

Roads to Freedoms: Discourses on Independence

Freedom, or the lack thereof, is a fundamental experience for many, if not all, areas of human life—both its individual and social dimensions. The concept of freedom is difficult to define despite its presence in numerous discourses on topics such as world view, religion, ethnic identity, sexual orientation, social life, state governance, law, economy, or scientific research. Since the discourses of freedom are also discourses in which independence is manifested, the histories of societies and individuals can be viewed as histories of practicing freedom in various spaces or as collective or individual roads to freedom. Therefore, freedom, considered in all its possible dimensions, is a key issue in the literature of European countries. The notion of progress, which was important in the 20th century, should not be viewed solely as technological development that facilitates daily life and improves its comfort, but rather as the process of nations reclaiming freedom and individuals and societies expanding its boundaries.

Looking at the 20th and 21st centuries from this perspective, one could compile an extensive catalog of fields and disciplines in which the experience of freedom has grown for the inhabitants of Central Europe. These are often domains that were previously difficult to even imagine. To paraphrase a famous maxim from Ludwig Wittgenstein, it could be said that the human understanding of freedom is confined by the boundaries set by the imagination.

It would be a truism to say that freedom is never granted to anyone once and for all; sometimes, that one must fight for it anew and continuously negotiate its terms. It is challenging, for instance, to determine the boundary between freedom of speech and hate speech, between the freedom of scientific research and its integrity, between human self-determination or the independence of individual social groups and the integrity of the state, between economic freedom and the right of individuals to accumulate wealth versus the idea of social solidarity, between freedom of assembly and travel versus epidemiological regulations, and finally, between freedom and loyalty.

Literature is undoubtedly one of those fields of artistic and social human activity that cannot be overlooked when discussing freedom. As a tool of “engineering of the soul” it helps to maintain the enslavement of individuals and entire societies, while also enabling the effective propagation of a particular worldview. At the same time, it is difficult to overstate its role in the reclamation of freedom by, for example, the nations of Europe or marginalized social groups (such as ethnic or social minorities). These somewhat old-fashioned convictions are confirmed in the articles collected in this issue. They demonstrate that, in recent centuries, the most important factors determining freedom for the nations of Central Europe and their citizens have been geopolitical conditions. These conditions could be seen both from a long-term perspective and on the macro- and microscales, relating to both continents, states and nations as well as regions, cities and individual people. Mykola Riabchuk, in his article *Empire, Literature, and the “Archeology of Ignorance”: (Re-)Reading Ewa Thompson’s “Imperial Knowledge,” During the War*, shares reflections on reading Ewa Thompson’s book *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism*, showing how its arguments about the Russian empire are updated by the narratives related to the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. The situation of Czech writers, intellectuals, and so-called “ordinary citizens” creating and living under the rule of Soviet-dependent authorities is analyzed by Anna Gawarecka in the article *Getting used to Conformism: On the Attitudes of Czech Scientists Towards the Totalitarian Regime (in Literary Representations)* discussing the works of Milan Kundera, Bohumil Hrabal, Václav Havel, and Vladimír Macura; Agata Firlej in the article *Socrates, or the Free Man in Communist Czechoslovakia*, describing how figures significant to Czech culture, such as Jan Patočka, Jiří Němec, and Eva Kantůrková, practiced freedom, as well as by Joanna Czaplínska in the article *Erotica in Jan Křesadlo’s Writing: Unbridled Freedom*. Similar theses are explored in relation to Hungarian literature in the Lajos Pálfalvi’s article *Hedonist in the Hungarian Gulag: György Faludy’s Memory Prose*.

The year 1989 and the related political transformations in Central Europe serve as a starting point for Karolina Korcz, who in her work *Post-Communist Self-Consciousness as a Source of Freedom in Polish Theatre after 1989* provides a panoramic view of Polish theater over the last thirty years, for Lenka Németh Vítová, who presents the “Moravian thread” present in Czech literature after 1989, and for Jarosław Bytner and his article *We Will Not Be a Mirror of Evil: Bydgoszcz’s Independent Music Scene 1982–1989*. On the other hand, the year 2021 is the focus of Siergiej Kowalow, who describes the phenomenon of the project *A Poem for Freedom* led by Radio Svaboda, the Belarusian section of Radio Free Europe.

Texts that delve into difficult and variously (un)resolved histories include Zbigniew Kopec’s analysis of Igor Newerly’s novel *The Hill of the Blue Dream*, where the protagonist, exiled for attempting to assassinate the tsar, feels free only in the Siberian taiga; Elżbieta Winecka’s work *On Freedom Underlain by Trauma in Leopold Buczkowski’s Autofictions*, where she argues that, for a writer who lived through two world wars and the Volhynia massacre, the stakes of participating in history were not only the freedom of the avant-garde artist but also his own life; and Ryszard Kupidura’s discussion of Włodzimierz Odojewski’s novel *Oksana*, which highlights the significance of the Volhynian events of 1943–1944 for Polish-Ukrainian relations today, at a time when Ukraine is engulfed in war and its citizens seek refuge in Poland.

The issue of ethnic identity is also present in *Bronisława Wajs’ Creolism and Literary Comparative Studies in Poland* written by Emilia Kledzik, where the category of incommensurability and the figure of the Creole serve as tools for scholarly reflection on translations of the works of Roma poet Bronisława Wajs (Papusza).

Also included in this volume are texts addressing issues related to more individual dimensions of freedom: Alla Tatarenko in *The Penelopes of the Modern Era: Aspects of Freedom for Men and Women in Ivan Franko’s “For the Hearth” and Milan Begović’s “Giga Barićeva”* shows how the topos of Penelope, the woman waiting for a (non-)returning husband, is addressed and updated in Polish, Ukrainian, and Croatian literature. Joanna Goszczyńska in the article *Freedom or Destruction? Gejza Vámos’ “The Atoms of God” in the Context of Maladic Discourse* discusses the connection between freedom and illness in the Slovak novel, where the protagonist, a doctor, decides to infect himself with a venereal disease. Mieczysław Dąbrowski in his dramatic work *Bacon and the Angels* conducts a two-pronged reflection on the complicated relationships between experience, artwork, and the freedom of interpretation, as well as between artists and their (in)visible close ones.

This volume is concluded by Tomasz Nakoneczny's work *The End of History as a Postcolonial Issue: The Polish Perspective* and Ewa Thompson's article dedicated to Michel Houellebecq's novel *Soumission (Submission)*, which addresses the cultural and religious dilemmas of the contemporary world, all related to the issue of variously understood freedom.

It should be emphasized that the order of the presented articles is just one of many possible, and it intersects, collides, and clashes with the order defined, for example, by moral issues, the history of twentieth-century traumas, or the condition of the intelligentsia and intellectuals.

The volume *Roads to Freedoms: Discourses of Independence* was prepared in recognition of the academic achievements of Prof. Bogusław Bakuła, the founder and longtime editor-in-chief of *Comparisons*, the first comparative literature journal in Poland. Bogusław Bakuła, through numerous scientific, educational, and organizational initiatives, frequently referred to the concept of freedom, its limitations as well as reclamations, thematizations and instrumentalizations in literary life and the literatures of Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century. The articles in this issue, written by the professor's students and colleagues, are a testament to his continuously inspiring influence.

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