UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

DEPARTMENT OF SLAVONIC STUDIES

Paper SL.13:

Introduction to the Language, Literature and Culture of Poland

HANDBOOK

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INTRODUCTION

COURSE AIMS

The course introduces students to the language, literature and culture of Poland through language instruction and a broad survey of Polish literary, cultural and political history.

The paper will pay close attention to the hybridized and multi-ethnic nature of Poland’s past, pointing to the interlocking cultural narratives of a broader region laced with shifting borders. There will be a strong focus on often painful international relations – especially with Russia – and on comparative perspectives that place Poland in a much larger, pan-European context.

Weekly lectures and fortnightly supervisions will cover the history of Polish culture from before the symbolic beginnings of 966 until the present day. Students will encounter a wide range of cultural productions, including novels, poems, plays, short stories, memoirs, historical studies, films, musical compositions and works of visual art. Throughout the paper, the powerful influence of historical experience on national culture will remain a central concern.

Students will learn the basics of the Polish language in twice-weekly classes throughout the academic year. No prior experience is required.

The second half of the paper will feature an increasing emphasis on the challenges and techniques of creative translation. By the end of the paper, students will be able to complete short literary translation assignments from Polish into English.

PREPARATORY READING

Before the beginning of the academic year, students should read either Heart of Europe: The Past in Poland’s Present by Norman Davies or Poland: A History by Adam Zamoyski for a general overview of Polish history. Students should also familiarize themselves with the first two units of the Polish language textbook, Colloquial Polish: The Complete Course for Beginners (2011).

COURSE STRUCTURE

The course consists of five elements: lectures, seminars, supervisions, language classes and reading.

**Lectures:** The course will include sixteen lectures, eight in Michaelmas and eight in Lent. The lectures provide an introduction to and overview of the course.

**Seminars:** There will be two revision seminars in Easter term.

**Supervisions:** Students will have ten supervisions: four in Michaelmas, four in Lent and two in Easter.
**Language classes**: Students will attend two language classes weekly, commencing from absolute beginner level. Lessons will strongly focus on practical elements of spoken and written communication.

**Reading**: The course will include various materials, including films and musical works, but the vast majority of sources will be textual. Students will read novels, poems, plays, short stories, hip hop lyrics, memoirs and historical studies. Certain texts will be obligatory, but students will also be able to choose particular areas of interest for more focused study.

**USING THE HANDBOOK**

The handbook is divided into four sections:

Section 1: Exam  
Section 2: Lectures and Seminars  
Section 3: Supervisions  
Section 4: Reading
SECTION 1: THE EXAM

DESCRIPTION
The exam paper is divided into three sections, and you must answer one question from each section. All questions have equal weight.

Section A is a translation task. You will translate a short literary passage (approx. 250 words) from Polish into English.

Section B has six questions, of which you must choose one. The questions will cover topics from the first half of the course.

Section C has six questions, of which you must choose one. The questions will cover topics from the second half of the course.

PREPARING FOR THE EXAM

Section A: You will have plenty of opportunities to work on translation tasks throughout the paper – in seminars, supervisions and language lessons.

Sections B and C: The general format of the exam questions will be similar to the essay questions posed for supervisions, which will consequently form a key part of your exam preparation.
SECTION TWO: LECTURES AND SEMINARS

All lectures last fifty minutes. Please check with the departmental secretary for times and venues.

MICHAELMAS

1. Introduction: Poland, Past and Present
2. Pagan Origins to the Beginnings of Polish Literary Culture
3. The Golden Age: The Polish Renaissance
4. Sarmatian Culture: Counter-Reformation and the Baroque
5. Enlightenment and the End of Independence
6. Uprising and Romanticism
7. Positivism and Social Critique
8. “Young Poland” at the Turn of the Century

LENT

9. Independence between the Wars: The Second Polish Republic
10. Into the Abyss: The Second World War
11. Stalinist Poland
12. The Solidarity Revolution
13. Independence Regained
14. Culture Wars: Redefining Polishness
15. Jews in Polish Culture
16. The Future of Poland

EASTER

17. Revision Seminar 1.
18. Revision Seminar 2.
SECTION 3: SUPERVISIONS

Essay preparation: Aim at five or six double-spaced pages; research using the general and topic-related reading in the reading lists; cite quotations (in Polish wherever possible) by footnoting; end with a full bibliography.
Please send me your essays at least 48 hours before the scheduled supervision.

Supervisions will take place in RFB 344.

MICHAELMAS

1. Essay supervision
Choose a question from topic 1 of the Michaelmas list.
2. Essay supervision
Choose a question from topic 2 of the Michaelmas list.
3. Essay supervision
Choose a question from topic 3 of the Michaelmas list.
4. Essay supervision
Choose a question from topic 4 on the Michaelmas list.

LENT

5. Essay supervision
Choose a question from topic 5 of the Lent list.
6. Essay supervision
Choose a question from topic 6 of the Lent list.
7. Essay supervision
Choose a question from topic 7 of the Lent list.
8. Essay supervision
Choose a question from topic 8 of the Lent list.

EASTER

9. Essay supervision
Revision questions for exam preparation.
10. Essay supervision
Revision questions for exam preparation.
MICHAELMAS LIST

**Topic 1: Pagan Pre-History to the Middle Ages**
1. Discuss some continuities and ruptures between the pagan “pre-history” of the Polish lands and the post-966 Christian Polish state.
2. “Early Polish poetry borrows and reshapes forms and themes from Latin Christian culture.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE texts.
3. “Medieval poetry constantly returns to the theme of death.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE texts.
4. “Polish literature from the Middle Ages gives an insight into relations between social groups.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE texts.

**Topic 2: The Golden Age and Sarmatian Culture**
1. “The Polish vernacular was fostered by religious dispute.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE texts.
2. Discuss some similarities and differences between ONE of Jan Kochanowski’s “songs” or “epigrams” and ONE of his Laments, considering questions of style, content, tone, mood and worldview.
3. "The Polish Renaissance was both derivative and original.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE texts.
4. "The poetic works of Jan Kochanowski embody a perfect union of form and content.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE texts.
5. Discuss some key features of the Polish “noble democracy” with reference to Jan Pasek’s Memoirs of the Polish Baroque.
6. Describe the general worldview of Jan Pasek as expressed in his Memoirs of the Polish Baroque.
7. “Poland’s strength in its Golden Age lay in democracy, liberty, diversity and tolerance.” Make an argument for or against this proposition.

**Topic 3: Enlightenment and Romanticism**
1. “After the Third Partition, the Respublica disappeared from the map of Europe, but it survived in the minds of its inhabitants.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE texts from the Romantic period.
2. “The art of the Polish Romantics was not art for art’s sake.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE texts.
3. Discuss the development of “Polish Messianism” in ONE OR MORE texts.
4. Discuss Adam Mickiewicz’s poetic construction of Russia with reference to ONE OR MORE texts.
5. Discuss the poetic expression of exile with reference to Adam Mickiewicz’s Sonety krymskie (Crimean Sonnets).
6. Discuss Adam Mickiewicz’s representation of the concept of nation with reference to TWO OR MORE texts.
7. Discuss Adam Mickiewicz’s use of folk motifs in TWO OR MORE texts.
Topic 4: Positivism and Decadence
1. “Nineteenth-century Polish realist writing embodied a new spirit of social critique in the wake of failed national uprisings.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE literary works.
2. Discuss the intertwining of Romanticism and realism in TWO OR MORE literary works of the second half of the nineteenth century.
3. How does Henryk Sienkiewicz depict the imaginative landscape of exile in “The Lighthouse Keeper of Aspinwall”?
4. “Bolesław Prus was pessimistic about the direction of social and political change in the Russian partition of Poland.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE works.
5. “The ‘Young Poland’ movement was essentially a new incarnation of Romanticism.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE texts or paintings.
6. “Polish painting of the ‘Young Poland’ period reflects new currents in social and intellectual life at the turn of the century.” Discuss.
7. “Stanisław Wyspiański’s Wesele (The Wedding) delivers a critique of the ‘Young Poland’ movement.” Discuss.

LENT LIST

Topic 5: Independent Poland and the Second World War
1. “The instability of ‘form’ was a central concern for several interwar Polish writers. Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE texts.
2. “All literature is political.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE texts.
3. “We are trying to enlarge the possibilities of composition by abandoning lifelike logic in art, by introducing fantastic psychology and fantastic action” (Witkiewicz). Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE texts.
4. Discuss TWO OR MORE literary attempts to describe or capture the unprecedented suffering and destruction of the Second World War.
5. “Nothing is more serious than the absurd.” Discuss with reference to ONE OR MORE texts from the interwar period.
6. “Bruno Schulz’s literary technique is to fill everyday things with unexpected content.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE of Schulz’s stories.
7. “The first-person narrator of Tadeusz Borowski’s stories presents himself as both victim and perpetrator.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE stories from This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen.
8. “Miłosz’s The World and Voices of Poor People present opposing aesthetic responses to war.” Discuss.
9. “The works of Gustaw Herling-Grudziński and Tadeusz Borowski share certain common characteristics of ‘camp literature’.” Discuss

Topic 6: Communist Poland
1. “We lived in the plural” (Zagajewski). Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE texts from the twentieth century.
2. “Communist ideology succeeded in attracting many Polish writers and intellectuals after the war.” Discuss with reference to ONE OR MORE TEXTS.
3. Discuss the literary expression of traumatic memory after the Second World War with reference to TWO OR MORE writers.
4. “In Polish culture, the poet is the acknowledged legislator of the world.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE poets.
5. Compare and contrast Andrzej Wajda’s Generation (Pokolenie, 1954) and Kanal (1957), paying particular attention to the transition from the limitations of socialist realism to freer forms of cinematic expression.
6. “Post-war Polish poetry and cinema deal with similar themes.” Discuss with reference to ONE OR MORE poets and ONE OR MORE films.
7. “Polish poets between 1945 and 1989 found many different ways to deal with political questions.” Discuss with reference to TWO OR MORE poets.
8. “The ironic precision of Wisława Szymborska’s poetry allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality.” Discuss

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**Topic 7: Culture Wars: Post-1989 Poland**

1. Discuss the role of historical memory in post-1989 Poland with reference to ONE OR MORE texts.
2. Discuss one key political or cultural conflict in contemporary Poland.
3. Discuss the significance of “borderlands” in contemporary Polish discourse with reference to ONE OR MORE texts.
4. Discuss some challenges and opportunities of Poland’s membership in the European Union.
5. “The novel is above all a vehicle for social critique.” Discuss with reference to ONE OR MORE post-1989 Polish novels.
6. “Contemporary Polish writing gives expression to marginal perspectives that were previously inadmissible.” Discuss with reference to ONE OR MORE texts.
7. “The role of the writer is to shock.” Discuss with reference to ONE OR MORE Polish writers after 1989.
8. “The period after 1989 has witnessed ideological disputes over what it means to be Polish.” Discuss

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**Topic 8: Jews in Polish Culture**

Polish-Jewish relations continue to attract considerable attention in the international media. Very often this attention focuses on relations during the Second World War and on debates over the extent of Polish complicity in the Holocaust (for instance, in connection with the Jedwabne massacre).

Do some Internet research and respond to the following essay prompt:

“Polish-Jewish relations are represented in contrasting ways in the international media. Discuss with reference to the historical context.”

You might think about whether the contrasting representations are positive or negative, nuanced or reductive, historically accurate or distorted, objective or polemical. You do not have to be exhaustive in your approach – you may choose to focus largely on a single issue, examining it in detail. You may choose to present a general overview. Choose at least two articles from different media sources, and use secondary sources from the reading list for historical background.
SECTION 4: READING

The following list provides a general guide to available resources. **Students are by no means expected to read everything on the topic lists.** The “Key Readings” are strongly recommended.


[The accompanying audio files may be downloaded for free here: http://www.routledgetextbooks.com/textbooks/colloquial/polish.php]

Czesław Miłosz’s *History of Polish Literature* is the course “textbook,” and you will be expected to read the relevant chapters from it week by week.

Many of the works on the topic lists are available electronically via the SL13 Moodle site.

**GENERAL WORKS**


TOPIC 1: PAGAN PRE-HISTORY TO THE MIDDLE AGES

Key Readings


Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


TOPIC 2: THE GOLDEN AGE AND SARMATIAN CULTURE

Key Readings


Selected poems by Jan Kochanowski – from *Monumenta Polonica*, pp. 135-158.

*Laments*, by Jan Kochanowski (translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Seamus Heaney).


Selected poems by Jan Andrzej Morsztyn – in: Monumenta Polonica, pp. 303-324.

Primary Sources

Staropolska Online: http://www.staropolska.pl/

Secondary Sources


TOPIC 3: ENLIGHTENMENT AND ROMANTICISM

Key Readings

Selections from the poetic works of Ignacy Krasicki – in: Monumenta Polonica, pp. 427-468.
Selected poems by Franciszek Karpiński – in: Monumenta Polonica, pp. 509-520.

Ksiegi narodu polskiego, by Adam Mickiewicz (https://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/Ksi%C4%99gi_narodu_polskiego_i_pielgrzymstwa_polskiego – only in Polish).

Primary Sources

Virtual Library of Polish Literature: http://literat.ug.edu.pl/books.htm

Secondary Sources

Lednicki, Waclaw. Russia, Poland, and the West: Essays in Literary and Cultural History.

TOPIC 4: POSITIVISM AND DECADENCE

Key Readings

“The Lighthouse Keeper of Aspinwall,” by Henryk Sienkiewicz.

Wesele (The Wedding), by Stanisław Wyspiański (https://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/Wesele_(Wyspia%C5%84ski) – in Polish only).

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources

TOPIC 5: INDEPENDENT POLAND AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Key Readings

Witold Gombrowicz, Ferdydurke.
Tadeusz Borowski, This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentleman – “This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen”, “The People who Walked on”, “A World of Stone”.

Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


**TOPIC 6: COMMUNIST POLAND**

**Key Readings**


**Films:** *A Generation (Pokolenie*, 1955), *Kanal* (1956), and *Ashes and Diamonds (Popiół i diament*, 1958), directed by Andrzej Wajda.

*Man on the Tracks (Człowiek na torze*, 1956), directed by Andrzej Munk.
The Last Day of Summer (Ostatni dzień lata, 1958), directed by Tadeusz Konwicki.
Knife in the Water (Nóż w wodzie, 1962), directed by Roman Polański.

Sławomir Mrożek, The Mrożek Reader – “The Elephant” and “Tango”.

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


**TOPIC 7: CULTURE WARS: POST-1989 POLAND**

**Key Readings**

One of the texts in primary sources below.

**Primary Sources**

---. *Dom dzienny, dom nocny*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2005

Secondary Sources


**TOPIC 8: JEWS IN POLISH CULTURE**

Reading Selection