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An Academic Discipline at a Crossroads. The Different Approaches to Teaching Literature in Warsaw and in Vilnius in the years 1811–1830 — an Initial Analysis

Abstract

The article's goal is to reflect on the perception of literary studies as an academic discipline in the 19th century Poland in the twenties and the thirties. The answer to this question may be found in lectures given in that time period at the University of Warsaw and at Vilnius University. The author analyzes excerpts of works by L. Borowski, E. Slowacki, L. Osieński and K. Brodziński in which they define the object of their studies and extrapolate on their methodological tenets. The analysis concludes with an attempt at defining the foremost tendencies in Polish literary studies of the time period, especially in regards to the relationship between the history of literature, literary theory and literary criticism.

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The current debate on the state of Polish humanities, especially its noticeable „duality”¹ which Ryszard Nycz describes in terms of „classically modern humanities” and „new humanities” (Nycz 2015: 11), encourages us to look for past occurrences of heated debate on academic practice within the field of literary science. Indubitably, one of such periods of heated debate² were the first three decades of the XIXth century. The noticeable turn towards a historical approach to literary phenomena and the focus on local (national) issues, which resulted in the literary novelties of the Romantic period and the famous dispute between the Romantics and the Classics, exerted its influence on the approach towards teaching and conceptualizing literature. Besides questioning the ways literature should be written, the manner of its teaching in the light of new literary aesthetics and a different political landscape was also brought into question.

The development of Vilnius University, reformed by the Commission of National Education during its period of activity and then later in 1803, and the foundation of the University of Warsaw in 1816 provided its academics with an opportunity to search for a practical answer to that question, and at the same time necessitated it. These scholars were: in Vilnius — Euzebiusz Slowacki, who assumed the vacant chairmanship of the Department of Poetics and Rhetoric in 1811, and later his 1814 successor Leon Borowski; in Warsaw — Ludwik Osiński and Kazimierz Brodziński, who taught at the university almost concurrently (Osiński since 1818, and Brodziński since 1822).

All of the aforementioned scholars left behind works which were transcriptions of their lectures: the posthumous — published by Borowski — *The Remaining Manuscripts* (*Dzieła z pozostałych rękopismów ogłoszone*) by Slowacki (Vilnius, 1826), *The History of Polish Literature* (*Historia literatury polskiej*) by Borowski (which was actually based on his students’ notes, although with a preface taken from one of the author’s manuscripts, Warsaw, 1848), *A Lecture on Comparative Literature* (*Wykład literatury porównawczej*) in the second

¹ The term „aesthetic duality” in the context of cultural situation was first used by Maurycy Mochnacki in his article published in „Dziennik Warszawski” in 1825, entitled *On the spirit and the source of poetry in Poland* (*O duchu i źródłach poezji w Polsce*) (Mochnacki 2004: 5).

² New, interesting view on the dynamics of the discussion see: Jędrzejewki, 2016. Author prefers to describe the situation in the early 19th century criticism and poetry as „the debate about the national literature” rather than „the quarrel”. Similar approach regarding literature as an academic subject is presented in this paper.

volume of Osiński's *Works* edited by F. S. Dmochowski (Warsaw 1861), and Brodziński's *Polish Literature (Literatura polska)* „from the author's manuscripts and notes derived” also by Dmochowski (pub. Poznań 1872 by J. I. Kraszewski.) I have taken the liberty of limiting the written works I will be analyzing to those directly related to academic practice, as I believe that those works give — both directly and by implication — the answers not only to the question of what form, according to each author, should literature take (although the answer to that question gives important insight into their way of thinking), but also the form of literary studies. Moreover, I will be primarily focusing on prefaces and introductory lectures to their works, as it is those elements that contain general analyses, definitions and methodological statements of their respective authors.

The awareness of the existence of different modes that the practice of literary studies may take is especially clear in *An Introduction to the History of Polish Literature* by Leon Borowski (Borowski 1972)³. As a summary of certain prior academic practices, the text enables a systematization of various issues that arise from them. In his short introduction, Borowski attempts to find an answer to the question of the meaning of the word „literature”, and it is apparent that he is discussing the usage of a specific term⁴. According to the scholar, the term refers to several different subjects. Even though Borowski ascertains that the term is used imprecisely and divergently, he does not discredit its use in any of its apparent meanings — he actually attempts to set them apart. Out of the three meanings he mentions, I will be focusing on the first and the third meaning⁵.

Thus, firstly:

the literature of a nation in its broadest sense covers without exception every single work that nation produces during its existence, both in its native and any foreign tongue, extinct or extant, finally, by any writer of the nation in that nation's country and under its sovereign government, or in many countries, scattered under many governments (...); in its strictest [sense] — more specifically defined as *belles-lettres* — it contains all the intellectual, written produce of any nation, gathered in the fields of poetry, rhetoric, historiography and popular philosophy, and in its native tongue. (Borowski 1972: 144)

It is worth noting that this meaning encompasses both general „output” and literature (*belles-lettres*), thus Borowski's division does not differentiate between oral and written literature, neither high nor popular, and further — neither literature nor literary production. The difference between the first and the third definition of the word „literature” is in my opinion based on a different academic approach which results in two differing — though seemingly similar in scope — subjects of research. Their distinctness becomes apparent when the two are compared based on the goals Borowski sets to „literary” scholars in each case.

³ It is the latest work discussed in this article, related to lectures given after the November Uprising at the Imperial Roman Catholic Theological Academy in Vilnius. We may assume, though, that the analysis it contains took shape earlier.

⁴ The question, how Borowski understood the term “literature” was posed by A. Kaupuz in her article about Borowski's lectures, based on the remaining notes and exam questions. Unfortunately the author treated the translation of Eschenburg's *Theorie und Literatur der schönen Wissenschaften* as the Borowski's own text, so her answers cannot be reliable [Kaupuz 1970].

⁵ For completeness' sake, it is worth noting that the second meaning of „literature” in Borowski's dissertation is „the current state of research”, or what we now call „source literature”.

In both cases, Borowski calls the scholar of literature using the term „man of letters”. As a person whose concerns lie in *literature*¹, a man of letters should acquaint himself with „the most pertinent literary products of a nation” (Borowski 1972: 144), thoroughly research both external and internal history of this literature, be able to philosophically conceptualize its development and to evaluate its most important works, and should furthermore know the history of world literature, and especially of those national literatures which influenced the literature and political and cultural history of the nation with which he concerns himself. A man of letters practicing literature in the third sense faces an altogether different task. He should create a „philosophically sound” „theory of the verbal arts” (*Redekunste*, rhetoric), based on an analysis of patterns and encompassing „guidelines towards an easier and efficacious use of them” (Borowski 1972: 148) in connection to literary criticism. Thus a man of letters should develop the knowledge of language and style, and — moreover — the knowledge of imagination, wit, and feeling based on his understanding of man and nature. In this meaning, literature is defined as „a separate branch of man’s intellectual pursuits” — in other words, „culture” (Borowski 1972: 144). This area of culture encompasses poetry and rhetoric. The difference between this meaning of „belles lettres” and the first one is seemingly slight (as it does not encompass historiography and philosophy). In this case, though, literature is part of another area altogether: not just literary production, but of all the arts in general. It is the French *belle lettre* and the German *Schöne Wissenschaften* — fine skills or verbal arts (*Redekunste* — as opposed to visual arts).

Thus Borowski’s lecture introduces the difference between a historical and a theoretical approach to literary scholarship; a division that has in many ways informed the choices of his predecessors despite often not being directly expressed by them and despite the fact that — as I will attempt to elucidate — it should not be treated as absolute. The Vilnius scholar associates the first of the described approaches with German literary tradition, the other one — with its French counterpart. Interestingly, even though the turn towards a historical approach to literary phenomena is usually associated with Romantic thought and considered a chronologically latter idea, Borowski points out that the French approach is newer and he rather begrudgingly opines that it must first earn its rightful position in the world of scholarship and art. The allegation as to the previous nonexistence of the *belle lettre* theory seems to be the result of bias which can be clearly seen if we take into account the theories of Borowski’s Polish predecessors.

The Theory of Taste in the Works of Fine Art by Euzebiusz Slowacki follows this trend. Its first part, *On Liberal or Fine Sciences and What Liberal Arts Are*, he attempts to define *Schöne Wissenschaften* (*literature*³ in Borowski’s conceptualization):

The calling of *liberal or fine sciences* shall be understood as the theory of *Poetry and Oratory*; the latter considered as unique talents perfected through education and practice. The aforementioned theories are also called *Poetics and Rhetoric*, both of which contain rules fit towards their purpose. (Slowacki 1827: 3)

This concise statement requires commentary in the light of further lectures on *The Theory of Taste*. Slowacki usually does not use the term literature: by „liberal sciences” he usually means „poetry and oratory”, making it a dual subject, internally divided, yet consistently considered as one in the context of general considerations. The more important — and

much more complicated — question is raised by the initial distinction between „poetry and oratory” and „the theory of poetry and oratory” — in other words, „poetics and rhetoric”. Despite being very specific in its definition, Slowacki later uses these terms with less precision: the concepts of „poetics and rhetoric” disappear and „liberal sciences” become synonymous with „poetry and oratory”. This inconsistency can be explained at least to certain degree in the light of how poetry and oratory are defined as „unique talents perfected through education and practice”. Contrary to modern language habits (especially in the case of „poetry”), „poetry and oratory” are not considered here as the product of human activity but the skill to perform it. Let us not forget that Borowski translated the term *Schöne Wissenschaften* as „fine skills”, and it seems to be a better carrier of meaning ascribed by Slowacki to „fine sciences”. Moreover, Borowski’s definition includes the duality of meaning which might be cause for confusion by saying that it is „a separate branch of man’s intellectual pursuits”, yet „using that name both for its produce and its fruit” (Borowski 1972: 144). According to Slowacki, the skills of poetry and oratory are „unique talents” that are „perfected” through education and practice. This concatenation — separable only with much difficulty — of the intrinsic and the learned (the relationship between the two — the „genius” and the „rules” — was one of the primary concerns of the period’s scholarship) is the main cause that poetry as „a particular affinity and the channeling of intellect” (Slowacki 1826: 55) is not consistently separate from „poetics” which „contain rules fit towards their purpose”. Moreover Slowacki also does not differentiate between these two aspects when he employs other areas of art as an example or for comparison; for instance the theory and history of painting in relation to the ability to paint (in this case Slowacki lacks even the terminology afforded to literary scholarship in the Greek words „poetics” and „rhetoric”).

When „poetry and oratory” are understood in this fashion, the purpose of scholarship concerned with poetry and oratory and the theories of their practice becomes not the acquisition of knowledge regarding texts, but helping in the development of innate human abilities (as exemplified by the title of the second subsection of *The Theory of Taste*: „progress in fine sciences and arts is dependent on the widening of scope of one’s spiritual faculties”, Slowacki 1927: 8). The means for this development is, above all, reading, yet for it to achieve its desired effect, it must be counterbalanced with criticism, which:

is the intellectual action with the purpose of discovering and showing the beauty or the failings of various kinds of poetry or oratory. It collects unique observations and unifies them in a single theory, thus judging them according to certain rules extracted by itself from the laws of mind and nature, or rules previously known and made public. (Slowacki 1827: 132)

Thus is „criticism” another discipline — or rather another aspect of literary scholarship — that deals with either creating theories based on literary works or applying previously extant theories to those works. The superior branch of science that expedites the creation of theory is aesthetics the science that deals with the nature of beauty and universal laws that govern taste⁶.

⁶ Slowacki notes: „it should not be the history of art, but source its rules from the nature of things and of mankind” (Slowacki 1827: 48).

This immersion in the tradition of teaching poetics and rhetoric as the art of crafting poems and speeches is indubitably the starting point and the backdrop of Slowacki's idea, yet the inspiration he finds in aesthetics (a term coined a short time before by Baumgarten to whom Slowacki actually refers) takes it much further. The goal of learning the rules is not the acquisition of skill for one's own creative work, but the tools which would allow a person to self-educate in the area of taste. This innate disposition, vital for the aesthetics of classicism, is given three goals by Slowacki: it enables to perceive and experience beauty, and is thus a source of pleasure, it influences passions by merging it with mental faculties through imagination, effectively allowing one to control ones mental state better, and, finally, converges with morality — although not through the simple means of the didactic function of literature, but through its influence on emotions and the ability it gives to recognize the aesthetic value of ethical deeds which gives additional motivation for ethical behavior. Slowacki's conceptualization — which was well-known to Borowski who published Slowacki's *Works* — fulfills to a great extent the call for the creation of „the theory of verbal arts”, despite its unfinished state and its occasional inconsistency and its lack of exemplification⁷.

Among lecturers from the University of Warsaw, Ludwik Osiński took a similar stance when it comes to literature as *belle lettre*, thus assuming the „theoretical” understanding of the word. Contrary to Slowacki, he does not dedicate a separate course to the issue of aesthetics, and his concept of teaching literature is described solely in a short introductory lecture to his course on comparative literature (Osiński 1861: 1–8). He also does not define the object of his lecture but dives straight into a detailed polemic — to which the entire *Introduction* is dedicated — namely: the issue of rules in art. He states:

At the beginning of these proceedings (...) it seems a thing of utmost import to accept this absolute truth with yet stronger resolve: that even though on one hand there is the written art, on the other it cannot be abandoned to that fancy which many consider a particular sign and the privilege of genius. (Osiński 1861: 2)

Whilst arguing for the necessity to learn and practice the rules of artistic creation, the scholar also articulates his convictions as to the duty of a scholar of literature and the goal of its study.

The goal being „to learn the noble art of writing and judgment” (Osiński 1861: 1). Literary scholarship should ultimately lead to the creation of literature. Unlike Slowacki, Osiński does not speak of the development of mental faculties — the study of literary masterpieces should serve as a basis for formulating universal rules of creative work. Moreover he basically leaves this tasks in the hands of professional literary scholars; his students are there but to learn their views:

we are to closely acquaint ourselves with these masters of the art who — through thorough study, analysis and comparison attempted to devise infallible rules and to show that which should define both a fine writer and a fine scholar. (Osiński 1861: 1)

⁷ About the Slowacki's conceptions as an important part of Polish literary theory and possible inspiration for contemporary theorists see: Czaplejewicz 1980. Unfortunately this short text still remains the only attempt to describe Slowacki's theory as an original whole.

Thus both the scholars of old who described works of art and the modern lecturer who presents both their achievements and the literary works toil mostly for the benefit of those listeners who plan to take up the pen themselves — the rest are relegated to the role of the literary public that learns how to judge, the better to approve of their work or the more efficiently to condemn it.

The means for the achievement of these aims is the practice of three branches of literary studies which are precisely defined in their goals by Osiński. The history of literature — „which shows the works born of genius and by genius created” (Osiński 1861: 7) — is tasked with the gathering of study materials. Even as far back as ancient Greece literary scholars „from the very history of art would formulate the basics of theory” (Osiński 1861: 2). Literary theory, in turn, „teaches what one should endeavor to create similar works” (Osiński 1861: 7). Finally, literary criticism „is the ability to judge the fruit of human thought” (Osiński 1861: 8). The second branch — theory — is especially noteworthy: the means for its practice are „analysis and comparison”. The published script of Osiński’s lectures is accordingly titled as *A Lecture on Comparative Literature*⁸. Although the poet and the National Theater’s director became the chairman of the Department of Polish Literature, even in his declaration of the position’s acceptance he would emphasize that:

The department of Polish literature cannot possibly limit itself with that which our native tongue provides in the matter, but must join it with that which we inherit from the ancients and that in which foreign nations can justifiably take pride.

Thus in this profession I wish to unwaveringly stride down the road paved by its greatest masters and I believe that comparing numerous fruits of genius and its examples should most unerringly lead us to prove clear, indubitable rules of art established through the judgment of experience. (Osiński in: Bieliński 1912: 468)

Osiński’s programme is in essence the teaching of the rules of the art of poetry. To prevent accusation of the arbitrariness and the abstract nature of such a series of lectures, the scholar emphasizes the derived nature of rules vis-a-vis the works of genius — he shall derive his theory from history, and his study shall take the form of the history of world literature ordered according to genre:

The analysis of the more prominent works of each kind, of various nations and ages, we shall support with the history of art both in general, and of our country’s in particular (...) As the source precedes the rules, thus those who would become adepts of literature should find it most advisable to first acquaint themselves with the works, and only then define the rules that govern them. (Osiński 1861: 7)

Still, the announcement that textual analysis shall be supplemented with historical knowledge is not meant to be misleading: even though Osiński often speaks of the „progress” of literature, the superiority of generic conventions over the historical order clearly points to a theoretical, universal approach.

⁸ About the connections between early comparative studies and 19th century philology in Europe see: Bilczewski 2013.

Osiński's concept (whose lectures are inspired by La Harpe's *Lycée*) of world literature was very much at odds with the expectations of the University's authorities who would have preferred to include a course on Polish literature in the curriculum. Thus in 1822 they hired Kazimierz Brodziński as the second lecturer who took up the task of teaching a course on „a critical history of Polish literature” (Brodziński, in: Bieliński 1912: 419).

In his introductory lecture to this course Brodziński attempts to answer three questions: „what do I understand by literature”, „what is its influence on the moral state of the nation”, and „what aspect of its history I shall be teaching” (Brodziński 1871: 99). In answer to the first question he proclaims: „*belle lettres* encompass: language learning, history, poetry, rhetoric and craft” (Brodziński 1872: 101). First Brodziński explains the importance of learning one's native language which is the basis of literature, then he defines the role of poetry, rhetoric, history and philosophy in the life of a nation. Afterwards he also declares that „we shall busy ourselves with the analysis of poets, orators, historians and of works on moral philosophy” (Brodziński 1872: 106). It is worth noting that the four aforementioned areas of scholarly interest converge with the more specific understanding of *literature*¹ in Borowski's conceptualization. Moreover, Brodziński designates an area of outer literary studies very similar to that of the Vilnius scholar: one should discuss the state of culture in each time period, the lives of the more prominent authors, and the relations between Polish literature and other literatures: „the state of research cannot be separated from the political and moral state of the nation (Brodziński 1972: 105). His investigations into the history of literature are thus a form of the history of culture, and the scholar is interested in its evolution: „as to how with time, government and custom did our taste and education ascend, change, or collapse” (Brodziński 1972: 99).

While looking for the answer to the question of how this concept of literature should be taught (and how he is going to teach it personally), Brodziński, like Borowski, mentions two different ways of practicing this academic discipline, although he does not differentiate them by way of definition — the view opposite to his can only be deduced from recurring (throughout all his lectures) statements in the form of „no... but...”:

I would not just point out the art and the craft of the best authors, but also show how with time, government and custom did our taste and education ascend, change, or collapse. (Brodziński 1972: 99)

To feel the beauty of speech and poetry, we need not just taste and education, but a particular penchant, a certain addiction which becomes a need of the heart — and it is required both for those who write, and for those who read them. (Brodziński 1972: 104)

Thus the point of my analysis of this period's writers is not showing how close they got to perfecting their art, but how much we can still learn from them today (Brodziński 1972: 286).

The common rule employed by those who take up the scholar's mantle is but reading exemplary works of certain distinguished writers. Having feasted on those, and having developed a liking for them, some believe that they themselves could one day become their equals. They could not be more wrong. (Brodziński 1972: 217)

If Literature were nowadays to be judged solely on wit and taste, if its history was solely about describing the beauty of the works of most splendid authorship, I would be less concerned with the subject's importance. (Brodziński 1972: 99)

Even though unlike Osiński — who clearly points out his opponents in the romantic school of thought — Brodziński does not name his opposition, but it is clear that he is criticizing Osiński's very method: the addressing of selected, great works by foreign authors. The oft repeated terms of „wit and taste”/„taste and scholarship”, „splendid/perfect authors/writers” point to a set of beliefs characteristic of certain classicist thinkers who emphasized the necessity of achieving artistic perfection.

Brodziński counters these beliefs with his idea of a literature which „contains moral identity, a country within its own borders; and through these things does a nation make its past its present, and makes her presence known to her descendants” (Brodziński 1972: 103). On one hand, it is about „doing right by our predecessors and preserving their legacy” (Brodziński 1972: 113), on the other it is about actively learning based on their example. Because Brodziński is actually not that far removed from considering a literary education as a path that leads through the evaluation of literature to its creation. Indeed, „it is from literature that a nation derives the love of its country with which its works are suffused” (Brodziński 1972: 113), and still such literature remains a well-spring of enthusiasm with which latter poets may inspire their works. It is also a source of knowledge on the nation's past and its customs which modern authors can use in their works:

One should read not just those who further educate our taste, but also those who enrich our memory and knowledge (...). All great authors owe the excellence of their works to earlier writings not distinguished by sophisticated taste, yet broadening the horizons of their own creativity... (Brodziński 1972: 217)

In Brodziński's polemic with the classical and the romantic conceptualizations (he criticizes imitation as well as the attempts to separate genius from rules) the ultimate goal is the same as in Osiński — the creation of poetry as perfect as possible. And thus, since literature draws its strength from its national roots, and not literary rules, as Osiński decides to study rules, Brodziński shall study their nationality.

The story of the two separate lectures at the University of Warsaw exemplifies with extreme clarity — confirming Borowski's later claims — that scholars devoted to this academic discipline in the time period had two diverging ideas about its form. Classic poetics and rhetoric with their ancient roots, enriched with the aesthetic thought of the XVIIIth century, conceived literary studies as an attempt at understanding a particular human ability — and the mechanisms of this ability, and the rules that would allow the best possible use of it, aesthetically and ethically, can be learned through the study of literature. Among the scholars discussed in this article, Euzebiusz Słowacki represents this aesthetic. Limiting the study of literature to the rules of language and style (as it, unfortunately, happens, for instance in Osiński's lectures) and the triumph of a competing discipline have, to a great extent, overshadowed this kind of approach to literary studies. It is not just about the simple distinction between the classical and the romantic. It is where the romantic contemplation on genius, on the relationship between literature and imagination has its place. A competing solution would have to be the developing scholarly discipline of the study of the history of literature. Even then, as the analysis of Kazimierz Brodziński's lecture shows, it was not totally separate from the traditional model of teaching literature as a way of shaping authors; a model which exemplifies the proximity of the creation of

literature and the study of literature in the time period, and which resulted in the University of Warsaw appointing Osiński and Brodziński — both of them being poets.

It is also worth noting that the choice of either of the aforementioned paths also decided — in the scholarly practice of the lecturers — the relationship between literary history, theory and criticism — the three areas of literary studies between which they themselves distinguished. If criticism is perceived as the ability to judge and value literary works, either one's own or anyone else's, or even more broadly still — as the skill to discuss and describe specific works and their specific elements, the study of history and theory would be means towards the development of this skill. And thus, in Osiński's academic practice, even though he mentions all three areas of literary study and does not forgo chronological order, theory was dominant (the issue of rules in art), and it was practiced by way of comparative study (*A Lecture on Comparative Literature*). Brodziński's standpoint, however, was that proper judgment of literary works is achieved directly through the study of the history of literature, with classic and modern works playing a slightly different part in these studies:

With this goal of the history of Polish literature in mind, it must be considered from two main points of view. Classic literature is more of a study in history and custom, whilst modern literature is and should be more of an education in taste. Thus, the first kind we shall study in relation to past history and customs, which is essentially the history of literature as perceived in the way I have elucidated. The latter, by which I mean the period of Stanisław August, I shall relate more critically, with regard to the rules of art. (Brodziński 1872: 287)

History of literature and literary criticism are thus in confrontation, differentiated as tools for the study of literary texts more or less chronologically removed from the scholar's time. In Slowacki's lectures, the relationship between the two areas is different still. He makes little mention of history, with criticism being the most important activity, treated as a sort of meta-theory which creates and applies theory, supported by aesthetics, the universal science of beauty and its rules, and as such the theory of the critical faculty most important to Slowacki — taste, which brings „the spirit of philosophy” to literary criticism (Slowacki 1827: 137).

It is worth noting that the indicated differences described on the basis of methodological declarations directly influence academic practices, which is best exemplified by the order each scholar gave to his lectures: in the case of Slowacki and Osiński it is order according to literary genetics, whilst Brodziński and Borowski order them chronologically. Still, the first two do not forgo chronology within each genre, and the other two do not ignore genre conventions within each time period. The division which took shape at the turn of the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries — visible with utmost clarity in Polish academic practices of the first decades of the XIXth century — turned out to be extremely long-lasting. It might be worth taking a closer look at that particular moment in history and its theoretical concepts which can give crucial context to the still relevant questions of identity and the (co)existence of literary theory, the history of literature, comparative literature and literary criticism.

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