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EDUCATION BETWEEN CULTURAL “CANON” AND THE FUTURE: “CLASSICS” AND THEIR DIDACTIC VALUE

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Abstract. The text considers various aspects of pedagogical reflections within the problematics, described and analysed as follows: (1) The future speeds up and surprises, also painfully, (2) Everyday experience as an enemy of the future, (3) How symbolic culture is functioning?, (4) On the possibility of appraisal of classics beyond the classicism, (5) On bureaucratic interference into a lively textual tissue, (6) Between conservative and liberal treating of traditions in culture, (7) Between social radicality and dialogic deconstruction of culture, (8) Illusions and traps of canonizations of cultural contents, (9) The conclusion: on cultural attitudes in didactics. The author discusses limits and paradoxes of imposing cultural canon within education perceived as initiation into culture. The latter is to be perceived as invisible environment constituting symbolic soil for the memory of signifiers which serve for self-expression, understanding of the Other and for creative autotranscendence and enrichment of the cultural patrimony for the next generations. The basic message of the text requests more profound educational perception and treatment of tradition in order to make it participate in influences becoming the energetic and symbolic background of cultural development at the same time critically revisited in order to meet the challenges of the future.

Keywords: canon, classics, tradition, modernity, symbolic culture, education.

1. INTRODUCTION

The key dilemma at the intersection of pedagogical theory and educational practice concerns what modern education should look like in relation to cultural tradition and program norms of school discourse organization and textbook content. This also applies to the question of whether for new generations traditional programs are not only boring but even dead in the face of new cultural attitudes. Hence emerge the questions whether and how it can be reversed, whether it is enough to strengthen the rigors or whether we should even break with the pressure of social norms and open ourselves to lowering the requirements and the level of education. As it turns out, as I will show in the following considerations, the complexity of the existing cultural and pedagogical situation is not taken into account enough. One must be able to open oneself to paradoxes, communication traps and refusal to cooperate with the school or educational environment on the part of successive generations of young people on an ever-increasing scale. Circumstances of these phenomena and countermeasures will be analyzed below and indicated through the review of referenced literature.

2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 The future accelerates and surprises, also painfully

The ever-accelerating pace of social change, the scale of technological revolutions in the world, which are just some of the factors that put on the agenda the issue of the future that is already happening before our eyes, and not waiting somewhere far away in the unpredictable abyss of time. In the past, the change concerned the time after several generations of stability, then breakthroughs began with the life of the next generation, and now the leaps are made many times during the lifetime of one generation, marginalizing some experiences and putting pressure on others (Mead, 2000). This difference in the rate of acceleration fundamentally affects the chances of young people adopting patterns of the world order of adults, or even old people, and the institutional claims of the stabilizers of the social world, including schools. Sometimes, with a new pace and power of expression, old fanaticisms return and new frustrations grow, gaining masses of new spokesmen polarizing the world in hateful marches and their rhetorics. Didactic means alone in any form of media are not able to counteract this. Generational and civilizational surprises bring both opportunities and threats. It happens that the canon of ancient pathologies returns, such as nationalism and racism, with their personal models, as well as pathological reading of the classics (eg the Bible as a source of witch-hunts and drastic evangelization). The canon of the past may collide with the utopian vision of personifications of progress, when the classic freezes in the monumental granite of the rights to destroy thoughts outside the designated framework. Hence, the future tends to be blocked within past frames of rigid identities, or reduced to the rations of newly canonized idols eliminating the disturbances of a one-way march. Didactics is sometimes entangled in the interest of both pathological poles of establishing a degraded future. Thus, the classics are closed here in one of the extreme ways, causing the thought to freeze in the unreflectiveness and arrogance of the new generations, experiencing the kitsch of false sublimation of content, elevated to altars and allowing others to be condemned to the dustbin of history and culture, at least into oblivion, and more often into the stigma of irretrievably inferior. How to free the classic from this trap?

2.2 Everyday life as the enemy of the future

The future emerges in the current versions of the world, constantly colliding with the preparation of the imagination and the functioning of institutions that are supposed to influence the competences to deal with challenges, which more and more often require abandoning the existing standards and rules of the social game. This also applies to cultural interactions of new density and complexity, full of paradoxes, ambiguity and recurring chaos in falsely imposed patterns of order and its rigid framework of procedures, criteria and pressure of authoritative mechanisms, especially those forcing obedience. This even applies to the quality of spending free time, and even more so to the sense of meaning within school time, from primary to university. Everyday life stretched over years can carry a dangerous emptiness, filled with ad hoc defense mechanisms, accustoming to banality and sterility, and even more so to the pathology of irresponsibility as a norm or identity standard.

The "ritualization of appearances" begins to dominate, where the experience of time devoid of reflection pushes one to abandon risk and even change, or into ad hoc reactions and temporality. Preparing for the future turns out to be impossible, and even hindered, when conventional modes of education are refused to engage in interaction, when they detach themselves from new technologies and implement them thoughtlessly into a symbolic space devoid of meaning for the modern world, introducing them to submissiveness and indifference. The world that is becoming before the eyes of new generations seems to break with the mechanisms imposed by the existing institutions and their adaptive orders. Today's world is dominated by electronically processed visuality, multimedia and digitization. It is emerging, oriented towards performances that seduce with shortness and speed of recall, when haste

and superficiality of reception block the possibility of immersing ourselves under the coating of signs and images, including words, into the space of invisible meanings, values and experiences.

Understanding tends to be devoid of concepts, so it's easy to "have no idea" how to express yourself and how to understand others, and embrace complexity beyond antiquated conventions, primitive despite modern media, such as shortcuts available in electronic gadgets. Empathy becomes more and more difficult, and at the same time perceived as redundant and wrong from the perspective of narcissistic egoism. Indifference to meanings, and even more so values, overwhelms through distance and minimizing one's own involvement beyond temporary complacency.

2.3 How does symbolic culture work?

In such a situation and aura, easy simplifications and polarizations are commonplace. Dualisms separating the past and the future, tradition and modernity, opposing closed school education and the open becoming of the world, most often govern the institutionalization of cultural interactions, causing enormous damage and losses, and at the same time being taken for granted. The canon and the classics, which used to be the cultural source of emerging identities, tend to be manifestly poorly present or even absent in the perception of the world by the masses of successive generations, with the participation and fault of institutions (educational, media) of formal intercultural mediation. Anyway, quickly successive cohorts of individuals affected by the "massity syndrome"¹ (Ortega y Gasset, 1982) become not only victims of such a mechanism of cultural degradation of their world, but even accomplices, accomplices in a convenient conspiracy of reduction, and even self-degradation. Didactics, which is unable to attract individuals to educational cooperation for the sake of their own development, often generates a mechanism of "negative identity", denying the value of the cultural offer (Witkowski, 2015).

Therefore, entire generations, environments and communities tend to be deprived and often deprive themselves of elementary rooting, growing into culture, understood as symbolic memory, requiring work on oneself from anyone who wants to enrich and transform it. Meanwhile, spiritual work is needed, occurring through the effort of absorptive immersion into the soil of symbols as an invisible environment of meanings in the form of categories as screens that allow you to be a creative participant in the circulation of ideas for deeper self-expression and understanding the expression of others. It is also about getting used to the world and its creative transformation, having material for the "breath of thought" beyond the socially available contents inscribed in the temporarily dominant local "vortexes of reducing the cultural complexity of the world"² (Witkowski, 2009), from which only education has a chance to pull the imagination. New technologies of meaning sharing do not work automatically and do nothing for or instead of the recipient; rather they close it in their virtual world, destroying the potential paths of growth of cultural competences intended for enriching, not impoverishing, the symbolic content of a human person becoming an increasingly symbolically saturated being thanks to creative encounters with difference processed for his/her own spiritual identity. This is done in interactions immersed in historical heritage and opening it to the unpredictability of the future, despite the approach

¹ Phenomena of narcissism dominated by satisfaction with one's own mediocrity, bringing unwillingness to make an effort to exceed one's limitations or the demanding attitude and escaping from responsibility for one's own development, as well as postponing thinking about the emerging future, often mean an ostentatious "development moratorium", as defined by Erik H. Erikson, damaging the quality of identity in the long run towards an individual reproduced "mass personality".

² This is how the "logic of socialization" works, which can excessively reduce the quality of thought, language and immersion in symbolic space, requiring educational desocialization that opens horizons saturated with difference, inclining to "decentration mechanisms" as conditions for the development and enrichment of communication. I wrote about it using *Sztuka powieści* [The Art of the Novel] by Milan Kundera or the theory of communicative action by Jürgen Habermas, cf. Witkowski L. (2009), *Ku integralności edukacji i humanistyki II. Postulaty, postaci, pojęcia, próby. Odpowiedź na Księgę Jubileuszową* [Towards the integrity of education and the humanities II. Postulates, figures, concepts, attempts. Response to the Jubilee Book], Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2009 [in Polish].

usually equipped with tools of resistance and transformations that are not always creative.

2.4. On the possibility of praising the classics outside of classicism

Less and less often in the (post)modern world one speaks and writes about the “classics” of cultural works, considering it an issue that is too outdated and subject to being removed from the tasks of the curriculum of education, when it is allegedly subject to constant “modernization”. Classics of thought in many disciplines, or classical works advertised as “masterpieces”, are often treated as monumental but valid for other epochs and are sometimes reduced to excessive excerpts of summaries, textbook anointings or groundless affirmations or final devastating critiques and overcomings. At the same time, the classics are sometimes negated as condemning those who recall them to the unnecessary and harmful excess of “classicism” in fundamental opposition to the aforementioned modernization, which is a manifestation of supposedly the only right liberation from the past by “modernity”.

Reading the classics in its erroneous (naive, superficial, shorthand and unreflective) school practice constantly boils down to the question “what did the author mean?” for another time, instead of inquiring “how does the author make the reader think and in what is he significant?” for the present day. The canon affirmed as a classic achievement may be regarded as meaningless and enforced only by an anachronistic program of introduction into the bygone world. Teachers often do not know that freeing texts from the impression of anachronism in the practice of recalling them is the basic condition for them to be meaningful in anything and not to be annihilated in their cultural function. So that they do not become “culturally mute” objects. Modernity cannot abide with impunity the orientation towards “ritualizations of appearances”, as Pierre Bourdieu often expressed it, which dooms education to vainly decreeing the importance and meaning of symbolic matter, making cultural interactions in education sterile and stimulating developmental stagnation. Symbolic culture is then made available didactically in a mock school ritual in trivialized, ignored and shallow access to the wealth of spiritual impulses necessary to complete the quality of life and the ability to experience and affirm values in the effort to meet the challenges of the increasingly rapidly growing future.

Meanwhile, it is necessary to encourage new readings, inspirations, included in the triad of live contact with culture through “explosive effects”, carrying the experience of destroying naivety, awakening that opens the eyes to great impulses that give food for thought, so that life-giving impulses for one's own identity can be processed, enriching the quality growing into the culture, increasing the potential for self-expression and growing up to the tasks awaiting today as a dramatic challenge (Jaworska-Witkowska, & Witkowski, 2010; Witkowski, 2014).

2.5 Bureaucratic interference with the living fabric of texts

Responsibility for modernizing education is most often only included in the process dominated by the operations of building a minimum curriculum for education, from the perspective of short-term visions of what is useful for present preparations for the social space, including the minimum competences necessary to perform roles on the labor market. There are also various ideological and political frictions involving administrators in the field of educational content. They function in the space of tensions, especially between the conservative and liberal approaches, both of which free thinking about the classics from treating it as a living medium of introducing into the contemporary world through its symbolic dimension.

In the conservative approach, the classic becomes in fact the foundation of the degrading “classicism” as a closed base of patterns necessary and sufficient for life in their exegesis, not subject to reflection, let alone correction. Negating such an extreme interpretation of the status of “classics” usually manifests itself in a refusal to recognize its value in general, hence historical content falls into disfavor as allegedly closed in references to a world that no longer exists or has no meaning for the present, having the right to rebel and create a new “epoch” on new foundations. This may be expressed in such a fundamental “instrumentalization” of cultural knowledge and competences, in which procedures and

practical skills matter, and not the potential for reflexivity that postpones or undermines the existing, newly established conventions of social behavior. And yet, there are also radical ideological instrumentalizations of symbolic culture, reducing the permitted content to assumed functions stabilizing behavior under the patterns of control and steering.

As a result, the content carrying the potential of reflexivity and criticism towards the mechanisms of power is removed; the possibility of asking questions and looking for alternatives is eliminated, cultural deficits and deprivations are sometimes "zeroed", with the loss of awareness of what losses come into play here (Kwieciński, 2000). School textbooks and even public media can reduce the space of thought in such a way that it is devoid of a sense of lack, and even more so it functions without rebelling against the damage caused by this mode, typical of a "wasted" (miserable) existence³.

2.6 Between conservative and liberal treatment of tradition in culture

I have already shown separately various educational strategies regarding the treatment of tradition in school curricula (Witkowski, 2007, pp. 204-206). One of them, most often called conservative, operates with intercultural transmission, treating tradition as a minimum source of cultural initiation, inscribed in the symbolic heritage of classical texts or other cultural entities (objects considered timeless "masterpieces") of imperishable value, or at least such we must constantly remind the next generations not to forget about them, or at least be able to associate them in the local courts.

Hence, the well-known formula warned against by Witold Gombrowicz in *Ferdydurke*, indicating that often the effect of such an influence is duplicated but not experienced, not experienced emotionally or intellectually and devoid of meaning that develops the spirituality of the recipient. This was illustrated by the phrase "Słowacki was a great poet" as necessary and sufficient declaration in the verification mode of the minimum socialization of an "educated" man with diplomas, although not shaped by these contents in his own sensitivity, imagination and the will to open up to this area of symbolic phenomena in culture. As an environment of meanings, it ceases to be a vivid „symbolic soil“ into which it is worth growing in order to gain the potential to express oneself and understand the value of the expression of others, and above all to operate such content in the current sphere of existential tasks and challenges. An indifferent exegesis is enforced, independent of the changes in the world and the attitudes of the recipients, whose reluctance or resistance needs to be broken as an expression of cultural immaturity.

Thus, an attempt at a radical antidote to such a perspective was the (neo)liberal affirmation of tradition as a space for possible interpretations, boldly stripped of the rigors of binding and absolutized conventions. Here, the encouragement is to reach for interpretations that become the legacy of transgressive procedures oriented at originality and boldness of individual reaction, combining meanings into their new constellations beyond the canon of interpretation as the key closing access to the layers of meaning, which are, as Gadamer used to put it, the "semantic surplus" of thought, constantly letting us know in new readings. Hence the disagreement with the use of content that is dead in their reception for the recipient.

Perhaps the most complete expression of such a strategy was the attitude of the famous teacher in the film *Dead Poets Society*, where the condition for affirming and protecting the development of students' poetic potential was allowing them to rebel against the canon of poetry readings, including removing the recommended content from the binding and affirming set. In a gesture of rebellion to protect the living poetic spirit of young readers, it was possible to challenge the school curriculum by tearing out pages from textbooks on the history of literature in the mode of refusing to recognize the value of what the older generation imposed, by itself no longer being a convincing guardian of enforced

³ It is enough to recall the title question of Friedrich Hölderlin's famous poem: *What is the use of a poet in a miserable time?* The secret of the formula lies in the hidden sense of vanity as a wasted existence, incapable of deeper reflection.

content. The canon ceases to apply here if it is considered dead, even though it is imposed by software. The demand to recognize the content of the dead from the past as the key to the present destroys the sense of the right to the life presence of content emerging from the space of new challenges and inspirations that were not even dreamed of by the classics.

The point, however, is that it is enough to rebel against the necrosis of the remains of meanings killed in their school textbook affirmations for it to turn out that texts already covered with a patina of sublime but empty interpretation can speak completely differently when freed from the existing patterns and historical limitations.

2.7 Between social radicalism and dialogical deconstruction of culture

Tradition, even inscribed in the classics of literature, can also be the subject of modernization in the sense of selective adaptation to currently desired attitudes, e.g. in the field of an organic approach, positivist work at the grassroots or a romantic outburst. Similarly, it is possible to separate the “progressive” content from the “relics” in the struggle for social modernity, organizing a new social order based on new principles of order, transforming the basic framework of the organization of institutions and modes of functioning of power and creating a vision of social responsibility.

It was not for nothing that Maria Janion, announcing the “end of the Romantic paradigm”, was in fact advocating that, despite the local Polish reduction of ideas about Romantic poetry, we would be able to go beyond the contexts of the fight against Russian tsarism towards a more universal perspective in European Romanticism. This emphasized the ethos of the struggle of the “Faustian man” with his challenges inscribed in the forces of evil, with which spiritual deals are often concluded, prejudging the degradation of man, or making him a hostage of the traps of fate, with whom one must be able to argue life and death for one’s own dignity of humanity. Of course, this can come back in the revival of the ethos of fighting against power, as Tadeusz Dejmek achieved in the famous staging of the master piece *Dziady* by Adam Mickiewicz from 1968, freeing the context of the fight against tsarism from the historical envelope, faded for the young generation, and carrying the potential for a new explosion of subjectivity political and cultural, including a challenge to God and to the communist regime.

2.8 Illusions and pitfalls of canonization of cultural kontent

Of course, it is not enough to merely formally include the classics in the canon of school reading. Politicians, acting as education administrators, insisting that something should be excluded from the list of compulsory reading at school, or something should be included, formally elevating it to the rank of “canon”, or allegedly excluding the harmful impact of unwanted content.

Usually, the scale of student resistance is not taken into account, on the one hand, the devastating power of school trivialization or superficial interpretations on the other, and even more so the dulling of sensitivity to cultural content in the future, in yet another perspective. The trivialities of education, waves of noise around meaningless content not only say nothing to students, but also teach them to take a reflective approach to culture. It is not for nothing that Olga Tokarczuk, in *The Tender Narrator*, talks about the “epidemic of unreflectiveness” spread in a rush mode and superficial reading, which independently resonate with her earlier depictions of Peter Sloterdijk in *Critique of Cynical Reason* or Jean Baudrillard in his essay *America* (Tokarczuk, 2020; Sloterdijk, 2008; Baudrillard, 1998). To those who are afraid of Gombrowicz's presence in the canon of reading, I hasten to report that from my experience of observing students of philosophy or pedagogy, the mere fact that they have had contact with some content and have it “out of the head” results in an *a priori* refusal to engage in serious cognitive engagement and to include anything from them as significant. eye-opening, enriching for the future. Only a surprisingly different interpretation of Gombrowicz reveals the illusory nature of „reworking” his ideas, reduced in fact to “reworking into gray” devoid of meaning. Treated in the mode of school reading, Gombrowicz loses all the claws of defiance and independence in thinking against stereotypes, which should be close to the rebellion of schoolchildren, and is not the fault of teachers and students

themselves, incapable of the effort extracting "explosive" impulses from this work.

Hence, paradoxically, Gombrowicz's presence in the school frame often kills him for extracurricular culture, which those who throw him out of the canon seem not to know. The gesture of exclusion itself strengthens the "subversive" potential of this work, which is exactly the opposite of the intended effect, until the pressure of censorship or even the list of forbidden books straight from the Inquisition does not work. It was not a coincidence, broadly speaking, that there was a postulate (Janusz Sławiński) to protect the classical canon of literature from being included in the list of compulsory school reading, considering what harm schooling in Polish studies can do with it. I was not surprised by the opinion of Krzysztof Pomian, expressed once in a conversation, against the obligatory inclusion of philosophy in the curriculum in high schools, considering what such a "philosophy" would be considered after school operations, degrading both the philosophical reflectiveness of students and the critical potential of philosophy itself. Of course, this only means that for the future of education, it is necessary to look for new strategies and forms of contact between generations and the philosophical heritage as the source of the potential of mental autonomy, so dangerous for the supporters of exercising the "rule of souls" from the position of political, ideological or ideological power. Every philosopher, starting with Socrates and his model of wisdom, can be treated in a way that cancels out, or even annihilates, the value of inspiration and spiritual awakening to care for oneself and one's own spiritual and cultural development. Each subject of teaching can be invalidated by discouraging from taking it seriously for one's own sake.

3. CONCLUSIONS: on cultural attitudes in teaching

In the background of the ways of treating tradition and indicating its canon or establishing the framework and style of the binding classics, the vision of a liberated, educated man, constituting the ideal and the basis of cultural transmission, comes to the fore. For once, it may be the "priest" of the binding truth, guarding the enforcement of at least the formal ritual of fidelity indicated by the canonization of the legacy. At other times, what comes into play is an encouragement to the attitude of a spiritual "artist", transforming the material of symbolic heritage in individually perceived creativity into new objects that combine sequences of meanings into systems even previously forbidden. In a different cross-section, radical social involvement may come to the fore, structurally rebuilding the structure of meanings, affirming responsibility for jointly releasing the space of symbolic interactions from individualism or absolutized convention.

Ultimately, the very opening of the space of meanings begins to mean itself, saturating the educational offer with a difference constituting the basis for building a horizon of thinking from the position of a receptive and creative "reader" of the open world of reading. Then spiritual liberation comes to the fore thanks to freeing oneself from the limitations of the place of socialization and the narrowed scope of content constituting the base of "anthropotechnics" available in the construction of cultural and social identity. The last "decentring mechanism" is the most difficult in terms of education, but it also most often appears from outside the school institution, forcing its most often unsuccessful adaptations or doubly destructive rigor: for itself and for its charges. Then, didactics becomes a hostage of "didacticism" as a schematic action that makes meanings dead, and therefore indifferent conventions, although admitted in the ritual simulating the normal functioning of education.

This is how the pathology inherent in the function of education is normalized, deprived of openness to an unpredictable future, unable to be closed within the currently available framework of the will to act, the ability to think, and the quality of imagination. The future of didactics depends in particular on freeing it from the framework of methodologies, techniques and formal rigors, with an opening to cultural types of teaching attitudes, at least ten of which were described and analyzed by Peter Sloterdijk (Sloterdijk, 2014, pp. 384-412): guru, Buddhist master, apostle, philosopher, sophist, polytechnic trainer, virtuoso, writer as a creator, scientist – all to complement and modify the notions of a traditional subject

teacher about the norm of didactic interaction. In particular, it requires freeing the thinking about pedagogical authority from the typical thirty “superstitions” I have described, contrasting them with the vision of authority “at the feet” as a dual challenge of the “autho-rite of passage.” (Witkowski, 2018, pp. 517-532).

Most likely, therefore, it is not possible to indicate one homogeneous salutary attitude for didactic influences, but rather they need to be dynamically intertwined, i.e. alternately selecting means for specific situations, using the wisdom of different cultures and taking into account the spiritual needs for the development of specific individuals. Beyond the volume of these considerations is the inclusion of the idea of the teacher as a “guardian of threshold experience” in the sense of the anthropological category of liminality, which was postulated long ago by Peter McLaren from the perspective of radical pedagogy (McLaren, 1999). It is worth returning to this separately.

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У тексті розглядаються різні аспекти педагогічної рефлексії в межах проблематики, описаної та проаналізованої наступним чином: (1) Майбутнє випереджає і дивує, в тому числі й неприємно, (2) Повсякденний досвід як ворог майбутнього, (3) Як функціонує символічна культура? (4) Про можливість оцінки класики поза класикою, (5) Про бюрократичне втручання в живу текстову структуру, (6) Між консервативним і ліберальним трактуванням традицій у культурі, (7) Між соціальним радикалізмом і діалогічною деконструкцією культури, (8) Ллюзії та пастки канонізації культурних контентів, (9) Висновок: про культурні установки в дидактиці. Автор окреслює межі та парадокси нав'язування культурного канону в рамках освіти, що сприймається як посвята в культуру. Останню слід сприймати як невидиме середовище, що становить символічний ґрунт для збереження пам'яті про знаки, які слугують для самовираження, розуміння Іншого, творчої автотрансценденції та збагачення культурної спадщини для наступних поколінь. Основна ідея тексту полягає в необхідності більш глибокого освітнього сприйняття і ставлення до традиції, щоб вона стала частиною впливів, енергетичним і символічним тлом культурного розвитку і водночас критично переосмислена для того, щоб відповідати викликам майбутнього.

Ключові слова: канон, класика, традиція, сучасність, символічна культура, освіта.