

Wbrew naturze i kulturze. O odmienności w hiszpańskiej prozie homoerotycznej na przełomie XX i XXI wieku [Against Nature and Culture: Queerness in Spanish Homoerotic Prose at the Turn of the Twentieth Century]

Łukasz Smuga

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Had Łukasz Smuga written the book *Against Nature and Culture* in Spanish, it would have only been accessible to Iberian studies scholars. Instead, he deliberately chose Polish, knowing that his book on the contemporary Spanish homoerotic prose has important cultural work to do in the field of Polish humanities.

First and foremost, he must have wanted to share with Polish literary and cultural studies scholars the richness and generic diversity of the Spanish homoerotic tradition in literature, which is still meager in Poland. In the texts he chose to explore we see a surprising variety of attitudes adopted by queers towards the dominant culture, and their many ways of functioning in a homophobic society. No less surprising is the cosmopolitanism of the novels tackled by Smuga, whose settings include ancient Rome, Byzantium, and Sodom, as well as Medieval Cordoba, contemporary Cuba, Venice, Madrid, Paris, London, and Harvard. Besides Spaniards, these novels are inhabited by many foreigners, including Petronius, Lord Byron, Oscar Wilde, and even Tazio borrowed from Thomas Mann's fiction. By translating long passages from fiction that had never been translated into Polish, Smuga enables us to enjoy the highly suggestive living language and unique imagination of such authors as José Luis de Juan, Juan Gil-Albert, Luis G. Martín, Juan Goytisolo, Eduardo Mendicutti, Luis Antonio de Villena, and Álvaro Pombo. Featured prominently in the study next to the above-mentioned seven prose writers is their precursor, the poet Federico García Lorca, whose life story constitutes an original historical introduction. As Smuga points out, until recently the non-normative sexuality of this internationally renowned poet, murdered immediately after General Franco came to power, was effectively erased both by the poet's family and the established literary critics. The subchapter on Lorca recapitulates the grim events from twentieth-century history which contemporary Spanish homosexual writers are forced to confront.

The historical context explored at length by Smuga is somewhat reminiscent of the Polish context because in both countries the conservative Catholic culture was overlaid with totalitarian ideologies—Franco's fascism in Spain (1939-1975) and socialism in Poland (1945-1989). Given the fact that homosexuality was demonized in both countries at the very moment when the cultural revolution initiated by, among others, the emancipatory lesbian and gay movement engulfed the western world, the literature Smuga writes about may be particularly interesting for Polish readers.

A second reason behind Smuga's decision to write in Polish may be that for the past 25 years Poles have been under the overwhelming influence of American culture. If foreign literary and filmic representations of non-normative sexuality reach Poland, they usually come from the English-speaking world. Such representations were shaped by different historical factors than those we experienced in Poland. As Joanna Mizielińska and Tomasz Basiuk have repeatedly argued, Poland was passed over by the sexual revolution and by the emancipatory LGBT movements that came with it. When anti-identitarian queer theories began to reach Poland after 1989, they were out of synch with the situation of homosexual people in this country. Like the Spaniards, Poles live in a culture saturated by Catholicism, a culture gradually recovering from the decades of totalitarianism. Although the regimes in Spain and Poland differed markedly, with equal ruthlessness they proceeded to stamp out all deviance from the heterosexual norm. The Spanish literature analyzed in Smuga's study shows a broad spectrum of reactions to the dissonance between the dominant discourses and individual consciousness, from internalized homophobia, through identification with the so-called "accursed" homosexuality, to camp and completely independent attempts to define queer sexuality and gender identity. As a result, reading about Spanish literature—if the literature itself is inaccessible—can help us to think about many local problems.

I also suspect that Smuga saw in his project the potential for an interesting theoretical intervention involving the triangulation of Spain, the US, and Poland. In the literature in question, he identifies many theoretical postulates which he confronts with queer theory. For instance, as he explains in the analysis of Álvaro Pombo's *Contra natura*, the author "adopts the role of the critic or—more precisely—theorist of sexuality" (238). Smuga also treats other authors—including Alfredo Martínez Expósito, Alberto Mira, and Frederick Fajardo—as theorists. He seats them at the table next to Michel Foucault and such seasoned American literary critics and theorists as Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Gayle Rubin, Lee Edelman, and Marjorie Garber, as well as Polish theorists: Maria Janion, Joanna Mizielińska, and Wojciech Śmieja.

Smuga attempts to impress upon us the need to take into account the different historical and ideological contexts in which literature is written and read, for instance, when discussing the prose of Villena, who

speaks out [...] against the trivialization of LGBT culture and the normativism of minority sexual discourse. His reflections are probably closer to queer theory. Yet his anti-identitarian understanding of sexual difference springs not from American poststructuralist theories but from a broadly understood countercultural history and dandyism. Villena's example clearly shows why queer criticism should take into account local conditions. (209-10)

Smuga pays attention not just to the writers' biographical experience but also to the historical moment in which a given novel was published and its original readership, as well as its place in the writer's oeuvre. When dealing with very prolific writers like Villena or Pombo, he attempts to analyze all their works to show the shifts in emphasis and changes in their thinking about sexuality. Though he treats all the above-mentioned writers with the utmost respect, he is not uncritical of them. He discloses the logic of their thinking, the limitations of their worldviews, and the rifts

between bourgeois culture and hedonistic queer culture, between the desire for monogamy and the world of chance sexual relations, between pleasure and responsibility for the other.

I find particularly valuable Smuga's survey of the history of Spanish homoerotic literature, whose first (post-1975) phase he describes as the literature of either "frenzied scribes" or artisan-copyists (terms coined by Martínez Expósito) who write hackneyed prose that nonetheless plays the important role of sustaining homosexual culture. This Smuga contrasts with the more ambitious prose of "artist-scribes" who consciously draw on a wide range of literary forms and discourses that impose their own ways of thinking about the body and sexuality. While acknowledging the work of his predecessors, Smuga engages in subtle polemics, and speaks in his own voice in every chapter. That beautifully modulated voice, coupled with erudition and sense of composition, makes reading *Against Nature and Culture* particularly rewarding.

301

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