledge* Nussbaum identifies herself as a follower of Henry James and his theory of literature (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge...* 3). According to her, we can find similar to James' thinking tenets in several points: first, there is an organic relationship between form and content; second, some truths about human life can be represented only in language and forms that are characteristic for an artist or a narrator. Moreover, a narrator-artist is a special kind of being, as if he/she was an angel, who can present all which cannot be presented by ordinary language. Nussbaum continues that every style consists of expressions of definite judgments about the world and significance in this world. Hence, also an abstract style of philosophical discourse has the same function: it has some judgments about the world implicitly included in the style. On the other hand, if the literary style is the richest and fullest one among all possible styles, it is a privileged kind of language because life can be described in it in the fullest way. Style is not a neutral factor which has merely a decorative function. Nussbaum refers here to others who maintain similar theses, for instance to Stanley Cavell from Harvard.

It is perhaps important to note, that Nussbaum is quite determined about a role of intention in texts (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* 9). Of

course, she discerns, following Booth, implied author and historical author, but she seeks mainly what is intentional. She agrees with Wolheim and Hirsh. This position could be called textual intentionalism. What is important for an interpretation of a text is what is intentionally included in the text. Authorial standards and conventions which are imposed by author bound a reader's freedom in interpreting the text.

So, form is meaningful. For instance, forms of Greek tragedy and Greek theatre imply a social character of a theatrical event, it makes people to feel together and to react compassionately to the events on scene (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge...* 16). This was connected with a kind of didactic influence of the tragic writers. They were perceived as teachers of morals. Hence, all writers are teachers of morals. In this sense Nussbaum continues the way of thinking in Cavell, Booth and Price. Novel as a literary genre must be, according to Nussbaum, seen in a natural context of moral philosophy, but not philosophy as a scholarly area of reflection. Nussbaum postulates a moral reflection which can describe practical life and the sense of this life. The only fact that we write a tragedy or a novel expresses some judgments, convictions and values. If we choose a novel, we automatically, first, put forward ethical significance of events outside of human control, second, we emphasize epistemological value of emotions, and third, we present a variety of phenomena and their incompatibility, and hence, we stress a priority of individuality (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge...* 26). We could refer here to sentimentalism in the 18th century and point out to the significance of an authorial decisions to choose such forms as letters or diary for development of a literary genre of novel. This is certainly characteristic of sentimentalism.

2.3 Neo-sentimentalism in ascribing a special role to compassion and love

We have already described a huge role of narrative forms which, according to Denby, prepared the French revolution. Narratives about ordinary people and emotive reactions of observers were constitutive for literary sentimentalism. In this sense, all proclamations about important role of compassion in reception of literature can be properly described as neo-sentimentalist. Nussbaum writes on compassion as a painful emotion aroused as a result of our being aware of somebody's undeserved suffering. (Nussbaum, *Uppeavals...* 301) It is quite similar conception of a notion similar to 18th century sympathy. It is interesting that in

the 19th century Comte and Renan talked on brotherhood, not on compassion (Nussbaum, *Uppeavals...* 303). This was a result of political changes in Europe.

But already Aristotle wrote about compassion and Nussbaum refers to him as one of the main sources. According to Aristotle, we should discriminate three conditions of compassion: first, suffering must be serious, not trivial; second, we must be convinced that the suffering person does not deserved the pains; third, the suffering person is virtually similar to the observer (Nussbaum, *Uppeavals...* 306). In Nussbaum's opinion, the third condition is not necessary. Aristotle thought that it was and this cause him to exclude slavery from the reasons of compassion (Nussbaum, *Uppeavals...* 308). Rousseau in *Emil* also is convinced that it is good for compassion to think about oneself as identical to others.

Nussbaum instead propose a more subtle approach. We should confirm variety of people, but we also should corroborate that the suffering of the Other is relevant for the person witnessing it (Nussbaum, *Uppeavals...* 319). In this sense empathy, according to Nussbaum, is valid regardless of gender, social class and even biological species. We can even experience "how it is to be a bat" (Nussbaum, *Uppeavals...* 125). It does not mean that we do not meet obstacles in feeling empathy. There are a lot of impediments coming not only from social reasons but also from religious, racial, national, and sexual ones (Nussbaum, *Uppeavals...* 342).

However empathy means openness for the Others. Nussbaum writes that human beings are the only finite beings who need to transcend their limits (Nussbaum, *Uppeavals...* 137 and 148). In this, Nussbaum define a human being as infinite in the open attitude to imitate others. It is quite paradoxical formula, but very important for all the arts and literature.

In this sense, Nussbaum repeats sentimental gestures of Sterne and his narrator from *A Sentimental Journey*: Yorick often stops during his journey and keeps open for others. At the end of the novel, he is open even for radically other: the mad Mary.

3. Martha Nussbaum and politics of neo-sentimentalism

In the previous paragraphs we tried to persuade readers that Martha Nussbaum's theory can be properly called neo-sentimentalism. She is neo-sentimentalist even more when we look at her political stan-

ces. In this respect, Nussbaum is quite close to many social reformers. She wants to reform the American society by institutionalising empathy and its social effects. She is quite far, however, from totalitarian communism. She is attached to the tradition of liberal democracy. On the one hand, she accepts variety and the rights for being other. On the other hand, she agrees as well that for the quality of our life it is important "what company we keep". It is valid also for literature and film from political reasons.

In this respect, she reminds a Marxist criticism of society. All social engagements are in a way tied to social emancipation of one or other group. All social reformers which want to emancipate various social groups are referring to similar conceptualisation. It is quite apparent that we have here quite limited choice. As Lakoff in *Moral politics* and Lakoff and Johnson (290-336) argue, our talking about the society can be characterised by using two conceptual systems referring to one conceptual metaphor: Morality as Nurturance. All nurturance appeal to empathic behaviours. Empathy, however, can be described as absolute empathy, when we behave in such a way that the other can fulfil her/his system of values, or egocentric empathy, when we do all in order to fulfil our own system of values (Lakoff and Johnson 309-311). According to Lakoff and Johnson, there are two coexisting and concurrent political systems: one system referring to a model with a demanding father as a main figure and the second system with absolutely empathic mother.

Martha Nussbau together with, say, Richard Rorty, represents in the theory of literature a model of society based on absolute empathy. Here we can find tolerance for others, sensibility for other values.

When we talk about this political engagement of the philosopher and literary theorist we have to agree that literature cannot be separated from the real life. Formalist traditions in theory of literature tried to keep literature and life apart. Nowadays, the rise of the moral criticism can strengthen in some people hope that literature is dealing with real life again (Alzheimer, Mazzarella) But we should also remember that this blending of literature, life and politics can also blend the academia and the real world. The fall of autonomy of a literary work means that aesthetics is falling too, at least aesthetics understood as an autonomic area of reflection. In this fall, literary theory is engaged in social polemics as well. We should ask ourselves if a politically neutral theory of literature is possible at all. Knowing recent 20th century history of it, we should say: no, there is no politically neutral literary theory.

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WSPÓŁCZUCIE I LITERATURA. NEOSENTYMENTALIZM
W TEORII LITERATURY

Streszczenie

W naszym artykule prezentujemy krótki przegląd zauważalnych ostatnio trendów w teorii literatury, których najwybitniejszą reprezentantką jest Martha Nussbaum. Koncentrujemy się na omówieniu roli współczucia w badaniach literackich. Naszą główną tezą jest, że neosentymentalizm jest widoczny w co najmniej trzech obszarach myśli Marthy Nussbaum: po pierwsze w jej poglądach na emocje (Nussbaum nazywa swoje stanowisko neostoicyzmem, ale według nas znacznie stosowniej jest nazwać je neosentymentalizmem); po drugie, w jej teorii gatunków literackich, poprzez którą Nussbaum charakteryzuje się jako antyformalistka w badaniach literackich; po trzecie, w teorii współczucia i miłości jako istotnych czynników w recepcji literatury, w etyce i myśli społecznej. Aby dobrze opisać teorię literatury Marthy Nussbaum, krótko podsumowujemy temat empatii w XVIII-wiecznym sentymentalizmie oraz w późniejszych wystąpieniach estetycznego sentymentalizmu. Interpretujemy tzw. krytykę etyczną (do której zaliczyć można poza Martha Nussbaum przede wszystkim Stanleya Cavella, Wayne'a Booth'a i Martina Price'a) jako ruch polityczny używający jako głównego chwytu retorycznego odniesienia do sentymentalistycznych motywów empatii absolutnej (wedle terminologii G. Lakoffa i M. Johnsona). Argumentujemy także, iż powinniśmy porzucić ideały apolitycznej krytyki literackiej i teorii literatury. Badania literackie mają wiele etycznych i w związku z tym także politycznych wymiarów i empatia jest podstawowym terminem w badaniach literackich z wieloma towarzyszącymi jej socjologicznymi i politycznymi zagadnieniami. Jednocześnie jednak ostatnie odkrycia w ramach kognitywistyki (*cognitive science*) zmuszają nas do traktowania empatii jako podstawowy termin rozumienia ludzkich zachowań i języka, zatem neosentymentalizm ma bardzo solidne uzasadnienie w nauce.