



Pavel Janousek

Generals always prepare for the previous war

On the new paradigm of Czech literary history

The notion of the canon in Czech literary studies is being challenged by a relativist, postmodern approach to history. Its proponents claim this constitutes a revolution, though literary critic Pavel Janousek is sceptical. Established schemas are predominantly an illusion, he writes: in the Harry Potter era, the canon ceased to be meaningful to anyone other than academics. In railing against the canon, they are like generals preparing for the previous war.

In the course of discussions and polemics about the writing of Czech literary history and the literary canon, two things have begun to interest me more and more: the mechanisms that explain why discussions about writing history are so impassioned these days, and the relationship between these discussions and the field of thinking in which they are taking place and which they are trying to help form.

Noteworthy — and, in the context of Czech literary scholarship, quite unusual — is the sheer number of discussions about history–writing; their frequency alone strengthens the suspicion that we are in a breakthrough moment when a new paradigm of literary history is being established. For anyone who has experienced these discussions on literary and non–literary history, the suspicion becomes a certainty: the majority of participants distance themselves from "normal history", proclaiming that the way it has been written until now can no longer meet the demands of the age, and hence there must be a change in historical thinking and practice that aims at the very foundations, somewhere in the depths of the nineteenth century and the national awakening.

A revolutionary discovery: everything is just a construction

These discussions share a common starting point, the thesis that literary history and literary canons are not given to us by God or Nature, but are the product of free human activity. In other words, they are a construct, and always have a creator. The past of literature, that is, does not constitute an essence that we are getting ever closer to; the history we write about literature is just a stylized narrative, motivated purely subjectively, a constructed story that always blends together with the moment of its origin as well as the social position and views of the person formulating it. From this starting point, such meditations tend to cast doubt on several certainties of literary history that had seemed undoubtable, but that now reveal themselves as artificial constructs maintained by power relations:

– The assumption of continuity and causality — which until now justified the historian in searching for connections between past and present — is

problematized.

– The meaning of the national language, as well as the meaning of the national literature that grows out of it, were once the key subject of a nation's literary history; now they are being relativized.

– The very idea of literature as art, and of literary value as the constitutive feature of the literary work and the principal subject of literary history, is blurred.

In practice, this also means casting the literary canon into doubt; it stops being perceived as something natural and becomes an instrument of power in the formation of social consciousness, helping to impose on its recipients a vision of what should be considered valuable in works of the past. Indeed, realizing the relativity of literary–historical efforts is a very good thing — not only because it allows us to see that the achievements of earlier scholars in our field are created constructs, but also because it leads to a deeper reflection on, and correction of, our own work.

And now what?

However, many participants in the discussions on history (especially those researchers who don't step outside the boundaries of literary theory) are convinced that the mere relativization of existing certainties is an adequate intellectual achievement in itself. Petr A. Bilek gave a precise formulation of this point when he asserted that: "We could certainly use some boundaries in literary history, but where are we going to find them, when they don't exist?"¹ Bilek is right: they don't exist. But isn't it our task, nevertheless, to keep on looking for these boundaries, with full consciousness of their relativity and temporality? Isn't it our task to make sense of the world around us, for this moment and for our own needs? And when we make such assertions, don't we surrender not just a right, but also our only responsibility?

Just a bit further on from this methodological skepticism — which, thought through to its conclusion, would mean that history can't be written at all, and therefore shouldn't be — are those researchers who may be conscious that relativization alone will not create a new paradigm of literary history, but who surrender to the deconstructionist faith that an essence may be glimpsed, perhaps only for a moment, once we eliminate all the constructs that previous generations have hidden it behind. These researchers generally think in simple bi–polar oppositions, which assume that the new and better will arise through the mere negation of what is old and therefore bad.

Their logic goes something like this. Until now, history has created stereotypical canons, always composed of the same works, and has used power to impose them on recipients — therefore, the new history should do without canons. Until now, literary history has told stories and constructed myths, artificial connections between past and present — so the new history must necessarily be non–linear and discontinuous. The natural effort to create series must be blocked, and the construction of artificial historical sequences must be replaced by analyses of individual points in history. And because, according to the current effort to blur everything that is clear, the very concept of a "point" is too concrete and static, we must work with Peter Zajac's very sophisticated and sufficiently cryptic theory of "pulsating points". Which, in practice, means turning away from historical synthesis toward disconnected partial studies and analyses, or even, in extreme formulations of this position, toward individual

entries in the literary lexicons.

I must emphasize that the fundamental problem with these approaches, for me, is not the fact that they favour change and draw our attention to unexplored phenomena, to neglected methods and neglected literary–historical genres. To my mind, their fundamental problem is that they continue to work with the traditional Euro–American cult of the new and different, which is seen as automatically better than the old — in other words, these approaches are not consistent enough in their relativism to apply it to themselves. For then they would have to realize that we can never escape from the world of constructs, and so even the new approaches to history are simply constructs. They may seem more attractive and productive at a certain moment because of their newness and difference, but they do not negate, in some simple bipolar opposition, the constructs that came before them.

The distastefully un(post)modern words "nation" and "national literature"

I think this can be convincingly demonstrated in the context of national literary history. Bipolar thinking claims that we have to rectify the fundamental mistake of Czech literary history up until now — namely, that it rests on the nineteenth–century linguistic construct of the Czech nation as consisting of all Czech speakers, as it was constituted in opposition to Germans during the national awakening. The new literary history therefore must get rid of this construct and be *different*... But different in what way? Pro–German? Central European? Hopes are fixed primarily on the concept of "areal studies",² and are connected with the idea that the constitutive role of language can be replaced by the constitutive role of space, a variable free of national axioms.

This interest in studies reflecting the relationships of the Czech nation, language and literature with other nations, languages, and literatures in a Central European space — along with the corresponding expansion in the fund of materials we study — is one of the very important future trends in our discipline. But it is not the only one. For I am convinced that national history, including literary history, is the memory of that real, functioning social construct we label with the word "nation", and is an important part of its self–recognition and ontogeny. This ontogeny represents a series of necessary steps. It starts at the phase when the nation must, just like any individual, confirm its own identity by distinguishing itself, in any possible (even adolescent) way, from others, and then it moves toward subsequent phases in which it corrects these initial extremes. And it is a mark of any nation's maturity if it reaches a phase when it can reflect critically and objectively on itself, and thereby also perceive and name what joins it with other nations.

The transition to areal studies of history, in my opinion, cannot be a simple replacement of the national language by a space that carries no markers of nationality, if only because space in and of itself, without subjects to inhabit it, has no memory and cannot create history. History represents a memory whose subject and addressee, I am convinced, are always a certain collective that *perceives itself* as this subject and addressee. The memory of each subject, whether nation or individual, naturally tends to construct continuities; it regularly bears the myth of its own origin — of, if you like, its "signs of birth"³ — and it cannot completely lose or renounce these signs without simultaneously losing its own identity, or at least its psychic health. The form of historical memory represented by history is determined largely by the ceaseless need to keep re–confirming the construct of its own identity. I

conclude that as long as a construct called the Czech nation exists, and as long as there exist people who feel allegiance to this construct, we will need to keep confirming that this nation, too, has created exceptional works of art, works that are shaped by its own specificity as well as by its equal membership among other nations. I am convinced that a unified supra-national history, let's say of a Central European area, cannot exist today for the simple reason that there are not enough people who identify with the construct of Central Europeanness and who would be capable of spontaneously subordinating their membership in individual nations to their membership in Central Europe.

The attempts to create an areal history of this space can therefore take many different forms. You can write a reference book simply by putting individual national histories next to each other in a single publication. A more common, and in my opinion more justified, approach is for the researcher (subconsciously or consciously) to observe the given area from the perspective of a single national literature, exploring connections with other national literatures and cultures in that space. The areal approach, then, is not a negation of the language-based approach, but rather its expansion and correction. In any case, the areal approach in and of itself isn't, and cannot be, a guarantee of scholarly objectivity and quality, because it too enables, in addition to "real knowledge of the past", the construction and confirmation of all kinds of myths: at one extreme, the expansionist myth of a single nation's cultural superiority; at the other, the self-destructive myth of a nation's own inferiority and derivative nature.

Writing literary history as a theoretical and practical problem

There are two possible ways to think about the new literary-historical paradigm. The first sees writing about history as a self-enclosed *theoretical* problem that must be resolved in the context of how other theoreticians think about this set of questions. The space for such thought is bounded, above all, by the ideas, concepts, axioms and pre-given conclusions that are commonly in use today, and the researcher feels no connection to the practice of writing about history. And if practice differs from his or her construct, then it is in error and should adapt itself.

Personally, I find myself in a somewhat different situation. For almost ten years, with the help of many co-workers, I have been trying to solve the pragmatic problem of how to write a text that would synthesize our knowledge of Czech literature of the second half of the twentieth century. From the beginning, I have been aware that we are creating a narrative construct that not only reflects how we, the writers, perceive the past, but also reveals the range of decisions and compromises required by our effort to name the unnameable, to incorporate a multi-dimensional and many-layered activity into a linear text, as well as by our disciplinary skills and rhetorical abilities. But now that I've made the decision to write such a history, only with great difficulty that can I accept the thesis, no matter how well formulated, that history is just a construct without reference to the past, or that history (or synthesizing history) cannot be written at all. I don't know — maybe someone else will someday be able to give a better description of this era by using the method of pulsating points; but for now, I am convinced that our very choice of the genre of synthesizing history requires, on the one hand, an almost positivist registration of material, and on the other, an attempt to find real continuities and linear series, as well as to name hierarchies of value. And this choice will lead researchers beyond the boundaries of purely theoretical discourse and force them to consider their own activity, as well as the new literary historical

paradigms, from the perspective of the space our texts enter after leaving the peace and quiet of an academic office.

Is there anything left to demythologize?

So please accept, at least for a moment, the assumption I voiced above, namely, that the subject and addressee of literary history is always some collective. Literary researchers today may consider *themselves* to be the subject of literary history, and feel responsible only for their own reputation among other researchers; but let us try to admit that the ultimate point of thinking about history is to help form the memory of a supra-individual collective known as the nation. I know this seems to echo the nineteenth-century national revival, but let's try it nevertheless. For then it will be appropriate to bring our thinking about the theory and writing of history into contact with this subject and addressee, and compare it with the current state of this subject's literary memory.

I consider this important, for one, because the deconstructionist construction forming the background of the revolutionary theses on new history rests on the idea that our world is so full of mythic and false constructions that there will always be something to shatter, to demythologize, to relativize. With respect to the current situation of literary scholarship, for example, it would say that the group of people who currently feel allegiance to the idea of a Czech nation are bound and tied by a literary canon that has been imposed by power relationships and now needs to be dismantled.

Let me, however, challenge you to a small experiment. Let us stop speculating theoretically about the Czech literary canon, let us collect some lists of books read by students applying to study Czech at various universities, and let us analyze them statistically. I think this is an ideal sample; these are people who not only have undergone some schooling and hence have the right to consider themselves educated, but can also be presumed to have a conscious interest in Czech literature. Knowledge of the canon should, for them, be a question of personal prestige, given that they are applying to become one of its co-creators, and so they must first demonstrate (or at least pretend) knowledge of it. I don't want to pre-empt the results of such research; nevertheless, my own years of experience tell me that these reading lists are becoming more and more differentiated, and practically demonstrate that not even this particular group perceives any powerful oppression by the canon, unless we consider the canon to be knowledge of *Harry Potter* and pretended knowledge of *Babicka*.⁴ And if we went on to look at the reading lists that graduates of literary studies present at their state exams — lists that are drawn up after a concentrated pedagogical onslaught and under pressure to pretend that one knows more than one actually does — we would probably have to start posing the question of whether there is anything left in this national literature to dismantle.

So I worry that the attempt to relativize and destroy established schemas, which is shaping progressive literary historical paradigms today, can only be seen as the greatest revolution since the rise of history, literary history, and the national awakening, in relation to the narrow community of people that actually talk about this problem. So those established schemas against which scholars struggle are predominantly an illusion, an assumption derived from reading books and maintained by the inertia of the memory of experts, who, like generals, prepare for the previous war rather than the next one.

Let's admit it: these days, the feeling of national belonging is not realized in literature, but almost exclusively in sports, where it has also found its symbolic expression in the winged words *Kdo neskace, neni Cech*. ["Anyone who doesn't jump isn't a Czech," a common chant at sporting events — trans.] And the Czechs who jump know quite well that they can easily get by without reading. And if they do read, then they know that what their teachers and experts call literature is too high an art form and no fun to read; after all, Czech literature is merely something you study in order to graduate from high school. Or it will be, at least, until we finally manage to get rid of, or at least neutralize, its unnecessary historical dimension, so that we can liberate our poor students from having to cram such a pile of useless facts into their heads. For what good is it to learn about dead writers, about books that don't interest students anyway, about books that they will never — literally never — open. The liberating force that the new literary historical paradigm is supposed to have for researchers can be seen, in confrontation with the subject and addressee of historical work, as expressing a more general, spontaneous trend. This trend pushes aside the memory represented by history and literary history, into the position of something unimportant and superfluous, perhaps even harmful, for society.

Of course you could object that the Czech nation, as a subject of literary history, has never fulfilled the ideal (nor has any other nation, for that matter) — that its members have always preferred other values and a different literature from the one presented to them. And I also know that literary researchers and teachers are the true carriers of literary memory. But how can its carriers be the people who, today, are working primarily to undermine the meaning of writing and teaching about history?

The idea that we need to destroy literary historical constructions maintained by power relations, to blur the boundaries, meets up in practice with the equally progressive opinions of contemporary Czech pedagogues, the most benevolent of whom merely want to erase history from literature courses (their reasoning: it is more important to know how to speak spontaneously about what we've read and to apply it to our own lives), the most radical of whom interpret literature as an exclusively aesthetic affair, and hence as useless. Therefore, they suggest changing literature into an elective subject for those who enjoy it, and their idea has received support; why annoy an entire population with something that is accessible only to a few, and what's more is totally useless. This would free up class hours, they say, that could be used to teach something truly practical, namely communication studies.

The institutionally disappearing memory of literature

But let us turn our attention to an even higher level of the Czech literary memory. What is the state of literary history in Czech literary scholarship today? I often encounter the idea that the past has been fully worked over. This idea emerges from the assumption that all we need is to have enough books written about the past in our libraries. But, I am convinced, literary memory must be active — that is, expressed in the number and quality of people who are its carriers. To realize how little attention we devote to literary history, all you have to do is travel to some of our areal neighbours — for example, to Poland.

This phenomenon has many causes, one of which is declining interest in literary history, portrayed in Czech studies today as the least interesting part of literary scholarship. I'm afraid that, for a long time now, "normal science" in

Czech literary studies has not been sustained by those literary historians who are obsessed with a mythic idea of the nation and a desire to create artificial continuities. Rather, it is represented by theoreticians who repeat, again and again, how difficult, complicated, ungraspable and so on are history and the Czech nation. Today it is far more attractive and prestigious to talk and write about why history can't be written, or how it should ideally be written, than to attempt to write it oneself. And it's also valued far more highly, for history is perceived as an extremely conventional affair, a boring trade, somewhere at the margins of the discipline, that just creates unnecessary constructs. Not long ago, a doctoral student at Charles University's Faculty of Philosophy and Arts convincingly formulated this when he described one of his colleagues to me: "He is a bit stupid and doesn't have a mind for scholarship, so he'll probably have to do history, whereas I'd like to write about history as narrative."

Recently, I took part in the defence of a dissertation on literary history, at which several of the opponents and members of the committee felt the need to emphasize that the work was least interesting when it took the form of a historical survey — for, as they put it, "these things are already known". They had overlooked the fact that this doctoral student was the only person in the Czech Republic who had written about these things; perhaps they assumed that, since they themselves knew these things, there was no need to write about them further. But I am afraid that their statement rather meant that "these things are the least interesting" — at least in comparison with the theoretical problems and foreign concepts that the defence (a very successful one, by the way) then went on to consider. And yet, if I wrote earlier that literary memory cannot exist without living carriers, I would also claim that the things "we all know" don't become part of literary memory until someone writes them down, fixes them, even if only in the much-despised form of the survey.

Discussions about the meaning of the past, and the ways of reflecting on it, are necessary and take place in all the historical disciplines, most of all in the field of history itself. But the situation of history *per se* is fundamentally different from that of literary history, for the field of history is practically impossible without history: despite all theoretical experiments, it preserves the rules and customs of its craft and will always have enough researchers who base their judgments on archival work. But it's not so impossible to imagine Czech literary scholarship without any history at all, surrendering itself exclusively to theoretical deliberations without feeling the need to confront them with historical material. In fact, we're just a step away from this.

Let me conclude, then, by repeating that despite all the excursions into the most varied contexts, the centre of Czech literary scholarship and history should continue to consist of searching for the specificity of a national literature. This must involve naming its relationships to other cultures, naming the processes that determine change, and naming causal relationships and continuities between past and present, as well as making an effort to find, in an extensive literary production, those values of Czech and world literature that can be presented, here and today, as canonical.

At first glance, this task may seem deeply conservative. But such a cultivation of literary memory would, in our country, be an essentially revolutionary deed.

This article was presented at a colloquium entitled "The Problem of the Literary Canon", organized by the Institute of Bohemian Studies of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of South Bohemia in March 2006.

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- ¹ Peter A. Bilek, talking at a discussion at the philosophy faculty of the Charles University on 15.02.2006.
 - ² *Arealova studia* in Czech refers loosely to studies of transnational or supranational regions that break free from the traditional national model of literary history — trans.
 - ³ *Signs of the Birth* is Vladimir Macura's important work on the construction of national identity in the nineteenth-century Czech culture — trans.
 - ⁴ *Granny*, the 1855 novel by Bozena Nemcova — trans.

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