

Teksty Drugie 2016, 2, s. 24-37
Special Issue – English Edition



A Common Defence of Literary History: The Reader's and the Researcher's Shelf

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Polish Theories of Literary Communication

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DOI: 10.18318/td.2016.en.2.2

For the third time (since 1974) I have taken part in defending literary history – my motivation being not only concerned with the evident difficulties in writing and publishing books as well as subsequent updated versions of a university manual, but most of all with the presence and the apparently growing popularity of such literary theories which explicitly, or at least implicitly, negate the possibility and the need for constructing syntheses in the field of literary history. My statement of course, but also the opinions expressed by opponents of the thesis suggested by the title, refers to a special traditional type of research called the “history” (or the “past”) of a given literature defined by the territory or most often by the language, and described in a certain chronological order aimed at reconstructing its evolution. I do not have in mind here elaborate historical analyses, but historical syntheses to be precise. Recapturing such seemingly obvious terms is not superfluous pedantry. We have just found out that “in five recent literary histories of West Germany, there is a tendency to depart from the principle of the comprehensive synthesis in favour of the principle of illustrative examples”¹ and that “histories of

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(1924-1990) – literary historian, in his work he focused mostly on the Renaissance period. Among the most recognized of his numerous works is the comprehensive synthesis *Renesans* (1973) and the shorter *Literatura Odrodzenia* (1987), *Wizerunki polskich pisarzy katolickich* (1963), *Powinowactwa literatury* (1980), as well as *Retoryka opisowa* (1990), and *Prace ostatnie* (1994), published posthumously. He edited Jan Kochanowski's *Psalterz Dawidów* and the collected works of Biernat of Lublin. He was awarded The Knight's Cross of the Order of the Rebirth of Poland, the Golden Cross of Merit, and the Medal Komisji Edukacji Narodowej.

1 Siegfried J. Schmidt, “O pisaniu historii literatury,” trans. Maria Bożena Fedewicz, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 3 (1988): 239. The original

literature are constructions – not reconstructions.”² To that, we could simply respond that the problem is not the selection of illustrative examples itself – as these, astonishingly, have not changed for over a century – but the system, that is the “linking of the data.” No sensible person would call such linking “reconstruction,” if this term implied an absolutely objective recreation of the real shape. The work of the literary historian does not resemble the work of the archaeologist or palaeontologist who creates a hypothesis of a whole out of preserved remnants – it is only one of many possible and useful philological techniques. Reconstructing a prior system of values is not the same as recommending values to contemporary readers, as is inevitable in historical writings.

In this context, “the researcher’s shelf” stands for “expert” readings.³ “The reader’s shelf,” on the other hand, is a rough image of the usual, unprofessional practice steered by the more or less refined taste and the more or less conscious intellectual need. I treat these two terms as a starting point of discussing the need for the history of literature – the starting point that is deliberately uncomfortable in view of the submitted thesis. I hereby propose a moment of false sincerity. Frankly speaking, we do approach literary works of different languages and cultural circles outside of school requirements – but not the history of literature. As children and young adults, we read books according to their difficulty and usefulness – and not in their historical order. As adults, we read books at random or on others’ advice, for entertainment or to be in vogue. This particularly concerns foreign literature. The average educated patron of a bookstore or library reads French, English, German, Russian and, most of all, Latin American authors, while ignoring their chronology. The author’s name is to her or him only a signature of a certain value, such as swift action, exotic themes, mystery, conundrum or the simple life; and there is a need to identify the name with the presented world. Many years of critical and selective reading eventually results in a fairly high level of cultural sophistication. The reader’s shelf is by no means a selection of popular texts of low artistic quality. There is no reason to be indignant about the fact that someone did not get through Joyce and Proust if she or he reads Thomas Mann or Günter Grass with understanding. There are people who, despite holding a degree in Polish literature, have not read *Pan Tadeusz* but know Gombrowicz almost by heart.

article of the German scholar was published in English “On Writing Histories of Literature. Some Remarks from a Constructivist Point of View,” *Poetics* 14 (1985).

2 Ibid., 239, see footnote 16.

3 See Janusz Sławiński, “O dzisiejszych normach czytania (znawców),” *Teksty* 3 (1973).

The reader's shelf, therefore, is a composition which is not so much chaotic as it is individualized; far from being canonical, it might be a sphere of free self-realization afforded by reading. Perhaps only the sociologist of literature (or even the psychologist) might want to interpret variants of reading choices in comparison to the invariant nature of literary history. Surely such approaches may turn out to be valuable, but neither do they confirm the need to study literary history nor do they question such a need. What I call to be invariant is in fact an arbitrarily established canon of supposedly non-scientific ambitions which does not mean they are wrong or unworthy of being accepted. Continuity of national culture, the need for remembering, the need for patriotic and/or international education, inculcating values of Western Christian culture – these slogans should not be rejected, but they are too weak to persuade an enthusiast of disordered readings to study the history of literature. There is, anyway, no reason to be scandalized by amateur readership and, even more, to professionalize the more sublime part of culture for those who do not yield to the pressure of iconic mass media.

The question about the need for literary history, therefore, should be formulated in a different way. We ought to think whether reading is at all possible in a simple and dry "reader-text" relation? When does a "text" become a "work"? And what does it mean to "become a work"?

The simple, or even primitive, "reader-text" relation happens quite rarely in practice: at best, this concerns reading popular entertainment literature of questionable quality. All the attention is directed towards the author, the author as an agent, as well as the author's environment and time period, which constitute the first step to a "contextual" and eventually "historical" reading. "The reader's shelf" can co-exist with "the researcher's shelf." It is not unprofessional reading which challenges and threatens a synthetic understanding of literary history. It is rather the various and often simply fashionable literary theories in whose shadow this discussion will be conducted.

Robert Escarpit came up with the notion of "creative treason"⁴ and the question is why. The fact that there exist "updated readings" of books, different from those from the time of their creation and release, was and is a trivial statement; only it is hard to answer the question – as once Tadeusz Zieliński did – "Why Homer?". Why do we constantly read Homer, Virgil, Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes and many others? Or maybe we do not read them? Or do

4 Robert Escarpit, "La littérature et le social," in *Le littéraire et le social* (Paris 1970), trans. Janusz Lalewicz, "Literatura a społeczeństwo," in *Współczesna teoria badań literackich za granicą. Antologia*, vol. 3, ed. Henryk Markiewicz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1973), 124 and futher.

we read them because of school or our snobbism? The sociology of literature may describe the contemporary (but also historical) canon and create a ranking system, but it cannot explain this immutable mutability of tastes. The notion of “creative treason” is evasive: of course there is also “adaptive reading,”⁵ which is evidently incompatible with the conventions from the time of a work’s creation (the easiest way to prove it is to use the philological example of how the meanings of words change) but in order to have “treason,” there must be a rule and form of “faithfulness” first. Against whom? Against the author’s will? What the author wanted to say is such an archaic formula that nobody treats it seriously nowadays. Twentieth-century readers do not care much about the political context of Dante, but maybe they are interested in Beatrice? In any case, when it comes to the debate over the usefulness of literary history, I would prefer to avoid any statements about the enduring problems of human existence mainly because they are only superficial and misleading allies of the literary historian.

The reader’s shelf may be completely accidental, but it could also be a well thought-out collection, and thus the improbability of “treason” operating in something so total and enriching. There is no such reader who does not know that every text has its set of expectations.⁶ It is hard to imagine a reader without something we call “literary culture.”⁷ While it is true that “the style of reception” of a given work may be in discord with the styles of production of a given work,⁸ the sum of the production and reception styles in a sufficiently broad synchrony probably generates a symmetrical system. Jan Mukařovský wrote about the relation of a work with artistic conventions of the past as a component ensuring that the work is comprehensible to the recipient.⁹ Following his reasoning I would say that the literary work in relation with the reader is, more or less, a late play in a sequential game¹⁰ which means that the result of the game depends on the tally of profit and

5 Henryk Markiewicz, “Rzut oka na najnowszą teorię badań literackich za granicą,” in *Literaturoznawstwo i jego sąsiedztwa* (Warszawa: PWN, 1989), 7–31.

6 „Everything told and contained in the text is burdened with anticipations,” Gadamer summarizes Heidegger – see Barbara Skarga, *Granice historyczności* (Warszawa: Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 1989), 17.

7 Janusz Sławiński, *Dzieło – Język – Tradycja* (Warszawa: PWN, 1974), 66.

8 Michał Głowiński, *Style odbioru* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1977), 126 and further.

9 Jan Mukařovský, *Wśród znaków i struktur. Wybór szkiców*, ed. and introd. Janusz Sławiński (Warszawa: PIW, 1970), 27.

10 Or rather in an extensive-form game.

loss in the entire chain that precedes it. The difference between the reader's shelf and the researcher's shelf is that the reader does not know and does not have to know earlier results, while the researcher tries to reconstruct them.

If literary history is not so bad, why do we need to defend it and why must this defence be common? Who is waging a campaign against the literary historian? As it turns out, the list of opponents is considerably long (according to Henryk Markiewicz¹¹) and the arms remarkably diversified.

In the first place, although not without hesitation, I would mention phenomenology. Hesitation stems from the fact that the term is overused and hides all kinds of orientations, often not even orientations but justifications of subjectivist-impressional propositions. I am not acquainted with a more outstanding theory of a literary work than Ingarden's *Das literarische Kunstwerk*. This seminal book and all the ensuing works not only omit the history of literature, but they also make such a history impossible. In the *Dodatek [Addendum] to O poznawaniu dzieła literackiego*, the author divides literary science to the history of literature and the "analytical-descriptive study of literary works of art," whereas he expresses a certain amount of mistrust towards the positivistic methodology which considers "all literary studies" to be a "historical science."¹² Is he right? Ingarden argues that:

cognition of a work created in a different historical epoch is approached [...] by a detour so that the first subject we get to know is not the work itself but various other subjects related to the creation and reception of the work.¹³

Here is the essence of the conflict. It is not that the prominent philosopher did not appreciate studies done on different types of works for example of styles. Indeed, he respectfully spoke about *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, but at the same time Wölfflin seemed to him "very far from the general theory of an artwork, from the problems of its existence."¹⁴ It is meaningful and

11 Henryk Markiewicz, "Dylematy historyka literatury," in: Markiewicz, *Literaturoznawstwo i jego sąsiedztwa*.

12 Roman Ingarden, *O poznawaniu dzieła literackiego*, trans. Danuta Gierulanka (Warszawa: PWN, 1976), 450.

13 *Ibid.*, 451.

14 Roman Ingarden, *Wykłady i dyskusje z estetyki*, ed. Anita Szczepańska (Warszawa: PWN, 1981), 170.

understandable that he agreed with Wölfflin's views more readily than with other research procedures applied by literary historians: art historians – despite being prone to reflecting over works, and not a single work – seldom think about the non-artistic personality of a painter or a sculptor because they are more interested, metonymically speaking, in Rembrandt's brush or Thorvaldsen's chisel than in Rembrandt or Thorvaldsen themselves. Scholars occupied with literature, however, are sinfully inclined to identify a work with its author, but if it was true that Werther, for example, was "a transcription of a love affair that Goethe himself had,"¹⁵ this fact according to Ingarden would be meaningless to the research done concerning a work of art.

A contemporary researcher has not much willingness to take up problems that are formulated this way: Johann Wolfgang and Charlotte von Stein, or Adam Mickiewicz and Maryla Wereszczakówna – these topics have long been ridiculed. But is the "creator-work" relation and the social context of the author really not of our interest at all?

It turns out that it is not only Ingarden who is standing on the frontlines against historical syntheses, but unlike many other contemporary thinkers, he does not make the debate any easier due to the philosophical elegance of his theory. Yet, we should not reject the thought that a literary work is an elementary and indivisible unit of collection called "literature." We should approve of a thesis that since a work is not an ideational or psychological subject, it may only be an intentional one. However, does the acceptance of these claims disable or only restrain the methodology of literary history? Or following Ingarden's reasoning about the layered construction of a work, are we abandoning phenomenology at the moment of switching to genealogical and historical studies.¹⁶ When all is said and done, it appears that eclecticism is a virtue of the literary historian.

Ingarden is sometimes considered to have helped pioneer the aesthetics of reception,¹⁷ the most remarkable representative of which is Hans Robert Jauss. If this is in fact true, concepts promoted by the Constance School make evident the weaknesses of such inspirations. Jauss states:

¹⁵ Ingarden, *O poznawaniu*, 453.

¹⁶ Jauss states that Prague school structuralism applied Ingarden's inspiration while "historicizing" it: "[...] hat [...] einen Ansatz der phänomenologischen Ästhetik R. Ingardens aufgenommen und historisiert," Hans Robert Jauss, "Geschichte der Kunst und Historie," in *Geschichte. Ereignis und Erzählung*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck and Wolf-Dieter Stempel (Munich: Fink, 1973), 206.

¹⁷ Ryszard Handke, "Dialektyka komunikacji literackiej," in *Problemy teorii literatury*, series 3, ed. Henryk Markiewicz (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1988), 444.

the renewal of literary history requires the liquidation of superstitions of objectivism (...)¹⁸.

What are these superstitions? It is easy to surmise, as in other editions of this work Jauss recalls the famous historiographer, Leopold von Ranke. However, his sorrows associated with the well-known phrase *wie es eigentlich war* almost do not concern literary historiography, and in any case they are simply one of those respectable positivistic eccentricities which, a century after the scholar's death, are no longer considered superstitions. I left off quoting Jauss, so I duly continue: the renewal of literary history also requires

support of the traditional aesthetics of production and presentation with the aesthetics of reception and impact. The historical character of literature does not base itself on the established *ex post* connection of literary facts but, first of all, on cognizing a literary work through its readers.¹⁹

Jauss initiates an untimely polemic: who defines today a "literary fact" identically to Ranke's understanding of it in (global) history? In this sense, facts could only be philological objects and "quasi-literary" events, and these deserve the respect of any decent research methodology, irrespective of polemics. When Jauss looks for facts which are unquestionable, empirically provided and verifiable, paradoxically, he returns to the positivistic methodology. It frames the encounter of the text with the reader and the horizon of expectations drawn by the reader. The literary historian is supposed to be, argues Jauss, first the reader, then the researcher.

This is true, but this truth does not provide any benefits because in order to stand on the firm ground of this challenge issued to traditional studies of literature, it is necessary to immobilize this "horizon of expectations," which is impossible, or describe particular "horizons" which not only could be done but already has been done – eventually, any history of reception of a given work, writer, trend or epoch is nothing else than a history of horizons: fairly useful, similarly to the research in the field of sociology of literature which should not be treated as a "challenge issued."

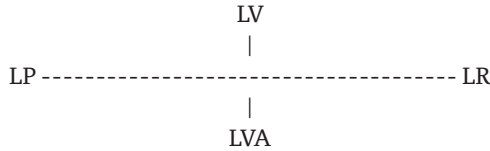
The Constance School eventually collapsed, and the eighties brought another wave of doubts and deconstruction which is hard to argue with because: 1 – deconstructivism, when it attempts to be a coherent programme,

18 Hans Robert Jauss, "Historia literatury jako wyzwanie rzucone nauce o literaturze (fragmenty)," trans. Ryszard Handke, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (1972): 274.

19 Ibid.

dissembles itself in a suicidal manner, 2 – terminologically, it is very complicated²⁰ (at least in its French, post-structuralist version), 3 – in fact, it refers to American New Criticism although what distinguishes it from its predecessors is that it does not see text as a coherent and hierarchical structure.²¹

The reaction to this decade of “exhaustion with literary theories” (*Rezension der Theoriemüdigkeit*) has inspired the latest proposition of German literary theorists: the “empirical literary theory” (abbreviated to ELW – *Empirische Literaturwissenschaft*) promoted by the NIKOL Working Group launched in 1983 by a few scholars from Siegen and Bielefeld led by Helmut Hauptmeier and Siegfried J. Schmidt.²² It is symptomatic that this most recent attempt, initiated under the slogan “empiricism,” in many ways continues Jauss’s concepts, although he is rarely mentioned in this context. The ELW rejects the subjectivist and irrationalistic tendencies of American deconstructionism. The central assumption of this group is that it is subject-oriented (*sachorientiert*), not person-oriented (*personenorientiert*). It does not mean that the ELW wants to deal with texts only, or be occupied with history without names, which would be an outdated and ridiculous idea, even in art history; orientation to subjects is to be based on examining “action roles” (*Handlungsrollen*) to be fulfilled by the “actor.”²³ There are four roles composing a system of mutual links which can be illustrated with the following graphic scheme:²⁴



20 Originally, the author used a made-up term from Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz’s works (Polish: “zagwazdrany”), [translator’s footnote].

21 Markiewicz, “Dylematy historyka literatury,” 26.

22 Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Grundriss der Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft*. Teil I/1: *Der gesellschaftliche Handlungsbereich Literatur*. 1/2: *Zur Rekonstruktion literaturwissenschaftlicher Fragestellungen in einer Empirischen Theorie der Literatur* (Braunschweig-Wiesbaden: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1980-1982). An English summary of the book was also translated into Polish (see footnote 1).

23 The translation of this text into Polish from English (Schmidt, “*O pisaniu historii literatury*,” 233) uses a slightly misleading term “podmiot” (Eng. *subject*).

24 I refer here to the shorter and later version of the ELW programme: Helmut Hauptmeier and Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Einführung in die Empirische Literaturwissenschaft* (Braunschweig – Wiesbaden, 1985), 15.

where LP means “production” (*Literaturproduktion*), LV — “distribution” (*Literaturvermittlung*), LR — “reception” (*Literaturrezeption*), LVA — “post-processing” (*Literaturverarbeitung*).²⁵

This proposition differs from Jauss’s concept by attempting to dismiss a contradiction between the aesthetics of production and the aesthetics of reception – so characteristic of the Constance School. Its advantage is treating the roles of actors in a spiral fashion: research does not end with reception, but is conducted further through transformations back to “production,” and at the same time it does not rule out direct mutual influences. The ELW Group is not correct in treating these roles equally in practice – even with the advantages of dealing with problems related to distribution and reception which stems from the detailed programme of the (preferable) group research and questionnaire surveys.

It is difficult to decide which is more important: production or reception. Due to the character of their work, literary historians have a conciliatory and tolerant disposition; they do not intend to ignore sociological facts, but they cannot give their consent to the symmetrical treatment of production and reception. For literary historians, Jan Chryzostom Pasek is a part of seventeenth-century literature, and not the nineteenth century, when Edward Raczyński published the *Pamiętniki* in the 1830s. Jean Potocki is a problem of the post-gothic novel in the beginning of the nineteenth century which does not mean we may be indifferent to Edmund Chojecki’s translation and further complicated story of *The Manuscript’s* manuscript. Responding to the question whether this novel belongs to Polish or French literature, we will say that the primary criterion is always language, but there is no methodological collision if we consider Polish literature as part of European literature. Obviously, the researcher occupied with Romantic drama will be interested in Shakespeare, but it does not mean that we should read his works only on the occasion of studying Słowacki for example, as it is practiced at some universities, and not in the original context of European Renaissance and its peculiar English variation.

And how to classify works, which at the time of their writing were, certainly, read and praised, but then forgotten – and not due to some reckless mistake, but simply in the natural course of things? This “natural” order of things has no biological meaning here, but is related rather to the “theory of communication.” Literary history gathers information from the past and makes a selection which means registering not only the accrument of values

²⁵ The English version of the term post-processing is accurately translated as “przetworzenie.” *Ibid.*, 234.

but also their loss.²⁶ The capacity of human memory, understood not necessarily personally but rather socially, is limited and – even though there is no obligatory canon outside school requirements – the contents of the reader's shelf may be roughly described as a probabilistically hierarchized system: some texts can be found there almost for sure and others definitely will not be encountered. And if we were to discuss the horizon of expectations, in any sense, this is the one we want to talk about, but this horizon – despite being worth sociological analysis – is not an element of historical thinking.

I am not separating here text from work as demanded by some theoreticians who believe that a text becomes a work once it connects with the reader; in such a case, the number of readers who contribute to the work should be established beforehand. The debate about the production perspective with the reception perspective, however, concerns the most important matter – something I would call “the concealed work.” Work A may disappear from the current readership circuit, but it remains the subject of the historian's interest if it was once read by B, influenced B and through B, it influenced C and so on – one by one until it becomes a sufficiently important event. Perhaps nobody reads Biernat's fairy tales if not obliged to, but Biernat reaches readers not only directly, thanks to reprints, but also in an indirect relation through his more outstanding successors such as Krasicki. If the example of Biernat seems banal, once again will I refer to Stanisław Porębski, who as we know was a great author of the completely lost *Skotopaski* – bucolic tales praised by Kochanowski. These bucolic tales surely have a specific role in the poetry of the bard from Czarnolas and in the development of the genre, in general. It is an extreme example of a situation which we call developmental value and which is an inalienable part of historical-literary thinking.

This example leads us to the question about the approach literary history assumes towards general history or – as others prefer – global history. From the point of view of the user (in our case: the reader) this contradistinction is substantial. The central point here is the way we understand the “event” (*Ereignis*) and “fact” (*le fait, l'événement*²⁷), and this is made even clearer as the relation between a particular “event”, independent of its interpretation, and the whole process is oftentimes the source of methodological disputes and misunderstandings, which, by the way, are not always insurmountable.

An event in socio-political history is never granted to the posterity directly but through evidence – more or less trustworthy documents. The Battle of

26 On this subject Krzysztof Dmitruk, *Literatura – społeczeństwo – przestrzeń. Przemiany komunikacji literackiej* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1980).

27 Algirdas J. Greimas, “Sur l'histoire événementielle et l'histoire fondamentale,” in *Geschichte, Ereignis und Erzählung*, 139-153.

Grunwald took place, but it also did not, in the same way as there were and there were not numerous elections, mutinies, uprisings and so on. The historian reconstructs not only the course of these events, but also their causes and effects among which we live. In the history of literature, an elementary event is a work which, unceasingly from the day of creation until the present time, exists as an identical object (intentionally understood) that is (in fact) directly given to us. This is usually the case because, of course, not everything has been preserved, we do not know what has been lost, lost facts can only be presumed and can sometimes possibly be reconstructed. However, what is ordinary in the methodology of social history becomes a flaw in the image and a deforming loss in the history of literature. The theory of literature, therefore, generates many auxiliary disciplines aimed at conducting reconstructions – similarly to archaeological procedures.

However, like the social historian, the historian of literature is not necessarily dealing with one individual author-creator, who can be through documents, but with everything that was a source of the work's creation, its singular effect and influences.

These ascertainments are obvious, it would seem, or even banal. Yet, this dualistic methodological situation was and is the cause of hellish arguments among literary theoreticians.

René Wellek wrote not without a reason, but only partially correctly:

Literary study differs from historical study in having to deal not with documents but with monuments. A historian has to reconstruct a long-past event on the basis of eye-witness accounts; the literary student has direct access to his object: the work of art.²⁸

First of all, works which are the subject of study and interest are not always monuments as such as this definition implies a specific style of thinking about literature. Secondly, it is true that the "subject" of research is the work itself or its pure form. Questions that should be asked are: How do works belong to another work as its anticipations, consequences and relations, called intertextual relations today? Are non-literary causes of a work significant and if yes – how?

It is cliché to complain about the history of literature being composed of analyses of single works, and (what is worse) read as simple and symmetrical expressions of the author's thoughts and emotions. An adversary of such undoubtedly archaic and, frankly speaking, "Lansonian" approach says that whoever wants to think about literary history must think about the

²⁸ René Wellek, "Literary Theory, Criticism, and History," *The Sewanee Review* 68 (1960): 13.

genre. Hence, the most effective form of describing literary history as the evolution of norms is through a genre system.²⁹ On the other hand, by no means embracing Lanson or referring to him, some “eloquent Frenchmen” discovered that... the work is unique, but in its extraordinariness still open to exegesis, which Jacques Derrida calls “hierocriticism” and contrasts it with the, supposedly, meagre “poetics of laymen”, which deals with the history of genres.³⁰ With a different methodological justification, but with similar consequences, the concept of “open work” functions in the contemporary humanist consciousness.

Officially, the animosity between literary history and literary criticism is inevitable. Literary criticism is understood quite specifically and widely, not only as the reviewers’ work being the first to have contact with a somehow unexpected work, but as an updated communion with an old work, when updating does not merely mean an ideological and naïve presentism, but a dialogic hermeneutic statement aspiring to be something like a second work.

Roland Barthes probably has put it most vividly as he expressed a sound conviction that criticism is meta-language. From that, he makes a seemingly inappropriate conclusion:

its [criticism] function is not to discover “truths” but discover “valence” exclusively...³¹

which means a coherent sign system. And if that is so, then

critical proof, if it exists, depends on the ability not to discover the analysed work but quite the opposite – to possibly completely cover it with our own language.³²

Apart from the effect of this wordplay, I am probably not mistaken if I see in this sentence a postulate to radically autonomize criticism as a legitimate partner. Criticism equals here any interpretation, also in reference to past

29 “Jauss seems minimally interested in how a text as a member of a genre is constituted.” Ralph Cohen, “History and Genre,” *New Literary History* 2 (1986): 211.

30 Michel Beaujour, “Genus uniwersum: gatunek literacki renesansu,” trans. Maria Dramińska-Joczowa, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2 (1989): 336.

31 Roland Barthes, “Czym jest krytyka?,” trans. Janusz Lalewicz, in *Mit i znak. Eseje*, ed. Jan Błóński (Warszawa: PIW, 1970), 285.

32 *Ibid.*, 286 and further.

works. It becomes clear, therefore, why literary history deserves rebuke, according to Barthes, when it is a history of works, or even worse, a "history of writers."³³

And this is the essence expressed in other words of the made-up collision between what I call the reader's shelf and the researcher's shelf; only the reader's shelf, in my opinion, is simply unprofessional reading, while in the quoted fragment of Barthes's thought, it becomes an antagonism which creates an unavoidable conflict among literary theoreticians.

Users of the reader's shelf are not obliged to be interested in annotated readings – such a thought could only emerge in some terrible, city of the sun, utopia ruled by philosophers. What is crucial is whether a component of reading, of any reading of a work, is its historicity which might be understood as both a direct and necessary cause (except for folklore) and as a favourable cause³⁴ to a certain extent and in a certain way (social relations of different duration)? In historiographic practice, a positive answer means that the researcher wants to remove the made-up contradiction between a discipline about "the principles of literature, its categories, criteria, and the like" and the one occupied with "concrete literary works" between statically treated criticism and history of a developmental character.³⁵ I will repeat again after Mukařovský: the relation of a work with artistic conventions of the past ensures that it is comprehensible to the reader.³⁶ It means that the work not only agglomerates a set of causes and possible effects, but this set is also an indexical sign co-shaping the sense that is not of little consequence to readers in any epoch. The fact that the work is created by a person does not mean it is an image of the artist's freedom. On the contrary – it is an image of the conflict between the postulated freedom and restraints imposed by artistic norms and non-artistic circumstances. The trace of this contradiction is present in every literary fact and this is the reason why it is not recommendable to divide history of literature to institutional history and readership. Historicity in this sense is not a writing technique but an outlook on life. It is not a coincidence that history of literature began together with Romanticism:

33 Barthes, "Historia czy literatura," trans. Wanda Błońska, in *Mit i znak*, 165.

34 Markiewicz, "Dylematy historyka literatury," 266.

35 Wellek, "Literary Theory," 1. Quoting Wellek, we should remember that originally he uses the terms *literary theory* and *literary criticism* which have a slightly different meaning than "teoria" and "krytyka" in Polish.

36 Mukařovský, *Wśród znaków i struktur. Wybór szkiców*.

Placing a man in history, treated as a human form of creation and one that is basic, is sometimes even the only form of self-knowledge; Romanticism all the while noticed the objectivity of the historical process.³⁷

This is why it is hard to accept the concepts of schools which question the unity of literary history by separating from it so-called criticism and reducing other research practices to narrow empiricism. Significantly, such practice connects seemingly remote schools. There is a positivistic complex of non-objectivity in it. Since we cannot articulate the final and certain judgement regarding a work, we should exclude it from the scientific process or/and find incontestable methods of polling the reader. The history of literature does not have to be free of the historian's taste – what is important is that the rules of axiological options should be included at least implicitly, but nonetheless as self-consciously and clearly as possible, and thus adapted to the norms of social behaviour. The history of literature is always the result of a specific effect of alienation towards the past, but in this context the word “alienation” does not mean disapproval and for sure it does not refer to freedom and axiological subjectivity. The alienation effect (*der Verfremdungseffekt*) expresses the social feeling of the flow of time and the degree of social changes. In any case, if something makes literary historians wonder or even astonishes them, it is not the freedom of judgement and its changeability, but the opposite – a strange stability. In the last century, there were no sudden revisions, spectacular degradations and rehabilitations, and if there were any, they were short-lived. Of course, discoveries and new interpretations were present in detailed analyses but the system of ranks, if we may say so, in syntheses has remained unchanged.

In this article, I assumed a defensive tactic, deliberately and consciously, even though it may seem an easier task. If I were to signal a positivist programme, I would say that I support methodological anti-naturalism. Yet, is it a programme if the declaration requires using “anti-” as a prefix? I know only one answer to the doubts expressed in the following question: process or work? Literary history obviously focuses on tracking transformations but in this narrative two techniques are required – one of them (I wrote about it fifteen years ago) is a technique, a focal change which indicates the ability to switch from seeing a wide panorama to the detail, and the second one (for which I will also use film terminology) is the rule of “freeze-frame,” signifying the obligation to stop the narrative in order to interpret both the work and its relevant part, perhaps even one word.

Translation: Marta Skotnicka

37 Maria Janion and Marta Żmigrodzka, *Romantyzm i historia* (Warszawa: PIW, 1978), 19.