

Jerzy Jarniewicz, 2024.
Frotaż. Szkice o literaturze anglojęzycznej
(Wrocław: Ossolineum)

Krzysztof Fordoński, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland
ORCID: 0000-0002-3012-5221

Frotaż (which is Polish for frottage, a surrealist art form developed by Max Ernst in 1925) is a volume of literary essays written by Jerzy Jarniewicz, professor of English literature at the University of Łódź, awarded poet and literary translator. The volume, published by the Wrocław-based publishing house Ossolineum, is a collection of essays published mostly in periodicals over the last twenty years, edited, expanded, and supplemented by several new texts. The older essays are brought up to date with additional sections, entitled "Postscriptum" ("Postscripts"). The essays offer a most valuable and a very private overview of English-language literary fiction from the mid-19th century to the early 21st century.

The selection of writers and their works clearly reflects private fascinations of the author. One must admit, however, that the list includes a majority of the best-known works of English, Irish, and American fiction. We start with Charles Dickens and George Eliot, move on through Robert Louis Stevenson, H. G. Wells, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, George Orwell, and James Baldwin, to finish with Zadie Smith and Ta-Nehisi Coates. Jarniewicz addresses his essays to a reader who is keenly interested in literature, ready to embrace new literary challenges. The book is certainly not intended as an academic manual. The author seems to assume that the readers already have some basic knowledge of the biographies and oeuvre of the writers he discusses. His essays, however, constantly invite readers to expand the scope of their interest and embark on an individual quest for further literary knowledge.

Jarniewicz attracts the attention of the readers, feeds their curiosity, by offering new approaches to and new readings of quite canonical works, partly forgotten perhaps, and, more often than not, little known in Poland. As a result, *Frotaż* is an attractive book both for readers with only a general knowledge of English language literatures and those well versed already. Both groups – and anyone in between – are quite certain to enjoy the collection.

Jarniewicz points out how books which may seem outdated or be considered mainly period pieces, as is the case of the novels of Dickens or Eliot, speak of matters that are still current and surprisingly contemporary. He invites his readers to return to writers once famous but now unjustly forgotten, such as Ernest Hemingway or H. G. Wells. In the case of the former, he states that the most common perception of the writer was largely false, as it was proven by the more recent biographers and new editions of his works. In the final section entitled "Tęcza" ("Rainbow"), which quite tellingly starts with an essay about Baldwin, he moves on to such contemporary writers as Mantel, Coates, or Smith, who deserve to be better known in Poland.

Jarniewicz successfully maintains a balance between his roles as an academic lecturer, a literary scholar who shares his impressively broad knowledge with the reader, and an essayist-populariser, whose task is to arouse readers' curiosity, incite them to reach for the discussed books. However, there is a third role at play here – that of an individual reader whose reception is influenced by the time and place, historical moment, as well as personal experiences.

After all, Jerzy Jarniewicz is also a poet with a particular, personal, subjective, and keen way of observing the world and expressing the observations. The volume is a pleasure to read not only because of its content but also its form. The essays are written in a language that is energetic and full of enthusiasm, lively and attractive. The reader has no doubt that the author loves books and wants to share the love with them. There is a lot of humour, playful allusions to literary texts, and quotations not necessarily from the ones under discussion in a given essay, such as a line from "The Sound of Silence" by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, which appears unexpectedly in the description of New York in an essay about Paul Auster.

Jarniewicz looks at the discussed books through the eyes of a literary scholar but also through the eyes of a poet. It is a probable source of his touching sensitivity to their physicality. Books do not interest him merely as texts subjected to critical literary analysis. He sees them also as physical objects which communicate with the reader through their graphic designs and points out the various possible approaches to the same book, which are caused by different cover designs.

He notices the texture of paper, which fades with the passage of time, and the cheap bindings of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which fall apart and require the immediate and careful attention of a bookbinder. He shares his personal

memories brought back by the changes that afflict the books with time. The alteration of old books (though not necessarily costly or valuable, Jarniewicz often mentions cheap mass-market editions which made it possible for him to read English classics such as a 1948 Polish edition of *Our Mutual Friend*) brought about by time becomes a metaphor for the changes that their readers undergo. And yet books have one superhuman quality: even when one copy ceases to exist, worn out by too many insatiable readers, the book can always return in a new edition or a new translation.

Frotaz combines texts originally published in various places; most of them were written for cultural magazines, but there are some published in dailies or theatre programmes, as well as afterwords to editions of novels. The original places of publication, however, are immaterial as they are connected by their author and his love of literature. It is an excellent collection of essays, combining as it should be expected of literary essays, the quality of the content with exquisite literary form.