

Community-creating power of text. Upper Silesian Literature 1989-2023

The project aims to show the development of contemporary Upper Silesian literature (1989-2023), its social functioning, and how it affects its audience and environment. Upper Silesian literature is the work of those declaring belonging to and/or connection with the Upper Silesia, and written in several languages and their dialects: Polish, Czech, German, Silesian, with the fewest publications currently appearing in German, and many texts written multilingually, i.e., in one primary language with borrowings (sometimes extensive) in other languages of the region.

The Upper Silesia is a Central European region, which in its history has belonged to Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Poland at various stages of their development, and after World War II, was included within the borders of Poland and Czechoslovakia (now: the Opolskie Voivodeship and part of the Silesian Voivodeship in Poland, and part of the Moravian-Silesian Region in the Czech Republic). The region's borderland and peripheral location in relation to the political centers, as well as its natural resources (including silver, ores, and coal), meant that for centuries the Upper Silesia was not only the subject of political and military disputes but also a place of intense contact between Germanic and Slavic cultures. Under such conditions, a specific local community developed along with its culture and language, and its distinctiveness was noticed as early as the 18th and 19th centuries, contrasting the ethnically "fuzzy" Upper Silesia with the German Lower Silesia (much of Silesia belonged to Germany at the time). These differences deepened significantly after 1945 when Lower Silesia lost much of its cultural specificity due to, among other things, border changes, the balance of political power in Europe, and resettlement actions. These changes affected Upper Silesia to a lesser extent, where local culture and its languages continued to develop. In Upper Silesia, for many years, there has been a heightened interest in one's own cultural heritage, a desire to be legally recognized as an ethnic minority, and attempts to distance oneself from the narratives dominant in the countries to which the region has historically belonged (Germany, Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic). The existence of a collective identity of (Upper) Silesians is confirmed by the results of censuses conducted in Poland and the Czech Republic — Silesian ethnicity is declared by 585,700 Polish citizens and 12,451 Czech citizens (2021 censuses). Upper Silesian literature plays an essential role in shaping local identity, and selected works, especially those written in the Silesian language, strengthen the Upper Silesian cultural community. Given the above, it is extremely important to pay attention to its social dimension in the study of Upper Silesian literature. Nevertheless, the literary value of the studied works or the description of the most important works, people, events, or publications should not be forgotten.

Upper Silesian literature can be considered transcultural literature on a micro-scale. Transculturalism is associated, among other things, with multilingualism, mutual influences, the interpenetration of different cultural traditions, and the creation of a specific local culture. The "micro," on the other hand, is associated with inferiority to cultures and literatures of greater scope, especially recognized national cultures, as well as insufficient funding for publishing projects. After the political change of 1989 (the collapse of communism in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe), one can see the gradual emergence of Upper Silesian literature from the dominant national literatures and attempts at its self-determination. This process has been gaining momentum since the first attempts to codify Silesian and recognize it as a regional language in Poland, i.e., since the 2000s — even though, it should be emphasized, this literature is not created exclusively in Silesian. In addition, it is worth emphasizing that the social and political situation of the Upper Silesian community greatly influences the functioning of local literature (and culture) and vice versa — selected literary, paraliterary texts or publishing initiatives often serve to challenge the ideas or perspectives of cultural and political centers, while at the same time strengthening identity-formation processes among the Upper Silesians. This, in turn, accounts for the prevalence of several recurring themes and motifs in this literature, centered around the values of the cultural community and, above all, around "Silesianness" understood in the broadest sense and its experience.

To study the complex problem of recent Upper Silesian literature, the PI will use literary, translation, and sociological theories and research tools. Moreover, the research project will study not only the literary texts themselves but also literary life and their social reception as well as social impact. The project will result in a series of publications in internationally recognized journals (with emphasis on open-access) and a research report published as a website, supplemented by scholarly and popular science articles and an extensive bibliography with links to open-access materials.