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The Polish History of Literature as a *Lieu de Mémoire*

Abstract

The article contains an analysis of the genealogy of 19th-century Polish research in the field of literary history. My inquiry contains a comparison between literary research in Germany and in Poland. From this point of view, literary history was an important factor in the process of building a modern nation. Furthermore, literary historians also played the role of indispensable authorities on the cultural past and present: in Germany as professors of universities, and in Poland during the partitions as intellectuals and writers.

Keywords: history of literature (discipline), Adam Mickiewicz, Maria Janion

On August 9, 1789, a young German aristocrat took a stroll around Paris where he had been staying for but a week. His name was Wilhelm von Humboldt¹ and he was an aspiring writer and philosopher. Having completed a semester of law school in Göttingen, he had decided to visit a place that was attractive to all writers at the time – the capital of a France in revolt. That day, he made his way to the Bastille, which only three weeks earlier had been a fortress and a prison. Since the Middle Ages, it had ruled over the city and, although with time it lost its former military function, it was still a place which embodied the royal reign and domination. Now, after the fortress had been taken and plundered, and its prisoners released, it was the first tangible testimony to the power of the revolution. In this case, the victory came with a desire to completely destroy and wipe this

¹ The literature on Humboldt is quite extensive and in recent years, due to several important anniversaries of his multifaceted political activity and research output, a number of new books have been published. See the essential intellectual biographies (T. Borsche, 1990; F. C. Beiser, 2011, ch.1; Quillien, 2015).

place off the map of Paris. During Humboldt's stay, the Bastille was being demolished, and the prison could only be visited on Sundays, which the traveler was happy to do.

Although the German aristocrat's visit took place at an extraordinary time, there was scant trace of the revolutionary events in his travel log from France and his stay in the capital. The young man visited parks, palaces and churches; he admired works of art, observed the monumental propaganda of Parisian architecture, and paid no attention to politics and current affairs. However, his walk around the Bastille inspired him to take a closer look at the motives of those who had challenged the fortress. Humboldt wandered around the walls that symbolized royal tyranny like no other place did. He saw the victors' enthusiasm confronted with the vestiges of suffering endured by many a generation of prisoners. In his view, an unarmed crowd lunging at a great fortress must have had a weapon that the royal soldiers lacked. It was despair that gave the masses an unstoppable energy, triggered by the threat that the emerging transformations might be stifled (Humboldt, 1916, pp. 119–121).

Humboldt only saw what he wanted to see and what matched his worldview. He ignored the Bastille's demoralized garrison, who were not going to lay down their lives for the compromised king. Also, that defenseless crowd which attacked the fortress actually had 20,000 muskets at their disposal as well as a number of cannons obtained earlier from Palais des Invalides. Furthermore, the attack was launched by the National Guard commanded by La Fayette, hence the notion that it was an unorganized entropic force which took over the fortress is untrue (Furet, 2008).

Humboldt described the Bastille as an example of a place which had lasted for centuries, enjoying its grim fame and devouring countless lives of condemned men, only to collapse as a result of an impulse, a fake rumor that the armies loyal to the king had planned an anti-revolutionary attack on Paris. As a writer fascinated by the Enlightenment's philosophy, particularly its British version, he both admired the authenticity of the freedom that the nation emerging before his eyes represented and feared the disintegration of the familiar world of traditional sociopolitical relations. Along with a number of representatives of German culture at the time, Humboldt asked himself the following question: How can similar goals be achieved without inciting violence and overthrowing existing systemic institutions?

Just 20 years later the experiences and observations from revolutionary Paris would come in handy to Humboldt. After Prussia's defeat to Napoleon, Humboldt was dismissed from his ambassadorship to the Vatican and appointed director of the Department of Education and Religion. His task was to reform secondary education and create a new type of university in Berlin.² This story about Humboldt is relevant to me because, as a historian of literature, I have been studying the emergence and development of my discipline. No one made a greater mark on its development than this German politician and philosopher. This stems from the fact that when he was creating individual departments and hiring faculty, Humboldt defined the history of literature in a particular way. From that moment on, it would aid the process of educating society and shaping its opinions.

In the first decade of the 19th century the history of literature exhibited a surprising lack of interest in facts and texts from the past. While the goal of classic historiography was searching for knowledge about the past and its reconstruction, the history of literature was given other tasks. In the view of August Wilhelm Schlegel, one of the patrons of historico-literary research, the military defeat of Prussia necessitated an intellectual response in the form of evoking ancient virtues, the notions of freedom and glory of the old Germanic people. His goal was to confront contemporary citizens of the German states with a constructed historical vision so their current condition could find counterbalance in the heroic message from the past, particularly from old myths, tales and poetry. The history of literature framed in such a way was to become the glue of the newly conceived national community. It was implied that a lack of commendable results or achievements from the past would never hinder the effectiveness of the prehistoric authority. From the very beginning, the

² A Humboldt university was referred to as a certain type of institution simultaneously conducting research and educating students. For around 20 years now, it has not been discussed in these terms any more, except in Poland. Critics have consistently stressed that the theoretical assumptions of Humboldt's ideas were never fully implemented, and soon after his short reformatory mission was over, his conservative successors quickly made all schools subject to the state, against Humboldt's premise of a university's partial independence and freedom of research and education. Years back, Bill Readings wrote an insightful book (Readings, 1999) about the impact of Humboldt's model on the development of the humanities.

first Polish historians of literature were fascinated by the German models, and traces of this historico-literary ideal, rooted in the politics and education of the time, are scattered across the discipline's 200-year history.

It is my assumption that the Polish humanities have never viewed the history of literature as one of many disciplines. I believe that Maria Janion diagnoses this issue most effectively in her research output, starting from her doctoral dissertation on the early literary career of Zygmunt Krasiński, all the way to *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna* [The Incredible Slavs]. In her writing, historico-literary research had always been synonymous with a special bond between tradition and the cultural past. That is, until the end of the past decade, when Janion lost her faith in the traditionally viewed connection with the past:

Today the debate about universal and vernacular values, which has been around since the 18th century, has come to a dead end. This is a result of the fact that the ability to read old Polish culture is vanishing, and instead, it is treated as little more than a collection of ideological quotations (Janion, 2006, p. 7).

It is not my intention to deprecate the works of a great many prominent researchers, among them Zygmunt Łempicki, Henryk Markiewicz, Kazimierz Wyka, Stefan Sawicki, Jerzy Ziomek, Teresa Walas, Ryszard Nycz or Przemysław Czapliński (to name just a few), who have made a significant contribution to pre- and postwar historico-literary reflection. However, Janion's approach to the history of literature has always been special. It was based on highlighting the birth of historicism, which was fundamental for the development of European culture. She has always stressed that if it had not been for Romantic historicism, which arrived in Poland from France and Germany, the Polish identity would look quite different. It was almost impossible to imagine Polish culture without Romanticism, while understanding this culture without the role of historians of literature seemed unfathomable.

Has the history of literature, framed in such a way, become a Polish site of memory?³ I was inspired to ask this question by

³ Research on memory has already entered the phase where textbooks, scripts and monographs aggregating the current state of knowledge are written. Several of these most recent publications offer a sound overview of the current state of memory studies: Erll, Nünning, 2010; Gudehus, Eichenberg, Welzer, 2010; Erll, 2011; Feindt, Krawatzek, Mehler, Pestel, Trimçev, 2014.

a reflection of François Hartog, who recently posed a similar question regarding history as a European site of memory. Hartog follows up and elaborates on the reflections of Pierre Nora, who supported his concept of sites of memory (which he has been developing since the early 1980s) with the loss of a social and intellectual bond with the past. Nora's concept – contrary to other groundbreaking views offered by Halbwachs, Le Goff, Ricoeur, or Jan and Aleida Assmanns – was based on the belief that the experience of modernity is characterized by a sense of accelerated time, the need to constantly document and record it, and to construe institutionally aided memory which will be responsible for a relationship with the past (Nora, 1996).

So as not to repeat Nora's arguments, which are quite well-known, I would only like to note that according to him, all the fields and disciplines that are affected by a similar crisis, will struggle. The history of literature is facing a crisis whose focal point, as Nora believes, is the discussion around the discipline's scientific birth. Referencing a seven-volume dictionary of French sites of memory, Hartog develops his own idea about two systems (or regimes) of historicism. One of them is focused on the past, the other on the present, whereas the year 1789 is treated as a symbolic shift in the paradigm (Hartog, 2015). According to Hartog, history travels a long way toward commemoration. Its task is to help (cultural and collective) memory bring back from oblivion what has shaped our contemporary condition. Hence, it is worth asking the question: What tasks should we set the history of literature? What should it commemorate and where is its place?

If we concur that the Polish history of literature has become a site of memory which requires permanent and institutional support because it has lost the vestiges of its former social legitimization, we would also have to admit that the effects of this process are visible to the naked eye. Undeniably, my interest in this subject is augmented by the fact that in the last decade, there has been a steady decline in the number of Polish scholars and linguists who refer to themselves as historians of literature, and to their profession as the history of literature. The number of historico-literary doctoral dissertations and post-doctoral degrees has also diminished. For quite some time now, Polish literary studies have been moving away from their historico-literary roots. Furthermore, this dispute, which has lasted for at least three decades, directly affects the scope of contemporary

methodological research and it will surely determine the future of the entire discipline.

Sonderweg, or evolution without a revolution

The outbreak of the French Revolution was cheered by the German-speaking states, particularly by the circles of writers, scientists and thinkers. The evolution of their views, especially the aforementioned Humboldt, Schiller, Fichte and Friedrich Schlegel, constitutes an important research area in German intellectual history (Saine, 1988). What made the great enthusiasts of revolution instantly change their approach toward the events evolving in Paris? In one of her recent books, Rebecca Comay interprets it as a certain perceptual error. For a long time German thinkers did not approach the revolution in France as a universal phenomenon but only as a local issue of the French (Comay, 2011). Complications arose when revolutionary France started viewing the German lands across the Rhine as a space open for expansion whereas Prussia and Austria were now its mortal enemies. In 1807 in Berlin, which had been taken by the army of the victorious Napoleon, J. G. Fichte gave the famous *Addresses to the German Nation* in which he redefined the role of the past in shaping the future identity of all the Germans (Borchmeyer, 2017). It was Fichte who greatly inspired Humboldt when the latter was founding the University of Berlin, placing emphasis on history, philosophy, language and literature as the cornerstones of education and key research areas.

At that point, the history of literature did not become a secondary discipline. From the beginning, it competed with other disciplines for influence, positions and level of funding. German philology, which aggregated literature and language studies, was soon scornfully tagged as *Brotwissenschaft* – a science for money (bread), which made it stand apart from more noble and older faculties (Meves, 1994). However, this younger discipline proved to be a fierce competitor. Due to the tasks involved in educating teaching staff for the growing number of schools, it could count on increasing support from the Prussian government, and as the Humboldt model of the university became more popular, from other German states as well.

History of literature as a national mission

I would like to discuss this issue without moving beyond the first half of the 19th century, and, to be precise, by focusing on selected works of two people who were particularly vital to Polish culture. They are Kazimierz Brodziński and Adam Mickiewicz.⁴ Both of them, and each in his own way, initiated a certain type of historico-literary reflection in Poland. They were not the first Polish historians of literature. Mickiewicz himself would most likely strongly oppose being called one. Nevertheless, considering the nature of their writing and scholarly activity, they provide two turning points in the first half of the 19th century. Between 1822 and 1830, Brodziński taught Polish literature at the University of Warsaw. Mickiewicz, on the other hand, taught Slavic literatures in Paris between 1840 and 1844. Their activity became a reference point for a number, if not the majority, of historico-literary efforts in Poland, and not only from the era of the partitions.

Brodziński

In 1818 Brodziński wrote in his critical treatise on Classicism and Romanticism: “Poetry is a mirror to any century and nation.” However, if literature reflects and represents the truth about a nation’s past, then only a historian of literature is able to interpret that reflection and verbalize that truth. This famous article may be analyzed simultaneously with the critique of the myths of historicism by Nora. He treats the mirror reflection as one of the primary metaphors illustrating the tension between memory and history. A historian of literature who uses the image of a mirror in evoking and explaining the past is suggesting that they are able to show the beginnings and evolution of a given phenomenon as well as its role in the life of the national

⁴ The bibliography on Brodziński and Mickiewicz is beyond extensive; however, as far as the historico-literary dimensions of their activity go, the sources are much more scarce. Works by the following authors are noteworthy: Rościński Skręt, Eugeniusz Klin, Wiktor Weintraub, Maria Prussak, Marta Piwińska, Piotr Śniedziewski, and Michał Kuziak (among others). Few works are written on this topic, and their greatest shortcoming is weak placement of the Polish historico-literary narratives against the French and German models.

community (in the case of Brodziński, this phenomenon was the idyll). However, in reality, the only thing that can be shown is a series of differences between the past and the present. The questions who we were in the past and why we are no longer this way cannot be answered.

A little later (at that point, he was a professor at the University of Warsaw), Brodziński wrote the following:

If a nation's insignificance, futility of efforts, frenzy and misfortunes leave a sorrowful impression over the course of history, the history of a human society's enlightenment always brings comfort. It is that history where we see the most Providence, which prods people toward greater and greater dignity. Temporary frenzy and suffering become irrelevant in the course of time. Yes, a watchful eye perceives it as necessary repose, necessary disorders that lead to an even greater rebirth. Frenzy and affectation fade away, much like a redundant flower, but each grand idea lasts for centuries and gives birth to another one. Each truth that has been revealed, even if obscured for a moment by clouds, lives on, like the sun, shines even more brightly. All the hindrances and altercations only serve it well and increase its triumph. Only he who looks beyond the present can understand vocation, dignity and the meaning of life, and only he who firmly believes in reaching for ever greater glory and happiness of people can appropriately comprehend literature. This zealous belief in it is the first spring toward loving it, the first stance which allows for its appreciation (Brodziński, 1872, p. 100).

Brodziński's opinions trigger two observations. Firstly, his beliefs are a contamination of the views of key German thinkers, particularly Winckelmann, Herder, Schiller and Friedrich Schlegel. Secondly, his concept of the history of literature has been imported entirely from the German background. Thirdly, there is one fundamental difference, because Brodziński formulated his vision of the institutionalized history of literature for a nation without statehood. Finally, Brodziński hides his role of author and acting subject of the historico-literary narrative, invoking the authority of literature, to which he only loans his voice. Having synthesized the features of early Polish culture, Brodziński moved on to clarify the purpose of his reasoning and the research method:

These are the general properties of our old literature, which I will try to demonstrate over this course. It shall not be interesting or engrossing, though. The entire history of our national education has

been a tedious road, and many of its sections still need paving. At times, it will take us through enjoyable and pleasant locations, but often we will have to wade through drifts, arid and barren lands, and, even more often, we will face obstacles. However, the destination where I wish to take you, Gentlemen, should make this journey more enjoyable. This goal is to serve justice to our ancestors, and keep their legacy alive (Brodziński, 1872, pp. 112–113).

In my view, Brodziński's concept and the aforementioned words by Janion refer to the same imagined historico-literary community. While Brodziński was one of its first exponents, Janion is undoubtedly one of its last representatives. In the spirit of this agreement, national culture requires special guardians and depositories of its values who will be capable of recalling and explaining what others have forgotten or what they have never learned. The history of literature understood in this way has never detached from its Romantic roots, and historians themselves never doubted the importance of their mission.

Mickiewicz

If we wanted to apply D. R. Kelley's (Kelley, 2010) formulation on two different types of historiography, Brodziński would definitely represent the history of Thucydides whereas Mickiewicz would surely be a follower of Herodotus' mission. Brodziński believed in the scholarly and educational dimension of historico-literary research, in knowledge derived from the correct reading of a message from the past. Mickiewicz, on the other hand, taught Slavic literature in its cultural and political context, which rejected the existence of the one and only true interpretation. Its scholarly dimension was dismissed and excluded by him at the very beginning, in the preface to the German edition of his lecture:

As I have been for the most part unable to use historical documents, I had to begin with the only means that were at my disposal: my memories. Whatever I felt or noticed during my stays in various Slavic countries, what I recorded in my mind from my old works on history and literature, and particularly what I contracted from the spirit which is animating nations these days – this is all I had. And this is what I shared with my listeners. The literature course at Collège de France is aimed more at presenting the results achieved by the discipline than a detailed analysis. Among the attendees of Collège de France, there are those who know the details as well as

the professor and who cannot be taught as students. My audience was largely made up of Slavs. All these factors had a great impact on the shape of my lectures.

Whenever I was going to speak to my listeners, I stood in front of them without a prepared speech, often without any written notes. The raised topic often took me right to the core of related literary and philosophical questions, and by improvising, I presented the results of my old works as well as my deepest personal feelings (Mickiewicz, 1997, p. 9).

Brodziński's intention was to raise and shape a national sense of greatness, morality and community by showing the distant past of Polish literature. Mickiewicz taught literature for political reasons, at a time when a sense of impending conflict between the West and the East was on the rise (pardon the simplification). Brodziński's history of literature was timeless and universal while Mickiewicz's was engaged and temporary. Brodziński studied sources and reconstructed the literary past according to the principles of philological and historical critique. Mickiewicz ostentatiously rejected the study of literature, claiming – contrary to the facts and pedagogical empiricism – that he drew on his memories and readings of his youth. Although he was reluctant to admit it, Brodziński's formulation of thoughts and his historico-literary narrative were often inspired by German philology, aesthetics and emerging history of literature. Mickiewicz, for whom various German publications (still not fully described by the lecture's researchers) were also a key source of knowledge about Slavic culture and which he was just as reluctant to quote, ostentatiously rejected the approach of German researchers toward literature and culture. He confronted it with Slavic culture – to use Larry Wolff's term, which is quite apt in this context – as “the invented East,”⁵ enveloped in a mist of researchers' and readers' ignorance supplanted by averse civilizational and political fabrications, fictions and lies.

If I were to point to a figure who unifies Brodziński's and Mickiewicz's efforts, and who is permanently inscribed in the Polish historico-literary narrative resurfacing in research and

⁵ Wolff's incredibly important and revealing book (Wolff, 1994) has not yet been appropriately received or followed in Poland, although thanks to the evolving research on the postcolonial dimension of Polish culture in the 19th century, this state is likely to change before too long. See (among other sources) Kuziak, Nawrocki, 2017.

published books, it would be Guślarz [Wiseman, a Slavic shaman-like figure] during the ritual of Dziady (Forefathers' Eve). He is anchored in the past but also leans into the future, a future in which he aims to play a part. In Polish historico-literary research, the goal has always been to get in touch with the ancestors and do them justice, because without this contact it was (and still is) impossible to define the Polish identity.

The literary historian used to be an elitist, niche profession, one designed to serve the community. He or she also deeply believed that there would always be a place for their research in the area of social interest. They tried to transfer knowledge about the past that could fill in the blanks but also help build a link between bygone times and the broadly defined experience of the present. Historians of literature are struggling to adjust to the current evolution of the humanities and the changing role of the university. Their Polish-centered approach, which used to be a strong suit, now has become their weakness. We are clearly standing at a crossroads, searching for a new model of research, a new ethos and a place on the map of the humanities.

I am not going to put forward the hypothesis that the beginnings of the history of literature determined its later condition. It would mean embracing one of the most dangerous historiographic myths. Nevertheless, I suspect that the numerous publications pushing one to rethink the history and output of German (Ulrich Muhlack, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Marcel Lepper, Peter-André Alt), French (Pascale Hummel) or British (Simon Goldhill, M. A. R. Habib, Joshua Billings) historiography might inspire contemporary Polish literary scholars to do the same.

Translated by Katarzyna Szuster

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