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DOI: 10.55159/tri.2023.0104.05



Debates on the Polish Literary Canon in the Second Half of the 20th and Early 21st Centuries

Abstract

The purpose of this article is a synthetic and historical overview of the debates on the Polish literary canon, which took place in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The article attempts to classify post-1945 attitudes toward the canon and the works that constitute it. Political, historical and social circumstances greatly influenced the choice and assessment of works what were considered the most important in the history of Polish literature. In presenting and analyzing the views of renowned critics and literary historians (as well as other experts on the subject), the essay reveals that the outlook on the canon, which is one of the key elements of any nation's culture, is heterogeneous, multilayered and embedded in many different contexts.

Keywords

Polish literature, culture, masterpieces, literary canon, literary discussions

Rawski J. (2023). Debates on the Polish Literary Canon in the Second Half of the 20th and Early 21st Centuries. *Trimarium. The History and Literature of Central and Eastern European Countries*, 4(4), 143–163.

DOI: 10.55159/tri.2023.0104.05

Submitted: 12.11.2023 / Accepted: 18.11.2023

Discussions about the literary canon – evaluating, ranking, and mapping works, or rather masterpieces, as well as their impact on the present day – have a long tradition in humanistic thought in the Western world. Suffice it to recall the monographs by German-speaking literary historians, such as Ernst Robert Curtius' 1948 *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* and Walter Muschg's 1953 *Tragic History of Literature*, or the acclaimed and still much-discussed *The Western Canon* by American literary theorist Harold Bloom,¹ first published in 1994. Such synthesizing publications have not appeared in Polish research, but disputes over the canon of literature came to light especially in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which does not mean that they were not there before (Marchwiński, 2017). It should be noted that in the discourse on the canon, regardless of the standpoint, the debaters' arguments are based mainly on three criteria, namely: methodological considerations (or preferences), aesthetic inclinations, and the need to choose certain works and not others, backed up by knowledge and erudition. Thus, for the sake of methodological clarity, it is worth noting that the canon is subject to interpretation (the approach of classical hermeneutics) and reinterpretation (hermeneutics of suspicion).

The canon, in the simplest terms, is “an authoritative list of works, the obligatory reading list in a given cultural circle” (Wilczek, 2004–2005, p. 76); it is also often referred to as a collection of masterpieces. Such a simple and brief definition seems entirely accurate and rational, if we assume that the canon should include the most outstanding works, both in terms of aesthetics, ethics and form, which most fully reflect the human experience in various contexts. Maria Janion noted that “the accumulation of the most important experiences of humankind, the accumulation of meanings, can be found in the masterpieces of philosophy, but most of all in literature” (Janion, 1982, p. 125).

The discourse on the canon, however, often fails to address the determinants of a masterpiece. If we assume that the canon only

¹ This famous researcher and expert on Western culture listed the works of five writers from Poland: Bruno Schulz, Czesław Miłosz, Witold Gombrowicz, Stanisław Lem, Zbigniew Herbert and Adam Zagajewski (Bloom, 2019, p. 634).

contains masterpieces, it is worth looking at their characteristics. In Polish research, these were most fully described by Stanisław Jaworski, who claimed that a masterpiece should (Jaworski, 1987, pp. 8, 11–16):

- (a) have high artistic value,
- (b) have aesthetic and ethical value,
- (c) be embedded in literary tradition,
- (d) be universal,
- (e) include the reader in the totality of culture,
- (f) expand the reader's inner universe with a new experience of the world,
- (g) establish a link with tradition and the present.

We should add here the definition of Krzysztof Krasuski: “the rank of masterpiece was granted to works that focused and expressed the totality of human experience. They integrated what was scattered in fragments as existential magma. In a masterpiece, this is presented as a whole issue” (Krasuski, 2009, p. 162). To conclude these remarks, we should bring up the obvious: who is to decide whether a work is a masterpiece? To the critic and researcher, popularity and reader response do not make a work a masterpiece: “wide reception of a literary work does not yet mean the work is valuable. Only a professional reader, whose reading behavior, ways and norms of reading are different from ... those of a common reader, makes credible judgements about that value” (Dutka, 1998, p. 47).

In communist Poland, the history of the literary canon can be most simply divided into two periods: 1949–1956 (social realist works as forming the only official canon²) and 1956–1989 (works of various styles and genres, but published under censorship). Of course, it should be noted that there were two parallel literary canons: the official canon, i.e. containing works published in Poland, and the émigré canon, which consisted of works by Polish writers published outside the censorship as well as abroad. The 1980s are significant,

2 Until 1956, social realism was the binding and oppressive doctrine, and there was no room for other poetics in literature. After the October thaw, socialist realism did not end, in fact, it still remained, “it only lost its monopoly in literary life. However, it was subject to numerous modifications – within its system” (Krasuski, 2009, p. 92).

with a date that significantly expanded the official canon permitted by the communist authorities: 1980, when the Swedish Academy awarded Czesław Miłosz the Nobel Prize for Literature. This event not only made a lasting mark on cultural history, but also became a catalyst for placing the author of *Three Winters* in the official canon of Polish literature, as until then his writing had been published in the mother tongue in émigré and underground press. During the Stalinist period, Miłosz became the target of attacks when he decided to emigrate, while after 1956 he was condemned to obscurity.

The centers of Polish culture in exile, especially the circle centered around the Literary Institute, since 1947 in Maisons-Laffitte, founded by Jerzy Giedroyc, Zofia Hertz, Zygmunt Hertz, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński and Józef Czapski, produced a particular discourse on the canon, mainly by publishing Polish literature in exile and literature that could not be published in Poland due to censorship. In addition to books, the Literary Institute also issued the famous monthly magazine *Kultura*, which also featured those works that were doomed to obscurity in communist Poland. Witold Gombrowicz's attack on Henryk Sienkiewicz in *Kultura* was one of the most important voices on the issue of the canon in that era. In his opening sentences, the émigré writer diagnosed the remarkable influence of Sienkiewicz, the author of the *Deluge*, on the Polish nation, while accusing his novels of having little artistic value and belonging to the genre of popular literature: "A mighty genius! – there has probably never been such a first-rate second-rate writer. He is a second-rate Homer, he is a first-rate Dumas the father. It is also difficult to find an example of a similar enchantment of the nation in the history of literature, a more magical influence on the imagination of the masses" (Gombrowicz, 1953, p. 3). Gombrowicz's voice was invigorating for the debate on the Polish literary canon. His scathing essay joined the critical debate on Henryk Sienkiewicz's writings, which still continues in the discourse on the canon today. Incidentally, Gombrowicz resolutely and ruthlessly exposed "infantilization," from which, as the narrator in *Ferdydurke* states, "there is no escape at all" (Gombrowicz, 1997, p. 264). It seems that the literary canon is also a sign of "infantilization." Ultimately, Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* entered it as well, although it should be noted that this book "does

not lend itself easily to ‘canonization,’ mainly because it is a challenging read for most young audiences and eludes school explication” (Rusek, 2008, p. 53).

Due to the polarization of the canon of Polish literature, which occurred after 1945 and lasted until 1989, into domestic and émigré literature, writers such as Józef Łobodowski, Józef Mackiewicz, Ferdynand Goetel, Michał Kryspin Pawlikowski or Barbara Toporska were not widely known by Polish readers, whereas “today it is difficult to imagine the canon of our literature without them” (Staroń, 2023, p. 6). While the works of such famous writers as Gombrowicz, Czesław Miłosz and Kazimierz Wierzyński reached readers in Poland, there was a problem with the reception of the aforementioned authors, although their books were published by the Literary Institute. The situation is entirely different now, as their works are being published, and a number of scholarly studies, including monographs on their writings, have appeared, e.g. books on the works of Łobodowski (see Siryk, 2002), Mackiewicz (see Fitas, 2019) and Goetel (see Polechoński, 2012).

After 1989, the editors of the Paris-based *Kultura* carried out a survey, whose results were published, significantly, in 1992, i.e. after the political transformation and at the end of the 20th century, which was a very interesting testimony to the debate on the canon of Polish contemporary literature. Literary scholars, literary critics and writers were asked to name the writers they believed to be overrated, and thus certainly present in the canon (or at least in literary life), and those that they believed to be underrated, i.e. who did not have a place in the canon, who were not remembered or were too unnoticeable to readers. What prompted the idea was an identical survey in *Le Figaro*. Respondents to the poll included Henryk Berezka, Jan Błoński, Tomasz Burek, Grażyna Borkowska, Małgorzata Czermińska, Michał Głowiński, Krzysztof Koehler, Antoni Libera and Tadeusz Nyczek.

It is worth taking a closer look at the answers of one of the most famous and controversial Polish literary critics of the twentieth century, Berezka, as in the 1980s and 1990s he rose to the rank of arguably the most important reviewer of contemporary literature. He listed the following among the underrated writers: Jarosław

Iwaszkiewicz, Leopold Buczkowski, Tadeusz Różewicz, Miron Białoszewski, Wiesław Myśliwski, Andrzej Łuczyński, and Ryszard Schubert. Apart from the last two prose writers, the remaining authors were already present and much talked about in cultural life at the time, in 1992, and beyond any doubt belong to the canon of Polish literature today. One may wonder why Bereza did not mention the Kashubian writer Jan Drzeżdżon, about whom he had notably written more than a decade earlier that “as the author of works published up to and in 1977, he is a more outstanding writer than Llosa and Cortázar taken together and Borges to boot”³ (Bereza, 1982, p. 105). One cannot fail to point out here, too, that Bereza consistently tried to broaden and reevaluate the canon of Polish literature, without suggesting that it should be abolished or replaced by another. The critic located on the map of Polish culture such important phenomena as the peasant trend in prose and the artistic revolutionary current. The works of writers of the latter movement, which Bereza was particularly fond of, were neither accepted by the readership nor sanctioned in the canon, but the prose writers of the peasant trend already have their place in the literary scene, if only to mention Wiesław Myśliwski, Marian Pilot and Tadeusz Nowak.

Most certainly, one of the major elements of the contemporary discourse on the canon is the so-called economy of prestige (English, 2013), i.e. the functioning of works which have been nominated and

³ This famous and controversial opinion of Bereza resonated widely in criticism and literary history in Poland, and has often been cited in jest, but it is worth noting that so far no academic has attempted a scholarly evaluation of this statement: simply put, no one, since 1982, has compared Drzeżdżon's work with the writings of Llosa, Cortázar and Borges. In fact, Bereza himself predicted this would happen: “Entire academies, institutes and university departments are already working on an elaborate documentation of my judgment, it will be announced after the meaning of the term ‘Gothic novel’ is finally established, for opinions are divided on this matter: some believe that the development of the Gothic novel is crowned by Kafka's *The Castle*, others that Capote and Mach are also developing the Gothic novel, while the boldest discover the structure of the Gothic novel in the works of Jan Drzeżdżon” (Bereza, 1982, p. 105). Bereza ironically points out as well as diagnoses that no scholar is dealing with Drzeżdżon's works, thus it is impossible for others to prove or disprove his claim, just as it is impossible to make a conclusive definition of Gothic literature or the Gothic novel.

which have won recognizable, media-publicized awards such as Angelus, Nike or Gdynia. This type of recognition, putting a particular book in the category of the best, most valuable in a given year, has a direct impact on reading choices, publishing circulation and communication between the authors, publishers, critics and readers. The prestigious awards translate into the inclusion of the winner in the canon. The writers of the peasant trend are good examples of this. Myśliwski's two-time winning of the Nike Literary Award in 1997 and in 2007 cemented his place in the canon. Today, some scholars declare that Myśliwski "is Poland's most outstanding turn-of-the-century prose writer" (Kulesza, 2022, p. 7). The Nike for Pilot in 2011, on the other hand, reinstated him into the reader's memory, the interest of publishers, and ultimately made it difficult to think of the Polish literary canon today without the author of *Pióropusz* [Plume]. This is the very reason why the Nike Literary Award shapes the general canon of Polish literature, but also creates a special canon, if "we think ... of a canon that is not institutionalized by, for example, the introduction of a given book to the school reading list, but rather a repertoire of titles that we all readily choose, sometimes driven by curiosity, and other times by the need to see if we agree with the jury's verdict" (Rejter, 2017, p. 7).

National canons are always, well, certainly often, influenced by the Nobel Prize for Literature⁴. This is one of the most important processes of canon formation today, because "while the global production of a canon of world literature can and increasingly does flout national hierarchies of prestige, it is certainly difficult in the long run for a national market to support a scheme of symbolic pricing that is radically different from that which obtains on the global market" (English, 2013, p. 212). As soon as the Swedish Academy pronounces its verdict, the winner or laureate becomes part of

4 There are, of course, Nobel laureates who, for political reasons, do not exist in the official literary canon of their country, to recall those awarded by the Swedish Academy in the last quarter century: Svetlana Alexievich from Belarus or Gao Xingjian from China, who, interestingly, "by integrating the norms of literary modernity ..., has been able to reconceive, in the Chinese language, the forms of an older Chinese literature" (Casanova, 2017, p. 230). History shows, however, that when a regime changes, a Nobel laureate is placed in the codified literary system of his or her homeland.

the history of world literature, which confirms his or her place in the national canon. This is due to a fact that Pascale Casanova accurately diagnosed when writing about the Nobel Prize for Literature: “there is no better measure of the unification of the international literary field than the effectively universal respect commanded by this prize” (Casanova, 2017, p. 222). With the basic criteria for evaluating a writer’s oeuvre, i.e. universality and exceptional artistic value, guiding the Swedish Academy, the works of Nobel Prize-winning authors are (usually) excellently received by audiences around the world, who, even despite some controversial verdicts (such as Bob Dylan), eagerly pick up books by awarded authors. In this way, the link of the national canon becomes part of the world canon. Polish literary Nobel laureates – Henryk Sienkiewicz, Władysław Stanisław Reymont, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska and Olga Tokarczuk feature in the domestic literary canon⁵ and in the popular one. Even Sienkiewicz, who is not held in high esteem among some cultural critics and is accused of racism and discrimination, has an important place in it. As Koziolok states, “In the canons of world literature, *Quo vadis* is often the only book that represents Polish literature” (Koziolok, 2016, p. 95).

The voices of individual scholars (not just literary scholars) who provide their own subjective versions of the canon of literary masterpieces stand out in the discourse on the canon. Philosopher and cultural theorist Jan Kurowicki, in an essayistic book with the telling title *Przewodnik po arcydziełach i nie tylko* [A Guide to Masterpieces and Beyond], took a chronological perspective when looking at literary works from ancient to modern times. This is how he explained his decision to publish this work: “Books by literary critics do not contain any suggestions for a canon of readings. Moreover, they always deal with fragmentary issues, being an expression of some fashion or fascination with certain modes of writing” (Kurowicki, 2001, p. 9). Significantly, the researcher, who did not deal professionally with literature⁶ proposed and discussed his corpus of texts considered

5 School canon and/or academic canon, in which the author of *The Magician of Lublin* features the least, but this issue requires a separate study.

6 Although he was a writer himself, an author of books of poetry and plays.

masterpieces, without making a division between universal and Polish literature. Kurowicki's proposal of the canon is a repertoire of domestic and foreign works⁷.

There are several books similar to *A Guide to Masterpieces and Beyond*. All are organized around a similar principle i.e. the subjective choice of the author, who creates his or her canon on the basis of his or her own reading experience and erudition. In his book *Na obrzeżach arcydzieł* [On the Periphery of Masterpieces], Krasuski undertook a similar task as Kurowicki, but with a caveat that "by considering the works featured here in the context of masterpieces and canons, sometimes more explicitly, at other times only incidentally, I seek to go beyond established, meaning non-modern, literary poetics and aesthetics" (Krasuski, 2009, p. 7). Thus, Krasuski analyzes the works of Bruno Jasioński, Zofia Nałkowska, Wojciech Gieca, Jan Józef Szczepański, Marek Nowakowski and Janusz Anderman (Krasuski, 2009).

Like the author of *Guide to Masterpieces and Beyond*, Jerzy Paszek, in his book *Blask arcydzieł* [The Brilliance of Masterpieces], analyzes and interprets both Polish and foreign works. He chose the following works from Polish literature: *Bogurodzica* [Mother of God], *Fraszki* [Epigrams] by Jan Kochanowski, *Monachomachia* [War of the Monks] by Ignacy Krasicki, *Pan Tadeusz* [Sir Thaddeus] by Adam Mickiewicz, *Dożywocie* [The Annuity] by Aleksander Fredro, *Beniowski* by Juliusz Słowacki, *Lalka* [The Doll] by Bolesław Prus, *Popioły* [Ashes] by Stefan Żeromski, *Żywe kamienie* [Stones Alive] by Waclaw Berent, *Ferdydurke* by Gombrowicz and *Kwiaty polskie* [Polish Flowers] by Julian Tuwim (Paszek, 2020). All three mentioned researchers – Kurowicki, Krasuski and Paszek – named and described their subjective literary canons contingent on the above-mentioned categories,

7 It is worth mentioning the Polish writers whom Kurowicki anointed as authors of masterpieces: Bolesław Prus, Walery Łoziński, Władysław Reymont, Stanisław Brzozowski, Stefan Żeromski, Julian Brun, Kazimierz Wyka, Witold Gombrowicz, Ludwik Flaszen, Jerzy Stempowski, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Andrzej Żaniewski, Edward Redliński, Bolesław Leśmian, Bruno Schulz, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Czesław Miłosz, Tadeusz Różewicz, Miron Białoszewski, Jerzy Kosiński, Ryszard Kapuściński, Sławomir Mrożek, Marek Hłasko, Rafał Wojaczek, Edward Stachura, Stanisław Lem (Kurowicki, 2001) – these authors form the researcher's personal canon.

experience, erudition and necessity of choice. When speaking of subjective canons, it is impossible not to cite Miłosz's textbook *The History of Polish Literature*, published in 1969 in the United States. The Nobel laureate offered a synthetic and chronological overview of the history of Polish literature, yet one that was not free of judgments, opinions and comments. Obviously, "using his extensive reading background supported by his vast teaching experience, he aspired to make a lasting impact on Polish studies in America and on the transatlantic canon" (Shallcross, 2014, p. 290). This textbook is still used today by Polish studies students at American universities, but it did not and does not influence the discourse on the canon in Poland; however the discourse on the Polish literary canon in an international context requires a separate study.

In the 21st century, debates about the literary canon around the world, and therefore also in Poland, revolve around revisiting it: the need to reevaluate and remove certain texts. There is a recurring tendency to censor and amputate masterpieces, which is derived from the discourse of cancel culture. The demands inspired by these tendencies are clearly methodology-driven as usually their etiology can be traced back to cultural theories that grew out of the hermeneutics of suspicion: feminist criticism, postcolonialism, and gender and queer studies. As Arkadiusz Kalin notes, such approaches emerged earlier in the United States, "where the literary canon of Western civilization is being remodeled – even replaced by the representation of minority texts, resulting in the exclusion of, for example, Shakespeare in favor of authors more widely (hitherto) unknown, and representative of oppressed ethnic minorities. This even takes on the dimension of a war for the canon" (Kalin, 2012–2013, p. 84).

In Poland, cancel culture manifests itself especially in disputes over the canon of school readings, which, like the canon of readings in philology studies, is an example of a codified literary canon. It is approved by specialists and relevant state bodies (in the case of academia, by universities), with the goal of teaching pupils/students about the most important works of literature (and more⁸). Some

8 The current Polish literature core curriculum for high school/vocational schools also recommends theater and film works.

researchers, critics and journalists suggest removing Sienkiewicz's 1911 novel *W Pustyni i w Puszczy* [In Desert and Wilderness] from the canon because of the ideology underlying the plot, which is based on racism, colonialism, chauvinism and praise of white domination. Most recently these demands were expressed in a 2021 essay by Maciej Gdula, in which the sociologist stated, "We keep in the canon of compulsory readings a novel that teaches a sense of superiority towards people of other races, shows how to celebrate one's own culture and despise foreign culture, and justifies the domination of the strong over the weak" (Gdula, 2021). Ryszard Koziolok retorted: "Of course this book is, from today's point of view, full of racist clichés, Eurocentric hubris, male superiority, and an exploitative approach to nature. But precisely because of this, it is perfectly suited for teaching ethics and empathy, based on the simulation game of imagination" (Koziolok, 2023, p. 25). A critical reading of the work as advocated by Koziolok allows the work to remain in the canon and to for readers to reflect ethically, aesthetically and methodologically on the controversial elements inherent in its plot.

Sienkiewicz is accused of racism, while Boleslaw Prus and Zygmunt Krasiński are charged with anti-Semitism, which also makes their works (*Lalka* [The Doll] and *Nie-Boska komedia* [The Un-divine Comedy], respectively) unworthy of a place in the canon, according to the revisionists. Leonard Neuger looked at this issue in his article "Antysemickie wątki w polskim kanonie literackim" [Anti-Semitic Themes in the Polish Literary Canon] (Neuger, 2008). Here, as in the case of Sienkiewicz, it seems necessary to read these works critically, refer them to the present day, yes, but with knowledge of the historical realities in which these pieces were written. Regarding Prus, Neuger remarks on the issue of the writer's anti-Semitism: "I would be very cautious here, in demanding each time that the writings be placed in the political and socio-economic context of the 'here and now'" (Neuger, 2008, p. 41). At the other extreme of the disputes over the inclusion of Jewish themes in the Polish canon, on the other hand, is Jerzy Kosiński's *Malowany Ptak* [The Painted Bird], the only novel from the writer's oeuvre that "has stood the test of time and is included in the American canon of compulsory reading on the Holocaust" (Kępiński, 2021, p. 157). Meanwhile, in

Polish literature, as well as in Polish humanities, it is mostly glossed over or discounted through the prism of Kosinski's biography, as evidenced, for example, by Joanna Siedlecka's 1994 book *Czarny ptasior* (The Black Bird), in which the reporter disavows *The Painted Bird*, and portrays its author as a mythomaniac and a liar.

Thus, it is not necessary to invalidate, amputate a work: it is enough to initiate a discussion about it, to subject it to interpretation, to look at it from different perspectives. Janion pointed out that "Critical hermeneutics ... seeks to consciously experience our existence. To this end, the effort to reinterpret tradition and the effort to create a personality that understands and finds a language to speak about their existential situation becomes necessary" (Janion, 1996, p. 36). Such optics on the canon seem to be the most reasonable, if we assume that we want to participate in the canon, have access to it, and yet not remain passive towards the contexts that the present times bring. After all, one could have valid (from the viewpoint of a particular position) objections to any masterpiece. This was mentioned by Fred Nichols: "what would the reading list look like if it were compiled according to the criterion of prohibition of drugs. The first book to be removed would be *The Odyssey* because when Telemachus arrives at the court of Helen and Menelaus, Helen gives him all sorts of drugs that make them forget their troublesome past" (Nichols, 1992, p. 176).

Also the voices about the need to remove Romantic works from the canon of literature are close to cancel culture. Here, there are no accusations of discriminating against anyone, but of shaping Tyrtaean attitudes of future generations of Poles. The works that are still singled out from the rich, diverse and hardly unequivocal oeuvre of the Polish Romantics are primarily those that contain the ideology and symbolism of martyrdom. School teaching guidelines, both when it comes to methodological theory and pedagogical practice, predominantly suggest reading the works of Mickiewicz or Słowacki from a historiosophical angle, ignoring the existential issues. And yet it is perfectly possible to read Słowacki as well as other Romantics "outside the canon" (Troszyński, 2014). The school reading canon has remained intensely saturated with Romantic works since 1945. The number of texts changes depending on the adjustments made to the Polish classes core curriculum, but

Romanticism is always, with the exception of modernity, represented most heavily. For the aforementioned reasons like the prominence of national messianism, the call for active struggle for national liberation or the imperative to fight the revolution, voices calling for the removal of Romanticism from the canon recur from time to time. One of the most recent contributions on this topic is that of Marcin Matczak, who, in his 2022 essay “Pora złożyć Mickiewicza do mauzoleum” [Time to entomb Mickiewicz in a mausoleum], argued that “*Ballads and Romances* will not promote romantic attitudes. They will dishearten readers. They will not increase readiness for sacrifice, but discouragement. ... There is no point in reading a text that has lost touch with our reality, because it is impossible to make it one’s own” (Matczak, 2022, p. 25). However, this is what Janion said on the subject of the presence of Romanticism in the canon more than twenty years ago:

Careless manipulation of the school reading canon is quite dangerous in general. The school canon [...], does mark the space of national culture. [...] Communication within the national community is predicated not only on a common colloquial language, but also on the “deep” existence of a literary language, which constitutes a reservoir of meanings that constantly imbue the national culture (Janion, 1996, p. 13).

Another phenomenon in the discourse on the literary canon are voices that advocate rejecting it entirely. The provenance of this position can be found in postmodernism. On humanistic grounds, this current of thought correlates with political determinants, hence “the popularity of the traditional notion of ‘masterpiece’ is melting away in neoliberal culture, living by the slogan of deconstruction of tradition. For many contemporary art commentators, the concept of ‘masterpiece’ is overly dogmatic and therefore passé” (Krasuski, 2009, p. 162). Since there is to be no masterpiece, there will also be no canon or even canons. Another reason for the rejection of the canon, one that is not rooted in postmodernism, is the belief that it is oppressive or that it is impossible to define its criteria. Arguing in favor of the former claim, Jacob Kornhauser takes a clear stance that “The canon is something bad mainly because its very essence contains violence,

the desire to impose one's vision and requirements of interpretation on others. Additionally, this violence is seemingly anonymous, hiding under the guise of ... lists and syllabuses. Meanwhile, behind each choice there is also a private strategy that charts the horizon of interpretations" (Kornhauser, 2019, p. 73). The second case, in turn, is represented by Jakub Lichanski's outlook: "There is no point in talking about a literary canon when there is no clearly defined hierarchy of values to which literature is supposed to appeal" (Lichański, 2012, p. 67). Given the above-mentioned standpoints on revising the canon or claiming the need to abolish it, it is worth noting the dynamics of the discourse. In 2012, Elizabeth Wichrowska noted that:

Questions about the need to build a literary or cultural canon have also appeared in the Polish debate. The much later discussion, compared to what was taking place in Western Europe and the United States (the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries), never had the hallmarks of extreme, exclusionary statements against traditional thinking about the canon, tracing the seeds of sexist or racist thinking to its creation. In a word, the Polish discussion of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century did not exactly succumb to the pressure of American universities (Wichrowska, 2012, p. 12).

In a decade, as can be seen from the summary above, the situation has changed dramatically.

The canon should be under constant reevaluation, critical reflection, but the approaches resulting from cancel culture seem dangerous. It is certainly more beneficial for the coming generations, current and future readers, to expand the canon, not censor it, deepen it, not amputate it. Jerzy Szacki, who insisted that the canon should be flexible and subjective, held a similar view. As he noted, "The canon of culture is ... inevitably changeable and prone to constant contention from social subjects who, for one reason or another, feel alien to it. The canon of culture is necessarily somebody's: the question about the canon is ultimately a question about the community that produced it and considers it its own" (Szacki, 1994, p. 19). Joanna Przyklenk, on the other hand, postulates thinking about a canon, not the canon. In her opinion:

Since in the modern world there is no longer any question of a single, central and universally accepted canon, there is rather talk of (multiple) canons, motivated, for example, by the educational situation (the canon of school readings), an ad hoc rankings (the canon of popular books) or sales lists (the canon of purchased books). In this sense, any list made for public or private use will become a canon in its own right (Przyklenk, 2017, pp. 169-170).

Krystyna Koziółek has noted that “any book reading, canonical, social, popular, or fashionable, reconnects the reader to themselves; detaches them from the world, glues them to the book, but forces them to feel, think, and experience for themselves” (Koziółek, 2017, p. 202). This hermeneutic and phenomenological function of a literary work, after all, is also one of the basic functions of the canon, which should provide the reader with images of the world and human experience compatible with their experiences, and enrich their horizon with realities not directly accessible to them. Hence, the following statement by the researcher may come as a surprise: “when reading, they must ‘experience’ something in my likeness, and I do not mean the community of the canon, but the kind of experience that only reading literature offers” (Koziółek, 2017, p. 202). Does indeed the experience of reading exclude the community of the canon? It does not have to; after all, the canon is precisely meant to produce community, to bring people together, to encourage them to participate in the great history and writing tradition of a country or nation. As Zbigniew Herbert pointed out, “There is an erroneous view that tradition is something akin to an inherited asset and that it is inherited mechanically, without effort, and therefore those who object to inheritance and undeserved privileges speak against tradition. Meanwhile, in fact, any contact with the past requires effort, work, and is difficult and arduous at that” (Herbert, 2000, p. 91). Through the literary texts it includes, the canon also makes it possible – to use the hermeneutic formula again – to understand the world we live in.

In light of all the debates about the Polish canon of literature, it seems that we can distinguish the following stances that have emerged in the discourse and categorize them into:

1. affirmative attitudes:
 - (a) acceptance of the current canon;
 - (b) acceptance of the current canon, barring the need to reinterpret or expand the interpretation of certain works.
2. revisionist attitudes:
 - (a) the need to reevaluate and revisit the canon by removing works containing discrimination, racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, etc.;
 - (b) the need to reevaluate and revisit the canon by introducing under-appreciated, forgotten, absent artists into it;
 - (c) the need to reevaluate and revisit the canon by rethinking it as conditioned by social structures, rather than a single, fixed repertoire of masterpieces.
3. repudiatory attitudes:
 - (a) the demand for the complete rejection of the canon as an oppressive and exclusionary structure, i.e. decanonization of literature.

In her article outlining her private mini-canon of literary masterpieces,⁹ Janion wrote: “This is what has always interested me most: what hides under the hard shell of the official canon” (Janion, 2011, p. 55). It is worth peeking under the layers of the official canons to pry them open, and then to find and add more masterpieces that will not only show the commonality of experience, our place in tradition and the universality of destiny, but will also teach humility about existence, because “it is the inherent right of masterpieces that they shatter our understandable certainty and that they question our importance” (Herbert, 2000, p. 90), as well as perform the humanistic task of therapy and insight (Janion, 1982) and help us in moments of doubt, as Herbert wrote in his poem “Old Masters” (“I call on you Old Master / in my moments of doubt”) (Herbert, 2011, p. 453).

As the author of this essay, I am aware that I have not exhausted the subject. I have tried to give an overview of the most important standpoints in the debate on the Polish canon of literature, as well

⁹ The researcher mentioned such Polish literary works as Czesław Miłosz’s *Obłoki* [Clouds] and Miron Białoszewski’s *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* [Diary of the Warsaw Uprising].

as to sketch the history of this debate, with attention to the most significant tendencies within it. The research, analysis and findings obviously lead to a conclusion. The Polish literary canon (perhaps) should become more egalitarian, inclusive, and encompass, for example, popular culture works. However, this raises a doubt: will the revamped canon prove more valuable than the current one? Or should the two canons be combined: the traditional one, encompassing works from *Bogurodzica* [Mother of God] to Tokarczuk's *Księgi Jakubowe* [The Books of Jacob], with the progressive one, which would make room for song lyrics or popular literature novels? One thing is certain – discussions on the canon will continue.

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