**Workshop with Joanna Orska, March 20, 2021, Akademie für Lyrikkritik**

1. Please write a short critical statement (1-1,5 pages) on the question whether the **feminist approach** in criticism of the poetry of **Justyna Bargielska**, **Marta Podgórnik** and **Joanna Mueller** concerning female identity and the (gender) role-playing games in female poetry written in a conservative society is either crucial or could be neglected in order to get an appropriate critical view on those poems. Please include **Anna Kałuza's text** on the feminist approach in your thinking.

If one considers that poetry has, for the (still) longest period of human literary production, authors have been mostly male, and that women started publishing poetry in large numbers only in the 20th century, one could argue that gender can never be neglected when reviewing poetry by women. And since the limitation of literary production to men resulted to a significant extent because women were considered incapable of writing literature (at least literature of supposed quality), or writing literature was deemed inappropriate for women, reviewing literature by women might also always need to occur from a feminist angle that critiques this exclusion of half of humanity from the literary sphere. The fact that much of poetry written by men seems to lack an explicit gendered perspective would fit into this argument as well, since the male gender was seen as the norm for humanity, thus it was not discussed as a particular gender. Only women were seen as having a particular gender that makes them different from men, and thus humans, in general. However, the risk behind a feminist perspective on poetry by women that focuses on the gender of the author and the discussion of gender as a topic in the poetry is considerate: The risk is to continue the division of poetry and literature generally into seemingly ungendered, male, and gendered female writings.

One way out of this dilemma—both ignoring and focusing on gender in women’s poetry appears to continue the oppression of women in a male-dominated society—would be to discuss the topic of gender in any type of poetry, written by men or women or any in-between gender possible. The problem with that approach is that it forecloses the possibility that there could be writing independent of gender or transcending gender boundaries and norms. Another would be to find in poetry precisely that potential: the potential to overcome or avoid gender boundaries. – But then the question becomes:

Can we abstract from humans’ gendered existence in writing about human life, which is the topic of most poetry? Is the gender division decisive or at least highly significant for everything and all that humans experience? (I would be very happy if the answer to this question could be “no.”)

In the poems under consideration by Justyna Bargielska, Marta Podgórnik, and Joanna Mueller, it is difficult to ignore both the gender of the authors and gender as a topic, since gender often *is* an *explicit* topic in these poems, and because they frequently appear to be written from an autobiographical perspective, reflecting on decisively female experiences. The lyrical I appears to be female in many of the poems, and the form of many poems is reminiscent of 18th-century style Romantic poetry that gives the impression of an authentic emotional expression. This is especially true of the work by Justyna Bargielska and Marta Podgórnik. It is however less true of Podgórnik’s work, in comparison with Bargielska’s, and even less so of Joanna Mueller’s, even though Muller has written essays “about motherhood, feminism and literature,” and is thus fully aware of her gender in her writing (lyrikline.org). The less naturalistic and the more – I dare say it – poetic a poet writes, the less the work seems to be straightforwardly about a specific topic or about an individual, gendered perspective. And Mueller’s poetry is by far more poetic than Bargielska’s, and less naturalistic. For that reason, it makes sense if Anna Kałuża focuses on—and tears apart—the female perspective in Bargielska’s work. Kałuża complains that Bargielska’s work is not political enough, that it affirms the dominant patriarchal perspective. I agree with Kałuża that Bargielska’s poems often seem caught in female stereotypes (of the prostitute, the mother, the wife). In “Die Übertragung” (Przekład), for instance, the lyrical I reflects on the fate of women who give up their lives, ‘making room for death in themselves’ (first line of second stanza) for their family, their husbands and children. The poem ends with a description of how the lyrical I or speaker finds her “reward” in the nut that she cracks. The reward is the “dust of a little mouse, my husband, my children, my reward, my confirmation.” However, I am not as sure as Kałuza seems to be that Bargielska thinks of “sexuality as an apolitical, not a socialized sphere.” And that she does not make the ”patriarchal structure of the relationship between man and woman responsible for the fate of subordinate fate of women” (I am translating from Ricarda Feit´s translation of Kałuza’s essay into German). Kałuza does not give convincing proof of her judgment or dismissal of Bargielska’s poetry, I find. Why would we read “Przekład” as an affirmation of patriarchal society, just because it describes it? And in what sense is it apolitical? It is an age-old question: Does literature affirm what it describes? Can literature not imagine things that the author does not subscribe to, or can it not express perspectives that are not models for us? – I also believe that the question whether a poem is critical and feminist, or not, is, in the end, not a very interesting question. The question reduces a poem to a thesis, and, in my view, a poem is not a thesis, does not express a clear thesis.

To conclude, I will take a quick look at two poems by Podgórnik and Mueller, respectively. Podgórnik’s poem, “luxemburg und andere gedichte,” is openly self-reflexive and full of cultural references of which I do not know many. The poem discusses politics in relation to gender and gender relationships, which Kałuża may like. It mentions politics as one topic among others mentioned in a women’s magazine. The lyrical I writes that it has just published an unhappy love story in such a women’s magazine. And she reveals how politics is framed in a way that it is drowned out by traditionally female topics like music, love, stars. – Mueller’s poem “wie liebst du sie?” (“how do you love her?” “jak ją kochasz?”) is confusing, since it may, at first, be seen as taking a male perspective, with its question of “how do you love her,” and describing this woman in a series of female clichés. These clichés make it unlikely that the speaker is female as well. The dedication of the poem to Władysłaf Bełza, which seems to be a man, also seems to imply that the poem is written from a male perspective. The denigrating clichés (stupid daughter, submissive student, menstruating messianist) with which the beloved is compared are accompanied by descriptions that emphasize the negativity of the comparisons. At the same time, the descriptions remain ambivalent, also giving power to these female roles. This also allows us to think of the speaker as female and as loving the various roles that women have, were given to, have taken on, have suffered under.