

Title: The Polish and Central European Literary Canons: a Comparative Perspective
Author: Piotr Wilczek, University of Silesia

This paper is devoted to the problem of Polish and Central European literary and cultural canon, discussed in a comparative perspective. There are several questions I would like to refer to in the paper: What constitutes a canon? How do we know that the canon is a canon? Who prescribes the literary canon to nations and other large communities? Central European countries have not participated in the debate on the issue of the canon, one of the most vigorous debates that the world of the humanities has been confronted with.

In my paper I will discuss the causes of the absence of Central Europe from the dispute on literary canon and the impact of this absence on the present cultural and educational debates. There are many causes of this absence and they should be discussed in the context of Western debates of the 20th and 21st centuries. First, feminist and postmodernist methodologies have not captured Central European literary studies to the degree apparent in the Western world, particularly as applied to literature created before the 20th century. Secondly, phenomena characteristic of the western world inseparably related to its colonial past: multi-culturalism, multi-racialism and multi-ethnicity which are contributory to the substantial reevaluation of the canon, are not dominant in Central European literature. Thirdly, Polish and Central European literary theory has been badly afflicted by attempts at canon reevaluation made by Communist regimes. Fourthly, the debate over the function of literature-in-exile in post-war Central Europe was also an important voice in the canon debate. Central European controversies over the canon have pursued a course diametrically opposite to the similar disputes in Western Europe or the United States.