

## **A Vote of Confidence: On the Aims and Functions of Literary History**

### **The Multifaceted Nature of the Crisis**

It is difficult to recognize recent discussions of the crisis in literary studies that refer, *inter alia*, to the condition of literary history, as something completely new in the history of the discipline. One does not have to look far to see that the crisis in literary history was much earlier a matter of observation and reflection. In the 1960s, Julian Krzyżanowski drew attention to this, remarking that the following questions were both sources and symptoms of a crisis of which much had been written in the second decade of the interwar period. "Is there such a thing as a science of literature? Is what professors of literary history teach at universities really a science? Do research studies of all kinds, the subject of which is literature, really possess the character of scientific studies?" (Krzyżanowski 13). Calculating the consequences of the atmosphere of crisis, Krzyżanowski expressed his conviction that the chaos connected with that atmosphere had become a cause of much damage inflicted on literary studies, while the advantages accruing from that atmosphere of crisis had turned out to be relatively slight. The three basic losses pointed to by Krzyżanowski included: a tendency toward "sterile and empty verbalism" (25), a loss of interest among young literary scholars in the discipline, and their quitting it as a result of drawing the conclusion that it was not worth devoting oneself to a field of study, the status of which was doubtful, the object undefined, and the methods applied in its analysis scarcely less controversial. A third defect was connected with a decline in the quality of research work. In Krzyżanowski's opinion, the crisis had become for the scholar a point of departure in justifying his/her own laziness. He summed up this phenomenon as follows: "The old methods are past their best, but new ones have not been adequately sketched out – that is the argument they put forward in answer to the question as to why they do nothing" (25).

Krzyżanowski, as the author of *Dzieje literatury polskiej, od początku do czasów najnowszych* (*A History of Polish Literature: From the Beginnings to Recent Times*), saw positive results in the discussion of the crisis. Among these, he noted "the transference of the centre of gravity from peripheral, side issues to central ones, that is to the works themselves and the artistic issues relating to them" (25). He also included

efforts to clarify the term “literary studies” and to distinguish within its scope “ (1) historical, (2) systematic, and (3) theoretical investigations into the nature of literary phenomena” (26). The object of research of the first kind was, according to Krzyżanowski, setting literary phenomena in a chronological order, and establishing the circumstances of their emergence, reception, and final disappearance, along with the connections and dependencies among them. As an organizing criterion, he recognized the language in which literary works were written. Language offers a point of departure for grouping works in classes such as Polish literature, Italian literature, Greek literature, etc. In multi-lingual countries, the criterion of language was replaced by that of the state; indeed, today it sometimes gives way to the criterion according to which the author’s feeling of identity is considered determining irrespective of the language in which he/she writes.

If we leave to one side for the moment the very difficult question Krzyżanowski raises as to whether “speaking of a crisis” means “the genesis of a crisis” and the matter of the justice of his judgments on the subject of the laziness of literary scholars (one can say that, as a consequence of Krzyżanowski’s vast and unquestioned achievement as the author of *Dzieje literatury polskiej*, he had every right to express that opinion), it is appropriate to notice that literary historical research aimed at establishing a cross-sectional view of literary history (along with scholarly editorial work) belongs to what is undoubtedly the most time-consuming tasks within literary studies. If they are conducted in a competent fashion, they demand a constant knowledge of and checking of a very large number of sources, tireless reading, and the investigation and reconstruction of a variety – and not just of literary – contexts. If we consider the matter from this perspective, we must insist that even the frequently aired reproach made of literary historical research, connected with the fact that it remains marked by gaps and simplifications, does not discredit the labours of the authors of the syntheses that are so unfashionable today, and does not change the fact the formulation of a literary-historical generalization is incomparably more laborious and requires a broader knowledge and greater competence than does the formulation of a criticism of that generalization, to the extent that that criticism does not simultaneously propose a competing vision of the past. By the word “competing” I understand a formulation of past occurrences whereby the author of the critique, after discussing the issues set out by his/her predecessor, goes on to explain phenomena that contradict a generally accepted view or that have been ignored by the conception that is under criticism. Such reproaches of anachronism do not at all diminish the effort put in by the literary historian to properly conducted research. One must, however, treat such arguments seriously when the methodological innovations, once they are applied in practice, assure

an increased effectiveness in work with literary sources, an effectiveness that leads to growth of knowledge and a better understanding of what is past, and innovations that guarantee an increased efficiency in the process of ordering and passing on information. Thus, methodological reflection on the history of literature should aim to achieve only those innovations, the implementation of which will not be one-off, but repeatable. The possibility of repeated application of a method to research into literary texts is one of the most important factors that determine its effectiveness. Methodological change is necessary in literary history, but cannot constitute something valuable *per se*. Change, understood as a crisis-generating state, in itself is neither good nor bad. Value can only be ascribed to methodological ways of dealing with change, or, in other words, of coping with a crisis – crisis being sometimes a sign of an abyss, at other times an exceptionally powerful stimulus to development.

From the time of the establishment of literary history to the present, the issue of change remains in the field of observation of Polish researchers. This is attested by the many utterances on the condition and subject of literary-historical research<sup>1</sup>. On this basis, we can judge that crisis thinking constitutes a testament to continuous reflection on the condition and specifics of literary-historical research, ways of conducting it, and the perspectives, limits, and practices common among those who deal with this area. As a result, literary history can be seen as capable of self-reflection.

## **The contemporary crisis and its specific features**

Although, considered in general terms, a situation of crisis is marked by a repetitive quality, nonetheless the time of emergence, circumstances, causes, and consequences of the appearance of the thought of crisis all determine its specific qualities. The sources of the contemporary chaos of crisis is the subject for a book. So, in this article, I will only mention some of its factors.

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<sup>1</sup> See *inter alia*: B. Chlebowski. "Znaczenie różnic terytorialnych, etnograficznych i związanej z nimi odrębności ekonomiczno-społecznych, politycznych i umysłowych stosunków dla naukowego badania dziejów literatury polskiej". [1844] *Teoria badań literackich w Polsce*. Wypisy. Ed. H. Markiewicz. 62; J. Kleiner, *Charakter i przedmiot badań literackich*, "Biblioteka Warszawska" 1913, vol. 1, 456–457; J. Krzyżanowski. *Nauka o literaturze*; K. Wyka, *O potrzebie historii literatury*; M. Janion. "Jak możliwa jest historia literatury". *Humanistyka: poznanie i terapia*; H. Markiewicz. "Dylematy historyka literatury". *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (1986); T. Burek. "Jaka historia literatury jest nam dzisiaj potrzebna?" *Żadnych marzeń*. Szkice; T. Walas. *Czy jest możliwa inna historia literatury?*; W. Bolecki. "Czym stała się dziś historia literatury" *Polowanie na postmodernistów (w Polsce) i inne szkice*; E. Balcerzan. "Granice literatury, granice historii, granice granic". *Polonistyka w przebudowie: literaturoznawstwo – wiedza o języku – wiedza o kulturze – edukacja*; T. Kostkiewiczowa. "Historia literatury w przebudowie". *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (2005); T. Walas. "Historia literatury w przebudowie". *Polonistyka w przebudowie: literaturoznawstwo – wiedza o języku – wiedza o kulturze – edukacja*; W. Bolecki. "Pytania o przedmiot literaturoznawstwa". *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (2005); R. Nycz. "O przedmiocie studiów literackich – dziś". *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (2005); D. Ulicka. *Literaturoznawcze dyskursy możliwe. Studia z dziejów nowoczesnej teorii literatury w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej*.

There is no doubt today that one of the sources of the crisis was the reception of poststructuralism, which called into doubt the basic units of the literary-historical account. It is sufficient to mention Roland Barthes's protests against the creation of literary-historical models that lead to the neglect of the unitary meaning of a literary work, and Barthes's argument that the interpreting reader appears as a co-creator, and even as the creator, of the ultimate meaning of the text, and, moreover, scholarly activity, if it is to have any sense, should become literature (sic!), and the literary scholar should become a writer. It is worth noting that the implementation of Barthes's postulate would lead to the annihilation of the discipline. Since, in this formulation – despite the precedence of the literary text in relation to the act of reading – the burden of crystalizing the meaning of a work is transferred to its receiver, and since this receiver's reading is not limited by anything, the question arises as to what, in fact, the point is in undertaking the bother of doing research into a literary texts. After all, the object of description, from this perspective, does not have an objective existence, nor can descriptive categories be rendered objective. If we are to accept Barthes's views at face value, then traditional research procedures can be seen only as a clumsy substitute for literature, crude schemata far beneath literature's loftiness and its beauty of expression.

It is, however, worth noting that Barthes, in formulating his ideas, underestimates the basic difference between literary texts and texts in literary studies. He ignored the question of their object, which, in the case of literary history, is the literature of the past seen in its originating context. To a substantial degree, this determines the specific cognitive procedures available to the researcher; it limits and defines the repertoire of those procedures; projects other ends; and also determines the "priority of the object vis-à-vis the subject" <sup>2</sup>. That is how it happens, despite the fact that the praxis both of literature and of literary studies takes place in language and in time – in their discursive formulation – and they begin to appear superficially identical to each other.

At this point, it is worth recalling Barthes's concept proclaiming the "death of the author" <sup>3</sup>. Barthes partly distanced himself from this idea only three years after its formulation. However, a radical reading of the positions contained in the above-mentioned text resulted at times in eroding the scholarly status of biographical research and inhibiting reflection on the methods used in it. It affected, too, the value put on matters fundamental for textual studies, such as establishing the authorship of anonymous literary texts and of their translations. Work of this kind, demanding, as it does,

<sup>2</sup> See also: D. Ulicka, *Literaturoznawcze dyskursy możliwe. Studia z dziejów nowoczesnej teorii literatury w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej*; W. Bolecki, "Pytania o przedmiot literaturoznawstwa".

<sup>3</sup> R. Barthes, "Śmierć autora". Trans. M.P. Markowski. *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (1999).

considerable linguistic skills, began to be appear in the general view as not only unnecessary, but even simply dispensable.

The status of literary history was also affected by the arguments of Jacques Derrida, because their reception resulted in the widespread diffusion of a conviction that each text (including, as is the case, one in literary studies) can become the object of interpretation, and, further, that interpretations are equal, and there is no way of distinguishing among them one privileged interpretation <sup>4</sup>. As a consequence none of the languages of description can aspire to the function of a metalanguage. (If this observation is to be treated literally, it applies also to the positions of poststructuralists themselves.) However, it is impossible to agree with the assertion of the equality of descriptive practices. After all, it is difficult to treat as equally valuable two interpretations – let us use this term – suggested by two authors, of whom the first, by using the tools of poetics, tries to penetrate the meaning of a single poem without taking into account even a minimum of context (for example, the extensive work of the chosen poet), and of whom the second, after much philological-historical research, creates a literary-historical synthesis of the poetry, prose, and drama of the inter-war period. These kinds of literary studies differ from each other vastly in terms of the scope and ambition of their reading, and in the aim and function of such reading. Even if in describing both these undertakings we use the concept of interpretation, we cannot regard them as equal. Even in a situation in which the first of those readings is precise and insightful, it cannot on its own aspire to be called a unit of literary-historical description; it will remain what it was at the start – an immanent analysis and interpretation of a text, the hidden context of which are the (most often contemporary) schemes of thinking about literature, of which the interpreter is more or less conscious and which have been more or less internalized by him/her.

A second impulse for crisis thinking was the changes in the political system, in society, and in people's world views that took place in Poland after 1989, changes that strengthened a tendency to redefine recent history. In this last matter, the participants in the events that had now become history were unable to achieve consensus. It quickly became apparent that the account of relatively recent times comes in many variants, and that that is the case even when some voices are more attended to than others. The lack of a shared narrative of the post-war past and still lively resentments were reflected in literature, either in a fixed version, or as objects of criticism. As a consequence, literature itself as an object of study necessarily presented problems to its historians, who,

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<sup>4</sup> See: J. Derrida. "Struktura, znak i gra w dyskursie nauk humanistycznych". Trans. M. Adamczyk. *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2 (1986).

indeed, found themselves in an unenviable position. On one hand, not only the object of study, but its contexts too, appeared unstable: the meaning of the historical context was open to discussion and dispute; there were conflicts about the truth; and the immediate literary-historical context began to undergo transformation, as a result, *inter alia*, of a need to understand better *emigré* literature and to engage in a full scholarly reflection on works that earlier had only been published outside official channels (*w drugim obiegu*). A series of polemics were initiated on the subject of the canon and of criteria for selecting new publications for it and for excluding from it texts included previously for ideological reasons. (It is open to discussion how necessary this gesture of exclusion was. Such texts read with editorial commentary could, in fact, constitute a document of the times, and bear witness to ideological interference in a text with artistic, literary-critical, or scholarly ambitions.) Even the functions of the literary canon began to appear problematic, and at the end of the 1990s Jerzy Jarzębski wrote convincingly on this matter. Let us recall: the canon can be understood as a library of masterpieces that constitute the foundations of the “house of culture”. Clearly, as a member of a given community, one should know that such texts exist; it is not necessary, however, to explore them, for there are experts whose task it is to possess knowledge of them. These are scholars in the academy, the jurors in literary contests etc. Along with the emergence of the free market, the canon became increasingly treated as a commodity (literary-historical lists of worthwhile books less and less frequently coincided with the lists of works popular among readers). It has also long been noticed that the canon can become “a sociopolitical instrument” (Jarzębski), the clear indications of which were apparent not only before 1989, but also later. (Let the unsuccessful attempt to remove from the list of reading for schools works by Witold Gombrowicz, Franz Kafka, and Feodor Dostoyevsky, and their replacement by works by Henryk Sienkiewicz and Karol Wojtyła, serve as an example here.)

In literary-critical disputes, which literary historians actively participated in, there was discussion of the criteria for recognizing a literary text as canonical. There were suggestions that the list of masterpieces should consist of texts diagnosing problems in social communication, or that the measure of canonicity be made diversity and its powerful impact on the community. (It is worth noting here that the authors of the above-mentioned positions made what are in general extra-literary criteria their point of reference: in the first case, the canon was to become a tool for diagnosing social attitudes; in the second, if we are to take the proposal seriously, students of literary studies would have to study *Mein Kampf* immediately after reading the Bible.) Relatively speaking, the least space in literary-critical discussions on the canon was given over to consideration of historically recognized, aesthetic criteria internal to literature. This resulted

in the relative weakening of the social position of the history of literature, which constructs its periodization not only on the basis of extra-literary criteria, but also, and indeed perhaps above all, on criteria that are internal to literature. It is in the stylistic, genre-related, and thematic shaping of the text that literary change is expressed. It is crucial also that to the post – 1989 tendency toward “change,” “redefinition,” and “reconstruction,” were added (in their general formulation perfectly answering the situation) slogans such as “there is no one truth,” “the crisis of master narratives,” “The crisis of representation,” “the death of the subject,” “the absence of the source,” and “the end of history”. Metaphorical descriptive formulae did not emerge from research into local contexts, which means that in using them it was possible to lose the specific nature of literary-historical changes (Bolecki).

On the other hand, historians of contemporary literature, besides the fact that they were struggling with the polyphony of the subject of research, and with its unstable (that is, subject to unceasing disputes) contexts, both historical and literary-historical, had to face a methodological critique of their own actions. In Polish reception, narrativistic and constructivist concepts, among others, became substantive and widely discussed impulses behind that critique. These resounded loudly, together with voices that formed what was probably the last stage of a Polish settling of accounts with the Marxist model of producing literary history. In this critique, the history of contemporary literature began to emerge as vulnerable to sociopolitical appropriation and conceptually varied, narrative structuralization. In the first of these cases – I am thinking here of narrativism – it was cast up to literary history that like M. Jourdain, the protagonist of *le bourgeois gentilhomme*, it did not know that it had been speaking prose. However, we may well doubt whether literary historians (among whom there is no lack of readers of Aristotle’s *Poetics*) learned of the narrativity of their proposed cross-sectional framing of works from the past, for the first time from the work of narrativists.

Constructivist and narrativist theories, formulating a critique of an essentialist understanding of the model of practicing historiography, may, paradoxically, have caused, I believe, a growth in a consciousness of how central the writing of history is from a cognitive-cultural point of view. For example, the consequences of the topological conception of Hayden White do not have to be the conviction that the historian’s effort, as he works with sources and aims at a many-sided description, is *a priori* futile, because he deals not with facts, the meaning of which is established once and for all, but with a chaos of data that achieves sense only through their introduction into a narrative structure the character of which is based on metaphor, synecdoche,

or irony. It is important that the theory suggested by White need not stand in contradiction with aspirations aimed at raising the standards of scholarly integrity, since, on one hand, it inclines the researcher to reflection and self-reflection on the matter of the rules of constructing historical discourse. It demonstrates the potential simplifications that narratives of the past are subject to, and makes apparent how facts are subject to manipulation. On the other hand, however, it prompts reflection on the functions that particular types of narration, and not just literary narration, fill in culture, and it also encourages ones to confront the question: why was a given narrative of what is past constructed?

It is important that the historian of contemporary literature does not deal with the medieval chronicle, which White makes into the *exemplum* of his conception. Most frequently, it deals with writing (including literary writing), in other words with sources that are often narratives. The narrative conventions that can be seen in them (those mentioned by White – tragedy, comedy, satire, and romance – do not exhaust the possibilities) may indirectly offer information as to the purpose for which a given historical narrative has been constructed. If the author decides to apply the matrix of tragedy, the description of facts may serve the remembrance of victims or the demonstration of the dramatic choices that confronted the participants in historical events. If it turns out that the narrative is framed as a comedy, it is legitimate to assume that its aim is to distance the speaker from the facts presented, to reduce their terrible quality by means of the elements of the therapeutically comic that are introduced into the narrative. In turn, the application of satirical conventions is a sign of an attempt to judge the conduct of the participants in history. One of the most important tasks of the historian of contemporary literature who deals with a source, is the verification of that source; one of the methods available is an examination of narrative. A multi-level description of narrative takes into consideration the following problems and questions:

- how broad a repertoire of facts and the relations among them and how many contexts does the narrative of past and/or present include?;
- what facts and contexts have been omitted from the description of past and/or present?;
- to what degree and in what way does the convention of representation lead to an extension, a transformation, or a distortion of the available knowledge of the facts?;
- what do these transformations and/or deformations consist of and where do they come from?;
- who speaks, to whom, of what, and to what end?;



- what is the temporal distance of the speaker in relation to the presented events? Was the speaker a witness to them, a participant in them, or does he/she possess knowledge that is mediated? What is the specific nature of this mediation? What role does it play in shaping the narrative of past times? What is the relationship of the speaker to the receiver and to the presented facts?

The historian asks these questions of him/herself too, and then offers an explanation of his/her own research procedures. The historian also considers how secondary aims, unconnected with the scholarly work, may not only affect the cognitive results of that work, but also hamper or distort them.

### **The historicity of genres of literary-historical utterances**

The genres that are, to a certain degree, susceptible to fabular formulations, referring to the idea of totality, include, in common understanding, the synthesis, and, to a much lesser degree, the monograph (because it deals with only one topic). The dictionary belongs least to these genres, since it establishes an alinear model of reading, which generally does not move from the first entry to the last.) However, if the issue is presented in a nuanced way, it appears that methods of constructing syntheses are marked by considerable differences.

To illustrate my point, I will give two examples. The first is the research work of Julian Krzyżanowski, who in his reflections on literary history used the category of the current – a unit exceeding the borders of one literary period. He drew attention to the tendency for classical and romantic currents to appear in alternating fashion in literature. He was convinced that they were antonyms – not only in terms of theme, style, and genre, but also in terms of world view<sup>5</sup>.

The periodic repetitiveness of these two sequences in a changing historical context that, according to Krzyżanowski, plays (i.e. the context) a decisive role, determines the shape of the syntheses that he proposes. It results in a dichotomous conception of the clashing of currents, and, although this certainly bore on the manner of its presentation, it did not negatively influence the accuracy of Krzyżanowski's research into the material he presented. In his output, we cannot find any sign that the scholar thought himself exempted from working at the sources, simply because he had succeeded in grasping the mechanism of literary-historical operation that transcended any one period.

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<sup>5</sup>See: J. Krzyżanowski. "Na szlakach rozwoju kultury polskiej". *Pamiętnik Zjazdu Naukowego im. Jana Kochanowskiego w Krakowie* 8 i 9 czerwca 1930; J. Krzyżanowski. "Barok na tle prądów romantycznych". *Problemy teorii literatury w Polsce międzywojennej*. Ed. H. Markiewicz. 291–292; J. Krzyżanowski. *Nauka o literaturze*. 334–335; J. Krzyżanowski. *Neoromantyzm polski 1890–1918*. 6–7. See also: M. Śliwiński. *W kręgu historii literatury i kultury*. Konrad Górski, Julian Krzyżanowski, Ignacy Chrzanowski, Tadeusz Zieliński, Czesław Miłosz, Lew Szestow. 22–40.

The other example is the study *Dwudziestolecie międzywojenne* (*The Two Inter-War Decades*) written by Jerzy Kwiątkowski. In his discussion of this period's output of poetry, prose, and drama, Kwiątkowski drew attention to the fact that the debatable demarcation point of 1918 was determined not only by extra-literary criteria, but also by those internal to literature. In the case of prose, these were: a change in dominant apparent on three levels – thematic, stylistic, and genre-related. The way in which Kwiątkowski presents the information contained in his book is a sign of his consciousness that the literary history of the inter-war decades may be presented in several shapes. It may be formulated in respect of theme, style, genre changes, and the emergence of new institutions of literary life, thus changes taking place in literature itself and in its immediate environment, occurring in historical context. It is notable that Kwiątkowski did not limit his classification to any one of the determinants that he mentioned (not even the thematic one), but tried to grasp the multi-dimensionality of the phenomena under consideration. It is the same in the case of his description of the development of prose: instead of a simple, one-dimensional systematization, there is a picture of the intersection of tendencies – realist, experimental, and fantastic – with continuations of realism and expressionism constituting the currents that transcend one period. Kwiątkowski tried to demonstrate the mutual correlations between them and their internal dynamic.

Krzyżanowski's two-part, alternating, dualist conception, and Kwiątkowski's linear vision, using the established category of the turning-point and of the change in dominant, are not the only models that determine the possible shape of literary-historical synthesis. That shape is dependent on what vision of events emerges before the historian as he/she conducts research into the context of the broadest possible selection of literary material. It also depends on what pre-established vision determines the selection of sources already at the level of their reading. In both cases the historian's activity has a constructive character. The first such activity is one of ordering, enabling a remembrance of what is past in an approximate way, although not a truly essential way. The second, however (if its constructional principles are derived from outside literature itself), will be a result of neglect, of an inclination to speculation and simplifications that will raise questions concerning the cognitive aspirations of the scholar involved in it. One must acknowledge that the temptation to accept a pre-established vision of the past is great. After all, the philosophy of history offers models for constructing their descriptions: a narrative of literary phenomena can illustrate an Enlightenment notion of cumulative progress; it can present the history of literature as a result of the operation of laws determining the emergence of concrete works; or it can also present the idea of a cycle (one that was popular in ancient times, in the shape of the conception of "the eternal return",

later reactivated, in another context, *inter alia*, in Nietzsche's philosophy). As examples, let us use the famous postmodernist slogan "everything has been already" and the extraordinary career of John Barthes's phrase "the literature of exhaustion". In consequence, the negation of originality that is manifested in the literary scholar's belief in the repeatability of a model, and that is combined with a lack of interest in the mechanisms whereby that model is transformed, may lead to a disregard of the importance of context and to a proffering of judgments that are ahistorical (unconscious of their own historicity) and that are formulated from the illusory perspective of an "eternal now". This last example shows that the result of a pre-established vision of history is the disappearance of historical reflection.

Since literary genres have their histories, nothing prevents us speaking of the histories of genres within literary studies. The dynamics of their transformations can only be established by an intensive examination of sources: the literary historian who has at his/her disposal an inventory of the units of literary-historical description will sooner or later have to meet the challenge of finding a form of utterance adequate to the specific features of the changes taking place in literature. In the case of syntheses (which fewer and fewer scholars are, unfortunately, inclined to write), one can observe a variety of principles (compelled by the historical context) underlying their construction. It is as a result of that context that Jerzy Świech's *Literatura polska w latach II Wojny Światowej* (Polish Literature during the Second World War) – besides chapters of a kind typical for syntheses, containing a reconstruction of the circumstances in which literary life took shape in the period discussed, and besides chapters that are distinguished on the basis of frequently applied criteria, such as those of mode and genre, chapters that make possible an ordering of the material presented – is divided into two parts, "Literature in Poland" and "Literature outside Poland".

Indeed, an understanding of the synthesis as a genre that assumes an attempt to penetrate to an essentially understood wholeness that comprises past events grasped in their essential shape, is a historical phenomenon, but the creation of historically-oriented comprehensive formulations does not have to be thrown on the scrap-heap. Perhaps it is worth constructing a hypothetical model – a grossly caricatured one – of literary studies without history, in order to realize what the meaning and function are of historical and comprehensive formulations in culture.

### **Without history – literary studies à rebours**

Ahistorical reflections, "deprived of memory", on the subject of literature, which do not take into consideration the history of the language in which literary texts have

been written, which ignore questions of the continuity or of various types of transformation of subjects, and questions of poetics, aesthetics, problematics and their mutual effects on each other, such reflections would quickly lead to the realization of such *ad hoc* aims as pandering to the taste of selected authors and/or the literary public, making views on the subject of works dependent on the interests of cliques and the mechanisms governing contemporary literary life. This would foster the basing of the authority of the person speaking on the subject of literature not so much on his/her knowledge as on his/her powers of persuasion. It would make scholars more subject to rapidly changing fashions, and it would deprive them finally of the most elementary independence of judgment. Giving relatively authoritative opinions on the subject of newly emerging literary works would become practically impossible as a result of the loss of a point of reference for any evaluation. The use of terms such as "original," "innovatory," "ground-breaking," and "derivative" would lose any meaning. One can only be innovatory or derivative, of course, in relation to someone or something. The use of these terms assumes temporal relation. While the vector of derivativeness, which is based on uncreative repetition, is directed toward the past, innovation, though oriented to the present and the future, cannot be identified without reference to what was. The very use of the name, after all, tells us of the appearance of a substantive qualitative change that has taken place in time. Even when establishing the meaning of a literary fact, which is measured by the force of effect of a given aesthetic on the literature of subsequent periods, there is no way to do this without temporal relations.

Along with losing the ability to evaluate literary texts, literary studies would lose the ability to select the material that should be the object of study. In consequence, at least four scenarios for the development of the discipline are possible, three of which seem more likely than the fourth. The first variant assumes a situation in which it is sufficient to motivate one's choice of subject for research by personal preferences. (The outline of the argument runs thus: "Among the publications I have read the one that fascinates me most is the one associated for me with". ...). It is also sufficient to offer justifications by *ad hoc* pragmatic considerations (the outline of the argument would be: "In this concrete situation for many reasons it would pay me best to write about this particular author..."), or to underline in a positive fashion the role of chance (the outline of argument being: "By good fortune I came across this book, and that's why I've decided to deal with it..."). The second scenario assumes a blossoming of theoretical activity. As a result of the excess of potential, diffuse subjects of research, the mutual relations of which are not established, and as a result of the lack of criteria permitting one to make a selection the countless mass of works and issues deserving treatment,

a less time-consuming course, and one guaranteeing speedy results might turn out to be indulging in speculative-theoretical activities, in creating models of what the subject of research should look like and what needs it ought to answer. Should it become clear that it does not realize these models, then it can be easily discredited – as non-literary or inadequate to the theoretical frame. In this case, we would be dealing with another type of evaluation. The point of reference in the valuation of literature would be not other literary texts, but theory. This would also change the creator's basic task. His role would not only be a matter of creating a literary work, but also of writing it so that, in the end, it can keep up with theory.

The third scenario assumes the appearance of a new character in the drama, the reader of literature (experiencing literature, indeed, in an unsystematic manner, but regularly and with enthusiasm), who has interested him/herself in the state of literary research, because he/she wants to know which among the old books available in bookstores or libraries it's worth getting hold of. Or, more ambitiously, he/she wants to systematize knowledge obtained earlier, and to see the books he/she has read in some, let's say, even just hypothetical order, against a background that's even just a tiny bit broader than the reading horizon of one lover of literature. That reader, fairly familiar with literary creation, but a little lost in its riches, will, alas, find no road signs and not even a map. Maybe he/she will create one alone – of course, only for his/her own use – and the matter of the differences between professional and unprofessional reading will be avoided in a tactful silence. And now at last the fourth scenario: in a situation in which the criteria of evaluation and selection of literary texts have disappeared, literary scholars practicing the discipline will begin to read and analyze in a value-free way all the books that are published in their own times without exception. Thus there will be a difference between the professional and the unprofessional reader. It will be a quantitative one. This scenario seems least probable for, so to speak, natural reasons. In all the areas of life, not just in language, there is a tendency to economy of effort. Why should this not also apply to literary studies? What leads us to suspect that the fate of this discipline should run differently to the end of history? The most tenacious scholars, believing that quantitative differences frequently favor the emergence of substantial qualitative differences, would rapidly realize that reading the entire output of the publishing industry (even though that entire output was measured only by the length of human life) exceeded the possibilities of individual persons. To solve this problem, scholars would create research teams and divide up the tasks. They would try to describe the mutual relations between read works and to systematize them in a general way. They would educate disciples, to whom they would elucidate the aims of their work, point out

its limitations, and whom they would initiate in the *arcana* of the trade, passing on to them the most important bits of knowledge. They would also arouse cognitive passion in young scholars and explain to them that the knowledge gathered over decades cannot be passed on in the course of a few semesters. However, from the countless mass of problems it is possible to mark out systematizing categories, so-called units of description, thanks to which the next generation can be, in elementary fashion, made aware as to what projects are not to be taken up, as those have been done already. The next generation would also create research teams and would work on those problems that their masters were not able to deal with. Disciples would take on research into works coming out in the contemporary period in relation to the texts described by teachers older by one or even two generations. This new history of literature would certainly not go back further, because it would be born in the new era that followed after all possible endings. Its children would never learn what once memory was in culture and what meaning it had. It is interesting to speculate whether the students of the new history of literature, busily working at gathering knowledge, would notice the moment in which their findings began to pass into history.

### **On the aims and functions of literary history**

These hypothetical visions of a literary studies without history can prompt reflection on the aims and functions of literary history, which, although not fashionable, continues lively and practiced in its classical variant. Literary history is research into literary changes and the construction of continuities. It does not just organize phenomena, but also, tracing the history and changes of artistic forms and literary themes, commemorates and stores them, attempts to define their mutual relations, and creates a map of phenomena vital for literature. In this sense, it appears to be a central mechanism maintaining memory and cultural identity, of which it is no doubt part. This does not mean, of course, that the continuity I mentioned above is absolute and unquestionable; it is a certain necessary idealization, certainly making possible the transmission of knowledge, but also demanding supplement when new works and hitherto unknown sources appear. In relation to the function of literary-historical studies, if it is so understood, the not infrequently accurate reproach resounds less forcefully, the reproach that literary-historical generalizations are relative and are closer to the creation than to the discovery of correlations between the results of literary activity. That is true – the structuralizations erected by literary historians are moot and are, indeed, discussed on various levels and for many reasons.

The first example of this is connected with problems of definition, in other words with difficulties in grasping what is the essence of the subject of literary-historical

research. Definitions of the component parts of the name “literary history”, that is “history” and “literature”, are fragmentary, and ways of understanding them are, without the slightest doubt, historical.

The second objection emerges from the comments of creators themselves, taking the form of such statements as “I can’t recognize my own work in literary-historical description”, “I am against the academic habit of pigeon-holing”, “I can’t agree with inscribing my works in trends, currents, and other isms”, and “My work has an exceptional character; I wanted to express my own individuality with it”. Opinions like these have a glibness about them, and are generally formulated without the speaker’s deeply considering that the aims of literary historians do not come down, nor can come down, to meeting the expectations of the authors of literary texts. The memory of culture is not individual memory, despite the fact that it consists of occurrences recalled and preserved by particular individual units.

The third, substantially more important, reservation concerns the historicity of literary-historical studies. This is not most forcibly apparent when the subject of reflection is currents, conventions, and the achievements of literary groups and schools, but it is when the object of description is the individual achievements of writers if these are not placed in a broader context. In this situation (and not only in this situation), the literary historian taking up the challenge of interpreting a text emerges as the member of a community of readers existing in a particular time and place (Sławiński 66–67). However, the description of the text offered by him/her is not a unit in the literary-historical process in the classic understanding of that term, but only a piece of reflection on the work’s meaning, an example of “the art of interpretation” (Sławiński 71–72), and may itself be subject to description, becoming one of the links in a history of reception. Here, too, a field for the anthropology of literature opens up, which, and this is vital, is equally subject to temporal phenomena, and may be, and should be, conducted in a historical manner.

The fourth problem is connected with the necessity of realizing that contemporary times are not always disinterested, which means that sometimes it gives in to the temptation of reinterpreting the past “for today’s purposes”. In extreme cases, this may lead to the depreciation or the mythologizing of what is past, and to making commentary ideological. In this case, written works of literature and their impact on the shape of the socially accepted vision of what was, may, from the perspective of time, become the object of the history of reception. The object of reflection will then be the influence of the axioms and research tools applied by individual literary historians on the shape that is given to the above mentioned vision of the past. In this view, passing time begins

to appear as a source of judgment favoring the verification of research and viewpoints. However, there is no need for this to mean that frameworks proposed later always turn out to be more accurate, from a scholarly perspective, than the results of research presented earlier – although such a state of affairs ought to be the desired one in scholarship, as it is evidence of the development of knowledge, in other words of progress in research and scholarship. Without this intellectual challenge, scholarly work would lose its basic sense. One of the vital indicators, thanks to which it is possible to speak of the validity of any findings, is the literary historian's self-awareness – the ability to formulate issues and to evaluate their importance, but also to describe research procedures and their connection with the cognitive results achieved thereby.

If we can look at the matter from a longer historical perspective, literary history and the systematizing and ordering work carried out within its remit are road signs for subsequent generations of researchers and scholars. They show areas that have already been explored; they give direction to research; they present a possibly coherent picture, situated within the context that produces it, of the literary inheritance of past periods; they make possible an elementary understanding of the specific features of those periods; they guarantee an accessible and ready orientation in them, one that can be given greater depth later. Thanks to competently conducted literary-historical research, young scholars do not have to start from scratch.

Literary research that is historically oriented makes possible the evaluation of newly emerging artistic texts. It is important to stress that the term “newly emerging” must not be identified with the formula “innovatory”. This is why it is necessary to consider what the matter looks like in a concrete case. One can only speak of innovation in relation to something, and thus in context. The broader the context, the greater the validity of the conclusion drawn.

What is more, a consciousness of historicity makes it possible for scholars to confront the evaluative criteria that they employ with the gauges of value used by their predecessors. By virtue of this, their consciousness becomes a guarantee of distance to premises upon which contemporary valuations are based. A consciousness of historicity will not permit one to forget that criteria of evaluation are subject to changes in time. Evaluation that is internal to literature itself, oriented toward any conclusion concerning the importance of changes in artistic forms in literature, creates an impossible situation in which the meanings of formulations such as “newly emerging”, “innovatory”, “popular”, or “suitable for the achievement of *ad hoc* aims” begin to be treated as synonymous.

Literary-historical knowledge does not always have to be useful; it is enough if it turns out to be intellectually valid. Service to the present does not belong to its duties;



to its services is counted the maintenance of living memory of the context that is the condition of the present's self-understanding and that makes possible for the contemporary world to distance itself from itself. Literary history, however, must not be identified with the didactic. Its responsibility toward the present is not, *pace* Cicero, to be an instructress of living, to offer counsel to contemporaries, lost in the depths of simultaneously or consecutively occurring events. If literary history becomes that, its contribution to the present's understanding of itself reveals its optional dimension (dependent on the reader), and not an obligatory one. Literary history, although it separates what is contemporary from what is modern and past, has no obligation to achieve any function oriented toward the present (aiming to support a contemporaneity directed toward implementing certain pragmatic aims), nor a prophetic function (the future is not an object of literary-historical research).

*Per analogiam* to what was - its tasks include, however, making contemporaries aware that their individual aspirations may be caught up in temporal processes beyond the individual, processes that are not identical with the aims and intentionally undertaken acts of just one group or generation. Literary history can show contemporary times that, in the past, the contemporary was not in control of its own meanings, since their shape was conditioned by the resentments and traumas passed on by earlier generations. In this way, as Goethe put it, the contemporary, thanks to a knowledge of history, has a chance of freeing itself from the weight of what is past, and does not have to unconsciously repeat its mistakes. The duties of literary historians do not, however, include solicitude for the good self-image of their contemporaries. But researchers into the past can, on one hand, show – in all their gravity – the complicated choices of the predecessors of those contemporaries, thanks to which the actors of history that are alive here and now have an opportunity to realize the transitory nature of at least some of their purposes, thus becoming conscious of their involvement in the realization of *ad hoc*, short-term ends. On the other hand, however, literary historians are able to reveal in the past, which was once contemporary for someone, the aims behind the implementation of past events. That implementation does not necessarily explain a lot; on the contrary, it is able to call up new, unusually powerful conflicts, and disputes that are difficult to settle.

Literary history conducted in a responsible manner, concentrating on working with sources, precisely setting out its poles of investigation, undertaking reflection on the limits of literariness, and refusing to avoid methodological interdisciplinary reflection (that is, defining the character of the relationship of its own language and its own context-oriented research tools vis-à-vis the languages of other areas of scholarship) – such a literary history may assist in the development of the ability clearly to perceive a situation

in which it has come to an auction of methods of working on concepts that create a real chance of integrating knowledge.

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