

Domain of Freedom

It has only now occurred to me that the Institute of Literary Research, which operates under the auspices of the Polish Academy of Sciences but is in fact a few years older than the Academy itself, is now celebrating the 55th anniversary of its founding. I began my work there as an apprentice assistant in autumn 1958, and hence I have been associated with the Institute for the entire duration of my professional career.

At the outset of my work there I felt rather out of place, as I knew almost no one and the renowned names of the Institute's founders evoked not only respect, but also a kind of unease. Moreover, I sensed that the opportunity of commencing work at such a reputable research unit entailed a particular type of predestination. Nonetheless, I immediately began to make myself at home, as the individuals I encountered at the Institute were not only outstanding researchers, they also turned out to be very agreeable and kind people.

But my success there was inspired by something else as well. Namely, by the time I began my professional career the Institute had already overcome the trauma of the Marxist era, a distressing time when the study of literature cultivated by the Institute had to serve Marxist ideas, in vulgar Stalinist style. The Institute was already quite a different place by autumn 1958, and its past record, unworthy of any continuation, had no influence whatsoever on what was then going on there. From the mid-50s onward, the Institute was a domain of freedom. My peers and I were not forced to make the dramatic choice that my elder colleagues had faced: either to abide by externally imposed patterns of behavior, which were hard to accept, or to just keep quiet. Those of us who had only just become employees of the Institute were not made aware of such an alternative. On the contrary, not a single person attempted to exercise any pressure of this sort. One could either be a Marxist or not, as one chose. Never during those several decades did I encounter any encouragement to write about something in any particular manner or with any particular emphasis added, nor was I given any recommendation compelling me to focus on a particular scholarly approach when interpreting any text or phenomenon. Such things are obvious today, but in the times of Communist Poland, when ideology could interfere with everything, they were indeed far from evident.

Starting as soon as it became feasible, the Institute of Literary Research kept in touch with global research. We were assisted in doing so by remarkable library resources, which made it possible to practice high-caliber literary theory.



Despite political upheavals in Poland, the PAN Institute of Literary Research was able to retain its autonomy

The Institute of Literary Research has had a vast impact on the development and standards of literary studies in Poland. This influence has manifested itself in various forms, the main one being the establishment of very high scholarly standards and criteria. The Institute has also had an impact on university studies, not only owing to the fact that most of its staff are engaged in teaching work, but also through numerous publi-

cations. Hence, the Institute is not merely a group of scholars exclusively immersed in the contemplation of somewhat abstract problems, or, as some might claim, detached from real life.

Such objections were raised for decades by the Institute's adversaries – mainly the Communist Party members among the Warsaw University staff that could not tolerate the existence of such an institution, since they themselves were unable to live up to the scientific standards it had imposed. They thus plotted to have the Institute shut down. Their offensive became particularly intense in 1968, when the Institute's existence came under serious threat. Nevertheless, we survived the attack. We also survived another period of great difficulties for the Institute: this was when a Communist Party nominee

was appointed as the Institute's president, his primary and hardly concealed goal being to incapacitate the Institute from within. Although having only a vague idea of what scholarly research was all about, this person managed to do much harm to the Institute during his four years in office (1984-1988). Even so, he failed in his attempts to radically restrict our freedom.

If I were asked to point out a singular event in the Institute's history that I recalled with particular intensity, one I especially appreciated, I choose a staff meeting that was convened in mid-March 1968 (during the so-called March 1968 Student Protests). This meeting was held in order to protest against what was going on in Poland at the time, above all against the acts of physical violence that were then being committed against student protestors. There were only a few domestic institutions in Poland at that time whose employees dared to demonstrate their disapproval. The Institute also provided further evidence of its courage during the Martial Law period. Apart from its scholarly work, the Institute's history is also comprised of deeds of this sort.

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