

The Canon – (Im)movables

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Introduction

The literary canon is a problematic category because it functions, on the one hand, as an umbrella term and, on the other hand, as a self-evident concept. As a useful point of reference in contemporary literary criticism and contemporary literature, it is usually not subject to major revisions, going beyond the selection of specific works or authors. However, it may become a serious problem at times of major cultural shifts, especially if it is understood broadly – not only as a collection of timeless works but also as a set of values and the resulting expectations towards literature which guide both writers and critics.

The 1990s were such a “turning point” in Poland and the ongoing canon debate, with its sources in post-communist reevaluations, post-transformation realities, and cultural theories widely discussed in the West since the 1960s, shows that it is not only the object but also the locus of fundamental disputes. Andrzej Skrendo, among others, emphasized the fundamental nature of the canon debate in his paper presented at the *Kanon i obrzeża* [The canon and the margins] conference,¹ and Przemysław Czapliński further commented on such a vision of the

¹ The canon is a place “where not only fundamental questions about literature but also the most important social and political questions are formulated: what is literature? What does it mean to be a critic and a literary scholar? How to educate through literature? How should we view our history, and what is the relationship between the past and the present? Who are we and who do we want to be? – and finally – what does it mean to be Polish?” Andrzej Skrendo, “Kanon i lektura” [The canon and reading], in: *Kanon i obrzeża* [The canon and the margins], ed. Inga Iwasiów, Tatiana Czerska (Kraków: Universitas, 2005), 69.

canon. Skrendo was primarily interested in how different ways of thinking about literature are revealed in the canon debate and he discussed the close correlation between the understanding of the canon and the ways of reading in Piotr Śliwiński's and Inga Iwasiów's works, arguing that they both create a "counter-discourse" to the contemporary canon debate, but their understandings of the canon differ radically. According to Skrendo, Śliwiński, especially in his book *Przygody z wolnością* [Adventures with freedom] (2003), longs for the canon as a "permanent and universal bond" that may only be created by literature; Iwasiów, in *Gender dla średniozaawansowanych* [Gender for intermediate learners] (2004), argues that the universal canon is harmful, and that literature is not a privileged sphere but "an institution like any other, meant to protect the interests of certain groups."²

I refer to this comparison of two critics who were very active in the 1990s to emphasize the fact that my goal is not to define the canon, not to show all the critical perspectives and positions,³ nor to classify or evaluate them,⁴ but to try to look at the role this concept has played (and still plays?) in literary criticism over the last thirty years. Thus, I will refer to critical voices and different definitions of the canon and examine how and why various critics use this concept, bearing in mind the fundamental fact that the understanding of the canon translates into how we think about literature and the role/obligations/possibilities of literary criticism.

The conference organized in 2004 by the Department of Polish Literature at the University of Szczecin in a way allowed scholars to summarize the discussions that had taken place in the 1990s and also contributed to this debate. In the introduction to the conference proceedings, Iwasiów emphasized that the canon debate does not belong to the sphere of pure theory, since it is also a discussion about "equal rights, being open to different opinions, and understanding that every voice matters. Not only in the sphere of theory but also in the real world [...]"⁵ Among texts published in the conference proceedings, also titled *Kanon i obrzeża* [The canon and the margins], the ones written by, at the time, active literary critics⁶ seem particularly interesting and I will refer to them repeatedly.

² Skrendo, 67–68.

³ I do not refer to, for example, the discussion concerning the canon of interpretation, important in the 1990s, which took place, inter alia, in "Teksty Drugie" (see no. 6 (1997) entitled "Granice interpretacji" [The limits of interpretation] and no. 4 (1998) entitled "Granice tekstu" [The limits of the text]). I also do not refer to the reception of Harold Bloom, a staunch opponent of cultural studies, defender of the canon and the aesthetic autonomy of literature (in 2003, excerpts from his book were published in "Literatura na Świecie" (No. 9-10); Polish translation of *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* was published in 2019).

⁴ Cf. Bogusław Bakuła, "Kanon, antykanon, postkanon w dyskursie o tożsamości kultur w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej (1991–2011)" [Canon, anti-canon, post-canon in the discourse on the identity of cultures in Central and Eastern Europe (1991–2011)], *Porównania* 9 (2011): 13–43.

⁵ Inga Iwasiów, "Wstęp" [Introduction], in: *Kanon i obrzeża*, 8. A few years earlier, she argued that canon debates did not bring about any "real revisions." In her opinion, "titles from one list were replaced by titles from a different list, and they were always connected to some superior 'values,' which gender criticism did not consider important" (Inga Iwasiów, "Wokół pojęć: kanon, homoerotyzm, historia literatury" [Discussing concepts: Canon, homoeroticism, history of literature], *Katedra* 1 [2001]: 102–103).

⁶ Importantly, some of these texts also appeared in journals of literary criticism: Arkadiusz Bałajewski, Konrad Cezary Kęder, Piotr Śliwiński and Krzysztof Uniłowski published in the Szczecin quarterly "Pogranicza" (No. 3 (2004)). Uniłowski and Śliwiński also published their texts in the following books: Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę! Szkice i recenzje* [Buy a book! Essays and Reviews] (Katowice: FA-art, 2008); Piotr Śliwiński, *Świat na brudno. Szkice o poezji i krytyce* [Dirty world. Essays on poetry and criticism] (Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, 2007).

1.

In its traditional understanding, the canon refers primarily to the broadly understood authority, mastery, a stable hierarchy of values, the common and the “obvious.”⁷ The belief in the existence of such a “space of community and understanding, represented by the widely known works from the past”⁸ is accompanied by a belief in a certain whole. It was in this context that Janusz Sławiński wrote in 1994 about the disappearance of the center (the collapse of the Whole) as a point of reference for the interpretation of what is new (in poetry).⁹ At the same time, Maria Janion wrote about the “uniform, symbolic and romantic style of culture” as a canonical style which, until the fall of the People’s Republic of Poland, had organized culture “around shared spiritual values [...]”¹⁰ In 2004, Arkadiusz Bałajewski described the history of canon debates and the key critical literary metaphors of the 1990s in terms of *Od ‘zaniku centrali’ do ‘centrali’* [From the disappearance of the ‘center’ to the ‘center’].¹¹ Przemysław Czapliński also described the canon as a “whole” in his book *Polska do wymiany* [Polish exchanges] (2009) – his history of the 1990s and the 2000s is similar to the history of the gradual immobilization of the center which he had written two years earlier. The changes in literary life discussed in *Powrót centrali* [The return of the center] (2007) in terms of the disappearance and return of the center were described in *Polska do wymiany* as a gradual transition from the deconstruction (“institutional, ideological and aesthetic breakdown”) to the reconstruction of the canon, treated by Czapliński broadly, not so much as a collection of works, but as an institution of collective life.¹²

However, while in the essay about the reconstruction of the canon, which is based on two opposing interpretative attitudes – the traditionalist one, which endows literature with importance and communal meaning and is based on hierarchical assessments and timeless principles (hereinafter referred to as “the culture of the canon”), and the modernizing one, which grants art freedom and the right to individual expression at the cost of it losing its importance (referred to as “the culture of uncertain meaning”) – we learn about an inevitable conflict and the inability to develop strategies other than these two, in the introduction to the anthology *Polityka Literatury* [The politics of literature], also published in 2008, Czapliński, describes an alternative possibility. He calls the broadly understood interpretative attitudes canons, and instead of the “actively discriminatory” “national canon” and the “liberal canon” which “excludes discrimination,” he formulates the politics of literature (commitment to commitment).¹³

⁷ See: Michał Głowiński’s entry “Kanon” [Canon] in: *Słownik terminów literackich* [Dictionary of Literary Terms], ed. Janusz Sławiński (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 2002), 234.

⁸ Cf. Piotr Śliwiński, “Kanon, hipoteza konieczna” [Canon, necessary hypothesis], in: *Kanon i obrzeża*, 85.

⁹ Janusz Sławiński, “Zanik centrali” [The disappearance of the center], *Kresy* 2 (1994). Reprinted in: *Prace wybrane* [Selected works], vol. 5: *Przypadki poezji* [Poetry] (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 335–339.

¹⁰ Maria Janion, “Zmierzch paradygmatu” [The end of the paradigm], in eadem: *Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś* [Will you know what you have experienced] (Warsaw: Sic!, 1996), 5.

¹¹ Arkadiusz Bałajewski, “Od «zaniku centrali» do «centrali»” [From the disappearance of the ‘center’ to the ‘center’], in: *Kanon i obrzeża*, 97–122.

¹² Przemysław Czapliński, “Kanon” [Canon], in idem: *Polska do wymiany* [Polish exchanges] (Warsaw: W.A.B., 2009), 227–276.

¹³ Przemysław Czapliński, “Polityka literatury, czyli pokazywanie języka” [The politics of literature, or showing the language/sticking the tongue out], in: *Polityka literatury* [The politics of literature], edited collection (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2008).

Czapliński uses the concept of the canon in the most spectacular way when he treats it as a useful term to define, jointly, the accepted hierarchy of works, writers, poetics, ideological beliefs and attitudes, evaluation criteria, interpretation strategies, mechanisms of communal/institutional action, public image, and the language of a given community. Thus, he goes beyond the obvious ways of describing the canon in the 1990s and the 2000s, analyzing not so much its legitimacy, the mechanisms of its production or its dependence on market values, but the practices and beliefs which organize how communities function. Such an approach may be treated as one of the main achievements of contemporary canon debates. What seems important is both how Czapliński defines the canon and how he employs this term,¹⁴ as well as the very fact that he uses the term “canon” to tell the story of the 1990s and the 2000s, proving the importance of this concept in the critical debate at the turn of the century.

2.

When Poland first embraced a transition to democracy back in the 1990s, various forms of producing, publishing and selling literature (domestic, emigration, underground) were combined, the world of literature underwent decentralization and reorganization in accordance to market principles, and the intense interest in post-structuralist cultural theories inspired heated canon debates. As a result, the role of the canon as the objective center was radically undermined. Many users of literature became interested in the question of the canon, understood primarily as a list of literary works and methods of interpretation, as evidenced by numerous public disputes over school reading lists and works and authors who should be remembered (or forgotten). Moreover, critical disputes concerned not only school reading lists but, more importantly, also the canon itself as a mechanism for evaluating and prioritizing literary phenomena and the place of literature in the new reality. The process of dismantling the canon was described in 2004 by Teresa Walas in the wider context of changes in the cultural paradigm. Walas emphasized that “one of the [...] obvious things on which permanent ideas about Polish culture were built was the conviction [...] that it was characterized by a concentric system, in the center of which was a shared permanent canon of traditions.” These beliefs came hand in hand with attempts to “reconstruct the canon, namely attempts to restore works which were removed from the canon for ideological reasons [...] as well as attempts to introduce new works.” At the same time, however, contradictory processes of “decentralization, differentiation, dispersion were revealed, triggered by [...] a new historical epoch [...]. And this sudden clash between ordering and differentiating, integrating and disintegrating, is one of the most important experiences of post-communist Polish culture, forcing it to revise [...] its own beliefs and prejudices.”¹⁵

¹⁴“The canon is a set of rules of collective life – it is a way of integrating the world, it is a clear cultural identity. An orderly, hierarchical and holistic reality” (*Polska do wymiany*, 26). Czapliński returns to this understanding of the canon and explains it in more detail in the conversation about the canon conducted as part of a series of masterclasses entitled “Canon from scratch” at the 2018 Festiwal Fabuły [Story Festival]. He describes it as a “multiple medium;” the books included in the canon are for him “the tip of the iceberg,” underneath which we find the rules of social life. He argues that it is difficult to imagine a society that would function without a canon, but also one in which there would be only one, <https://www.zamekczyta.pl/kanon-albo-o-tym-czego-nie-widac-rozmowa-z-przemyslawem-czaplinskim/> (date of access: 6 Sep. 2022).

¹⁵Teresa Walas, *Zrozumieć swój czas. Kultura polska po komunizmie. Rekonesans* [Understand the times you live in. Polish culture after communism. Reconnaissance] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003), 116.

The acts of breaking with tradition, refusing to accept the canon as the bedrock of a unified literature and culture, and rejecting hierarchies, objective authorities and evaluation criteria, perceived as ways of imposing authoritatively accepted (and exclusive) norms, were accompanied by numerous texts and discussions. In 1994, Jerzy Jarzębski published his seminal article *Metamorfozy kanonu* [Metamorphoses of the canon] in the special issue of "Znak"¹⁶ devoted to the canon of European culture. Jarzębski described three different ways of understanding the canon: as a timeless "edifice of culture," as a commodity (culture functions as a "shopping mall" – people take what they like, and the guardians of the canon "cannot even for a moment forget about the tastes of the public"), and as a tool of sociopolitics (a means of influencing society). Referring to these three concepts, the critic outlined his own project, in which the "disinterested" vision of the canon as a cultural edifice was combined with "openness" and "pragmatism" (corresponding, let us add, to the other two discourses), in keeping with the liberal and universal ideal of European tradition and its susceptibility to change. Jarzębski thus combined the notions of market conditions and political mechanisms which influenced the canon, especially considering the political and social changes which took place in Poland in the 1990s, with an optimistic vision of rational and liberal European culture, "hungry" for new literature that would respond to the new reality.¹⁷ Also in 1994, in "Ex Libris," Dariusz Gawin wrote about the need to find a compromise between traditionalists and supporters of the new, insofar as the canon had to be protected in the name of "true culture understood as a vocation, duty and challenge," based on traditions fostering a sense of community. Gawin responded to Kinga Dunin's radical arguments, postulating "stock-taking rather than liquidation."¹⁸

The dangerous repercussions of giving up on the existing "obligations" were mainly exposed by those critics for whom the undisputed value of literature was an obvious point of reference in the recent past, and for whom the canon, as an indisputable tradition, was a measure of stability and merit without which it was impossible to make meaningful judgments about contemporary literature.¹⁹ "Young" critics (I use quotation marks because generational differences were not the only factor) criticized not only the canon and its institutional functions but also the very principle and criteria of hierarchization and canonization. What was at stake was not so much the history of literature as contemporary literature and the challenges which criticism had to face. As a result, the axiological perspective was abandoned (the critic only took responsibility for

¹⁶Znak 7 (1994). Special issue entitled "Czy kryzys kanonu kultury?" [The canon of culture in crisis?].

¹⁷Jerzy Jarzębski, "Metamorfozy kanonu" [Metamorphoses of the canon], *Znak* 7 (1994): 12–17. Reprinted in idem: *Apetyt na przemianę. Notatki o prozie współczesnej* [Appetite for change. Notes on contemporary prose] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1997).

¹⁸Dariusz Gawin, "Kłopoty z literaturą" [Problems with literature], *Ex Libris* 49 (1994). Kinga Dunin's essay *Literatura polska czy literatura w Polsce* [Polish Literature or Literature in Poland] (*Ex Libris* 48 [1994]) was one of the first texts to raise the issue of the canon of Polish literature in the context of the reader's expectations and the boom in foreign/popular literature at that time. Dunin wrote: "the whole sacred canon would make sense if there was a living continuation, if the knowledge forced upon children at school allowed them to decipher the existing cultural meanings [...]. Polish literature did not "fail" because it did not describe the People's Republic of Poland [...]. The problem is that it lost touch with the books that Poles read [...]." Cf. also: Jerzy Sosnowski, "Bładaczka w krainie leguinów" [Bładaczka in the land of legouins], *Ex Libris* 50 (1994).

¹⁹Cf. among others: Andrzej Zawada, "Co ja tutaj robię?" [What am I doing here?], *Znak* 9 (1993); Jan Prokop, "Kanon literacki i pamięć zbiorowa" [The literary canon and collective memory], *Arcana* 5 (1995): 42–49; Andrzej Werner, "Otwórzmy okno" [Let's open the window], *Więź* 4 (2003).

one's own reading of the text, criticism was a form of private reading),²⁰ and, respectively, other evaluative criteria and other possibilities of organizing the canon were introduced.

The canon's universal claims were challenged by minority groups. Inga Iwasiów, who joined the canon debate as a female reader and critic, wrote: "[...] the canon and what it had to offer were selected as if we all were men dreaming of sublime Platonic feasts."²¹ Exposing the violent nature of the male-centered canon and its mechanisms, Iwasiów referred to Foucault's guards of the "panoptic universe" and the well-known notion of temple guards. Furthermore, she argued that the so-called "labor camp literature," "reclaimed" after 1989, demonstrates how "the changes in the canon camouflage the fact that the canon actually excludes works which threaten to undermine it." According to the feminist critic, labor camp literature became a "new sacred form of martyrdom" which made it impossible to notice in it "moments of silence and exclusion" which did not fit into the heteropatriarchal pattern.

Feminist and queer perspectives revealed the historical, political, and institutional nature of the procedures that legitimized a literary work; they exposed the claims of universality and the mechanisms of excluding or obscuring non-heteronormative works and authors. They also showed different interpretative strategies and ways of reading, those that were not only individual but also community-based. This revisionist procedure was, on the one hand, part of the evaluation process characteristic of the canon, insofar as authors marginalized in or excluded from the history of literature were to be reclaimed; on the other hand, it expanded and opened the canon, validating minority voices guided by values which differed from those considered "universal." It also gave rise to interpretation procedures which differed from the canonical ones, insofar as they were focused not only on the text but also on the outside of the text.²²

In the canon debates which focused on the place of minority groups and the consequent revisions of the canonical history of literature and the ways of reading, the main point of reference was the traditional procedure of recognizing the "value" of given works. Issues related to the role played by the media and the market, which were at the center of the "majoritarian" critical debates, were not as important. This difference is also visible in language: in gender

²⁰The rejection of objectivism and the privatization of criticism took different forms; for example, let us observe the radical differences between Karol Maliszewski's empathetic reading and Krzysztof Uniłowski's criticism governed by the postmodern ideas of differentiation, rejection of institutional positions legitimizing the value of literature and accepting responsibility for one's own reading of the text.

²¹Inga Iwasiów, *Gender dla średniozaawansowanych. Wykłady szczecińskie* [Gender for intermediate learners: Szczecin lectures] (Warsaw: W.A.B., 2008), 54.

²²I refer to, on the one hand, the procedures of restoring forgotten authors (less often female authors) to the history of literature, establishing the relationship between women's literature and the male canon, and, on the other hand, revealing what is hidden in texts considered canonical or following in the footsteps of Nancy K. Miller, who read works by women as if for the first time – in opposition to the masculine, universalizing, readings which appropriated these works. And, also, to the ways of reading contemporary literature. Cf., inter alia, the discussion on the gender of literature entitled "Męska, żeńska, nijaka" [Male, Female, Neuter], *Ex Libris* 85 (1995); Grażyna Borkowska, "Zeskrobać starą zaprawę z pomnika polskiej literatury (O «młodej» prozie kobiecej)" [Scrape the old mortar from the monument of Polish literature (On «young» prose by women)], in: *Sporne sprawy polskiej literatury współczesnej* [Contested issues in Polish contemporary literature], ed. Alina Brodzka, Lidia Burska (Warsaw: IBL, 1998), 387–402; Inga Iwasiów, *Rewindykacje. Kobieta czytająca dzisiaj* [Revindication. Woman Reading Today] (Krakow: Universitas, 2002); Wojciech Śmieja, "Kanon i kanony, czyli jak rozumieć pojęcie literatura homoseksualna?" [Canon and canons, or how to understand the concept of homosexual literature?] *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2008): 96–116. Błażej Warkocki, "Skradziony list, czyli homoseksualna tajemnica wobec kanonu literatury polskiej" [The purloined letter, or homosexual mystery and the canon of Polish literature], in: *Kanon i obrzeża*, 295–307.

criticism, the canon was mainly contrasted with the metaphors of the margin²³ and the apocrypha.²⁴ The “majoritarian” critics, in turn, referred mainly to the private canon, the canon in motion, the canon (as opposed to the Canon). Various market “substitutions” of the canon – “the canon as a center of market operations,”²⁵ rankings, popularity contents and awards – were also discussed. For young critics in the 1990s, an art niche (a high art niche) was a metaphorical space which sheltered literature (and criticism) from both canonical / traditional claims and market appropriations.

At the turn of the century, when the mass media ruled the world, “normal life” was difficult, capitalist mechanisms were widespread, “the Center” returned, and the illusions about the optimistic visions of culture of “moving margins” were shattered,²⁶ one first began to seek a way out of the impasse in which, according to critics, literature and criticism entangled in media and market mechanisms found themselves. One of the possible ways out was to recognize the mechanisms governing culture in liberal market economy and to use this knowledge to inspire political commitment, taking responsibility for what, how, and where something was said and written. This led to widely discussed communal/political projects which were especially important for critics and writers born in the 1970s and the 1980s.

Rebuilding traditional evaluation criteria in the new world was one possibility. From the perspective of the modernist tradition, movement and fluidity were not so much a positive form of decentralized and democratic culture as a damaging and dangerous threat to hierarchies and boundaries between high and low literature. Consequently, they posed a threat to literary value, eclipsed by market demands or old boys’ club mentality. From this perspective, the canon remained a space of unquestionable values, which sheltered one both from market fads and politics (power/ideology). Thus, it was supposed to guarantee a perspective that goes beyond temporary and local triumphs: as in Marian Stala’s famous text *Coś się skończyło, nic się nie chce zacząć* [Something has ended but nothing will begin] in which decentralization is considered the most painful experience both for poetry and criticism. Stala writes: “To be an

²³ Arleta Galant wrote about the many different meanings of the metaphor of the margin in feminist criticism, also in relation to the canon. She drew attention to the fundamental difference between the post-structuralist understanding of the margin as fragmentary or peripheral and the feminist understanding of it, which, drawing on bell hooks, she read as a figure of alienation and uprooting (which endowed it with a political and existential dimension). She also emphasized, among others, the role of the margin in the reinterpretations and discussions of the history of women and minority groups, creating an alternative historical and literary approach to literary texts across the canon. She also pointed out how the change in the meaning of this metaphor (as a deep/wide edge in the literary canon) translated into how the history of women’s writing in relation to the canon was presented (e.g., if we consider genealogical approaches). (Arleta Galant, “On Waves, Lands and Margins. Metaphors and the Possibilities for a Feminist History of Literature,” *Forum of Poetics*, <http://fp.amu.edu.pl/on-waves-lands-and-margins-metaphors-and-the-possibilities-for-a-feminist-history-of-literature/>).

²⁴ Inspired by the definition of the apocrypha found in Biblical studies, Inga Iwasiów read the apocryphal story as a “feminist commentary on the state of social and literary consciousness:” the apocryphal story was a text of uncertain origin, containing often hidden knowledge, available only to the chosen few (Iwasiów, “Wokół pojęć: kanon, homoerotyzm, historia literatury”, 98).

²⁵ Śliwiński, “Kanon, hipoteza konieczna”, 88.

²⁶ Furthermore, as Czaplinski nostalgically described in 2002, when he was already disappointed by the new capitalist reality, “the center does not remain haughty and stable” and “no one is considered inferior indefinitely.” Przemysław Czaplinski, *Ruchome marginesy* [Moving margins] (Krakow: Znak Publishing House, 2002), 7.

outstanding poet in the eyes of a number of peers is not the same thing as to be an outstanding poet for the majority of contemporary readers.”²⁷

A similar mechanism of disappointment and critical expectations towards contemporary prose was discussed in detail by Czapliński, for whom they were the consequences of the “victory” of late modernity over postmodernity (projected in the symbolic sphere). Czapliński showed how “the preference for the canon that is permanently renewed, the canon which is expanded to include problematic writers, eventually mutated into the will of stability.” Czapliński further argued that the canon debate was not about literature but about fundamental issues: literature/prose which “in the symbolic sphere will validate the rights of the majority, and not because it possesses some great literary value, but because it is part of shared official history.”²⁸

The special issue of “Znak” from 1998, devoted to literature and criticism, is also testimony to the need to legitimize criticism and stable evaluation criteria. It featured extensive commentaries to Jarzębski’s original text, entitled *Wartościowanie w sieci kultury* [Evaluation in the network of culture], and responses to the questionnaire entitled *Krytyka i jej kryteria* [Criticism and its criteria].²⁹ Optimistic (despite all odds) reflections of Jarzębski, who analyzed the crisis of hierarchies and the problems with evaluating works of art in the network model of culture “with its incredibly multiplied possibilities” and “the demon of relativism,” and nevertheless insisted on using traditional criteria for judging the value of literature believing that the critic, as a “guardian of relative continuity and stability of the canon,” should in a way guarantee the status of literary criticism, clashed with much less optimistic opinions of other critics.

Jarzębski argued that the canon plays a more important role in network culture than in traditional culture (paradoxically, it still functions in it as a system of references). He perceived the canon as a “structure in motion,” arguing that the measure of the value of a new work of art should be its ability to enter into relationships with canonical texts and stimulate the processes of constant reinterpretation. And although in the network model of culture “an objective model of literary criticism does not seem to exist,” we may turn to the pragmatic category of “using” literature if we accept the fact that it always takes place in the context provided by the canon and the related reading and interpretative procedures.³⁰

²⁷Marian Stala, “Coś się skończyło, nic się nie chce zacząć” [Something has ended but nothing will begin], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 2 (2000). Reprinted in: *Była sobie krytyka. Wybór tekstów z lat dziewięćdziesiątych i pierwszych* [Criticism. A selection of texts from the 1990s and the 2000s], ed. Dariusz Nowacki, Krzysztof Uniłowski (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2003), 110.

²⁸Czapliński, “Kanon”, 261, 244. Czapliński discussed in detail the context of popularity contests, polls, discussions and texts from the 1990s, within which the literary canon was reformulated (disassembled), as well as texts and discussions related to “realistic expectations” (i.e., expectations towards prose which drew on the canon of Polish Romanticism and Realism). He also discussed the clash between liberal and nationalist models of culture. Czapliński was interested in the mechanisms governing the social functioning and reconstruction of the canon (that is why he emphasized the disputes over Szyborska’s Nobel Prize and Miłosz’s funeral). I am mainly interested in his comments on the critics’ expectations about the novel.

²⁹“Krytyka i jej kryteria”, *Znak* 7 (1998).

³⁰Jerzy Jarzębski, “Wartościowania w sieci kultury” [Evaluation in the network of culture], *Znak* 7 (1998): 8–15.

Piotr Śliwiński, instead argued that “the network and the canon are incompatible,” because the canon is neither a prop room at a theater of culture nor an element in an intertextual game, but “a living bond, implying the center, context and hierarchy.” It is not so much a structure that adjusts to the new model of culture but a model that allows “to clearly distinguish idols from authorities, fads from classics,” a reference point that allows “to build a counter-discourse of the present, within which evaluation will be possible.” Furthermore, as Śliwiński emphasizes in the title of his text, which was later published in his book, the concept of the network should be replaced by the concept of the bond.³¹ That is why the critic, as “the guardian of the canon” (and not only, as Jarzębski argued, the guardian of “the relative continuity and stability of the canon”), must oppose the infinite multiplication of traditions and must be aware of their own reactionary nature.

Dariusz Nowacki addressed Jarzębski’s text from a different perspective. He undermined the overly optimistic (or, indeed, traditional) vision of both network culture and the role that the canon plays in it. For Nowacki, the network is a postmodern rhizome, and participating in the network culture means “participating in the late capitalist culture of consumption.” The critic further argues, after Jean Baudrillard, that the canon that is dominant in the network culture is “a cultural cliché [...] a cluster of stereotypes subject to the law of uncontrolled reproduction and simplification.” While Jarzębski writes about “noble postulates,” Nowacki emphasizes the realities of literary life and criticism which are controlled by market mechanisms and focused on the category of the new (thus weakening its links with the canon). And, consequently, Nowacki shows two incompatible worlds: the connoisseurs who pay attention to the links between literature and tradition, and the users who value literature for the exact opposite reasons.³²

Nowacki’s comments on the problems of criticism in the new market reality, firmly rooted in postmodern theories and practical challenges posed by postmodernity, reflected the attitudes of critics associated with the literary quarterly *FA-art* published in Katowice. Indeed, these critics (Konrad C. Kęder, Dariusz Nowacki, Robert Ostaszewski, Krzysztof Uniłowski), clearly influenced by postmodern literature and philosophy, did not use the term canon in their texts. Even in his early critical essays, Nowacki discussed new market conditions and the “dethronement” of literature and criticism.³³ Uniłowski (whose answers to the *Krytyka i jej kryteria* questionnaire were also published in this special issue of *Znak*) consistently argued that postmodern liquid values and worldviews not only do not undermine the significance of literary criticism but actually justify it, making the critic responsible for their chosen criteria. Their observations regarding the legitimacy of criticism and the situation of literature in the late 1990s resonated with the voices of other critics but their diagnoses differed significantly.

³¹Piotr Śliwiński, “Inna krytyka?” [Different criticism?], *Znak* 7 (1998): 22–28. Reprinted as “Sieć czy więź” [Network or bond] and slightly altered, with the addition of the part entitled “Miejsce kanonu” [The place of the canon], in: *Przygody z wolnością. Uwagi o poezji współczesnej* [Adventures with freedom. Notes on contemporary poetry] (Kraków: Znak Publishing House, 2002), 35–45. In the book version, Śliwiński writes about replacing the concept of the canon-as-core with the notion of “the movable canon” – in this model, the center follows current debates and trends. The perception of the canon as a key tradition is also more distinct in this text.

³²Dariusz Nowacki, “Szczypta sceptycyzmu” [A pinch of skepticism], *Znak* 7 (1998): 16–21.

³³Cf. Dariusz Nowacki, *Zawód: czytelnik. Notatki o prozie polskiej lat 90.* [Occupation: Reader. Notes on the Polish prose in the 1990s] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1999).

In the introduction to a selection of critical texts from the 1990s and the 2000s, entitled *Do Czytelnika* [Remarks for the reader], Nowacki and Uniłowski described contemporary literary life as a combination of commercial market conditions with superficial “social, cognitive and aesthetic respect for the art of the word,” which, consequently, gave rise to a preference for traditional, conservative, poetics and issues “traditionally considered to be serious and important.” Nowacki and Uniłowski wrote about a political and ideological “contract” under which “universal acceptance of liberalism in the economic sphere is (or should be combined) with sensitivity to social problems and traditionalism in the axiological and ethical spheres. Literary critics have nothing else to do but confirm judgments and maintain hierarchies that have been codified elsewhere.”³⁴

Consequently, Uniłowski’s critical texts, in which he criticized so-called middlebrow prose and analyzed the mechanisms of reactivating modernist traditions of literary studies or the model of culture-network, consistently exemplify a project of criticism focused on differences (and not on community) and on the description of (actual or imagined) cultural changes in the spirit of postmodernity.³⁵ It is no coincidence that Śliwiński in his essay devoted to the remains of the old canon in 2004 refers to Uniłowski. If I understand it correctly, Śliwiński reads Uniłowski’s critical texts as an admission of defeat, insofar as postmodern critics (and criticism, beginning with the 1990s) appeared to have failed. In his essay published in *Kanon i obrzeża*, Śliwiński explains how the canon rejected by “postmodern enthusiasts” was replaced by its doubles. Such doubles included (albeit for various reasons) the lists of books nominated for prestigious awards, rankings listing the greatest achievements of the year or lists of contemporary works in school textbooks,³⁶ as well as the utopian notion of a “community united by its belief in eternal values” (this is how Śliwiński reads Wojciech Wencel’s works).³⁷ Still, the canon as a “necessary hypothesis,” as a credible and true measure of literary value, remained a necessary/possible answer to market demands.

In the same book, Uniłowski describes the contemporary hybrid literary scene, paying attention to its “double structuring.” When modernism and liberal economy unite, the critic explains, the traditional vertical model (high-low, elite-popular/populist) may be superimposed

³⁴Dariusz Nowacki, Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Do Czytelnika” [Remarks for the reader], in: *Była sobie krytyka*, 21.

³⁵In a collection of essays and reviews published in 2008 entitled *Kup pan książkę!* these diagnoses act as introductions to the respective chapters (*Zaangażowani i ponowoczesni* [Committed and Postmodern]; *Modernizm kontratakuje* [Modernism Strikes Back]; *Elitarni i popularni, głównonurtowi i niszowi* [Elite and Popular, Mainstream and Marginal]; *Z popem na ty* [Getting to know pop]). In the latter, Uniłowski criticizes Czapliński’s essay devoted to the canon, where he argued that the most important literary event at the turn of the century was the ideological conflict between the “liberals” and the “national-Catholic right.” According to Uniłowski, both continued the discourse of modernity, and therefore this dispute was not significant from the point of view of cultural changes. It is worth adding that Czapliński points out that the progressive camp and the reactionary camp follow the same rules of canonization, which seems to corroborate Uniłowski’s claims. Guillroy comments on progressive and reactionary critics’ shared views on the canon and literary values. Cf.: John Guillory, *Cultural Capital. The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

³⁶They are doubles, because “they imply eternity,” they refer to the mechanisms which “anticipate accepting the values which are necessary for a given community to communicate.” (Śliwiński, “Kanon, hipoteza konieczna,” 86).

³⁷This “double [...] is at the service of the consolation industry.” According to Śliwiński, “Wencel [...] does not seem to realize that his muse-comforter is celebrated by mass culture” (Śliwiński, “Kanon, hipoteza konieczna,” 95).

onto the horizontal model (central-peripheral, mainstream-marginal). The two incomparable perspectives challenge, or “at least question,” one another, and, as a result, clash.³⁸ Uniłowski thus puts emphasis not only on the fundamental problems but also on the concepts employed in literary debates about values and hierarchies. The most frequently discussed questions (the benefits of the traditional canon, the mechanisms of canonization, value judgments, the legitimization of interpretation procedures or a sensible answer to the domination of the media center) and the very concept of the canon (which may be noticed, indirectly, in the traditional division into the high and the low) were addressed in the wider framework of the literary and artistic “mainstream.” As Uniłowski showed, the “mainstream” (and not the canon) became the actual point of reference in the hybrid model of literature, a “schizophrenic mix,” where a work of literature must be, paradoxically, both popular and of high artistic merit.³⁹

For Uniłowski such an approach was nothing new. He commented on this question, among others, in *Skąd wiemy, kto jest ważny (w literaturze najnowszej)* [How do we know who matters (in contemporary literature)],⁴⁰ *Chcieliśmy rynku...* [We wanted free market ...],⁴¹ and the introduction to the anthology *Była sobie krytyka...* [Criticism ...] written together with Dariusz Nowacki, where the clashes between various critical circles and the mainstream were discussed.⁴² In the latter text, Uniłowski also explained (mainly in the context of the Warsaw-based magazine *Lampa* [Lamp]) how the new market and the network society allow for smooth transitions between the non-mainstream and the mainstream. Consequently, the “avant-garde” (traditionally regarded one of the last bastions of non-commercial literature and criticism) loses its idealistic character.

The new circumstances in which literature and criticism functioned (as exemplified by, at least for Uniłowski, the blog kumple.blog.pl and artistic and media strategies allowing for smooth transitions between the non-mainstream and the mainstream) and, more broadly, the manner in which the schizophrenic model of the literary scene was described may be read as alternative conclusions to be drawn from the canon debate (alternative to the ones reached by Czaplinski). They teach us that we should carefully consider other categories and points of reference which better reflect cultural changes and the state of literature and criticism in the new reality.

³⁸Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Elitarni i popularni, głównonurtowi i niszowi” [Elite and Popular, Mainstream and Marginal], in: *Kanon i obrzeża*, 79.

³⁹For Uniłowski the mainstream is a broad category – it is a place where the significance/popularity of individual works is established in accordance with adopted norms and criteria.

⁴⁰*Pogranicza* 5 (2003): 9–19. Referring to numerous examples, Uniłowski argued that critics neither recognize nor set any values. He wrote: “Which writer matters? Which book is worth reading? Both [the critic and the literary scholar] independently get their answers from the same source – a market that operates at the intersection of the publishing business, influential media, ideological and political forces, current trends and cultural fashions. The influence of the market seems overwhelming, and its verdicts are unquestionable. However, its status is unique. It is powerful but it does not rely on authorities; on the contrary, it is powerful because it relies on anonymous, intrusive, infinitely multiplied, endlessly resonating repetitions. The verdicts of the market reach us as gossip, as rumor: suddenly everyone likes Olga Tokarczuk’s *Primeval*, everyone wants to read Pilch, everyone knows that Jerzy Sosnowski’s debut will be fabulous and Dorota Masłowska’s novel is a revelation.” https://rebus.us.edu.pl/bitstream/20.500.12128/10400/3/Unilowski_Skad_wiemy_kto_jest_wazny.pdf (date of access: 2 August 2022).

⁴¹*Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2002).

⁴²Analyzing the role of the media in the Polish literature and criticism of the 1990s, they write: “After 1989, the humanistic intelligentsia, which was one of the groups most burdened with the costs of systemic transformations, ceased to determine society’s cultural aspirations. It also ceased to define literary hierarchies and cultural patterns.” [Nowacki, Uniłowski, “Do Czytelnika”, 23].

3.

In the political and market realities of the 2010s, the canon ceased to be an important or, for that matter, useful concept in literary criticism. While political decisions concerning school recommended reading lists were still controversial and the repeated attempts to reformulate the canon were discussed in the media (e.g., as exemplified by debates concerning the best books of the 20th century, publishing editorial collections of “canonical” books to boost sales),⁴³ in literary studies and criticism, the canon, as a point of reference, was appropriated by the mainstream and other categories, which were deemed better-suited to describe the heteronomous nature of the literary field. This was due to the strong divisions between different ideological and intellectual communities, which became more antagonistic over time, not only because of political reasons, but also because of digitization, the social media, networking, and massification, which altered the networks and relations in the literary field and literature itself.

One of the few attempts to bring the canon back into critical debate was an invitation to participate in the second edition of the “University criticism” competition organized by the *Biuro Literackie* publishing house in the spring of 2015. Entitled the “Grand Canyon,” it aimed to compile a new canon “for the new reader.”⁴⁴ The invitation to participate in this debate, the issues it aimed to raise, as well as the majority of the twenty published student texts reflect the traditional understanding of the canon as a collection of works considered important (specific names and genres which should be included in the canon were discussed; respectively, teachers were asked to change their approach to contemporary literature). What further reflected the political and cultural climate of the 1990s was the follow-up question posed by the organizers about the “the role of books published by Biuro Literackie in revolutionizing the canons and hierarchies in Polish literature.” This question, as Przemysław Rojek writes in his conclusion, was posed because “from the very beginning, Biuro Literackie and its Forts/Ports wanted to challenge the hierarchies in Polish mainstream literature, to destroy, as one of the critics [...] put it, ‘elite poetry.’”⁴⁵

A number of “Grand Canyon” texts touched upon the problematic nature of the canon and the value of literature in a world where culture is commodified (writers function as well-designed brands) and authorities are “local.”⁴⁶ Krzysztof Sztafa commented on how anachronistic the

⁴³Cf. e.g., Justyna Sobolewska’s article on the “Literary canon marking 100 years of Polish independence” published in 2018 in the weekly *Polityka*; the canon was compiled by “critics, scholars, journalists and the like:” “We need the canon – also so that we can discuss it, change it, revise it. This is how we approach the list of Polish twentieth-century books that we have prepared – **as triggers for change in the national canon**, including many overlooked authors and works” (emphasis original) (Justyna Sobolewska, “Literacki kanon na 100-lecie niepodległości” [Literary canon marking 100 years of Polish independence], *Polityka*, 23 October 2003, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/1768460,1,literacki-kanon-na-100-lecie-niepodleglosci.read>).

⁴⁴Przemysław Rojek, “Wielki kanion” [Grand canyon], <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/wielki-kanion/>.

⁴⁵Przemysław Rojek, “Wielki kanion – podsumowanie” [Grand canyon – conclusion], <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/wielki-kanion-podsumowanie/> (date of access: 2 August 2022).

⁴⁶Exposing how anachronistic Jarzębski’s *Metamorfozy kanonu* was, Zuzanna Sala wrote: “First of all, contemporary literary value cannot be based on any objective authority [...] We are democrats, we are capitalists. A poet, an association, a literary magazine, a group, an event – they all function as brands. With different target groups, different brand strategies.” (Zuzanna Sala, “Kanon: wartość, estetyka, prawda” [The Canon: value, aesthetics, truth], <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/kanon-wartosc-estetyka-prawda/>) [date of access: 2 August 2022].

concept of the canon was. He analyzed the dictionary definition of this concept, concluding that aesthetic dominants which “ensure cultural continuity” are, by definition, discriminatory and arbitrary. The critic argued that we should look for new aesthetic categories to describe new poetry, because numerous contemporary poetics render “the concept of (literary, aesthetic) value (but also ‘value’ as such) obsolete.”⁴⁷

Jakub Skurtys, whose voice appears to be representative of young poetry critics, argued that “the canon, be it old or new, potentially brought to life by the book series [published by Biuro Literackie], should be avoided.” He weighed in on the debate on the “Poezja polska od nowa” [Polish Poetry from scratch] series which was to be published by Biuro Literackie in 2010. According to Skurtys, Polish poetry needs neither a new canon nor its drastic reevaluation, and if “something is to take place ‘from scratch,’ it must direct its rebellious force of ‘ordering and choosing’ against tradition [...]” What lies at stake is not a historical selection of good or bad poems but deciding what is important and attractive today. Skurtys writes: “a new canon is not the goal, and the selection will take place not so much against as beyond the canon.”⁴⁸

I argue that the act of “going beyond the canon,” not so much questioning but disregarding it, making individual choices, represents the views held by the majority of this new generation of critics.⁴⁹ If they mention the canon in their texts, they refer to a tradition of not so much values as literary conventions accepted by a given community. The following rhetorical tricks are a testament to this:

If today we start (And what does that even mean? We? Who are we?) to read Ważyk and Wat instead of Białoszewski and Różewicz, it will of course be as grave an oversight as the fact that they are currently not part of the so-called “Canon.”⁵⁰

To give you an example – to refer to the so-called canon – let’s take Whitman’s understanding of democracy, and how it influenced his poetics, insofar as he preferred enumeration [...] and complex sentences with subordinate clauses [...].⁵¹

⁴⁷Krzysztof Sztafa, “«Why so real?». Nowa poezja i rzeczywistość alternatywna” [«Why so real?». New poetry and alternative reality], <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/why-so-real-nowa-poezja-i-rzeczywistosc-alternatywna/>.

⁴⁸Skurtys is convinced that the questions concerning the possible reevaluation of Polish poetry and a new canon are tantamount to “war market rhetoric;” poetry itself is left out of this debate. He also has his doubts about not including some authors in the canon (“the so-called canon”) and introducing others. Jakub Skurtys, “Nie(do)czytani” [Un/read], <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/niedoczytani/>.

⁴⁹I refer to leftist poetry critics, mainly based in Wrocław and Katowice, who declare a generational bond based on a community of beliefs (Monika Glosowicz, Paweł Kaczmarski, Marta Koronkiewicz, Dawid Kujawa, Jakub Skurtys). They discuss, inter alia, issues of commitment/politics and the legitimacy of criticism. In the communal context they envision, the manifested indifference to the canon as an essential category is even more interesting. Cf., for example, Karol Poręba, “Czas pokoleń. Pokolenia literackie i tożsamość ponowoczesna” [Time of generations. Literary generations and the postmodern identity], *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne* 1 (2019): 276–305; Jakub Skurtys, “Strategie niezaangażowania, czyli jak przeczekać zwrot polityczny” [Non-commitment strategies, or how to wait out the political turn], in idem: *Wiersz... i cała reszta. Rozważania o poezji i krytyce po 1989 roku* [Poem... and all that. Reflections on poetry and criticism after 1989] (Kraków: Universitas, 2021).

⁵⁰Skurtys, “Nie(do)czytani”.

⁵¹Paweł Kaczmarski, “Wyrastanie z wielogłosu” [Growing out of polyphony], in idem: *Wysoka łączliwość. Szkice o poezji współczesnej* [High connectivity. Essays on contemporary poetry] (Wrocław: Fundacja im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2018), 240.

If we were to ignore the linguistic refinement and thoughtful strategies of both critics, the language they use (“the so-called canon”) could be read in terms of mere rhetoric. However, I would like to argue that it reflects their critical perspectives. We use the phrase “so-called” to either introduce a term that is not that well-known (and then we refer to a generally accepted and known term), or to keep our distance from a given concept or phrase.⁵² I have the impression that Skurtys and Kaczmarski try to do both: they use a well-known term in order to emphasize their distance. For them, the canon is a canon that both somehow exists (since we refer to it/ can refer to it if necessary – because no one questions the principles which govern school/university recommended reading lists) and does not exist (in the universal meaning that is traditionally attributed to it) because its various contexts, be it class, market, political, aesthetic, or social, are evident. Indeed, as both critics argue, the fact that the concept of the canon is of little use today is evident as well.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁵²“Co to znaczy tzw.?” [What does ‘so-called’ mean?], <https://polszczyzna.pl/co-to-znaczy-tzw/> (date of access: 2 August 2022).

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KEYWORDS

canon

ABSTRACT:

This article discusses the concept of the canon in Polish literary criticism in the 1990s, the 2000s, and the 2010s. The author discusses contemporary social and critical debates and different definitions of the canon employed in them and shows the contexts and repercussions of redefining (disassembling, reconstructing) the literary canon. Bearing in mind the fundamental fact that the understanding of the canon translates into the way of thinking about literature and the role /obligations/possibilities of literary criticism, she analyzes both the goals and the ways in which the concept of the canon is used. She also analyzes the circumstances in which the canon, as a point of reference, was replaced in discussions and texts devoted to literary hierarchies and/or literary criticism by the mainstream and other categories which were better suited to describe the heteronomous nature of the literary field.

LITERARY CRITICISM

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