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Servile Literary Studies

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1. Introduction

The discipline of literary studies,¹ in common with others within the broad field of the humanities, has not had a good press lately, and each year it faces even more difficult challenges. An attempt to diagnose what literary studies is, and – even more importantly – what it should be, has recently led to a more dramatic question: is literary studies of any kind capable of validating one's existence, creating – or recreating – a position strong enough to survive in the modern world and not become an obsolete field of science, cultivated only from time to time and only out of obligation?

The gravity of this question is even stronger when we realize that, when a similar problem was raised in the early 2000s (as evidenced by, among others, the anthology *Sporne i bezsporne problemy współczesnej wiedzy*

1 In this article I consistently use the term "literary studies," whose quasi-plural form emphasizes the inherent complexity of the discipline.

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*o literaturze*² [Disputed and indisputable problems of contemporary literary studies]), it took the form of a question regarding what to do with the dynamically developing and changing field of literary studies. These doubts therefore concerned the directions of the development of the discipline, not its survival.

The challenges that literary studies is now facing are no longer limited to determining whether it should remain relatively autonomous and methodologically coherent. Instead, two types of problems have emerged: the first, which could be categorized as internal, concerns the identity of literary research in the situation of the increasing expansion of new scientific subdisciplines, focused on a broad understanding of cultural studies and the need to form alliances with diverse academic disciplines, including those that are not even part of the humanities in a broad sense. The second, which can be described as external, stems from the problems of the humanities as such, which are increasingly criticized for being incompatible with the currently preferred model of science. Both these types of challenges are a direct outcome of the changes taking place in the system of academic research in Poland (especially regarding finances). At first, the reform replacing a subsidy system with a grant-based one was advertised by the government to the academic community as more effective and just: funds were supposed to be transferred to the “most deserving” recipients in each discipline. Soon, however, it became clear that this would not be the case: competition indeed took place, but rather than being between individual researchers, it was between diverse disciplines of science.

2. The Challenges of the Humanities as the Problems of Literary Studies

The current criticism of the humanities resembles the well-known positivist objections to everything that does not fit into a clear model of the functioning of science viewed in a narrow perspective, but would like to be treated as such. In the nineteenth century, an effective form of self-defense against accusations of being not-scientific-enough was the anti-positivist breakthrough, with its strong message about the value of all research that is not necessarily repeatable and not always intersubjectively communicable, but still provides an irreplaceable insight on ourselves and the world around us. However, Wilhelm Windelband's idea, supported and continued by Heinrich Rickert, which boiled down to separating the nomothetic and

2 Ryszard Nycz and Włodzimierz Bolecki, eds., *Sporne i bezsporne problemy współczesnej wiedzy o literaturze* [Disputed and indisputable problems of contemporary literary studies] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2002).

idiographic sciences while valuing the latter, only worked for some time. Just as it was only for some time that the concepts of Wilhelm Dilthey or Henri Bergson validated the foundations of the anti-positivist turn and provided arguments for a holistic understanding of the functions of the humanities and their individual disciplines. The anti-positivist breakthrough was also just a short pause in the era of domination of something that, for lack of a better term, can be called “pure science.” This short breakthrough came with a price in the late twentieth century: from then on, humanities, as especially concerned with our experience as humans and as parts of society, began to have “social responsibilities.”

Over time, this change, initially quite beneficial for the humanities, became a burden. Any science, in order to gain approval and financing, is now simultaneously held accountable for its – understood in various, mostly not coherent ways – scientificity and usefulness (and the fact that these two features do not have to be related is quite often simply lost in public discussions). This means that, paradoxically, on the one hand the situation used to be easier: individual fields or disciplines were held accountable solely for their scientific nature, so each field of the humanities with a well-established methodology and a clearly defined subject of research had at least basic tools to defend its good name. On the other hand, this type of attempt to justify the scientific usefulness of literary studies in Poland contributed to the field’s progressive closure in the time before numerous breakthroughs (especially cultural ones). Excessive protection of the unity and uniqueness of literary studies was dangerous, because at first it blocked the gradual evolution of the scope and the methods of the discipline, and – after years of closure – provoked a revolutionary reaction. Since then, the field has been “revolutionized” by particular methodological fashions dozens of times, and the boundaries between individual disciplines have been loosened. In turn, literary studies – at first almost imperceptibly – began to corrode and dissolve in subsequent discourses.

In this respect, literary studies paid the same high price for an attempt to find its way in the new, modern science as the humanities (which are now required to be not only scientific, but also “useful”). In this situation, literary studies, which is somehow “by nature” more distant from the social sciences than sociology or psychology, is in a particularly difficult position. Questions that have arisen are: how can we today justify the desire to maintain a scientific discipline whose main goal is to interpret texts, even in the broadest sense? How can we find a place for literary studies in the increasingly endangered humanities, and how should we orient the field towards other sciences? Is it better to fight for autonomy or to negotiate alliances?

3. Between Theories

To try to answer these questions we should slightly reformulate the thesis about the crisis of the humanities. As Paul Jay stated in his book *The Humanities "Crisis" and The Future of Literary Studies*,³ the challenges facing the humanities are not in fact urgent or new; on the contrary, they are recurrent and easy to predict, as accusations – almost identical ones – against the humanities have been recurring for decades. According to Jay, the question about the practical usefulness of achievements, as well as the conflict between “pure science,” valued solely for its development of knowledge, and “practical science,” valued due to its economic potential, are more or less constant. This redefinition of the phenomenon known as the “crisis” of the humanities into ongoing debate and critique forces us to look at the challenges of literary studies differently. For example, it undermines the suggestion that the current situation results from the fact that “real” science is developing dynamically, while the humanities are stagnant.

Nevertheless – as indicated by Jay, among others – literary studies still faces at least two great needs and challenges that must to be reconciled if the discipline is to thrive: on the one hand, the need to think about literature as part of a broader cultural and social reality is becoming more and more visible, but on the other hand, the need to maintain the autonomy of literary research is also becoming increasingly visible. Even more importantly, in recent years literary studies had been slowly losing its privileged position among the humanities: for decades, literary studies had been in the methodological avant-garde. Until the 1970s, it was in an exceptionally favorable situation: even when new discourses or research disciplines were created, either they were based on research tools developed within the field of literary studies (such as in the case of narratology), or literary studies was able to adapt, broaden and transfer further theories coined in different disciplines of humanities. Literary studies was therefore a field of dynamic exchange of theories, categories and concepts, one through which different concepts travelled between diverse scientific disciplines. This phenomenon, which is well described by Mieke Bal's⁴ metaphor of traveling concepts, brought both positive and negative effects: on the one hand, it enabled a common space to be created within the humanities in which conducting inter- and later transdisciplinary research was possible, but on the other hand it also contributed to the gradual dissolution of the boundaries between individual disciplines and methodologies.

3 Paul Jay, *The Humanities "Crisis" and The Future of Literary Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 7–33.

4 Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities. A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002)..

Therefore, the privileged theoretical position enjoyed by literary studies among the humanities is now in the past. Instead, the field is now negotiating both its scope and autonomy, and is being faced with many questions regarding its self-identity. More and more often, scholars tend to recognize that literature should be, to a point, treated as an autonomous field of enquiry, but at the same time it should be considered as part of a broader cultural phenomenon. In turn, literary studies is expected to stay both autonomous and open to new methodologies. This ambiguity and the need to study literature as a field that is entangled in multi-layered relationships with the non-literary and non-textual world are both promising and threatening. Promising, because they often allow us to say more than was previously possible, and threatening, because it might lead to an interpretation of literature in which it becomes not an independent subject of study, but only a secondary example of a certain thesis. This danger was also pointed out by Ryszard Nycz, known for his rather positive attitude towards opening literary research to the challenges typical of cultural studies, who pointed out that the text itself should always be the center of our interest as literary scholars, not necessarily a specific theory, and definitely not methodological fashion:

Working on a text – this crowning competition of the literary profession – means at the same time working with the text and working by the text. This last activity is crucial and, in my opinion, specific to how humanities operate. [...] In humanistic work, the text is at the same time an object, a partner and a guide...⁵

In this respect, the new challenge (in the positive sense of the word) for literary studies is problem-oriented methodologies (such as memory studies, ecocriticism, research on affect, trauma, experience, etc.). These are – as Jay, among others, has noted – an example of opening the discipline to satisfy the need for a specifically understood involvement and commitment, in which particular theories and methodologies derived from the humanities also serve to analyze non-textual problems. Such use satisfies both the demand for the autonomy of a specific field of research and its involvement. Moreover, as Jay claims, this type of involvement of the humanities is nothing new, nor is it something that would limit the possibilities of its development or eliminate texts from the first line of interest of literary studies. Jay's theses, which I mentioned earlier, are an important voice in the discussion about engaged humanities, one that seems now to be more than important. In the next part of this article, I will try to show that the ever-recurring conflict between

⁵ Ryszard Nycz, *Poetyka doświadczenia. Teoria – nowoczesność – literatura* [Poetics of experience. Theory – modernity – literature] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2012), 10.

autonomous and engaged humanities may be – for example for literary studies – not destructive, but, on the contrary, useful and refreshing.

4. Humanities – Involved or Autonomous?

An important and necessary discussion for the Polish humanities, especially literary and cultural studies, took place not so long ago regarding Michał Paweł Markowski's book *Polityka wrażliwości. Wprowadzenie do humanistyki* [Politics of sensitivity. Introduction to the humanities].⁶ This was another example of a book by a widely known Polish academic and philosopher being criticized, on this occasion by Jan Sowa, a researcher with an equally good reputation. Sowa, in his article published in *Teksty Drugie*, made it clear that the vision of the humanities proposed by Markowski did not suit him at all, to put it mildly.

Disputes between academics, especially if they involve both a slight generational and political conflict, as well as methodological differences, are nothing unusual, even when – as with this one – they take the form of quite fierce polemics. The conflict itself is therefore not that interesting, but such a polarization of the stances taken by well-known researchers is quite unusual. Markowski and Sowa occupy two different, extremely distant positions: the first could roughly be described as support for autonomous humanities, and the second for engaged humanities. While far from the first instance of these visions clashing in Polish discussions on the future of the humanities, this clash was exceptionally dynamic.

To better understand what I mean when I write about the dynamic nature of this conflict, I will quote an excerpt from Sowa's polemic, published – together with Markowski's reply, which will be analyzed later on – in *Teksty Drugie* in 2014:

The problem with Markowski's book is rather that the world has changed over the last twenty years, and with it the humanities, while Michał Paweł Markowski once again repeats the diagnosis he has already made many times and which has not changed fundamentally since the books on Derrida and Nietzsche. It can be reduced to the postulate of expanding the interpretation of the world – and with it the interpretation of literature and life – by multiplying contexts, dimensions and theoretical perspectives, supposedly guaranteeing a better grasp of the meaning of both our own life experience and the cultural reality surrounding us. This is what this "discursive sensitivity" is essentially about.⁷

6 Michał Paweł Markowski, *Polityka wrażliwości. Wprowadzenie do humanistyki* [Politics of sensitivity. Introduction to the humanities] (Kraków: Universitas, 2013).

7 Jan Sowa, "Humanistyka płaskiego świata" [Humanities of a flat world], *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2014): 193–194.

Sowa criticizes Markowski's book for several independent reasons. The invariability of his ideas and concepts is only one of them. The second, more important one is that the former master speaks now to his former student in a language that the latter no longer accepts. It is because this language is – I am simplifying a lot here for the sake of the clarity of the argument – a language that is not focused on contact. It is rather the language of art:

In this way, Markowski [...] articulates his program, which is basically an idea for practicing art, not for creating knowledge. [...] The whole point and value of practicing theory/philosophy/humanities is that it is irreducible neither to the exact sciences nor to artistic creativity.⁸

Jan Sowa, by opposing Markowski's proposal, is also – in his own understanding – defending the autonomy of the humanities. This autonomy, however, is not defined as liberation from social obligations, but as maintaining the separateness and distinctiveness of the humanities as a science with the potential for social influence. Sowa's protest against equating the humanities and art is, of course, understandable. It is difficult to disagree with the call to distinguish the specific tasks of the humanities. However, when a researcher presents what could be described as a positive agenda, things get a little more complicated:

The task that the humanities have to fulfill today, and the reason for their existence, is to ensure that the movement of the dialectical screw can complete its full turn, that is, that the alienated effects of human activity cease to have power over him and instead become the means of his (and her!) emancipation.⁹

Of course, when describing the task facing contemporary humanities, Sowa uses a specific language whose metaphors are entangled in the traditions of critical philosophy. However, what bothers me personally is not the metaphorical nature of this passage, but its lack of specificity. The belief that critical theory can change the social practice, and specific activities undertaken through academic work will in turn lead to positive social effects, may be right, but Sowa's statement does not say much about the actual objectives of the humanities. In other words, he describes what should be done, but not how it may be accomplished.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

Similar doubts also served as a starting point for Markowski's polemic against Sowa's criticism. The author of *Politics of Sensitivity* responded to the accusation leveled against his theory by making the strongest possible argument, namely by accusing his fellow researcher of naivety or cynicism:

This is what the humanities, unlike the sciences, are all about: that we argue personally, because certain issues are important issues for us, not for science *per se*. Let's make no mistake: no one but us cares about these things. Because we do not perform science, unlike physicists and oncologists, we just tell our own stories, hoping that someone will be interested in them.¹⁰

The visions of the humanities presented by both researchers are so far from each other not because they define the goals of the humanities differently, but – even more importantly in this dispute – because they approach the problem of the goals of the humanities differently in general. Sowa claims that the humanities have a clearly defined, although of course temporarily variable, goal, which means that a) this goal can be clearly determined at any time; b) it will always be possible to check how far are we from accomplishing it. In his view, therefore, what defines the humanities is not so much their methodology or the subject of study, but its purpose. For Markowski, meanwhile, the humanities always appear as a highly complex, divided activity,¹¹ responding to different individual and social needs. The second difference between Sowa and Markowski that cannot be overlooked is the different emphasis on whom the humanities are addressed to. Markowski, by stating that “no one else cares about these things,” narrows down the circle of people interested in the humanities to a very limited group, somewhat like in George Dickie's institutional theory of art and Arthur Danto's concept of the artworld.¹² This world is, in Sowa's opinion, much too small: the humanities have obligations not so much to those who work within it, but to those who are excluded from it.

The discussion between Markowski and Sowa is, in fact, a radical dispute about the involvement of the humanities and the scope of their responsibilities and dependencies. In my opinion, the scholars' arguments highlighted

10 Michał Paweł Markowski, “Lewica akademicka: między hipokryzją i iluzją” [The academic left: Between hypocrisy and illusion], *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2014): 209.

11 See Markowski, “Lewica akademicka,” 209: “The humanities [...] are permanently divided, they are guided by different interests, different languages and different goals, and promoting the illusion that they will ever unite and give meaning to human life as such [...] is extremely naive.”

12 Cf. Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” *The Journal of Philosophy* LXI (1964): 571–584.

in the heat of the discussion¹³ allow us to see the essence of this dispute very clearly and provoke us to risk creating a middle path by forming the category of servile literary studies.

5. Servile Literary Studies

By introducing the concept of servitude, I do not want to simply multiply theories or concepts, but to describe one intuition that comes to mind when one wants to keep a balance between the need to maintain literary studies' autonomy and the urge for its involvement. The concept of servitude, strongly rooted in the Polish language, also refers to a well-known legal concept. A "servitude" is a specific right that encumbers a given property in order to increase the usefulness of another property or – as in the case of a personal servitude – to provide a specific right to a specific person.¹⁴ In other words, establishing a servitude burdens a specific object with certain obligations that are not easy to get rid of and continue even if the object changes its owner. Therefore, the servitude determines the functions of a certain object by meeting the needs not only of the owners of the object, but also other people.

Approaching this concept a little more metaphorically, we can state that servitude is associated with specific obligations, but not with complete subordination: as long as the object that is burdened with the servitude fulfills certain obligations, it can be used in any other way. If we looked at literary studies, and more broadly at the humanities, as a field of academic research that carries with it specific social obligations, the concept of servitude could explain their nature and, above all, their limits quite well. The harshest criticism of the humanities is based on pointing out that everything that is not useful, everything that cannot be easily translated into the language of profit or at least social benefits, does not deserve support and should not exist. And yet exactly the opposite should be true: as long as the humanities in general, and literary studies in particular, fulfill specific social functions, there are no grounds to question their usefulness in general. Certain servitudes are inalienable, but they do not limit the field of the humanities, just as the possibility of practical application of specific discoveries does not limit the field of research in the traditionally understood sciences.

The possibilities of servile literary studies as a project, which – if we look at the declarations of scholars both from Poland and from abroad – has in fact

13 In presenting the dispute between Markowski and Sowa, I specifically referred to articles, because this form forces one to formulate one's own judgments more sharply and transparently than a book.

14 See Kodeks cywilny [Civil code], art. 285–305.

been cultivated for some time now,¹⁵ can also become a threat. The increasing opening of literary studies to new, social and cultural needs and the modification of its language in such a way that it can be used not only to interpret literature, but also the world to which literature refers, may also have negative consequences. What worries me personally about these mostly positive changes is a certain tendency towards fragmentation (i.e. the visible domination of the field by analyses of isolated case studies).

Literary studies, like all fields of the humanities, can maintain (or regain, if we consider that it has already lost it) an important place in the modern world if it not only studies texts and not only creates theories, but also diagnoses important social and cultural problems. So when I write about servile literature, I consider this social and cultural dimension to be a servitude, rightly expected and imposed by society. Of course, defining the scope of the servitude in this way may seem not very radical, as for example the possibilities of solving social problems by literary studies are usually limited to noticing and describing them by those researchers who mostly work at a theoretical level. Implementation of certain solutions is therefore usually beyond the scope of literary studies. Furthermore, although this analytical goal of literary studies is extremely important, it is only one of its objectives. Diagnosing social problems or teaching how to notice and approach them must remain only one of the many goals of the discipline. Literary studies' servitude, both towards society and towards other research disciplines, cannot limit its scope: like any research discipline that is not obsolete, literary studies must look for new paths of development and at the same time cultivate its roots by working with the text, on the text and through the text – as Ryszard Nycz would say – by telling one's own stories – as Michał Paweł Markowski suggested – as well as through methodological experiments, and finally – as Jan Sowa urged us – through a commitment to engage in and change the non-textual world.

The project of servile humanities and literary studies, as I would like to imagine it, would probably not appeal fully to either Markowski or Sowa. For both, this would probably be a rotten compromise between literary studies' autonomy, understood as liberation from social obligations, and the justification for its existence derived from social utility. This rotten compromise, however, would have at least one strength: it would leave enough space for both researchers, respecting both the autonomy of literature and its responsibilities. Servitude, in the understanding I want to adopt here, is neither full subordination to external needs nor consent to recognize the complete

¹⁵ Research on cultural and social memory, as well as studies on trauma, are usually justified by social usefulness and the possibility of using the knowledge acquired within them to better not only understand, but also design of the social life.

autotelic nature of this field of academic inquiry. It is the middle ground that many of us occupy, regardless of whether we are closer to the views espoused by Sowa or those favored by Markowski.

Translated by Rafał Pawluk

Abstract

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Tabaszewska presents the concept of ancillary literary studies within the context of debates on the humanities' function and goals. She proposes to view literary scholarship, and the humanities more broadly, as a sphere in which the autonomy of research projects does not preclude their social engagement. Accordingly, the task of ancillary literary studies would be not only to study texts and create theories, but also to diagnose problems that are relevant to society.

Keywords

engaged humanities, goals of literary studies, New Humanities, crisis of the humanities