

***Incarnations of Material Textuality. From Modernism to Liberature*, eds. Katarzyna Bazarnik, Izabela Curyłło-Klag, Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2014, pp. 154.**

Essays collected in *Incarnations of Material Textuality. From Modernism to Liberature* are the result of an international academic collaboration focused on cultural phenomenon known as liberature. The present collection is based on presentations given at two panels about liberature during conferences: “Displaying Word & Image” — the 5th IAWIS Focus Conference at the University of Ulster in Belfast (4–6 June 2010), and “Material Meanings” — the Third Biannual Conference of the European Network for Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies (University of Kent in Canterbury, 7–9 September 2012). The symposiums provided “a spur to gather in one volume a selection of essays inspired by liberature [...] but picked up and elaborated by several international scholars interested in modernism, the avant-garde, and the materiality of literary works” (s. IX).

The presented monograph provides a complex perspective on a given subject — from the scrupulous introduction to interesting analysis of particular ‘liberacy’ examples and translations of Zenon Fajfer’s groundbreaking texts. Therefore, *Incarnations of Material Textuality* seems to be a perfect choice for those English readers who have encountered material texts (liberature) and now need a professional, scholar guidance through this multifarious domain of textuality. The structure of the book proposed by Bazarnik and Curyłło-Klag is close to a manual and as such works best. That is clearly demonstrated in the short information about the book placed on its cover “liberature — coined from the Latin liber — is simultaneously a movement in contemporary Polish literature, and a term referring to literary works that integrate text and material features of the book into an organic whole in accordance with the author’s design. The present volume collects essays inspired by this theoretical concept, first proposed by Polish poet Zenon Fajfer in 1999 [...]. It fits into a wider turn towards the recognition of the embodied nature of information in anthropology, literary, textual, media and AI studies. Yet its distinctness consists in the fact that it was suggested by a creative writer, and that it proposes to see the authorially-shaped materiality of writing in terms of a literary genre. The essays collected here present the modernist roots and inspirations of liberature, address the semantics of typography and the question of materiality of literary writing, and

explore how the “abstract body of the printed book is transformed into an experience of embodiment”. The volume is completed with a reprint of Fajfer’s seminal essays with a view to making them more available to English-speaking readers”. This founding concept to link Fajfer’s manifestos and Polish scholar approaches towards such material texts with wider perspective rooted in anthropology and semantics allows to “build” this book in a transparent way — providing all significant findings on a subject needed.

In Chapter One *Introduction: Modernist Roots of Liberature* Bazernik underlines the chronological sequences which show relations between modernism and the literary practices of the late nineties (“modernist practises of writing embedded in the materiality of language, and the early 21th century theory and practice of liberature”) (s. 2). Bazernik notices also the role of the 18th and 19th century legacy — works of Laurence Sterne (*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* — 1759–1766), William Blake and William Makepeace Thackeray (*The History of Henry Esmond* — 1853). What is surprising is that there are no annotations about unknowing ‘liberacy’ of writing and literature in general — in connection to differences between orality and literacy since first pictograms, cuneiform signs, pictorial signs, khipu, runes, variety of materials used to preserve history, stories and meanings (from stone tablets to electronic ones). This is not of course a direct origin for liberature manifestos or Fajfer and other authors’ proposals. Hereafter — Katarzyna Bazernik, who is the leading researcher in this field in Poland — focuses of various examples of material textuality in 2000s highlighting articles by Fajfer such as *Liberature. An Appendix to the Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1999) and describing the main assumptions of literature understood in that matter. Next, all the material features of the “new” book are juxtaposed with diverse ways of arguing about material aspects of texts before liberature manifesto, especially “the bibliographical code” — Jarome McGann’s term from *The Textual Condition* (1991) used to “define the kind of signifying code set to work, beside the linguistic code, through »the physique« of the literary work” (s. 8). This part of *Incarnations of Material Textuality* is a honest preliminary and reconnaissance in literary theory facilitating understanding further, more specific articles. The first one is *Book as a New Genre: The Book Illustrations of Bruno Schulz by Ariko Kato*, in which the author looks on literary work of a Polish-Jewish writer mostly known of his two collections of short stories *Cinnamon Shops* (1933) and *Sanatorium under the Sign of Hourglass* (1937). Kato studies two of such short stories titled “The Book” and “Eddie”. She also analyzes illustrations of horse-drawn carriage. Her conclusions seem obvious but at this stage of book they help to comprehend the issue of literature as something bigger than words. “[...] literature and visual arts have been compared with and distinguished from each other. Schulz envisioned a book as integrating images, texts, and other elements, and when read, producing many meanings at multiple levels. For him »the book« is an independent genre that cannot be divided along the lines of image and text, or visual art and literature. Nor can his books be categorized into any subgenres of literature and visual art” (s. 25). This perspective is common for those, who have approached liberature “itself” and since then perceive other literary texts — which seems to be accurate — with respect to methodologies after pictorial and material turns in humanities. Definition of such an attitude is close to the clear ‘liberacy’ statement: “In constructing their sense, texts [...] utilize just as much the semantics of language as the semiotics of matter: the shape and the spacing of print, the physicality of paper, the availability of a virtual link, the spatiality and architecture of the volume, the iconic potential of the page (or the screen). One could say that such texts refuse to don their »attire«,

as it has become an integral part of their bodies and thus ceased to be attire — its exteriority has been annihilated: what we see or what we touch is no longer an ornamental addition, but something that inherently belongs to the work. The book does not *contain* the work, it does not store it or cover it with its garments — the book (or its material equivalent) *is* the work” (W. Kalaga, *Liberature: word, icon, space*, <http://www.biweekly.pl/article/1422-liberature-word-icon-space.html> [07.2010]).

The author of another article which focuses on the liberature in the past is one of the editors Izabela Curyllo-Klag. However, in this case the subject is once again closer to the theory and manifestos than to literature itself. Curyllo-Klag writes in her *Modernism in a Rear-view Mirror* about Marshall McLuhan’s *COUNTERBLAST* project (1954 and 1969). “McLuhan sought to authenticate his own, ground breaking initiative — the call for new artistic forms which would suit the media age. The insights offered in the »zine« were later developed into the theories of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* [...]” (s. 35). This paper also looks closely to Wyndham Lewis’s *BLAST* which caused McLuhan’s so-called pamphlet. Findings presented by Curyllo-Klag refer consequently to visions of a new print culture proclaimed in the 50. and 60., what can be easily called anticipating the future of text we are living now. We can find similar approach in Michal Palmowski’s *Cage and Liberature*, in which the author analyzes writings of the famous composer. Palmowski underlines that the main reason of all similarities between literary work of Cage and liberature is the fact that he was a composer of “permeation of space with sounds” (s. 45) — therefore he “shaped” his liberature in the way he did it with music. He created a space with words, letters, morphemes in different fonts and blanks (e.g. *Empty Words* — 1958). “For Cage the ultimate value is reality. The real is something that is rather than something that means — writes Palmowski” (s. 53).

The search of new, fuller representation of reality is also visible in Chapter Five of *Incarnations of Material Textuality. From Modernism to Liberature*. Kris de Tollenaeere and Jeanine Eerdekenes present a summation of *The Hybrid Book Genre of Word & Image Narratives* project. In 2008–2010 the Graphic Design Department of the Media and Design Academy Genk (MDA, Belgium) conducted an artistic research project in collaboration with the Departments of Literary Theory and communication Studies of the University of Leuven (K.U. Leuven). It was titled *Transitionality between word and image in fictional stories for adults. The origin and reading experience of experimental books*. The conclusions of this research prove distinctly an appearance of a new model of literariness based on “several important tensions: a tension between words and images, a tension between imagery that is quite accessible and one that is quite complex, a tension between usual and unusual ways of navigation through books, a tension between usual and unusual reading protocols” (s. 70–71).

After the introduction, two chapters on liberature in the past (in practice and in theory), a study analyzing liberature as a result of crossing different domains of art and very particular cognitive approach towards reality, and an article about hybrid genres, *Incarnations of Material Textuality* provides the reader a very interesting example of liberature close reading by Agnieszka Przybyszewska. The author of *Liberature. A Decade (a Snapshot View on its History)* suggests a reading of a work from the liberatic canon: Zenon Fajfer and Katarzyna Bazarnik’s *Oka-leczenie*. This paper seems to be the most elaborated and precise from the whole collection of presented essays. It provides its own complex introduction on model reading of liberature, the history of the phenomenon (from different perspectives) and well-developed analysis of *Oka-leczenie*. Przybyszewska’s article combined with Fajfer’s translated manifestos

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at the end of the book assure the reader all knowledge necessary to enter the world of liberature and its “know-how”.

There is another advantage of *Incarnations of Material Textuality*'s construction. Chapter Seven *Liberature and Person: An Anthropological Question* by Emiliano Ranocchi is the perfect closure for this academic discussion on liberature. Ranocchi tries to place “the new literature” in the background of post-human revolution and changes of cybernetic world. “In this context liberature surfaced at the end of the twentieth century as if to resume and systematize the intuitions and provocations of those predecessors. Liberature’s critical approach to the disembodiment of the text, which has dominated the Western idea of literature, has its analogue in the activity of anthropologists such as Daniel Cerqui Ducret, who collaborates with Kevin Warwick’s research center at the department of cybernetics at Reading University and is trying to question the reduction of the person to the brain” (s. 109).

*Liberature and Person* shows the wider range of issues in relation to liberature and materiality of the text. Questions we may ask studying such cultural “liber” phenomena are those who concern the most crucial problems of contemporary humanity.

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