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## The Canon as Identity Narrative

The main focus of this paper is to address problematic issues inherent in the canon, which can be understood as a construct that enables the production of the common universe of images and symbols, which support the collective memory, that is an indispensable element of the collective identity of social groups, including nations. In such understanding of the canon, it is a cultural construct which itself also constructs culture. This dual nature of the canon becomes particularly obvious in the case of national educational canons connected to complex collective subjects. Participation in the canon as a cultural text is partially indicative of belonging to a certain group, and thus guaranteeing one's individual identity. Education, however, is the field of constant debate, a polemical discourse and other forms of cultural dispute which may come under the header of ideological wars. The inextricable connection between ideology and education can be expressed in the form of a dilemma: what kind of person do we wish to raise, and how do we identify what it means to be a citizen, and does he/she have exhibit patriotism as a result? In this context, the question about the educational canon emerging from these debates is also a question about the image of culture and its dominant narrations defining ways of constructing and fulfilment of identity.

**Key words:** canon, nation, education

As Homi Bhabha remarked, every nation – however we may understand it – creates narrations about themselves and other nations. It is rooted not only in the human need of story-making, but also in the fact that the idea of a nation is still deeply embedded in our ways of thinking about the world (1990). One of the fundamental narrations that nations use to talk about themselves, usually to emphasise their uniqueness, righteousness, immaculacy, and the ancient origins, is a nation's cultural canon. Canon rarely becomes a topic of public debates or controversies. It is rather tacitly assumed to belong to an 'expert culture' where only a few have the right to comment on it. The efforts to determine what canon is – as

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a cultural category and the way of implementing this culture – as well as who and what belongs to it and on what conditions, usually intensify during sudden social changes, the so-called cultural or civilizational crises which call for new definitions of the past, present, or perhaps future, reality (Kurczewska 2000). We should also remember here, however, the words of the American scholar of the Polish literature Andrea Lanoux who noticed that even though scientific investigations into the canon were hindered by “fierce discussions on whose works belong to the canon or not and who decides about that (...), such discussions are themselves a part of the process of creating the canon, enabling its changes and revivals” (2003: 9–10). The discussions about the canon should, therefore, be treated as an integral part of their construction and deconstruction.

In this paper canon is understood as a construct enabling the production of the common universe of images and symbols which support the collective memory – an indispensable element of the collective identity of social groups, including nations. According to this definition, canon is a cultural construct which itself also constructs a culture. This dual nature of a canon becomes particularly obvious in the case of national educational canons addressed to complex collective subjects. When a cultural text is present in the canon, its author certainly belongs to a certain group and his individual identity is confirmed. Education, however, is the field of constant debates, polemics, discussions and other forms of cultural dispute which may all be called ideological wars. The inextricable connection between ideology and education can be expressed in the form of a dilemma: what kind of person do we want to bring up? Who is a citizen and does he or she have to be a patriot as well? In this context, the question about the educational canon emerging from these debates is also a question about the image of culture and its dominant narrations which define ways of constructing and the fulfilment of identity.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the category of the ‘canon of national culture’ as the narration of identity, i.e. the way a nation tells its own story, with a nation’s more or less active participation. A starting point for this analysis is the description of changes in the canon of the required reading list for schools in 2007, when the Minister of National Education of the time Roman Giertych proposed changes in the obligatory reading list for schoolchildren (which I will call further on ‘a school literary canon’ or simply ‘a school canon’). I use this example to demonstrate two things: firstly, that the idea of a national canon has its fierce advocates and opponents, which fosters nationalist tendencies, and secondly, to show that education, especially literary education, is one of the most important fields of developing one’s identity. After a short presentation of these changes I shall proceed to a description of the canon as a heterogeneous construct, taking into account its historical and ideological (including national) entanglements. In the final part, I shall discuss the fundamental issue of the relationship between the canon, culture, and national identity.

What was the essence of Minister Giertych’s ideological offer along with the changes in the school canon? (I shall only refer to several examples.) Firstly, ac-

According to the Minister, the canon perceived as the vehicle for lasting and unchangeable values should keep Poles from making the mistakes that the Western societies have made, and which led them to the state of common moral, cultural and socio-political relativism, which can be generally gathered under the heading of 'postmodernism'. Unfortunately, the Minister did not offer a more detailed characteristics of this category. The reform was supposed to bring about a great revival of educational and, at the same time, social spheres, as well as introduce order instead of 'slackening'<sup>2</sup>.

Owing to this reform: "Poland has the opportunity to (...) break the trend towards liberalisation and build the society capable of meeting great challenges". Secondly, Poland is therefore presented as the avant-garde of changes which make her 'great', which is the reference to Roman Dmowski's vision of Poland. Dmowski was the leader of the pre-war *Narodowa Demokracja* [National Democracy party] and had the idea of the great Poland stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. The 'greatness' of Poland should result in the sense of pride among her nation and in the emphasis on the national imponderables.

Thirdly, breaking the 'trend towards liberalisation', as well as keeping Catholic authors in the canon, and adding several new ones (Twardowski, Zuchniewicz), means opposing the more or less noticeable process of secularisation of the Polish society and restoring the importance of the Catholic cultural heritage which should be respected by other, minority religions. Consequently, Poland should be regarded as a Catholic country where Catholicism does not only dominate other religions, but should also become the core of what it means to be Polish.

Fourthly, the exclusion of Gombrowicz, Witkacy, Kafka, Conrad, Dostoevsky and Goethe from the canon (more precisely, from its first version) was justified by the Minister who claimed that their works "do not demonstrate the positive attitude towards education". Having included instead the works of John Paul II or Jan Dobraczyński, he argued that "We propose (...) books which help shaping characters, values such as: dutifulness, integrity, truthfulness, reliability, diligence, patriotism, prudence, etc. Thus, this reform becomes an inherent part of building the new, revived national Poland, and the state should foster the development of its fundamental institutions, i.e., mainly the 'normal' heterosexual family" (Giertych 2007).

Eventually, these changes had not been accepted and implemented. Nevertheless, the very proposal of changes ignited the vivid reaction in various environments and organizations, clearly noticeable in the mid-2007, mainly in the press, but also in the TV programmes and the Internet discussions. These reactions revealed a dispute concerning the very notion of the canon, criteria of its content, who should be included in it and who should not, and why. Moreover, the debate engaged not only representatives of certain political powers – close to the government circles of the time – but also journalists, public intellectuals, and representa-

<sup>2</sup> To illustrate the rationale of these changes let me refer to the interview with the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of National Education, Roman Giertych conducted by Magdalena M. Stawarska (Giertych 2007).

tives of academic community, mainly philologists. This shows that the canon (in this case, the literary canon) still remains a social and cultural institution that shapes to a greater or lesser degree the awareness of its readers, and that the struggle for the struggle for the symbolic content of culture takes place on very diversified fields of cultural activities.

What is the canon and why this particular way of 'struggle for recognition', to use Alex Honneth's expression, can trigger so many social emotions and controversies? Who shapes it? And why did canon become national? The following brief historical reconnaissance into the category of canon shall demonstrate its contingent, unnecessary nature. The word 'canon' comes from Greek and originally meant a measuring rod. Already in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC this word was used to describe 'a rule for the proportions of elements in architecture', but also 'for ideal proportions of a human figure'. Contrary to appearances, both original meanings are not far from one another, since they both include proportion, something understood by ancient Greeks as 'proper', 'adequately selected', 'recommended'. As such, since its first appearance in culture, irrespective of the field it referred to, the canon included numerous semantic structures related to 'appropriate measure'. Thus understood, the Greek canon has a very close meaning to the Latin norm. However, the Roman sense of normativisation gained advantage mainly in the legal field, whereas the Greek canon has a much wider meaning, since it includes hierarchical orders of cultural products (Pisarek 2005).

Following this path, we can assume, after the German historian of culture Jan Assmann, the Greek canon 'answers the question, What can we use as a guide?' (2011: 101). And he adds that this question 'becomes pressing when conventional measures are no longer adequate to deal with a given situation' (2011: 104), or, in other words, when the reality goes beyond the conditions up to the obvious conventions provided now by the tradition.

Assmann concludes his reflections with the remark that the canon is an instrument, because it allows for orientation in a given issue and a proper conduct, but at the same time it is a normative tool, 'an instrument not only registers what is but it also prescribes what has to be' (2011: 95). Although to a large extent canon owes its contemporary meaning to the Church (which began using this term for sacred texts), "the classical canon has still other roots than the theological. The former links up with the old meaning of measure and criterion, both for the production and, especially, for the judgment of art. It answers the question, What can we use as a guide? The canon defines the proportions of what is beautiful, great, or important, and it does so by pointing to works that embody and exemplify the relevant values" (Assmann 2011: 101–102). Assmann added that the notion of classics related to the notion of the canon 'encompasses the idea of the sacred together with guidelines for production and for judgment, and creates a "principle of sanctification"' (2011: 102).

The second line leading to the contemporary understanding of the canon is the tradition of shaping the body of texts acknowledged by the Church as sacred. In

this tradition, the canon is understood as “(...) the official list of books inspired by the Holy Spirit, which the teaching Church offered to its believers as the Word of God, i.e., an infallible rule of faith and conduct”. ‘Official’ means here that only some of many writings around the Testaments received the ‘certificate of belonging to the canon’ issued by ‘the Teaching Office of the Church’, while others were excluded and recognised as the Apocrypha. Therefore, not all texts were acknowledged by the Church as inspired by the Holy Ghost, and since the Apocrypha – which, it seems, can be interpreted as ‘folklore’, the product of folk culture – can be created indefinitely and as such do not foster the idea of ‘closed’ and hierarchical canon (Homerski 2000: 568).

The Christian idea of ‘canonical texts’ as collections of writings is also related to the issue of the ‘decline’ of the author and, at the same time, increased significance of authority. This may sound paradoxically, but these processes overlap. Since the Biblical texts are recognised by Christian Churches (also in Judaism and Islam) as ‘God’s writing’, their ultimate author is supposed to be God, whoever wrote these words down had to be inspired by God and could not be thought of as an independent author (Finkelstein, McCleery 2005), especially since language, including written language, was perceived as God’s gift (this idea survived until the 19<sup>th</sup> century). It was reflected in the practice of writing medical, legal or literary texts, which often do not mention their authors to emphasise that they were guided by God’s hand. On the other hand, since these anonymous writers were usually institutionally related to the Church (which had the monopoly for education, including literary education, for a long time), it ‘scooped’ the excess of the cultural production, building its authority on a very strong connection between intellectual and Church elites, as illustrated by the case of the process of formation of European universities and struggles for domination in this field. Therefore, it could be claimed that “the Church, which was the first to lay claim to such binding canonical (i.e., based on the truth) and indisputable authority, and which, by tying its members to the canon, produced a monocentric culture. Characteristic of such cultures is their all-embracing guidance; they come up with a unifying formula that brings all the different codes of cultural communication together, leaving no space for independent thought or discussion” (Assmann 2011: 99). Striving for cultural homogeneity (Gramscian cultural hegemony) started by the Church is, therefore, the process of creating canons understood as ‘rules’ or ‘norms’ through the works which embody certain values and their imitation is regarded as the fulfilling of God’s will.

The Renaissance adopted the Christian understanding of the canon as the list of works and its authors (this time with the emphasis on authors), but it was applied to works of secular writers from Antiquity and Middle Ages, but also to the contemporary writers. However, the criteria according to which given authors could qualify for such lists were unclear, so the existing registers were used and expanded with local works. Often the local versions of these lists referred to authors and works from the Western European countries: Italy, France, later Eng-

land and Germany. Works of these authors were considered to be model (classic), exemplary and worth following (Curtius 2013).

The important turning point in the understanding of cultural and literary canon was the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. during the consolidation of a modern nation state. It was the time when “18th century writers shifted the idea of the canon towards its more modern direction, when they managed to develop their own awareness of the value of national writers” (Lanoux 2003: 25). The idea of ‘nationalisation’ of literature and culture initially appeared in the works of German Romantics and soon was adopted in other countries. Friedrich Schiller and Wilhelm von Humboldt offered a significant contribution to this process: the former because of his esteem as a poet, and the latter, by means of institutional opportunities brought about by new universities and cultural centres. The Western culture began associating the canon with ‘inspired’ authors and works, ordered chronologically from Homer and Greek poets, Dante and Shakespeare, to contemporary authors included in the category of ‘national literature’. It should be noted that this category did not exist earlier and the ‘nationalisation’ of authors writing in a particular country or language was accomplished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Since then literature, literary education and the national awareness became closely associated. One of important elements shaping this awareness was the standardization of national literary language, accompanied by the normalization and codification of national languages (for example in the form of dictionaries). As the historian Eric Hobsbawm reported in this context, at the moment of the unification of Italy, only 2.5 percent of the people belonging to the cultural elite spoke the language later recognised as national, ‘while the rest spoke various and often mutually incomprehensible idioms’ and the situation in other countries was similar (Hobsbawm 1990: 38). The growing ‘national awareness’ resulted also from a certain focus of means of communication and social classes controlling them on national issues. In other words, one of the principal criteria according to which nations were emerging was the fact that its cultural elites (literary, administrative, and, notably, financial) of a given territory began defining themselves as ‘national’ and forms of communication they used – mainly in the form of literature and administrative documents – were labelled as ‘national language’. Jerzy Jedlicki, a historian of ideas, described it as a ‘nationalisation’ of culture, by which he meant the emphasis put by cultural and political elites on highlighting the aspects that differentiate various groups in terms of their nationality (1987: 46). Thus, the modern nation states, especially the Western ones, headed by France, England, and Prussia, began creating national cultural canons, intentionally different from the canons of other nations.

The emerging national ideology underlying the uniqueness of national canons draws its validity also from the works of Johann Gottfried Herder who often responds to the rhetorical question: “Is there a people upon earth totally uncultivated?” (1966: V), in order to justify the idea that culture and nation are in fact equivalent. In Herder’s philosophy, the preservation of the specificity and the evo-

lutionary continuity of a given nation's cultural identity was the purpose of every individual participating in the life of this nation – the very reason for describing oneself as a member of the nation – which could be most effectively accomplished by cultivating the native language as the expression of the nation's spirit.

The nation state, however, which concept was born in the spirit of the post-revolutionary liberalism winning the battle with the old feudal regime based mainly on the hierarchical political and religious structures legitimised by the Church institutions, required itself a legitimisation to exercise its power. It was found in the 'invented traditions' which supported the creation of a new identity through the canon of national values. The author of this phrase, Eric Hobsbawm, defines 'invented traditions' as a set of practices of a ritual and symbolic character based on tacit rules which "seek to inculcate certain values and norms by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (1983: 1). These repetitions are aimed at rooting norms and values in the social consciousness and practices of everyday life. Inventing traditions has always served nation states to demonstrate that in the post-revolutionary (i.e. after the French Revolution) world of changeability and constant modernisation there still exist areas of social life which have the status of eternal, unchangeable, and related to the past. This gives the nation state a social legitimisation to exercise its power. All European countries participated in this process, even the newly established ones (such as Italy or the German Empire) and the process intensified especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It resulted in combining the cultural canon with the idea of the nation. These two notions have become so closely integrated that since that time 'the canon of national culture' has become an almost commonly-used phrase. As Brennan notes in this context: "The rise of the modern nation-state in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is inseparable from the forms and subjects of imaginative literature. On the one hand, the political tasks of modern nationalism directed the course of literature, leading through the Romantic concepts of 'folk character' and 'national language' to the (largely illusory) divisions of literature into distinct 'national literatures'. On the other hand, just as fundamentally, literature participated in the formation of nations through the creation of national print media – the newspaper and the novel" (Brennan 1990: 48). It should be added that also the language of science ceased to be 'universal' (with the dominant role of Latin) and became a national language which became itself 'universal' for all communities included in a given nation.

Ernest Gellner has the similar approach. He defines nation in terms of convergence of will, culture and political borders. Gellner, however, underlines, it would find its justification only in specific social circumstances, to which he included: centrally managed higher cultures, standardization and homogenization of culture and educational politics. Thus understood, the nation can be defined in the following way: "Under these conditions, though under these conditions only, nations can indeed be defined in terms both of will and of culture, and indeed in terms of the convergence of them both with political units. In these condi-

tions, men will to be politically united with all those, and only those, who share their culture. Polities then will to extend their boundaries to the limits of their cultures, and to protect and impose their culture with the boundaries of their power” (Gellner 1983: 55). The specific social conditions mentioned by the British anthropologist can be identified with the need for shaping the sense of national awareness and origin. Even though the process of transmitting and reproducing culture is centrally governed and in the top-down direction, as a preparation to perform a certain social role and an attempt at achieving certain standards, it may bring about some positive results in the form of a strongly felt connection with one’s cultural community and, as a consequence, the will to create one nation. It would be more relevant, however, to interpret Gellner’s notion of the will not as the will of a nation, but rather as the state’s will or rather an aspiration for closing the whole society within the territorial and cultural borders. According to Gellner, the nation expresses the idea of nationalism, i.e. the principle of the unity of ethnic and state borders, closely related to “entry to, participation in, identification with, a literate high culture which is co-extensive with an entire political unit and its total population, and which must be of this kind if it is to be compatible with the kind of division of labour, the type or mode of production, on which this society is based” (1983: 95). Thus, the groups which define themselves as national determine the set of values, traditions and customs which are included into the canon of their culture.

Both Hobsbawm and Gellner focus on the shaping of the nations by means of the state power, which was typical for the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe. The situation in the Middle and Eastern European countries which had no statehood, was different. But also in these countries there were some groups or intellectuals who saw their purpose in ‘reviving’ these nations based on independent states. The lack of statehood, however, resulted in a situation where the national culture could not be promoted by the public administration or education – the official channels for the transfer of culture. I shall illustrate it on the example of the Polish culture. At the time of partitions, Polish literature was absent (or almost absent) from the official curriculum. It was very much present in home schooling, during secret courses and lectures. Since Polish literature was associated with the Polish national culture, i.e. the nation in the ethnic sense rather than in the Western political sense, introducing the German and Russian literature to school curriculums was regarded as a denationalisation and not building the new nationality. As Lanoux noted in this context, the lack of statehood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Poland resulted in creating a social environment where national artists and writers were regarded as cultural authorities. The status of Mickiewicz, Słowacki and Krasiński was the result of the intensive work on the idea of a national culture without the state support. Consequently, there was the need for a social process of creating tradition by formalisation, ritualization and institutionalisation, and making the tradition, a historical construct, seem to “have been there forever” (Lanoux 2003: 9). The lack of statehood and the public education system created a situation where

the literature read outside the school system took over the educational functions in the Polish society and, at the same time, became the nation-creating factor, because literature played the role of 'substitutive knowledge' in relation to both politics and history. Since the content related to history and language of a given territory could not exist in the official political circulation, it was transferred onto the sphere of culture. Aleksander Bocheński argued that it contributed to emphasising in the Polish mentality the irrational, emotional aspects at the expense of rational and critic ones (1986).

Another aspect of shaping the nation without state was acknowledging religion as the bonding material of the nation (Kieniewicz 1982), which was not typical for the Western ideas of the nation. This concept is rooted in the Romantic literature in which the notion was interpreted in terms of sacred categories transferring its history onto the theological plain where a certain ethnic group is associated with a special and sacred eschatological or civilizational mission that serves as a moral lodestar for 'degenerated' states and nations. To a large extent the Romantic literature imported the universal language of religion into its own literary and cultural activities. It resulted in emphasising the national identity as the only true identity and the deviation from it would deny the possibility of an individual existence. The Romantic idea of a nation and culture underlined the clear-cut nature of the performed social roles, associating producers of culture with the roles of 'guides' or 'bards' who are particularly responsible for the nation and its culture as a whole. The Romantic ideology combined with religion stressed the necessity for a public service of literature and all educational activities, which led to the perception of all education as a tool of serving the nation, where individual choices have much less significance than the needs of the nation (Janion 2007).

This national-Romantic image of culture, literature and canon is still strongly present in the Polish culture and education, even though it is slightly modified. The critical approach to such thinking about the canon allows for questioning the dominant, at least until recently, tendency to think about the origin of the canon as 'natural', which would suggest that a given group does not participate in the process of creation.

Joanna Kurczewska distinguished three contemporary notions of canon or its most popular expressions, and the basic criterion for this distinction is the canon's creator. In the first approach, the canon is the product of the invisible hand of national heritage, or "museum of national masterpieces" (2000: 34–50). It is a set, organised by the history of many generations, of what is considered to be masterpieces in various fields of literature and arts. Thus, the canon would serve as an indicator for contemporary generations of what is valuable for a given culture and in reference to which orders and rules can they distinguish themselves from other cultures. This approach to the canon includes primarily the authors of old masterpieces 'preserved by history' who perform two cultural roles at the same time. On the one hand, they are innovators in terms of works and norms, on the other hand, they are 'competent restorers' of the national

culture heritage which they aim to preserve. The first approach to the canon focuses on what is a lasting and obvious heritage of the Polish culture, and on its evaluation. The selectiveness of the mechanisms of its reconstruction reveals its social and cultural exclusiveness. "In other words – writes Kurczewska – it only takes into account its creators and competent recipients, irrespective of the issue of the place and role of these masterpieces in the social communication between creators and their audience, past and present, and ignores the reasons, course and results of the 'meetings' between masterpieces and their recipients" (2000: 36). The canon thus understood is transformed into a museum visited – out of duty – by school trips who leave as quickly as possible this 'edifice of culture' to come back to the real world. This is because the very principle of building this metaphorical museum is not discussed or even considered to be out of discussion. No one knows who decides about its construction, what needs it is supposed to have, who takes care of its conservation and the replacement of elements. Kurczewska summarises her account in the following words: "All this constitutes the false image of the unproblematic canon – the tradition of national masterpieces of painting, music, literature. It makes the impression as if the canon was 'always there', the same for authors and experts of Polish culture, while questioning its rules was the result of individual misapprehension and coincidental incompetence" (2000: 37).

The second approach presents the canon as 'the storehouse of national trends' and is discussed from the point of view of various types of recipients. The first approach focuses on the past, whereas the second one is related to the fragmented and fluent present. "It is focused on registering the 'here and now' of the national culture, on showing the power of great communities concealed under the intellectual and artistic trends" (Kurczewska 2000: 39). This interpretation is supported by the principle of kaleidoscope which says that the culture is apprehended in terms of what appears in the minds of its participants who depend on their place in the social or class structure as well as on their cultural competence. In other words, culture depends here on the perspective which consumers of culture adopt as the basis of their perception. Culture thus understood is a complex, and at the same time, very unstable system which largely depends on the active participation and more or less conscious intentions of its members. National culture seen from this point of view is focused on fragments rather than on the whole, and is organised accordingly. It may lead to the perception of the cultural canon in its present version as an already mentioned warehouse of national trends or, perhaps in a more current language, the supermarket. The canon as the warehouse of trends is the result of mass attitudes imagined by individuals and groups as something considered to be the most important and popular at a given moment. "This effect sometimes can elevate an obscure artist to the status of 'the hero of the moment' and an elite artwork to something everyone has to have some opinion about and not knowing it disqualifies an individual as a true Pole" (Kurczewska 2000: 41). On the other hand, the canon as

a supermarket populated by masses of consumers looking for special occasions and cheap shopping is pictured as chaotic and from time to time reorganised according to the converging tastes of its customers. In this approach to the canon, not many products reside permanently in the supermarket-like space of culture, since their position shifts according to sales statistics reflected in the changing 'bestseller' list. "The customer in the supermarket accepts an important premise that there are no good or bad preferences, because there is no normative framework to determine hierarchies and their measures" (Kurczewska 2000: 44). The basic limitation of this approach to the canon, alongside the falsely conceived democratization, is its susceptibility to marketization and the dependence on the skilful 'selling' of an artwork.

The third approach distinguished by Kurczewska presents the canon as the 'ideological offer for politicians'. The previous two approaches referred to the narrowly conceived artistic culture and its audience, including only to a limited extent its social and civilizational context. The last approach to the canon emphasised the importance of creating values as well as their imposition in the process of social communication. Here we reach the idea of culture in which both production and reproduction of culture become the indispensable elements of a social order. In a modern state there is always a social group which in a way more obvious than others decides about the direction and the course of social changes. Usually these groups are called 'political elites', even though their direct connection to the actual state authorities is not necessary. These elites set the standards within the norms of democracy in a pluralist state and society. "As 'the representatives of the whole society' they design the principles of building the new order and its indispensable cultural content" (Kurczewska 2000: 49). As such, they participate in the decision-making process about what is canonical in a given culture. In other words, the canon belongs to a wide sphere of social communication and includes also these elements of this communication which are focused on the existence and identity of a given society. This approach has two dimensions: institutional and symbolic. The former means that the canon is 'a complex set of instruments with which the privileged minority influences other citizens within the framework of the democratic state, i.e., the state in which there are conditions for emergence of free public discourse' or, let us add, in which these conditions, even though formally guaranteed, are not in fact respected (for example the existence of the so-called *samisdats* during the People's Republic of Poland). In the latter dimension, the canon includes the axiological offer of some politicians who use it as the common ground for gathering mass support for their ideological programmes. Here, the canon exists because it expresses the demand of a certain political auditorium and, at the same time, aspires to widen this auditorium or even recreate it. Its essence is the 'symbolic violence' – imposing social communication according to a particular set of beliefs concerning various spheres of social life. This approach to the canon underlines its political, social and cultural dimensions.

In the context of these distinctions, it should be concluded that creating the canon is a very complex process guided by clashing interests of various social groups, each of whom wished to have monopoly in the field of culture. The canon of national culture is most of all a particular mode of narration of dominant groups in a given historical moment of the nation. These groups act on behalf of the nation and, therefore, claim the right to define both the national citizenship and the set of axiological rules determining the criteria of this citizenship. As such, the canon changes in time, every period in the history of culture has its own canon of references, but it has to be constructed and reconstructed according to particular criteria assumed as important. The canon changes in time, because the world view which governs it also changes in time, even though it strives to seem unchangeable, which is especially important in the case of such communities as the nation.

Education plays a significant role in this process. It is seen as the basic instrument for inculturation, i.e. introducing to culture, in this case – to the national culture. There is a clear assumption concerning the cultural dependence of individuals subjected to all these pedagogical training designed to make them submissive to the imagined national whole. Such education is governed by the idea that it is the culture – national culture – that shapes individuals, and not by the idea that individuals are also creators of this culture. Secondly, education is a perfect tool to implement Hobsbawm's invented traditions, because it is founded on the ideal of a common and uniform national curriculum. Therefore, the plexus of nation and canon can be adequately apprehended when we discuss the national literature as something different from other literatures. This distinction is common in most textbooks for literary studies and its strong presence is especially visible in the reading lists which function as a school literary canon. The function of the canon – separating the national from what does not belong to the national canon – is one of the oldest traditions related to the development of national cultures.

It is worth noting that the cultural canon is often a heterogeneous set of reference points for constructing social groups and communities. Antonina Kłoskowska's (1991) understanding of the canon as a set of values, symbols, myths which are particularly valued and preserved by a certain group, can provide an illustration to this point. They are valued and preserved, because they laid foundation for the emergence of these communities. Therefore, the canon allows for the maintenance of a common universe of myths and symbols without which the shared social world would be impossible. Cultural canons contribute to the development of communities, and the image of these communities largely depends on the shape of their canons, their content, its interpretations and transmission channels. The image – it should be noted – is consolidated as valid for all members of a given community (irrespective of the level of saturation at which individuals actually live this image) by educational practices.

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