

## Call for papers, *Polylogue*, 2021

### CONVERSION TEXTS

The idea of a text which not only discursively formulates its message and accurately communicates a particular content, but also effectively and radically transforms its reader is as old as the very idea of philosophy. Numerous contemporary scholars have investigated the practical dimension of ancient and humanistic philosophy as a form of spiritual exercise, therapy or action. This dimension has been rendered by means of conceptually related terms, such as Greek *epistrophe* or *metanoia* and Latin *conversio*. The latter word, whose original, literal meaning was a “change” and a “turn”, came to be used as a technical rhetorical device, and has since acquired a fairly prominent position in modern philosophical and theological vocabulary. Plato’s philosophical idea of *epistrophe* as a complete turnabout of life resonates with the monastic notion of *conversion* as “a renunciation of all the deceptive worldly things”.

The concept of conversion, which seems to be gaining renewed popularity today, will serve as the leading idea of the upcoming special issue of *Polylogue*, a journal of the Jagiellonian University’s Department of Polish Studies. We want to inquire into new literary interpretations and functions of the idea and explore the forms of its continuity and change. Apparently, the original meaning of the concept considerably expanded over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet in many cases the relationship of the contemporary term with the old ways of thinking is highly complicated, if not questionable. William James, who firmly grafted the term onto American pragmatism, from the very beginning highlighted its metaphorical character and ambiguity. Nonetheless, the notion of conversion is pivotal to an array of early 21<sup>st</sup>-century narratives as varied as *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics* by Peter Sloterdijk (2009/2017), *Réparer le monde. La littérature française face au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* by Alexandre Gefen (2017), and *Be Always Converting, Be Always Converted: An American Poetics* by Rob Wilson (2009).

Conversion has also proved an important conceptual tool for modern sociologists (Gladys & Kurt Lang 1969) and philosophers (e.g., René Girard, Emmanuel Lévinas, Ludwig Wittgenstein), and is increasingly attracting their followers and interpreters. In the recent decade, a new theory of what has come to be dubbed conversion marketing has devoted ample attention to conversion narrative strategies (in this context, Eric Davis writes that “conversion [feels] too much like consumerism”). Numerous scholars study philosophical and religious, as

well as secular, national, aesthetic, artistic or stylistic, and, finally, positive and regressive conversions.

Today, the idea of conversion is beginning to make its way to the forefront of literary studies, which is our major thematic and disciplinary concern. The salient categories we seek to explore include literary conversion strategies and conversion narratives, which, as observed by Elisabeth Engell Jessen, have been rarely defined, despite their growing popularity. Although the verb “to convert” (Latin: *convertere*) etymologically refers to the now-hackneyed idea of a turn, it is also linked to the notions of return, reiteration, and renovation. Instead of announcing another “turn”, we prefer reflecting on the old and new sources of the very need for a “turn”, for turning to and turning against, turning back and turning around, in the diverse and multiple meanings of these words and the ideas they express.

We intend to employ the idea of conversion as a lens through which to examine the emancipatory, transformative, and agentive potential of the humanities in quite a novel way. As attentive readers of Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Rancière, and new historicists, we understand that there is no uncommitted or disengaged art. At the same time, our prime object is to delve into the increasingly visible phenomenon of literature which *explicitly* articulates its aspiration to be an agent, to be a conversion-channeling and therapeutic text, and to regain the Orphic power of harmonizing “self” and the world. Such proclamations are quite common in the recent literary production, as famously exemplified by J.M. Coetzee’s *Elisabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, Jenny Offill’s *Dept. of Speculation* and *Weather*, Richard Powers’s *The Overstory*, and Olga Tokarczuk’s *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*. Similar ideas are also frequently expressed in literary manifestos, speeches, and laudations.

We believe that situating these and other contemporary texts in the long tradition of exhortatory and conversion writing will catalyze new, inventive readings of them. We invite contributions to the diachronic narrative on “conversion” texts, stories, forms, and figures that make things happen, including the forgotten genres of protreptic, exhortation, *lalia*, etc. Notably, these genres seem to be attracting growing attention from philosophy and literature scholars (e.g., Olga Alieva, Annemaré Kotzé, Sophie Van der Meeren, 2019; Constantin Ionut Mihai 2018, Michał Kuran 2019). Common to all these literary forms is that they couple persuasion with exhortatory power in an attempt to simultaneously affect the intellect and volition, therein emotions (Hegel’s idea of “thinking with the heart”).

The deadline for paper submission is December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Submissions should be directed to [wieloglos.redakcja@uj.edu.pl](mailto:wieloglos.redakcja@uj.edu.pl)