

Canons and Their Questioning, Canons and Their Fading: Some Personal Remarks on the Development of the Teaching of Literary History

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SYNOPSIS

This article deals with the problem of teaching the history of literature, specifically with regard to Polish (and Czech) literary history in the context of foreign study, namely in Germany. The authors are concerned with the question of whether it is possible to teach the history of literature to foreign students according to the standards set for Polish (and Czech) students, i.e. through a historical and literary perspective, division into epochs and, above all, with regard to the canon. In view of the fact that undergraduate curricula in Germany provide only a few hours of instruction in literary history, and that German students are not taught the literary canon at school but rather learn to question the normative value of every author or text, the teaching of 'traditional' literary history in Germany is problematic. Drawing on their own biographical experience as part of the 'twilight of the canon generation', the authors argue that the didactic process requires an awareness both of the need for a canon — as a kind of 'map' to navigate the territory of literature — and of its constant questioning, deconstruction, rewriting, and expansion. In the next part of the article, the authors discuss the 'poststructuralist turn' in literary historiography and examine selected poststructuralist textbooks on the history of national literatures, especially those that do not abandon the basic assumptions of literary synthesis in their ambition to give new order to the material. Another part of the article discusses the textbook *Polnische Literatur im langen 19. Jahrhundert. Grundkonzepte — Author:innen — Textinterpretationen*, created by the Leipzig Institute of Slavic Studies in cooperation with the Polish Academy of Sciences, a textbook that aims to present the history of Polish literature 1822–1939 as a history of Polish attitudes towards both cultivating and questioning the Polish canon. The handbook was conceived on the basis of the programs of the B.A. Polish literary courses in Leipzig and its preparation involved the participation of the students as translators and commentators on chapters written in Polish. The conclusion of the article is a plea for a hermeneutical consideration of the didactic relevance of canons as interpretational-communicational tools giving students and others the possibility to mediate between the orientation skills a tradition can provide and its critical inquiring, as well as to make different points of views intelligible to one another.



KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA / KEYWORDS

Didaktika literární historie; kánon; slavistika v zahraničí; nové dějiny polské literatury; dekonstrukce; poststrukturalismus; hermeneutika / didactics of literary history; canon; foreign Slavic Studies; new history of Polish literature; deconstruction; poststructuralism; hermeneutics.

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BACKSTORIES

We wrote this article as a double personal positioning, combining our biographies, theoretical reflections, and praxis reports with regard to our experiences as both students and teachers of literary history and literary theory, and as scholars affiliated, over several years, at universities in various European countries. Our aim is to discuss, from the very first lines of our text, which features of our respective biographical backgrounds are relevant, and proceed to explain why we think reflecting upon personal backgrounds can be a stimulating starting point for elaborating on the theory and praxis of literary didactics, and on the specific ways in which each teacher chooses to deal with them.

A comparison of our respective backstories as university teachers of literature reveals both convergent and divergent aspects. We were both born in the second half of the 1970s, but while one of us grew up and began school in Italy when it was still part of the pre-1989 ‘West’, the other did so in pre-1989 ‘Eastern’ socialist Poland. We both attended upper secondary school, going on to study at university in Italy and Poland respectively — this time, however, in the post-1989 context, when Poland was already on its way to joining (or re-joining) the West. Indeed, it is not long after we completed our studies that Poland, along with many other East-Central European countries, became part of the European Union (in the 2000s). Both of us have, furthermore, also studied in Germany, and both of us currently teach Western Slavic Literatures in the Department of Slavic Studies at Leipzig University, taking part in the same study programmes and teaching many of the same students. At times, we even teach the same courses, so that didactics of literature is a recurring topic of conversation and of our ongoing discussions.

Having summed up the frame of our biographical backgrounds, we shall now explain why we consider them relevant to the topic of literature education. The first step to illustrate this point is to put this article in context, for it has been developed on the basis of a common talk we had in Paris at the conference « *Le Crépuscule des paradigmes?* » *Les canons culturels en Europe centrale: transgressions et réhabilitations depuis la fin du XXe siècle* (“The Twilight of Paradigms”? Cultural Canons in Central Europe: Transgressions & Rehabilitations Since the End of the 20th Century’), 23–25 May 2022. Didactics of literature was not the primary topic of the conference, yet the title of the conference makes it quite evident that concepts like cultural or literary canons and paradigms (as well as transgression and rehabilitation) are very relevant issues in discussing possible didactic approaches to literature. We shall therefore briefly discuss how the conference’s call for papers has framed our reflections on the didactic role of canons and paradigms and established the basis for the present article.



The aim of the *Crépuscule* conference was to elaborate on interpretations, both scholarly and non-scholarly, of the (histories of) East-Central European literatures after 1989, starting from a statement by the influential Polish literary scholar Maria Janion (1926–2020) who, already at the beginning of the 1990s, characterized the post-socialist period as the twilight of fundamental paradigms that had structured views on East-Central European literature since the 19th century.¹ Making open reference to Janion's remarks, the call for papers elaborated on the fundamental paradigms that the conference aimed to address. The first of these was — and still is — a general and widespread 'overparadigm' common to all literatures of the region, namely 'a common notion of literature as a cultural product of a national community'. Implicit in this paradigm is the assumption that every literary system must decide 'who has the right to define this national community and the type of culture it should produce', a question that in turn generates several literary 'underparadigms', possibly different for each national community but all generally characterized by an 'oppositional' structure that seeks to convey diverging ideas of the national culture: 'urban vs. rural in Hungary, for example, highbrow vs. popular culture for Czech literature, Romanticism vs. Realism in Poland for instance' (Galmiche — Royer — Siatkowska-Callebat 2021, pp. 3–4). The conference addressed the question of whether the traditional national overparadigm and various oppositional underparadigms can still be said to offer systematic representation of the variety and conflictuality of East-Central European literatures, or if these paradigms have already passed, as Janion claims, into a crepuscular state, to be replaced by new paradigms (or indeed if they have already been replaced). Might we even speak, with regard to recent years, of a trend inversion or 'new dawn' of the pre-1989 paradigms 'spurred by the political developments of the last two decades', i.e. by 'the rise of far-right populisms, the various economic crises, the challenges of the European project' (ibid., pp. 3–4)?

The question posed by the call for papers of the *Crépuscule* conference compelled us to consider the literature education we received at secondary school in the 1980s and 1990s, and later at university (at the end of the 1990s until around 2000), and the extent to which, and manner in which, this education fit the paradigm of national literature. We wondered how much our understanding of literary canons and their transgressions (or rehabilitations) was structured by traditional oppositional paradigms — urban/rural, highbrow/lowbrow, Romanticism/Realism, etc. —, or if it had already been shaped by the twilight of these oppositional structures. This led us to make connections between general history, i.e. the end of the socialist period and East/West opposition, and the history of theory and literary theory, connections

1 More than anything, Janion was concerned with the extinction of the romantic paradigm in Poland after the fall of the communist regime: 'To put it in the most general terms, for almost two hundred years, from the post-partition period to martial law and its aftermath, a fairly uniform style of culture prevailed in Poland, which I call symbolic-romantic. It was Romanticism — as a certain all-encompassing style — that primarily built a sense of national identity and defended the symbols of that identity. That is why it acquired the character of a national charisma [...] The Romantic canon was handed down from generation to generation' (Janion 2000, pp. 22–23). All translations, if not otherwise indicated, are by the authors of the present article.



that are all the more compelling given that several theories emerged in the 1950s in various parts of the world — for instance in Western Europe, North, Central, South America — to question both the validity of the national paradigm and inherent schematism of all binary oppositional structures (a trend even more pronounced in the 1960s until the end of the 1980s). The big theories that helped to establish the presuppositional basis for questioning traditional paradigms include, for example, deconstructionism and discourse analysis, postcolonial studies, gender studies, and a number of other poststructuralist theories that tend generally to undermine canon-structuring paradigms. The reference to the development of such theories from the 1950s onwards is undoubtedly crucial for the general comprehension of the phenomenon of the twilight of paradigms and for the consequences this twilight has (had) on the didactics of literature. It indeed reminds us, on the one hand, that this twilight concerns many regions throughout the world, starting in the West and its colonies or ex-colonies already in the decades before 1989, and, on the other hand, that deconstructionism and poststructuralism were not entirely unknown in the socialist world, despite the Iron Curtain. The history of theory, moreover, is highly relevant to every discussion on literary didactics, insofar as one must always consider how the above mentioned ‘big’ cultural theories have influenced the teaching of literature in the recent past, and on which level (primary school, secondary school, university) — especially after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and freer circulation of ideas in various regions of Europe and elsewhere.

We have found it all the more interesting — concerning this theoretical aspect — to consider the similarities and differences between our personal experiences, as both students and teachers of literature, given our diverse backgrounds on either side of the historical East-West divide. What we aim to show in the pages that follow is the very fact that while our individual respective backgrounds did seem to determine the particular way we learned literature at school, the differences between them, in the final account, were not so decisive. We would express this as follows: each of us feels to be part of a generation that grew up both learning and questioning literary canons, in the sense that the education we received included forms of literary didactics based on teaching the canon but also inspired by poststructuralist theories associated with the twilight of paradigms. The difference between our experiences has mainly to do with how early/long each of us was exposed to these theories: in Italy at secondary school, in Poland at university. This difference, in our opinion, is not so profound as may appear at a first glance, since the canon that was taught in both cases served primarily as a basis for questioning paradigms, with the result of a shared understanding of the interpretation of literature and its history as a dynamic relationship between the construction/reconstruction of patterns of traditions and their questioning. We also share in common an educational experience in which both the teaching of canons and their deconstructions involved a certain multidisciplinary: literary canons were taught in parallel with canons from art history and philosophy, for example, and with more general historical knowledge, whereas the questioning of canons was based — as typical of poststructuralism — on the combination of different disciplinary perspectives or transdisciplinary theories, or intertwining of various approaches: Marxism and psychoanalysis, for example, which characterizes most of postcolonial and gender studies. We also share the experience

of having received our education at a time when the practice of questioning canons on the basis of the new poststructuralist theoretical conjunctions was felt throughout the scholarly world to represent a fresh and creative approach. Both students and teachers perceived this practice *de facto* as the twilight before the dawning of a new educational and didactic paradigm, the beginning of a new approach to knowledge and new educational system able to deliver not only to scholarly experts but to everyone at school (albeit on different levels of complexity according to the educational profile) both structure/orientation tools (the studying of canons and paradigms) and deconstruction/criticism skills (their questioning).

However — and here we come to the main preoccupation of our article —, this understanding of literature, this way of learning and teaching that we feel to have in common, is quite dissimilar to the understanding of literature among students today, who for the most part (to put it bluntly and with a certain degree of generalization) do not have a clear notion of any canon. This is because the didactics of literature to which they are exposed, in both the secondary school and university environment, does not significantly include the teaching of canons, or in any case does not implement it (not to mention the idea of an integrative didactics systematically teaching a plurality of disciplinary canons in parallel). Our students have, on the contrary, a general and even programmatic inclination to the twilight of paradigms, in the sense that they are quite sensitive to all sorts of theories stating that a paradigm, being a canon-structuring construct, determines mechanisms of inclusions and exclusions that often lead to discrimination, and should therefore be questioned or avoided altogether. One could say, in this way, that our students have deeply interiorized the fundamental suspicions of the poststructuralist thinkers towards every form of paradigm and canon. Yet it is this precisely (to put it once more in generalized terms) that accounts for the great difference between the theoreticians of the twilight of paradigms and our students: the former knew a lot about the paradigms and canons they were criticizing while our students only have a vague idea of them. We, the middle generation, are likely somewhere in-between: we know the canons but not as well as the poststructuralist scholars of the 1950s–1980s.

It is this disappearance of canonical knowledge that makes up the core didactical question we wish to confront in this article: we too, belonging as we do to the ‘canon-questioning’ generation, subscribe to the notion that real understanding always implies looking critically at received and established knowledge. But is it ever really possible to question something in a meaningful way if one does not already have a systematically established notion of it — that is, if one does not work with paradigms and canons at all? How can one detect and highlight the cognitive potential, both gnoseological and epistemological, of the twilight of old perspectives and dawn of new (or resurgent) ones without knowing how former paradigms structured canonical visions of the world? This question is relevant not only to the context of literary studies at the university level but also that of literature education in secondary schools. This compels us to give some consideration in the present article to the latter, and to the lack of communication and cooperation between the two contexts — even if, for the most part, we concentrate on university literary teaching, where we have gained the bulk of our experience. We will also point out some of the specificities of the German education system, in which we have been teaching for a number of years,





though we each started our own educations elsewhere. We think in fact that cultural and regional specificities have to be taken into consideration in this case, which also happens to be a good example of the way national paradigms may still play a role even in a globalized world and integrated European Union. Indeed, it is our common experience that the German education system differs from its counterparts in both Italy and Poland to a greater degree — in terms of didactics in general and didactics of literature in particular — than Italian and Polish education systems from one another, and this despite the markedly divergent historical trajectory of the latter during the Cold War. This is because the teaching of paradigms and canons has continued to play a role in the literary didactics of Italian and Polish schools and universities in the time of the twilight of paradigms, notwithstanding the diminishing importance of canonical knowledge in these countries (for reasons we shall discuss later). The German system, by contrast, began abandoning a literary didactics based on a systematic learning of the canon some decades earlier. (We take into account here the distinction between the former East and West Germany — it is a topic, however, that exceeds the scope of the present article, and we only wish to point out, since we are publishing this article in a Czech review, that the Czech educational system strikes us as closer to the Italian and Polish than German model). Each of these models has its advantages and disadvantages. The Italian/Polish model provides students and scholars with a more systematically structured notions-based knowledge; not infrequently, however, this may devolve into a kind of rote learning, one that does not engage a student's critical thinking or ability to question the material. The German model, by contrast, exercises a student's capacity to put received knowledge under scrutiny, reinforcing and even shaping the anti-canonical and anti-paradigmatic attitude of new generations (as we describe above); however, this does not provide students with systematic instruction in the canonical notions they (may) question, resulting in a critical attitude that, however justified, is sometimes characterized by arbitrariness and lack of information.

To conclude the central claim with which we began this introduction, we feel committed, because of our personal backstories as literary learners in Italy and Poland during the 1980s through the early 2000s, to a didactics based at the same time on a systematic learning of canons and their founding oppositional paradigms *and* on their questioning. We feel, moreover, greatly challenged by the fact that canonical knowledge is being neglected or gradually dismissed by the educational systems today in Italy and Poland, and even more so in Germany. We shall dedicate the rest of our article to elucidating, by means of concrete examples, the double didactics of literature — combining canon-based with canon-deconstructing approaches — that we were exposed to as learners. We will also point out some of the difficulties we have in our teaching praxis when we present our students with scholarly and didactic material that simultaneously implies paradigms/canons and their twilight. In our students' experience, this material is 'too complex' and 'overwhelms readers with too many notions', or else 'presumes that readers have more knowledge than they actually have'. In this article, we offer our own answer to this problem: a handbook on the history of Polish literature that is being prepared by our Department, and which seeks to mediate between canonical knowledge and its questioning. We shall conclude with some general reflections on our position: namely, that the personal challenges we face with

the decline of canonical knowledge in the field of literature (and in general) is related not only to the gnoseological and epistemological problem of how to deconstruct without recourse to a given structure as starting point, but — all the more troubling — to an existential concern, insofar as we believe that forms of teaching which do not effectively manage a balance between a tradition (paradigms and canons) and its questioning give up their most fundamental mandate to help people how to learn to find orientating patterns in their lives and in the world they live in.



THE CANON-QUESTIONING GENERATION (AND EVER-PRESENT CANON)

The word twilight defines an intermediate state between light and darkness, and this is exactly how the canon was presented to us by our teachers. Yes, we were told, there is a cultural canon in the sense of a core of ideas, authors, and works that belong to different areas of activity, knowledge, time, and space, and that are representative for each of these areas. Yes, it is important to know about them in order to structure our vision of the world and its history, to give it a shape and *to see it in light*. We were also told, however, that this canon or core is not untouchable, that it changes both in history and according to the perspective of the observer. This is why it is important *to question the canon* and to inquire about what the canon leaves out, that is, *about dark areas*. We were taught, for example, to ask why there were so few women authors represented in the literary canons of both the East and the West, why there were so few émigré or exiled authors in the official education programmes of the Socialist East, and why, conversely, Socialist Realist literature was almost completely absent in that of the West. We were asked to raise the question, moreover, of why Balzac and Thomas Mann were more significant than Zola and Kafka, if you consider them from the point of view of Lukács' socialist hermeneutics (Lukács 1952, 1957), while Kafka must be considered as the highest order of genius — much higher, according to Deleuze and Guattari's deconstructionist-poststructuralist perspective in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Deleuze and Guattari 1975), than any Brod, Meyrink, Werfel, or other Prague German-language author. For us, asking such questions meant challenging the various oppositions around which individual canons are structured. Lukács, for example, as a Marxist theoretician, takes the side of Realism in opposition to Modernism (according to his well known oppositional paradigm); but even Lukács has something to say about the Romanticism-Realism contraposition, one that is, as we mention above, very important for Polish culture (see Lukács 1950, where he also discusses his preference for Realism). Meanwhile, one of the fundamental structuring oppositions for Deleuze and Guattari, writing on literature and other aspects of cultural production in the 1960s and 1970s, is between modernity and postmodernity; Kafka's radically sceptical *Weltanschauung* and style, they argue, is more congenial to the postmodern mentality than the very modern writing of Brod, Meyrink, and Werfel still longing for universal principles of salvation or — not finding them — a way of thinking and writing that Deleuze and Guattari consider escapist (Deleuze — Guattari 1975, p. 19). We are, indeed, thankful to all the teachers who explained to both of us what Romanticism, Realism, Modernity, and Postmodernity are as canonical cultural epochs, and who introduced us not only to particular oppositions that tend to



structure the differences among these epochs, but also to the various perspectives produced by taking different theoretical approaches — Lukács, for example, in contrast to Deleuze and Guattari.²

We would now like to focus on the conceptualization of the cultural canon as a core of ideas, authors, and works which are considered representative for different areas of activity, knowledge, time, and space — a conceptualization we received and worked with in our education —, and define it in relation to literature. This will help us to better understand criticism of the canon from the poststructuralist perspective in recent decades, as discussed above, and the related debate on the canon itself. The word ‘canon’, from the Greek *κανών* (*kanōn*, meaning ‘rod’ or ‘bar’, and therefore ‘line of measure’, ‘rule’, and ‘standard’), is connected in Jewish-Christian culture to religion, referring to a group of texts *de rigueur* considered holy, and canonized insofar as they represent the standard and rule of a certain religious culture. The mandatory aspect of a canon has partly disappeared in the context of contemporary literary studies, which see the canon as a certain selection of literary authors and texts considered by certain cultural actors and according to specific criteria as worthy to be passed on to the next generations (Winko 1997). The criteria of literary canonization may aim to have normative function, yet they are variable and subject to ongoing negotiation among different cultural actors of the same or different epochs, prominent among which are educational and other cultural institutions: university departments, for example, with their reading lists and publishing houses. From this point of view, a literary author or text is not worthy in itself but needs to be related to a standard according to which its value can be determined (*ibid.*, p. 585). The relative nature of criteria used to define the canon has been strongly stressed by postmodern culture, and tends to reflect a high awareness of its own heterogeneous and at the same time globalizing or globalized nature. The US-American canon debate, for example, which started in 1981 with the publication of *English Literature: Opening Up the Canon* by Houston A. Baker and Leslie Fiedler, has to be situated in the context of the liberation or emancipation movements of black Americans, women, LGBTIQ+ and other under-represented groups (not only in the context of literary history). One of the results of the debate was the extension and new perspectivization of the canon in the US university (Fludernik 2007, p. 51), and expansion of the debate to other cultural areas of the world, including East-Central Europe. An interesting overview on the canon debate can be found, for example, in the 2007 Czech publication *Literatura a kánon*, edited by Jan Wiendl, which features essays by Petr A. Bílek, Pavel Janoušek, Hana Šmahelová, Vladimír Papoušek, and Dalibor Tureček. Bílek’s opening text examines the development of the canon debate in the West and proposes a non-essentialist, situational concept of the canon that matches the one proposed above (*cf.* Bílek 2007). The other contributions all stress in different ways the necessity of historicizing the

2 Theories and cultural epochs are, moreover, mutually connected in complex ways, as we see with Lukács’ Marxist attitude on Romanticism, Realism, and Modernism (Marxism being a *Weltanschauung* developing through all these epochs) and Deleuze and Guattari’s connection to (deconstructionist) postmodern thinking. On the relationship between cultural epochs and theories and the necessity in both cases to historicize, see Zima 1992, pp. 1–14.



canon to demonstrate its changeable nature (Papoušek, Tureček), or else the necessity of defining the canon in relatively clear terms while stressing its non-essential nature (Janoušek), with other essays expressing views between these two positions (Šmahelová). These perspectives make evident certain conceptual outlines that have shaped the field of the canon debate from its very beginning.³

Issues raised in the debate on the literary canon and the conceptualization of it as a constructed, biased, and changeable selection of authors and texts was also at the core of our education. Yet this approach to relativizing the canon was not presented to us by any means as a reason for dismissing canonical structures. On the contrary, the canon, as a list of authors and texts of reference for world literature or a particular national literature (according to perspective) was taught to us as a 'primary (multiple) source', one that provides everyone interested in literature and its connections to culture in general, in the first place, with an orientation and platform of shared knowledge on which to build an interpersonal dialogue — a dialogue that provides a shared starting point for integrating and/or criticizing the canon, productively combining the various perspectives of literary history, literary theory, and literary criticism. It is an approach, in other words, that allows students of literature precisely to carry on the practice of questioning the canon. The most important function of the canon, from this perspective, is therefore as a form of interpretation and communication, which is why a canon should be known in its historicity and shifting movements. It is not only relevant what one may think of it from the present perspective and at a certain place, but also what others may think of it in other places and epochs, and the ability to read and speak in relation to the canons of others is strongly related to the possibilities we have to relate to their way of orienting themselves in the world. (We find aspects of this perspective in Šmahelová's contribution to *Literatura a kánon*, which concludes with a quotation by Hegel on the capability of understanding the other's point of view /Šmahelová 2007, p. 51/. This position on the canon has a clear hermeneutical inspiration, and it is not by chance that Šmahelová draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur in her argument. We shall return later to the hermeneutic perspective on the canon in the last section of this article.)

³ We cannot here discuss the question whether there was also in East-Central Europe, as in the United States, a strong revision of the canon following the debate on it (a question which would also imply asking whether there was any notable shift in Western Europe). One can, as a matter of fact, notice relevant changes in the canon as a consequence of the political turning point in 1989. We limit our brief considerations here to Poland, where works by women authors — in the early 1990s this was still disrespectfully defined as *literatura menstruacyjna* (menstruation literature) — and the literature of hitherto overlooked ethno-cultural minorities like the Kashubian, became gradually more prominent. The poststructuralist approach in cultural studies also led to new readings and interpretations of canonical texts and authors, and the Polish literary canon, after 1989, was extended to popular literature. One may, however, consider all these interventions on the canon as an integration of it, and not as its radical questioning. Scepticism towards a fundamental rejection and reshaping of the canon can be explained as historical caution: Polish culture had in fact already experienced a radical (as much as instrumental) questioning of the canon during Socialism and the Cold War.



We feel obliged here to provide specific examples, each of us drawing from individual experience, of the way our teachers taught us the complexity of the canon debate (as a way of illustrating, among other things, how this is not simply an idealization of our past and our education):

The first example is a handbook and anthology of Italian literature, *Il materiale e l'immaginario* ('The material and the imaginary'), in both ten- and revised five-volume editions, that works chronologically through the history of Italian literature, from the Middle Ages to postmodernity, with texts written in the late 1970s and early 1980s expressly for a secondary school and university student readership, and by authors representing literature education at both levels.⁴ The idea of its co-authors — Lidia De Federicis, a secondary school teacher, and Remo Ceserani, a university professor and former student of René Wellek in the United States — was that the task of cultural education in the time of the twilight of canons is in fact too complex to be achieved in a short time. Their assumption is that students, in the course of their education, must learn both canons and how to deconstruct them. It therefore takes a long time for learners, *both* at secondary school *and* at university levels, to absorb enough information and become familiar with enough theoretical approaches to both know and question canons. *Il materiale e l'immaginario* does not present, moreover, any Italian author or text without setting it in a larger context, so that you can find, for instance, excerpts of texts by such Italian modernists as Luigi Pirandello and Italo Svevo alongside excerpts by Franz Kafka, as well as a hint to the fact that Kafka and Svevo, while belonging to two different national literary canons, come from the same cultural and political region (Habsburg *Mitteleuropa*), that they are both Jews, both multilingual, have both read Freud, and so on. The interpretation of an author or literary work in *Il materiale e l'immaginario* is never exclusive, but always plural with references to the different theoretical approaches of the interpreters, whose analyses are anthologized or summarized in the handbook together with the literary texts: excerpts by Svevo and Kafka are thus accompanied by psychoanalytical readings, Jewish readings, cultural studies on bureaucracy, structuralism and narrative theory, etc. Literary texts and literary interpretations are moreover integrated with excerpts from research materials in other disciplines. Continuing with the Svevo and Kafka example, the discussion of Modernism is supplemented with texts by the philosophers Theodor W. Adorno and Günther Anders, as well as Freud.⁵ This transna-

4 See footnote 6 about the different range of volumes according to different editions of the handbook.

5 It is worth going into some detail here to convey an idea about the structure of this handbook. The common title of the two volumes dealing with Kafka and Svevo (and others) is *La società industriale avanzata. Conflitti sociali e differenze di cultura I-II* ('Advanced industrial society: Social conflicts and cultural differences'), and both volumes deal roughly with the end of the 19th century and first half of the 20th, that is, with the epoch of Modernism. They are volumes 8.1 and 8.2 respectively in the 10-volume edition of *Il materiale e l'immaginario*. Volume 8.1 is mostly devoted to the representation of the cultural history and literary system of the period from different perspectives, while volume 8.2 is dedicated to literary themes and individual authors and works. Kafka and Svevo are addressed in both books: Kafka is introduced in volume 8.1 in a section dedicated to specif-



tional and theoretically plural approach allows *Il materiale e l'immaginario* to present a canon to secondary school and university students while at the same time relativizing it, showing that the position an author or work has within the canon can vary according to the theory on which an interpretation is based. It requires, on the other hand, the active intervention of the teachers in deciding what they want to read from the handbook with their students. By design, *Il materiale e l'immaginario* contains much more material than can possibly be mastered in the time of a single school year or university term; this compels teachers to understand their own position on canons and paradigms as product of a particular selection. It is perhaps for this reason that Matteo — we have to state it honestly — cannot remember ever having heard of Deleuze at secondary school, although this philosopher is mentioned sometimes in De Federici and Ceserani's handbook: his teacher simply decided not to work on Deleuze. Yet it was already in secondary school (thanks, as we said, to the teaching of various disciplines in parallel, and specifically the co-teaching of literature and philosophy) that Matteo was presented with different theoretical approaches to theoretical works by such authors as Mikhail Bakhtin, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Juri Lotman, as well as Freud and Lukács, thanks to which he was familiar with their theories before going to university.⁶

ic cultural places such as Prague, Vienna, Paris, Berlin, London, Moscow, and New York. Besides Kafka's texts (from his diaries), the section on Prague and Vienna also features essayistic texts by Arthur Schnitzler and Karl Kraus as primary literature of the period, and by Claudio Magris and Günther Anders as secondary literature (Ceserani — De Federicis 1982, pp. 417–439). Svevo appears in the same volume in a similar section dedicated to Italian cultural places, and more specifically in the part dealing with Trieste, presenting some excerpts of his non-fictional writings alongside other Italian texts by Triestine authors (*ibid.*, pp. 547–562). Volume 8.2 presents an analysis of Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* and Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno*, in a section devoted to close readings of several major literary works of the period 1850–1950, with secondary readings by Theodor Adorno, Giuliano Baioni, and Clemens Heselhaus for Kafka and Guglielmo Debenedetti, Guido Guglielmi, and Mario Lavagetto (among others) on Svevo. These scholars themselves and their methodologies are introduced in short informational boxes, and for each of the interpretation approaches they represent there is an additional extension called 'Proposte di lettura e di ricerca' ('Reading and research proposals') with further insights and suggestions (Ceserani and De Federicis 1983, pp. 1966–1989 on Kafka and pp. 1990–2021 on Svevo). The text by Freud we quote above is not directly related to Kafka and Svevo, although the handbook's commentaries on Svevo do thematize his relationship with psychoanalysis. Freud's text is nevertheless part of a larger section in volume 8.1 on the history of knowledge around 1900, along with excerpts by a number of other authors, including Albert Einstein, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Popper, Paul Ricœur, and... Lukács! (Ceserani and De Federicis 1982, pp. 547–562, 299–416).

- ⁶ It is important to say that the poststructuralist didactic approach of *Il materiale e l'immaginario* had both its supporters and its critics among teachers and students during the decade in which it was first published, and later in the 1990s. While its supporters praised its varied and complexifying approach, its critics stated that the handbook can be too difficult to use, not only for students but for teachers as well, since they need very broad cultural competences to make a balanced selection of texts from the handbook for their coursework. The criticism is understandable, considering that only the two volumes



The second example we would like to introduce here has the title *Wielka Historia Literatury Polskiej* ('The grand history of Polish literature') and is still considered the most systematic and comprehensive account of the history of Polish literature up to 1945. The initiator of this project, which began in 1973 and was based at the Polish Academy of Sciences, was the literary scholar Kazimierz Wyka. Individual volumes of the series (eight in total) were written by the most eminent Polish literary scholars of various methodological backgrounds, working through the history of Polish writing and literature from the Middle Ages to 1945 in its entirety. Each volume of the series (some 600 pages!), which is still in print today, is chronologically and systematically organized, presenting the main authors, themes, problems and genres of each period. It is intended as a handbook for the study of Polish literature, providing the necessary historical, philosophical, and aesthetic contextualization for the selected literary texts.⁷ In the 1990s, this series was compulsory reading for the master's degree programme at university, supplemented by long reading lists of primary texts from Polish literary history and other literatures, in addition, of course, to various secondary texts on literary history and methodology. The idea behind this *magnum opus* arose from the conviction that it is possible to learn the whole of Polish literary history, at least until 1945, and above all still possible to *tell* it coherently.⁸ It

we discussed in the previous footnote, 8.1 and 8.2, are a combined 2054 pages in length, and that the entire series of books that makes up the 10-volume edition cover an entire bookshelf (there are actually 12 volumes, with two of them split into two parts). A related problem has to do with the price tag: in the 1990s, each volume costs the equivalent of 20 to 25€. Ceserani and De Federicis acknowledged these problems as editors and also prepared two reduced editions of five volumes and containing less material — and conceived for different types of secondary education (not only for the Italian *liceo* — equivalent to a Czech or German *gymnázium/Gymnasium*). These shortened editions maintain nevertheless the poststructuralist conception of the main edition. On the didactic principles of *Il materiale e l'immaginario* see Colombi — Fantappiè 2018, pp. 467–469; for a critical position on the handbook (and its part revision) see Zinato 2018.

⁷ In order to meet the needs of academic didactics, an abridged version of the series was developed under the title *Dzieje literatury polskiej. Synteza uniwersytecka* ('The History of Polish Literature. A university synthesis'). It comprises nine volumes and follows similar principles as the main series. In the introduction to the volume *Literatura Odrodzenia* (Literature of the Renaissance), Jerzy Ziomek states 'We did not adopt a rigid solution for all the volumes, but each time, depending on the period and the times, we repeated the question: What is the most appropriate context for a given phenomenon? A work for another work? The person of the author? The group? The programme? Or perhaps the historical period of non-artistic events?' (Ziomek 1989, p. 287). Nevertheless, this series is not only shorter, but also much less complex. Moreover, the authors of the two series do not always agree in describing the same phenomena.

⁸ Later, in the period of new (i.e. poststructuralist) literary history, attempts continued to systematically survey Polish literature after 1945. An example of this is *Literatura polska 1976–1998. Przewodnik po prozie i poezji* ('Polish literature 1976–1998: A guide to prose and poetry'; 1999) by Przemysław Czapliński and Piotr Śliwiński, which arranged the material, on the one hand, in a more problematic way (titles of individual chapters include 'The trouble with realism' and 'A Lesson from the Old Masters'), but which continued, on the other hand, to work with compilations and lists of the 'most important', 'central', 'classic' texts.

was not a matter of methodology, but — simply put — of the positivist transmission of knowledge. This attitude, incidentally, would have been familiar to everyone from the secondary school context, where lessons on literature (at least in the 1990s) were organized on the simple basis of chronology.⁹

To a certain extent, Polish studies during the 1990s was a two-track affair: in the literary history courses, one ‘learned’ the content of a particular epoch, in order to speculate in other courses on the (im)possibility of a literary history as such, or to interpret it through the prism of theoretical and methodological approaches — as in Italy, above all, poststructuralism. It was thus possible during the same semester to read the canonical dramas of the 19th century alongside debates (in other courses) on the deconstruction of the canon. Or it was asked whether Julia Kristeva’s concept of melancholy, her ‘black sun’ (Kristeva 1992), allows us to better understand the protagonist of Zygmunt Krasiński’s *Nie-boska komedia* (‘The undivine comedy’). Incidentally, ‘learning’ the contents of *Wielka Historia Literatury Polskiej* was only possible because the course lasted five years and because, as a student, one was already used to reading a lot at school, and so was aware that not every literary work had to be ‘interesting’ or ‘good’ in order to be discussed. On the other hand, one already had already been made familiar with Polish literary history at secondary school, which made it possible to understand the field at university, as well as the various expansions and extensions of it. At both school and university, the programme included literary texts from other European literatures, from antiquity to present, so it was not unusual to compare Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* with Bolesław Prus’s *Lalka*.

From today’s perspective, it seems doubtful that reading *Wielka Historia* can lead to a similar depth of literary awareness as reading *Il materiale e l’immaginario*: the series is a clear example of a traditionally national literary history that is not influenced by postmodern debates on the challenges of historiography. Literary histories conceived from a plurality of perspectives is something that would only follow later (see Maj 2021). *Wielka Historia* was effective, however, at compelling the reader to *think* well, both synchronically and diachronically, and to reflect on the fact that the canon is not so easy to deconstruct if one does not know it. The series was also well written and invited the reader to question its basic concepts, perhaps precisely because students were studying various poststructuralist approaches in parallel: poststructuralism appeared in Poland as early as the late 1960s and early 1970s, thanks to research by such scholars as Maria Janion and Janusz Sławiński. It became especially popular after 1989. As a student, for example, Anna took part in debates on the poststructuralist rereading of Polish Romanticism. This cultural period, which emerged after the partition of Poland at the end of the 18th century, was from the outset a projection screen for national issues and collective self-definition. As a state of mind and world view, it also trained future generations in the virtue of sacrificing private

9 One textbook widely used in school is titled *Oświecenie: podręcznik literatury dla klasy pierwszej szkoły średniej* (‘Antiquity to Enlightenment: Textbook of literature for the first grade of secondary school’) and was written by professors from the University of Poznań: Maria Adamczyk, Bożena Chrzastowska, Józef Tomasz Przychodniak. It was self-evident for the generation going to school in the 1990s that the study of Polish literature begins with ancient, that is Greek and Roman, history and that the history of literature is not limited to Polish authors.



happiness for the sake of ‘the happiness of the homeland’.¹⁰ Romanticism, strengthened by the conviction of Poland’s chosen role in world history, developed a series of anthropological images and patterns of thought, such as the myth of romantic love that transcends death, or that of revolution, which not only shakes up the political order but can also change people’s inner selves. Thanks to Maria Janion’s suggestions, it was discussed whether and to what extent the central categories of Polish Romanticism — the fatherland and the nation — could also be part of an individual’s project of existence in the post-1989 period (cf. Bieńczyk 1995). The 1990s was also a phase of feminist literary studies’ establishing and of raising awareness of the multicultural and transnational dimension of Polish literature. This period also saw an intensification of discussions on the possibility and necessity of a national literary canon.

To conclude this part: In Poland as in Italy, there was a new thinking on didactics of literature, expanding in the years before 2000, that lay in the overlapping area between tradition (*the canon is to be learned!*) and emancipation (*the canon? who cares!*), although there is perhaps no specific textbook for the Polish case that embodies this new thinking that would be the counterpart of *Il materiale e l’immaginario* in Italy.

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We hope that our examples effectively illustrate the fundamental features of our approach to the didactics of literature as we defined them in the first chapter of this article, namely: 1) that the literary knowledge we received in our education and can now transmit is a product of the twilight of canon; 2) that this twilight, in our experience, does not mean that the canon is defunct or absent, but that it has a kind of *questioned presence*, analogous to what happens to our view of the world when it is confronted with a world map redrawn to have China and not Europe at its centre; 3) we received our scholarly formation in an atmosphere where the ‘be-or-not-to-be’ of the canon, its twilight, was felt as a positive development, which is to say at the moment before the dawn of new gnoseological and epistemological standards concerning not only the scholarly world but the education system.

This is why we could only welcome, in the first years after 2000, the publication of a major work like *The History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, edited by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer — a seminal work in four volumes that attempts, from the comparative perspective, to deal with the entire region between the Baltic countries in the north and the Balkans countries in the south, and to approach this geographic space from the point of view (to apply our own concept) of *the canon as a questioned presence* (Cornis-Pope — Neubauer 2004–2010). *The History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* has all the hallmarks of a poststructuralist history of literature, namely that it is: 1) a collective work with more than 100 contributors from different countries; 2) a transnational work dealing with literatures from different places in many different languages (Baltic and several Slavic literatures, Albanian, Hungarian and Rumanian literature, as well as Jewish, German, and Italian

¹⁰ Compare the well-known quote from Mickiewicz’s *Konrad Wallenrod*: ‘Szczęścia w domu nie znalazł, bo nie było go w ojczyźnie’ / ‘He did not find happiness at home because it was not in his homeland’.

literature written in the region); 3) theoretically diverse, combining cultural studies, structuralism, and hermeneutics; 4) chronologically organized, in part, around nodal events, yet following history in retrograde fashion from 1989 to 1789, with the argument that the past is always narrated from the perspective of the present; 5) strongly self-reflective, starting with the very concept of East-Central Europe which is chosen by Cornis-Pope and Neubauer from a postcolonial perspective as a term that avoids the connotations of German and Austro-German imperialism implicit in the concept of *Mitteleuropa*, as well as the hegemonic implications of the idea of Eastern Europe that is carried on from the 18th century onwards by both Western Europe and Russia (or the Soviet Union). Interestingly, Cornis-Pope and Neubauer's approach to East-Central Europe also seeks to be aware of a generalized anti-German and anti-Russian attitude in the Central Europe discourse of other cultures in the region, such as the Czech and the Polish one. The programmatic poststructuralist pluralism of the handbook (the third point in our list) integrates the cultural studies focus on historical context — leading to an analysis of all the literary phenomena addressed in the handbook in term of race, class, and gender — with the structuralist discussion of the formal aspects of literature and hermeneutic interest in different typologies of writers and readers. The handbook also offers, moreover, a transversal focus on East-Central European institutions, places, and figures relevant to literature.¹¹

The History of the Literary Culture of East Central Europe clearly reflects the educational experience and scholarly approach of the twilight of the canon we are familiar with from our own education, and it is significant that it was written within the same cultural orientation and period which produced *Il materiale e l'immaginario*. This has not only to do with the fact that Ceserani and Neubauer were friends and worked together, but also and above all because it was the period in which the International Comparative Literature Association AILC-ICLA began its series *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*, published by the Dutch publisher Benjamins, part of which are Cornis-Pope's and Neubauer's work as well as a number of other projects: *European-language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa*, edited by Albert S. Gérard (1986); and *A Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula* (2 vol. 2010–2016),

¹¹ Cornis-Pope and Neubauer discuss the structure of their literary history project in a publication for the American Council of Learned Societies, ACLS (Cornis-Pope — Neubauer 2002). The main features of the handbook, including a discussion of the concept of East-Central Europe, are also presented in the 'General introduction' in volume 1 (Cornis-Pope — Neubauer 2004, pp. 1–18). The distribution of the different theoretical approaches discussed above is, finally, organized in the following way: cultural studies constitute a transversal focus in each volume, in contrast to the text-oriented and structurally inspired analyses that are presented in volume 1, and that discuss literary epochs, currents, and genres (i.e. the historical novel) and relationship between literature and other arts, other types of writings, and other media; author-reader-oriented sections can be found in volume 4 (i.e. a comparative survey on East-Central European national poets and their reception and aftermath); volume 2 deals with institutions relevant to literature (such as theatre, the press and censorship) and with literary metropolises (cities like Budapest, Prague, and Trieste, for example, but also regions like Galicia and Transylvania), and volume 4 is devoted not only to typologies of authors like the national poet but also to other figures, mostly of otherness, such as outlaws, exiles, and women.



edited by Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza, Anxo Abuín González, César Domínguez, and Ellen Sapega; as well as comparative works on single epochs, such as the Renaissance (*L'Époque de la Renaissance (1400–1600)*, edited by a team under the direction of Eva Kushner (4 vol., 1988–2017), or on specific literary trends (the whole series was inaugurated in 1973 by the survey *Expressionism as an International Literary Phenomenon: Twenty-One Essays and a Bibliography* edited by Ulrich Weisstein).¹² Cornis-Pope and Neubauer's handbook has, moreover, been born as a parallel project to *Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Comparative History*, whose 3 volumes edited by Mario J. Valdés and Djelal Kadir were all published in 2004. In his preface for *The History of the Literary Culture of East-Central Europe*, Valdés concludes with some considerations that encapsulate the way this handbook coincides with our idea of paradigms and canons as questioned presence:

The history of literary culture is both continuous and discontinuous. Continuous in the sense that an internally interconnected collective of people pass through time, and discontinuous in that neither collective nor historical experience is homogenous. [...] Lest we loose sight of this historiographical process, let us be reminded that just as universal historical theory does not exist, absolute singularities do not either. The historical process includes social forces, ideas that become a collective will, but we must never forget that great poets in every age create unique and rare works that approach singularity [...]. (Valdés 2004, p. XVI)

This attention for both continuities and discontinuities in history, as well as social forces and ideas collective and singular, is what motivates us to use *The History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* in our comparative literary courses, as for instance the undergraduate course 'Introduction to comparative literature' for students of the 6th semester (degree coursework for the B.A. in Western Slavic Studies), or in several graduate courses (for the M.A. in Slavic Studies) with a more specific and research-oriented profile (on the theory of the history of literature, for instance). Our experience, however, is that our students do not find it easy to work with such post-structuralist surveys as the one by Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, or with other post-structuralist overview studies specifically devoted exclusively, for example, to Czech or Polish culture. Our students have in fact the same difficulties working with *The History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* and with the surveys written by Dalibor Tureček and his research team on the Czech literary history of the (long) 19th century (see Tureček 2018 for a summary of the project) — or, to give some more examples: the multivolume work *Dějny nové moderny* (2010–2017), edited by Vladimír Papoušek and his research team; the new accounts of Polish literature after 1989, e.g. *Literatura polska po 1989 roku w świetle teorii Pierre'a Bourdieu. Podręcznik* (2015) ('Polish Literature after 1989 in the light of Pierre Bourdieu's theory: A handbook') by Grzegorz Jankowicz, Piotr Marecki, and Michał Sowiński; or *Literatura polska XX wieku*

12 Ceserani examines the development and discussion on (the theory of) literary history carried on by the above mentioned AILC/ICLA sponsored works as well as by other scholarly projects which take into account poststructuralist positions in an article partly devoted to Cornis-Pope and Neubauer's handbook: Ceserani 2013.

(‘Polish Literature of the 20th century’) by Bogumiła Kaniewska, Anna Legeżyńska, and Piotr Śliwiński (2005). We would really like to use these surveys with our students in courses like ‘Czech (or Polish) literature from the Middle Ages to the 18th century’ or ‘Polish (or Czech) literature from the 19th (or 20th–21st) century’, since they focus each in its own way on the discursivity of literary history — that is they all show from a poststructuralist point of view (that can be related according to the scholars’ orientation to discourse analysis, New Historicism, or the concepts and theories by such scholars as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault) that literary epochs can be defined from plural perspectives, both because actors define their own time in different ways, and because later interpreters and scholars look at them from varying points of view that may be related to different theoretical backgrounds. Even though we would like indeed to use these works, we cannot or can only use them in very limited manner, because our students find them too difficult to understand, not having the basic knowledge these works presuppose (the ‘too many notions’ argument we have already mentioned in the previous section). Let us be clear: we do not mean, directly or indirectly, to criticize the fact that these texts by Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, Tureček and Papoušek, or Jankowicz and Kaniewska etc. are too challenging for our students, and we understand that they are written as survey works primarily for a scholarly community of experts. Their goal is to propose new scholarly narratives on the phenomena they analyse, and their methods for this reason often have an experimental character. We understand this and we value these scholarly works for these reasons. Our aim, in relation to didactics, is simply to raise the question of how to use such works in our teaching. On the one hand, they represent significant contributions to the theory and practice of literary history that all students of Czech and Polish studies should know, yet they require, on the other hand, a certain knowledge of the canon that our students do not have and that they expect us to deliver in our classes before presenting them with such complex scholarly overviews. Our students might be right in their expectations, but it is a difficult task to transmit both the basics on the canon and the capacity to master new narratives experimenting on it in the short time of the B.A. programme, or even the B.A. followed by M.A. graduate studies. We are therefore learning to accept that working with our student on literature from the perspective of *canons as questioned presences* poses a didactic challenge, even if this is the very perspective we got in our own education, which we believe to be the fundamental innovation that all the surveys mentioned above share in common. Our students are overwhelmed by such a perspective, because they have no specific or substantially defined idea of canons — or, in Valdés’ world, of a time progression of continuities and discontinuities encompassing the material and imaginary aspects of cultural collectives, as well as the culture of each single individual. This is a result of the fact that they do not share the time of our own secondary school and university education, the 1990s until the beginning of the 2000s, or the space of our education — that is, the Italian and the Polish context —, which are, as we discovered in the years of our common work in Leipzig, quite different from the German education system. We have already hinted to this problem in the first section and shall focus on it in more detail in the section that follows.





COLD SHOWER, OR DO GERMANS REALLY COME FROM GOETHE'S *WILHELM MEISTER*?¹³

Let us begin this section with a question: Who studies Slavic literatures and cultures in Germany? On the one hand, there are young people who speak a Slavic language at home, and others who come into contact with Slavic cultures during their secondary school years and take an interest in it. Both groups usually have the German *Abitur*, which means that they have been shaped by a distinctly German school system. In the context of the study of literature, this means that most of them have acquired an aptitude for discussing literary and cultural problems — they have learned, very early in school, to think critically and question received knowledge. They are also highly sensitive in identifying any ambivalence of content in what they read. These skills make them attentive and pleasant interlocutors. The problems start when they are asked to talk not only about what they consider ‘important’ or ‘interesting’ in relation to their contemporaneity and their own life, that is, not only about a particular author or literary text they find engaging, but also about other subjects and issues that they have not chosen themselves. Starting from the principle of absolute selectivity, our students often question the idea of the kind of systematic study of literature we describe above, in which one must first become familiar with the literature in question, epoch by epoch — preferably still in the context of world literature and other humanistic discourses — in order to be able to draw on it selectively or question its traditional order and presentation. We spend a lot of time explaining to our students the relevance of the canon and why, for example, knowledge of the Middle Ages is an absolute prerequisite for understanding the texts of the Polish or Czech Romantics. Sometimes we turn into those literary historians whom Roman Jakobson compared to policemen who, with the aim of catching a single criminal, arrest everyone they meet in the house or on the street.¹⁴ At the same time, as has already been said, we are not dogmatic or even enthusiastic followers of the idea of the canon! Never having needed to learn the canon at school, our students, as we quote them above, feel overwhelmed by all the knowledge that survey-style handbooks like that of Cornis-Pope and Neubauer presuppose from their readers. For this reason, they do not really grasp the poststructuralist innovations in methodology deployed by these works, struggling merely to understand the basic canonical references that these books assume to be well known by their readers — and which they want to modify or deconstruct. It is therefore easier for us to use (at least in our courses on Czech and Polish literature)

¹³ This sentence, a travesty of Dostojevskij's statement ‘We all come from Gogol's *The Overcoat*’, was written by the German writer from the GDR Max Walter Schutz. See Leistner 1978, p. 33.

¹⁴ ‘The object of the science of literature is not literature, but literariness — that is, that which makes a given work a work of literature. Until now, literary historians has professed to act like a policeman, who, intending to arrest a certain person, would, at any opportunities, seize any and all persons, who chances into the apartment, as well as those who passed along the street. The literary historian uses everything — anthropology, psychology, politics, philosophy. Instead of science of literature, they created a conglomeration of homespun disciplines’ (Eichenbaum 2001, p. 1066).

more traditional handbooks, such as Czesław Miłosz' *The History of Polish Literature* (1969), Walter Schamschula's *Geschichte der tschechischen Literatur* (1990–2004), or Jan Lehár, Alexandr Stich, Jaroslava Janáčková, and Jiří Holý's *Česká literatura od počátků k dnešku* (1998). These books introduce their readers to the canon in a more chronological and less pluralistically structured manner (a discussion of how exactly they do this and the differences between them lies beyond the scope of the present article). Even here, however, our students find the didactic manner in which this material is presented to be a challenge, since they do not always quite understand why they should learn to master canonical knowledge with all its continuities and discontinuities when they might instead focus on specific topics that directly interest them.

When we speak of German students, we are speaking of students who, unlike their Italian or Polish (or Czech) counterparts, have often not learned the periodization of literary history before leaving secondary school, and who have at least a rough idea of the canonical authors of their national literature in the European context. Most German students have not read a single work of Slavic literature before beginning their studies with the exception of those few students who have spent time abroad or come into contact with Slavic languages and literatures. In German Romance or especially English studies, by contrast, it can be assumed that students have already been acquainted with the respective languages and have at least a very rough orientation in the respective literatures and cultures — that is, they know that there is such a thing as a German canon, but they do not know its contents, or they know them only superficially because they are taught German literature selectively and subjectively at school. German students studying Slavic studies may therefore have a rough idea about German canonical authors but they are equally unable to apply the concept of the canon to German literary history and cannot rely on this competence studying Slavic literatures. It is interesting to watch our colleagues from Polish and Czech universities, who occasionally teach at our university as part of exchange programmes, as they make allusions to German literature in the hope that this will help them to reach our German students — Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, for example, as a way of explaining the role of family novels in European Modernism, or ballads of the *Sturm und Drang* period as an important impulse for Polish Romanticism —, and their surprise when it does not work. Most German students are completely unfamiliar with these titles and topics. On the other hand, what they do know is that the idea of a canon has been much criticized in recent decades. They have heard, for example, that it includes too few female authors and is too influenced by national paradigms, and is therefore no longer current. Students know it already as students at school, and they may use these arguments to challenge every remnant of canon-based didactics that may arise in the classroom.

This problem — that school curricula no longer include or consider relevant classical works of German literary heritage — is portrayed in the comedy film *Fack ju Göhte* (2013, film-maker Bora Dagtekin), which quickly became the most successful German film release of the year. In fact the film, which has been hailed as a disruptive take on the 'school comedy' genre that subverts mainstream German school and integration narratives, is not primarily preoccupied with classic literature. Rather, the figure of Goethe, along with the name of the school where the film is set, functions merely as a synecdoche of the dusty and incomprehensible literature that one is





nevertheless compelled to read before graduating from secondary school. The pupils have problems writing the name of the national poet correctly and blame the cultural icon for their own frustrations at school. Even the class teacher, Zeki Müller, who is not actually a teacher, finds it hard to get enthusiastic about Goethe (he hasn't even read *Faust*). Dagtekin thus deals provocatively with certain themes — as a strategy of shocking the so called *Bildungsbürger* — that would have been politically incorrect and ultimately impossible to deal with in normal life. The conviction that there is a gap between students and the great poets, and that classics must be served to students in a simplified version, seems timeless. 'School reading is always hated. It is considered boring per se, smacks of work and is devoid of pleasure,' wrote Matthias Wulff in a 2008 newspaper article entitled 'Why Too Much Goethe in School Hurts' (Wulff 2008). In order to overcome this alleged gap, various strategies of 'appropriation', 'dissemination', and 'visualization' of the literary tradition are now being developed in the education sector.

In one of the most important scenes of the second part of the comedy, the students come up with the idea of explaining the content of *Faust I* to Mr. Müller so that he does not have to give up his job as a teacher. Although the class is on a school trip to Thailand, the pupils naturally reach for the Reclam edition of *Faust I* and begin to handwrite their own interpretations of the text. Afterwards, they bring them to their teacher as a gift and start a conversation about how to understand the classic today. One of the students (Chantal) writes the following interpretation:

Anyway, this Faust... which is the first joke, because Faust is just his name. He's in a bad mood. And then they don't say why he's in a bad mood. Did his wife break up with him by text? Did something get stuck? It could be anything, but you'll have to find out for yourself. Anyway, here comes the devil. But he isn't cool, he just talks all the time. And then I had to turn a few pages because I had to go to the toilet and catch up. And then the devil buys his soul or something? Because it's not written how it's supposed to look, you can't really draw the pictures yourself in the book, so you can see them in front of you, like in the cinema. Then he fucks his wife, I think. Then they have a child — how cute. Then he kills it! I swear, man, such a psycho, eh, such a victim, I hate that, really, he could have just aborted it. No sense in that. In my opinion: just hash it out for effect. And the devil thing is also totally unrealistic! That he speaks human language!¹⁵

This scene, comical in itself, clearly illustrates what is important in the German school system when it comes to the canon: the updating of a classic. It is striking that the students are not taught the historical and aesthetic contexts of the period in which *Faust* was written, nor are they taught the concept of the national poet. Instead, they are trained to interpret the text as such and to relate it by drawing from their own present context. This skill is of course very important, but it should not be taught in isolation. The abandonment of literary-historical classification leads to a complete loss of the temporal dimension of (literary) history.

15 Charlotte's performance, which is available on youtube, was commented on by a user with the nick Jo Xi as follows: 'Thanks! the summary saves my next German exam'; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXvJaY8-kkE> [15.05.2023].

The selective approach to literary history is not only a problem at secondary schools. It is perpetuated in most philological departments by the teaching of our German colleagues. In Slavic Studies, for example, it can happen that a student will take only one survey course on literary periods, that is, just one course in which they are advised to read works on literary history, during their studies. This course, however well designed, is never sufficient: it consists of only about 15 class-sessions in which knowledge is presented frontally — in some institutes even comparatively. Students are, moreover, not encouraged by the course's teacher to actively engage with the whole of the texts and authors discussed, let alone with problems of literary historiography. This can easily give students the impression that the study of literary history and knowledge of the canon are an important orientation tool (given that they are covered at the beginning of the studies), but that actual study must be based on the principle of selection: students should not, in other words, strive to master canonical knowledge but aim to learn how to focus on specialized scholarly questions. It is therefore no coincidence that the content of most of the other seminars on offer depend on the research priorities of the teachers. To put it more concretely, in Germany it is possible to graduate in Slavic Studies with a specialization in Polish or Czech, for example, without having taken a seminar on the general development of literature in the 19th century, let alone the Middle Ages or the Baroque period. The lecturers teach what they are interested in and what they are currently researching. Most of them do this very well — one cannot complain about the level of study in Germany from the point of view of case study research. Students learn to analyse literary texts in a well-founded way, they know the role of single aesthetics and literary devices and how to work with single methodological and theoretical approaches (the ones on which they happened to have courses). This, together with a good command of rhetorical skills, forms a solid cultural capital base. On the other hand, their knowledge is very fragmentary, and not sufficient for going beyond a specific question they have learned to deal with, or for working on the kinds of structured vision of the world and its history that we discuss in the first part of this article. Furthermore, German students' distrust of canons is somewhat arbitrary, because they have a superficial overview of them, nor may they dispose of an overview on the theories and approaches that could be used to modify or deconstruct canons.

We would like to conclude this 'cold shower report' on the state of literary education in Germany with an appeal. We believe that canons, in the sense of the questioned presence we have been discussing, have to be saved and made available to our German students as well as all other students. The reason for this, in a nutshell, is that everyone has the right to create his or her own vision of history, philosophy of history, or narration of the paths of human history — to be able to interact with other past and present visions, philosophies, and narrations of history, and of course to question them whenever necessary. For us, this is one of the central aims of culture, research, and education, but it cannot be achieved in a state of exclusive and permanent fragmentation of knowledge. We also do not think, we would like to repeat, that it is sufficient for students simply to overcome this state of constant fragmentation in order to create their new perspectives or even canons. On the one hand, such an achievement is surely welcome, and it is true that it could be all the more stimulating and innovative in the case of foreign (not only German) students who propose new





points of view on Czech or Polish culture, since their perspective may be less influenced by the existing, well established canonical structures. We think however that every new point of view on the Czech, Polish, or any other national canon, becomes all the more relevant if it is well aware of other existing canonical views, and if it is capable of engaging in dialogue with them, eventually questioning their biases but also acknowledging them and their origins. The point is — as we have already discussed and shall discuss again in the final section of this article — that canons, in our opinion, are above all interpretative-communication tools allowing people to understand one another. That is why we also try in various ways to provide our students with a more systematic education about existing canons and some of the trends questioning them. One of these ways is the literary history project ‘Polish Literature Without Borders’.

THE HISTORY OF POLISH LITERATURES (OR THE TWILIGHT OF THE ROMANTIC PARADIGM, AGAIN)

The Polish-German project ‘Polish Literature Without Borders’ arose in the context of our reflections on the role of the canon in the study of Slavic literatures in Germany. It was also motivated by the conviction that there is an urgent need for a new book on the history of Polish literature for foreign students. This need has been expressed several times in professional circles, and existing German-language histories of Polish literature have also been discussed in detail with regard to their conception and applicability in the classroom.¹⁶ The two most recent publications, *Being Poland: A New History of Polish Literature and Culture since 1918* edited by Tamara Trojanowska, Joanna Niżyńska and Przemysław Czaplński (2019) and *Literatura polska jako literatura światowa* (‘Polish literature as world literature’) edited by Magdalena Popiel, Tomasz Bilczewski and Stanley Bill (2021) are evidence that the idea of a new literary history is considered important by many other Polish scholars, and that a trend is emerging in the field of Polish literary historiography that can also be found in other philologies in general, namely the search for alternative models of presentation and problematization of literary material that seek to meet the challenges of the globalized humanities. There is a problem, however, with these new literary histories: they are either accessible only to linguistically and culturally advanced students (as, for example, with the *Wielka Historia Literatury Polskiej*, standard of the genre we discuss in the second section), or that they require a great deal of prior knowledge (as with poststructuralist surveys in the style of *Literatura polska po 1989 roku w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieu. Podręcznik* and *Literatura polska XX wieku*). This is why Czesław Miłosz’s 1969 *History of Polish Literature*, written by the Nobel laureate for his American audience, is still the standard work in Slavic studies departments in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The book has been trans-

¹⁶ Witold Kośny (2014) reviews the most important works on the history of Polish literature of the 20th century, including books by Aleksander Brückner (1901), Karel Krejčí (1958), Czesław Miłosz (1969; german editions 1981/2013), and the collective monograph *Polnische Literatur. Annäherungen* (1999 and 2011), edited by Waclaw Walecki.



lated into German twice (1981 and 2013). A further problem concerning outland or foreign Polish studies is that one cannot count on the fact that students have already read Polish literature at secondary school, whether in a canonical or non-canonical way. The question of the canon is, of course, a particularly intense one, not only in German-language Slavic studies, but in the context of Polish studies abroad in general. The many discussions of recent years reveal a certain perplexity on the part of lecturers, combined with the question of which texts should be discussed with students abroad, and how realistic it is to impart to them a canonical knowledge of Polish literature that they did not receive at secondary school and that they are often reading for the first time at university — not infrequently only in translation (cf. Shalcross 2014; Wilczek 2020).

These issues led Anna to consider the idea of a new book on the history of Polish literature in German, which would be inspired by poststructuralist approaches on the one hand, but which would not, on the other hand, completely abandon the systematic, epoch-based mediation of literature and concept of the canon. The work would accommodate a transnational perspective — raising the question, for example, of whether Polish literature really only includes works written in Polish, and what role intercultural, Polish-Jewish, Polish-Ukrainian, or Polish-Belarusian relations played in the development of Polish literature. The aim, in short, was a literary history that understood itself as a history of entanglements. Moreover, this book would serve to fill the gaps in knowledge on the part of our German students that we encounter on a daily basis. First and foremost, it would aim to cover basic phenomena of Polish intellectual history that are especially relevant on the *longue durée*, such as Sarmatism and the weak presence of the *Bürgertum* in the Polish social structure. It also seemed important to explain the peculiarities of the literary process itself: for example, where modernity begins in Polish culture, and why the significance of Romanticism in Poland goes beyond the context of literature. In addition, Polish literary history should be discussed in relation to the literary texts really studied at our institute (and not referring to an abstract corpus students do not read), as well as being short, compact, and simply written. Individual chapters should make extensive use of quotations from the primary texts, so that the book could also be used by students who had not read the primary texts. The intended reader of this work would be a student of our Slavic Department who had graduated from the German secondary school system.

The book was intended to accompany courses on Polish literature covering the period from Romanticism to World War II, so its focus would be literary texts from roughly 1822¹⁷ to 1939 (some earlier authors, epochs, and problems were to be discussed as well, on a selective basis, whenever this seemed essential for understanding the dynamics of Polish literary history). The survey would furthermore mediate between the necessity to transmit to non-Polish students basic knowledge, on the one hand, regarding authors who belong to the national canon and are considered 'important' in the common understanding, and to follow, on the other hand,

17 Romanticism in Polish culture began around 1820, coinciding with the publication of Adam Mickiewicz's first volume of poetry, *Ballady i romanse*, in 1822. It ended with the suppression of the January 1863 uprising against the Russian Empire in 1864.



a problem-oriented structure: indeed, its main purpose was to explain the history of the mentality of the Polish cultural elite as it is made interpretable through literature to readers who have not been socialized in Polish culture — not least to the extent that this would help them understand why this culture canonized some of its elements and ignored or repressed others. In other words, the book would approach the Polish canon as a questioned presence. The focus on the canon of high culture and the conviction that this can provide information about the collective Polish identity does not mean, by the way, that the role of texts and media outside high culture is not treated here at all. It is not a question of the exclusivity of high culture, but of its role in the formation of the collective mentality of the Polish cultural elite and those various cultural shifts that have had a significant impact on the whole of Polish culture, legitimizing some parts of it and ignoring or discrediting others. Some of the cultural segments excluded by elite culture, however, are taken into consideration in their attempt to gain the attention and acknowledgment of the high culture of the cultural elite.

Another important feature of the projected handbook is that it should not seek to replace a chronological, ‘classical’ literary history but was meant, on the contrary, to be read together with other standard works. The point is mainly that canonical authors and works are not necessarily discussed in the handbook in the context of the epoch from which they come. Moreover, the handbook does deliberately not aim to be exhaustive, and as such covers only part of the Polish history of literature from 1822 to 1939. This is not to say, however, that the selection of authors, texts, and topics is arbitrary. Readers of this volume should gain insight into the canon of Polish literature from Romanticism to Modernism as well as interpretations of works by such classic authors as Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and Stanisław Wyspiański. In addition, such topics and problems as the specificity of Polish social structure and emergence of the Polish narrative of sacrifice in the 19th century have also been taken into account. Multicultural aspects of Polish cultural past also play an important role, and while the object of study is texts written in Polish, some attention must also be paid to cultural relations between different nations that lived together on Polish territory in the course of history.

The invitation by Agata Ročko of the Polish Academy of Sciences to take part in a binational literary project in 2021 was taken as an opportunity to test the idea of such a new literary history, especially since funding was to be spent on this topic.¹⁸ This is how the project ‘Polish Literature Without Borders’ came into being. The project would be carried out in the following steps: 1. Scholars of the Polish Academy of Sciences and scholars of the Slavic Department in Leipzig would write essays on selected topics and problems from the history of Polish literature, formulated from the point of view of the specific needs that German students might have when studying Polish literature; 2. Students of Slavic Studies in Leipzig would translate these texts into German and check whether everything was understandable and whether there was any need for clarification; 3. Results would first be presented orally in the form of lectures in Leipzig; 4. A reader containing the texts would be published and tested for one year.

18 The project was funded by Narodowa Agencja Wymiany Akademickiej.

All planned steps of the project were carried out. After countless discussions and corrections with students and colleagues, the idea of the following handbook also emerged. It now bears the title *Polnische Literatur im langen 19. Jahrhunderts. Grundbegriffe – Autor:innen – Textinterpretationen* ('Polish literature in the long 19th century: Basic concepts – authors – interpretations') and will be published by Narr France Attempto at the end of 2023. The 16 essays do not aim, as per project parameters, to present the material in chronological order, but attempt a kind of cartography of Polish literature in which cross-references and connections between works, authors, motifs, themes, and problems play a key role.¹⁹ The handbook does not provide a synthetic overview on the Polish literary history of the period, but rather collects the interpretations of selected literary texts and their contextualization. It is therefore not *sensu stricto* a literary history, and understands itself as a study book dealing with Polish literature from a hermeneutic perspective focusing on the history of attitudes and perspectives. It could be defined according to the classification proposed by Joanna Maj as a new essayistic literary history (Maj 2021).²⁰ The essayistic character of the handbook is evident in its structure as a collective monograph, in which individual chapters are diverse and vary in length, as well as in their respective approaches to topics and questions. The handbook does not completely fulfil the paradigm of a 'literary history as an intertwining history' (Werberger 2012) but it considers itself to be a step in that direction. The title itself brings us back to Maria Janion and her considerations on Romanticism, or rather to its long history in Polish culture. The structure of the volume and its thematic preoccupations confirm not only the relevance of this epoch in Polish literary history, but above all its phantasmatic impact and long duration, even if the notion that the Romantic paradigm ended in 1989 is never questioned as such in the handbook. In the first part,

19 Literary texts are the primary object of study in the handbook, even though other arts and media play an increasingly important role in our post-postmodern society. The decision against art and media plurality is pragmatic, not ideological: while students of Polish literature should learn about a variety of formats, including film or graphic novels, their starting point, as literary students, should be literature. An important position on the situation of literature in the face of the expansion of media, audiovisual narratives (auteur films, television series, fictional computer games), and transformation of printed literature is presented by the book *Literatura i media po 1989 roku* ('Literature and the media after 1989') by Maryla Hopfinger (2010).

20 In her study *Nowe Historie Literatry* ('New literary histories') Maj divides recent essayistic publications in Polish literary history into three main groups by format: *formy enumeracyjne* ('listing formats'), *formy podmiotowe* ('subject based formats') and *formy performatywne* ('performative formats') (Maj 2021). The first group relies on lists in alphabetical order to present its history of literature, whereas the second makes use of essays, 'ego documents' such as diaries and interviews, which shape a literary history narration from a subjective perspective. The third group includes works that consider literary history as a performative negotiation or communicative game, as for instance in the case of a literary travel guide in its relation to the geography it covers. The *Polnische Literatur im langen 19. Jahrhundert* seems to belong to the second group ('subject based formats'). Although the authors followed the curriculum of the Leipzig Polish Studies, they approached the literary texts from an individual point of view.



Romanticism and 'Romantic paradigms' are discussed in terms of their potential to create collective identity. The reader is introduced to canonical authors of the period and invited to reflect on the reasons for and formats of Romanticism's afterlife. Although none of the contributors to this section (Maria Janion,²¹ Mikołaj Sokołowski, Grażyna Borkowska and Anna Nasiłowska) position themselves methodologically, they do a splendid job combining classical literary historiography with poststructuralist approaches (including Deleuze and gender studies), notwithstanding the handbook's overall aim of providing an accessible text to the student readership. The second part, 'Social and Ethnic Structures', deals with the specifics of Polish culture in terms of its classes and ethnic groups. It deals with the problems of Sarmatism and *szlachta* culture (Krzysztof Mrowcewicz), Polish intelligentsia (Grzegorz Marzec), and literary representations of peasants and rural life (Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz). Two final essays are devoted to the problem of cultural minorities in Polish literature (Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik) and Jewishness and Polish-Jewish relationships, as well as the Cossack Myth in Polish and Ukrainian Literature (Anna Artwińska). Although many of the case studies come from the canon of Realism (1863-1890) and Young Poland (1890-1914), this section is not intended as a chronological narrative of Polish literary history after Romanticism. Rather, it offers insights into genuinely Polish phenomena and allows the social structure of Polish society to be traced through the medium of literature. The cultural issues raised in the second part will be in fact familiar to any reader with a Polish upbringing, but they are often unknown to foreign students. The essay form proves to be the ideal format for conveying this material, as the authors emphasize their own interpretations of literary texts and explanations of historical and cultural contexts, rather than writing standard 'textbook' chapters of literary history. The third part, entitled 'Emancipations', deals with the problem of modernism and modernity of/in Polish culture. Although contributions focus primarily on Young Poland and the interwar period, the beginnings of modernity can already be found in Romanticism. Romantic subjectivity in Juliusz Słowacki's *Beniowski* is thus understood as one of the possible modernities of Polish culture (see the contribution by Wojciech Kaliszewski). In addition to classic authors of Polish Modernism, such as Witold Gombrowicz, Bruno Schulz, and Bolesław Leśmian, this section also explains selected emancipatory gestures in Polish literature that characterize the phenomenon of modernism, such as the transgression of cultural and gender taboos, or playing with the roles and masks of the 'committed' artist. It also examines processes of cultural translation, such as the reception of Russian literature in Poland or the work of Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, who sought to broaden Polish culture through his translations of the French literary canon (contributions by Anna Sobieska and Anna Artwińska). The questioning of gender roles is identified as an important theme of Polish Modernism as well as the emancipation movement, which is illustrated in the contribution by Iris Bauer using the example of the author Maria Komornicka/Piotr Odmieniec Włast. This is also linked to the (de)mythologization of the Polish family, which is conceptualized in modernity as a preoccupation (contribution by Magdalena Rudkowska).

21 In the case of Maria Janion, this is a reprint of a text already published in German.



Sections on Romantic paradigms, social structures, and emancipations are accompanied by a prologue (Anna Artwińska) discussing the methodology of literary historiography in the 21st century. The aim of these parts is to bring to the reader's attention the fact that every literary history is a construct, and that the study of a particular literary history should always be linked to a reflection on its genesis. One German standard introduction to literary studies reads as follows:

Does literary history aim at individual poetic texts, which it seeks to explain more adequately in their temporal context, or does it use the works to infer the general from the particular, e.g. a structure of literary epochs, a style or a 'national character'? Does it explain such references inductively or deductively, starting from the work, the author, the reader, or the spirit of the age? Is poetry seen as an autonomous cultural achievement, or is it placed in a dependent or reciprocal relationship with the social conditions of its time? (Meier 1996, p. 571)

In conclusion, it is reasonable to ask why the book *Polnische Literatur im langen 19. Jahrhunderts. Grundbegriffe – Autor:innen – Textinterpretationen* should be considered a more suitable option for today's classroom than other surveys of poststructuralist inspiration, such as those previously mentioned in this article. There is probably no satisfying answer to this question: the difference may consist only in a matter of attitude, given that the handbook sets off from the idea that the students who will work with it are not familiar with the canon, which cannot therefore be problematized without simultaneously being introduced. Of course, this notion is not unknown to previous authors and editors of poststructuralist histories of literature; it simply tended not to be at the core of their project. With *Polnische Literatur im langen 19. Jahrhunderts*, the first priority is to provide German students with an accessible text, which is also why students were involved in the shaping of the survey, and why its fundamental structure is very much based on the history of Polish literature courses that are taught in Leipzig (which means that the handbook could be less suitable for students of other German Slavic departments, a circumstance leading us back to the necessity for every literary teacher to autonomously adapt its didactic material to his or her classes — a necessity we have already highlighted in the case of *Il materiale e l'immaginario*).

We would add one last remark here regarding the strong emphasis placed by *Polnische Literatur im langen 19. Jahrhunderts* on two cultural aspects: the first is the high culture of Polish cultural elites and how it has shifted in time (while low culture, i.e. popular culture or subcultures that are not directed at or recognized by the elite class, enters the picture, as we have said, only in relation to high culture, at times seeking its acceptance, at times challenging it) — whereas the second emphasized aspect is the one on literature as art and writing as a medium (rather than on a so called interartistic and multimedia perspective which are both addressed in the handbook but not systematically dealt with). We are very well aware that this focus can be criticized as a clearly limited one from the point of view precisely of those theories which question the canon and which have led the debate on literary historiography in recent decades. We understand this criticism very well, yet we would simply stress again that this limitation is principally driven by pragmatic



considerations, namely that the book is meant to serve as a survey guide for undergraduate students who have, in the whole of their study cycle, only two courses (30 hours each) on the history of Polish literature and culture (it is the same for students in Czech studies), the first course being on the 19th century and the second on the 20th and 21st centuries. (Students do have other courses on literature but these are on text analysis and literary theory, on Slavic literatures from a comparative point of view, or on comparatistics in general. In the German system, coursework involving the literature and culture of previous epochs is part of the curriculum for the M.A. degree.) It is exceedingly difficult to deal with both Polish high and popular culture of the last 220 years in only 60 hours of class time (to say nothing of teaching more than one art or medium), especially when students do not already have systematic knowledge in all these areas. As for the teacher, he or she would need to have a very profound knowledge in all these fields to offer a convincing overview on all of them in such a short time (it is commonly understood that a teacher's ability to summarize tends to be directly proportional to the depth of knowledge he or she has on a subject). While we ourselves have some expertise in low culture and non-literary media, our competences are not sufficient for us to teach the canons in all these cultural areas. We do discuss them briefly as they intersect with literature, as we believe that it is necessary to teach literature in its broader cultural context, and we also dedicate some M.A. courses to the examination of interartistic phenomena and aspects of intermediality, yet we do not teach these topics as systematically as we teach literature. *Polnische Literatur im langen 19. Jahrhundert* therefore confirms the status of our scholarly competences and teaching choices as these relate both to the extent of our areas of knowledge and to the number of teaching hours we have within the curricula most common in Germany: the topics of low culture and non-literary arts and media are taken punctually into consideration in the handbook, without proposing any canonical knowledge on them. We do, however, encourage our students to take overview courses on these topics at other university departments and to read survey guides on them which can help contextualize our brief forays into these cultural areas.

EXISTENTIAL DIDACTICS (CONCLUDING ON A HERMENEUTIC NOTE)

We would like to conclude, as we anticipated at the beginning, with some considerations on the existential relevance of a didactic approach to literature that considers paradigms and canons as a questioned presence. Maria Janion, on whose inspiration the *Crépuscule* conference was based, advocates in her work for an 'understanding humanities' (*humanistyka rozumiejąca*). This concept is also important for us — as for anyone teaching literature or other subject in the humanities —, since it is part of our work to present an idea of what knowledge and thinking in the context of the humanities actually involves. We would like to emphasize once again that our students are intelligent, eloquent, liberal-minded, and engaged. We believe, on the other hand, that they have had the misfortune of growing up in a time when the teaching of canons and of different canons in parallel (literary and philosophical, for example)



has fallen, for various reasons, out of favour. We have already spoken quite diffusely about one of these reasons: namely, the problematic development in the academe of a poststructuralist diffidence towards paradigms and canons. The poststructuralist questioning of canons, which began in the 1950s, has been both crucial and inspirational, yet the same poststructuralist theoreticians who questioned the canons on the basis of their extensive canonical knowledge, and who in so doing required this knowledge from their readers to understand their deconstructing gesture, seem not to have thought of the fact that such canonical knowledge will fade if no one focuses on its teaching anymore, giving place to those very fragmentary approaches to the didactics of literature and humanities in general that are today becoming more and more common.²²

Let us conclude with a Czech-Polish conjuncture that suggests once more what is at stake for us when we are dealing with the didactics of paradigms and canons, that is with the traditions they founded. In 2016, the Czech scholar Lukáš Holeček published an interesting contribution to the Czech debates on the methodology of the history of literature that peaked in the years 2005–2007 when such scholars as Pavel Janáček, Petr A. Bílek, and most of all Vladimír Papoušek and Dalibor Tureček introduced the poststructuralist concepts of literary culture, new historicism, and literary discourse in a challenge to the rather structuralist approach to the history of literature that had characterized many Czech reformist and dissident literary scholars from the 1960s onwards, as well as the scholarship of the 1990s. These and other scholars have carried on the debate in the review *Česká literatura*, mainly shaped by the articles of structuralist and poststructuralist scholars reflecting on their diverging positions but also looking for a common ground.²³ Holeček's contribution distinguishes itself from the majority of other interventions on the topic, not only by the fact that it was published some years later but also because his perspective is neither structuralist nor poststructuralist. Instead he takes a rather hermeneutic approach, referring (like Šmahelová) to Paul Ricœur, who famously made significant attempts to combine hermeneutics and structuralism, and later hermeneutics and poststructuralism (Ricœur 2021). Holeček also seeks to hermeneutically mediate between the structuralist and poststructuralist perspective, reminding his readers that the function of paradigms and canons is to establish traditions, which is to say narratives that seek to relate 'to our lives by way of something that

22 Poststructuralist deconstructive approaches are for sure not the only reason for the fading of integrative canonical knowledge, which has been in fact gradually more and more challenged from the 2nd half of the 19th century (at the latest) by the spreading of the positivist and later also structuralist idea that valid knowledge has to be specific and specialized. We do hint to this circumstance in the following part of this chapter yet we cannot elaborate here more in details on this problem. We have, similarly, to skip every consideration on the impact that the digital world — a world in which canonical knowledge seems to be always at disposal in the web and does not need to be memorized anymore — has on the whole of history, literary history and their didactics.

23 We limit ourselves to mention just some of the articles that have appeared in the year 2005–2007: Janáček (2005), Papoušek (2006a and b), Janoušek (2006), Kubíček (2006), Müller (2007).



overwhelms us' ('našemu životu něčím, co nás přesahuje'; Holeček 2016, p. 396). The continuity of tradition, according to Holeček following Ricœur, is the continuity with which our imagination creates narratives able to give us orientation in the world and its discontinuities. Tradition does not negate ruptures, in other words, but implies them as part of that which overwhelms us. It also has the ethical function of connecting people living at a certain time and in a certain space with the ones who live(d) in other times and places. This is precisely why tradition must always be open to its own questioning and to the twilight of its own paradigms, since it shall continuously be reconsidered from the point of view of those who do not or did not find a place in it, or who suffer(ed) because of it. Education and also literary education, from the existential perspective — which is always latent in hermeneutics and surely patent in Ricœur's thinking — deal not only in the most exact description of phenomena, as supporters of specialization in the humanities state according to a certain conception of scientific knowledge, one that has a long history but that begins in the second half of the 19th century to dominate through positivist philosophy.²⁴ Moreover, education and literary education, from an existential perspective, do not concern only the capacity to question the normativity of particular structures or general narratives such as national literary canons, as poststructuralism sees it, although this capacity is certainly existentially relevant, as it gives people (including students) the ability to transcend certain conventions, and to follow individual paths in their own lives. Yet the skill required to discover suitable paths in one's own life also depends on the capacity to detect recognizable paths in the history of human culture, for the construction of the self in the world is both a matter of emancipation from and participation in given cultural patterns. This very existential ability requires both the knowledge of general cultural tradition and its particular aspects as well as their questioning — yet the progression of specialism in the culture of knowledge from ca. 1850, that is from positivism onwards has led to a didactics that neglects, as we said above, the transmission of a tradition of interrelated canons privileging the *ad hoc* knowledge of specific disciplinary traditions, whereas the reduction of poststructuralism to an *a priori* widespread anti-canonical attitude is becoming an obstacle for the transmission of every disciplinary tradition, including in specialized disciplines. This cultural phenomenon is a major existential challenge if one believes that human beings cannot live in a perpetual state of deconstructing fragmentation of knowledge but need to find a balance between structures/systems and deconstructed fragments in order to live their lives. We are aware that an adequately comprehensive discussion of the existential point we are now making would require a closer analysis of the philosophical presuppositions of hermeneutics and other theories confuting the modern (positivist and later structuralist) idea that knowledge can only be valid when it is specific and specialized, and questioning the postmodern (poststructuralist) conviction that knowledge has to be deconstructed and fragmentary. Yet such an analysis is beyond the scope of the present essay, all the more because it would be necessary to make a number of distinctions among different theoretical orientations to avoid generalizations (saying that something is specializing or fragmenting

24 See footnote 22.



in its tendency does not mean that it is *exclusively* that) — and we limit ourselves therefore to the personal positioning we announced at the beginning of this article, and concluding with the Polish-Czech conjunction we address above.²⁵

It is not by chance that Holeček, while referring to Ricœur, repeatedly quotes from the work *Historia egzystencjalna* ('Existential history') by Ewa Domańska, the Polish historian and popularizer of Hayden White's writings (2012), stressing that the history of literature and history in general is not just a matter of more or less adequate theoretical knowledge of the past, but rather a form of meditation about the sense of life and how we want to live our lives. Domańska's book, which opens with a quote from Jean-Paul Sartre, analyses the state of the contemporary humanities and is a critical study of postmodernism, which she understands as an umbrella term for deconstruction, poststructuralism, constructivism, and narrativism. The author's reflections are permeated by scepticism towards French poststructuralist theory, as being too text- and sign-centred and not taking context into account (Chapter Six, for example, with the title 'Forget Foucault!'). The result of the critique is a project to rethink the idea of a strong subject and community, the legitimacy of discussions of intellectual virtues and values, greater respect for the empirical nature of research, and bottom-up theory building.

The focus becomes a real and corporeal subject — author — agent — in its gender and race, operating in a specific political and social environment, belonging to a specific community (cultural, national, academic), and whose way of researching and writing about the past is conditioned by these different locations. In doing so, I draw on the long tradition of thinking of the historian as an active subject of historical research [...]. (Domańska 2012, p. 12)²⁶

Domańska believes that Janion's *humanistyka rozumiejąca* can build a form of knowledge about living together in the world that has a survival value for different individuals, communities, and cultures, and that demands an engaged academic culture. We would like to conclude this article by entertaining the idea that this indeed is how it could be — in which case canons and traditions will be necessary to the humanities' existential meditation on the world as well as their deconstruction, if we want to consciously move around in this world and not only be moved around, like the blind men in the well-known painting by Pieter Bruegel (what is our destiny as mortal beings anyway... but let's stop here).

25 See on the problem of specialized/fragmented knowledge *versus* generalist/holistic knowledge in the humanities and more in general in all scholarly disciplines the interview Colombi — Dobiáš 2022.

26 We cannot elaborate here more in detail on Domańska's interpretation of Foucault which is more nuanced than one might think. We just want to point out the existential tone of her argumentation.



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