

DANIEL SOUKUP
Reviving the dead white men
(creative writing and literary history)

One cliché which is prevalent in creative writing says that a good writer is, above all, a good reader. In fact, I believe that this is true; but to make the cliché pedagogically helpful, we need to ask more specific questions about the kind of reading which should be required from creative writing students. As an illustration, I will use our new European Literature course, which forms a part of our BA in Creative Writing.

In other courses, our BA students read selected works from British and American literature (Shakespeare, 19th and 20th century – see Appendix 2), and, in more detail, Czech literature since 1800. Our original European Literature syllabus also focused mainly on the 19th and 20th century, giving students a relatively comprehensive overview of this period. While we still want our students to be familiar with the fundamentals of newer literary history, we decided to modify the concept in several ways. The principles behind the new syllabus (see Appendix 1) are:

- 1. Beginning at the beginning**
- 2. Openly selecting**
- 3. Focusing on books**
- 4. Making students read**

1. Beginning at the beginning. We decided to expand the time range of the syllabus by almost 4000 years and study the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as the first work. Although our students are mainly interested in modern literature, we thought that we should also consider those who write genres such as fantasy, or who simply want to integrate archaic and mythical elements into their work. Besides, if you begin at the beginning, it gives the syllabus a sense of wholeness, while, at the same time, hinting at the impossibility of achieving it. There is a bit of romantic irony in this, which is in itself a sort of lesson for aspiring writers.

2. Openly selecting. The price we had to pay for the illusion of completeness was severe selectivity. Between *Gilgamesh* and the 18th century, we do not pretend to provide any kind of coherent narrative; and even 19th- and 20th-century literature is not covered in very much detail. But we believe that this is in line with what creative writing students should do: not learn the whole story, but become acquainted with particularly stimulating works of the past.

3. Focusing on books. This principle, too, is meant to reflect the perceived needs of creative writing students. It is a choice made within a specific pedagogical context, and it doesn't claim any absolute superiority over various other approaches towards literary history (which emphasize authors' biographies, periodization, the cultural or social context, the application of various interpretive theories etc.).

4. Making students read. One rationale of the previous two principles is to make students actually read the books, rather than study facts and interpretations. We do not, in fact,

ask them to do a terrible lot of reading: for instance, in the first three semesters (a year and a half), they should read about 25 books, but they should know them quite well.

In order to strike a balance between accepted tradition and individual inspiration, we give students quite a lot of room for choice. The reading list is deliberately complicated, because it is supposed to make students think of what they personally want to read. In traditionally taught literary history, where you simply memorize the historical overview, such issues do not arise at all. Neither do they arise from the students' own creative and personal experience; I guess that most of them would never dream of considering questions like: "Am I more interested in German or in Russian Romanticism?" The whole point of the syllabus is to bridge the gap between the "books on the shelves" and the students' own experience.

The syllabus shows that, controversially, we still believe in the traditional Western canon. One reason for this is purely practical: if I know that I have time to give exactly one lecture on the Age of Goethe, I am very reluctant to choose anything else than *Faust* as the topic. If I spoke about Bettina von Arnim's *Die Gunderode* instead, students, both male and female, might wonder what the point is.

Preferring *Faust* over *Die Gunderode* means that, also controversially, we still believe that there are differences in literary quality. Nevertheless, I don't think that this is necessarily linked with cultural imperialism or sexism. One thing is admitting the fact that, in the past, mainly well-off white males had rooms of their own which enabled them to produce great works of literature; quite a different thing is the question whether one agrees with this or not. As a one who disagrees, I do, in fact, believe it is very important also to liberate the suppressed voices of the past. But this can be done using canonical works, too; Goethe's Gretchen is just as good an example as Bettina von Arnim's work. Moreover, by highlighting the perspective of Gretchen, we can also release Goethe's drama from the shackles of canonicity, and establish some link between it and the students (most of whom are female).

The three national literatures which we concentrate on most are French, German, and Russian. English literature, which would also belong to this group, is covered just selectively because it is taught also in the separate course (that is why, for instance, English Romanticism or 19th-century English novels are missing from the European Literature syllbus). In terms of genres, fiction prevails over drama and poetry, which corresponds to the interests of our students.

The syllabus can be divided into three sections, each of them characterized by a different approach: 1. Pre-modern literature, 2. Enlightenment to WWI, 3. 20th and 21st century.

1. Pre-modern literature (questions 1–3): Here selectivity is quite evident. In questions 1 and 2, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and examples from the Bible, ancient Greek and ancient Roman literature are used to illustrate the three fundamental types of writing – the dramatic, the epic, and the lyric. Question 3 comprises three contrasting pairs of works portraying a complex "image of the world" which is always both distinctive and typical. For example, *Divine Comedy* and *The Canterbury Tales* are introduced as unique works, but also as two different representations of the medieval worldview. In the lectures, I talk about all the three contrasting pairs, but it is required to study just one of them; so you are forced to read neither *Kalevala* nor *Divine Comedy*. However, if you want to avoid both of them, then you won't escape *Don Quixote*.

2. Enlightenment to WWI (questions 4–8): In these questions, the syllabus comes closest to traditional literary history; because, to be able to find your place as a writer in

today's world, you should have some knowledge of the cultural processes which formed it. But here, too, the emphasis is on the works studied, and there is plenty of room for choice.

3. 20th and 21st century (questions 9–15): Here we abandon traditional literary history again. Although we do want our students to know something about existentialism or OULIPO, we don't attempt to split the chaos of modern and postmodern literature into "periods". Of these seven questions, one is dedicated to drama (where it is quite easy to decide which works should be in), one to poetry (where it is much more difficult, and I have not done it yet), and the remaining five questions to fiction.

These five questions correspond to fundamental themes of 20th-century literature, and can be (very schematically) summarized as follows: The modern era saw the disappearance of the belief in the triad truth-goodness-beauty, as well as the belief in the meaning and intelligibility of the world. The causes of this were existential (see the question "Human against the structures of the world"), but also historical – especially in the geographical and cultural space between Germany and Russia (see "Under the pressure of history").

Several types of responses to this crisis emerged:

a) Reducing the notion of "meaning" to concepts like play or experiment (see "Playing for meaning"). At first, experiment or play were still used as a way of discovering genuine meaning (Gide: *The Counterfeiters*; Hesse: *The Glass Bead Game*); with postmodernism, the idea of authenticity retreated (Perec: *Life: A User's Manual*; Calvino: *If on a winter's night a traveler*).

b) Re-imagining various "myths"; this includes literary reinventions of Christianity (see "Recurring myths").

c) Integrating "voices from elsewhere" (see "On the borders of Europe"). Today, it is no longer possible to draw a sharp line between "European" and "non-European" literature. Examples which illustrate this include: authors from countries on the border of Europe who make their in-between position a theme of their work (Orhan Pamuk); authors of non-European origin who settled in Europe (Kazuo Ishiguro, Gao Xingjian), and non-European authors who deeply influenced European literature (Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez).

In creative writing, students are often taught to go beyond self-expression, and to use other sources of literary material than just their own experience. Our European Literature course attempts something similar on the cultural level: like other small literatures, Czech literature has always been – and cannot but be – very much enriched by foreign inspirations. To ignore this would lead to cultural provincialism, which is just as pernicious as the provincialism of the isolated self.

**APPENDIX 1:
LITERARY ACADEMY – BA EXAM IN EUROPEAN LITERATURE
(Daniel Soukup)**

Work on this syllabus is still in progress: the reading lists for questions 8–15 are not complete yet.

1. Ancient forms of the dramatic and the epic

Choose one of the options:

- a) Human against order: *Epic of Gilgamesh*; *Book of Job*; Sophocles: *Oedipus the King*
- b) Fundamental forms of narrativity: *Book of Genesis*; Homer: *Odyssey* (at least Books 17–24); Erich Auerbach: “The Scar of Ulysses” (from *Mimesis*)

2. The birth of the poetic voice

Psalms (selection); *Song of Songs*; Sappho (selection); Catullus (selection)

3. Images of the world in premodern literature

Choose one of the options:

- a) *Beowulf* and *Kalevala* (at least Songs 1–25)
- b) Dante Alighieri: *Divine Comedy* (at least *Inferno*); Geoffrey Chaucer: *The Canterbury Tales* (selection)
- c) Miguel Cervantes: *Don Quixote* (at least Part I); John Amos Comenius: *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart*

4. Enlightenment, Age of Sensibility, Age of Goethe

Choose one of the options, and then two of the texts:

- a) Enlightenment and Age of Sensibility
Voltaire: *Candide*; Laurence Sterne: *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*; Denis Diderot: *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*; Jean Jacques Rousseau: *Emil*
- b) Age of Goethe
Friedrich Schiller: *The Robbers*; Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *The Sorrows of Young Werther*; *Faust* (Part I); selection of poetry

5. European romanticism

Introduce the concept of Romanticism. Choose one of the options, and then two of the texts:

- a) German romanticism:
Friedrich Hölderlin: selection of poetry; Novalis: selection of poetry and fragments; Adalbert Chamisso: *Peter Schlemihl's Remarkable Story*; Joseph von Eichendorff: *Of the Life of a Good-For-Nothing*
- b) French romanticism:
François-René de Chateaubriand: *Atala*; Victor Hugo: *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, *Les Misérables*; Alfred de Musset: *Confessions of a Child of the Century*
- c) Russian romanticism:
Alexander Pushkin: *Eugene Onegin*, *The Queen of Spades*, *The Gypsies*; Mikhail Lermontov: *A Hero of Our Time*, *Demon*

6. European realism and naturalism

Introduce the concepts of Realism and Naturalism. Choose one of the options, and then two of the texts:

- a) French realism and naturalism
Stendhal: *The Red and the Black*; Honoré de Balzac: *Lost illusion*; Gustave Flaubert: *Madame Bovary*, *Sentimental Education*; Émile Zola: *L'Assommoir*; Guy de Maupassant: short stories
- b) Russian realism:
Nikolai Gogol: *Dead Souls*; Fyodor Dostoyevsky: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons*, *The Brothers Karamazov*; Leo Tolstoy: *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*
- c) Realistic drama:
Henrik Ibsen: *A Doll's House*, *Peer Gynt*, *An Enemy of the People*; Anton Chekhov: *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*

7. The birth of modern poetry

Choose two of the texts:

Charles Baudelaire: selection of poetry; Arthur Rimbaud: selection of poetry; Paul Verlaine: selection of poetry; Stéphane Mallarmé: selection of poetry

8. The early avant-garde movements

(Guillaume Apollinaire, futurism, expressionism, Georg Trakl, dada...)

9. 20th-century poetry

Choose three of the 10 texts

10. 20th-century drama

Choose three of the following 10 texts:

Luigi Pirandello: *Six Characters in Search of an Author*; Bertolt Brecht: *The Threepenny Opera*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*; Eugène Ionesco: *The Bald Prima Donna*, Friedrich Dürrenmatt: *The Visit of the Old Lady*, *The Physicists*; Václav Havel: *The Garden Party*...

11. Playing for meaning (20th-century fiction)

Choose three of the following 10 texts:

André Gide: *The Counterfeiters*; Hermann Hesse: *The Glass Bead Game*; Georges Perec: *Life: A User's Manual*; Italo Calvino: *If on a winter's night a traveler*; Umberto Eco: *The Name of the Rose*; Milorad Pavić: *Dictionary of the Khazars: A Lexicon Novel*...

12. Human against the structures of the world (20th-century fiction)

Choose three of the following 10 texts:

Andrey Bely: *Petersburg*; Yevgeny Zamyatin: *We*; Franz Kafka: *The Trial*, short stories; Louis-Ferdinand Céline: *Journey to the End of the Night*; Albert Camus: *The Stranger*; Heinrich Böll: *Opinions of a Clown*...

13. Under the pressure of history (20th-century fiction)

Choose three of the following 10 texts:

Isaak Babel: *Red Cavalry*; Boris Pasternak: *Doctor Zhivago*; Günter Grass: *The Tin Drum*; W. G. Sebald: *Austerlitz*...

14. Recurring myths (20th-century fiction)

Choose three of the following 10 texts:

Mikhail Bulgakov: *Master and Margarita*; Pär Lagerkvist: *Barabbas*; J. R. R. Tolkien: *The Lord of the Rings*, Olga Tokarczuk: *House of Day*, *House of Night*...

15. On the borders of Europe (20th-century fiction)

Choose three of the following 10 texts:

Witold Gombrowicz: *Trans-Atlantyk*; Jorge Luis Borges: short stories; Marguerite Yourcenar: *Oriental Tales*; Gabriel García Márquez: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; Kazuo Ishiguro: *An Artist of the Floating World*; Gao Xingjian: *Soul Mountain*; Orhan Pamuk: *The White Castle*

APPENDIX 2: LITERARY ACADEMY – BA EXAM IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE (Mariana Machová)

With each question, the student is required to know the main work (with special emphasis on the extract), and one other work from the list.

1. Shakespeare

William Shakespeare: *Twelfth Night*

Extract: Act I, Scene 5

Other recommended works:

A Midsummer Night's Dream

As You Like It

Romeo and Juliet

Macbeth

King Lear

Othello

Sonnets 1, 12, 18, 53, 60, 66, 94, 116, 127, 130

2. Romanticism

S. T. Coleridge: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Extract: Parts I and II

Other recommended works:

Ann Radcliffe: *A Sicilian Romance*

George Gordon Byron: "The Prisoner of Chillon," "Lara"

John Keats: "To Autumn," "Eve of St. Agnes"

Sir Walter Scott: *Waverley*

E. A. Poe: "The Raven," "Philosophy of Composition"

3. Classic English Novel

Jane Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*

Extract: Chapters 1–3

Other recommended works:

Jane Austen: *Emma*

Emily Brontë: *Wuthering Heights*

Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*

Charles Dickens: *Great Expectations*

Thomas Hardy: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

4. Founding Voices of American Literature

Nathaniel Hawthorne: *The Scarlet Letter*

Extract: Chapter 13: "Another View of Hester"

Other recommended works:

James Fenimore Cooper: *The Last of the Mohicans*

Herman Melville: *Moby Dick*

Walt Whitman: "The Song of Myself"

Mark Twain: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Kate Chopin: *The Awakening*

5. Modernism

Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway*

Extract: from the beginning of the novel until "this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway"

Other recommended works:

T. S. Eliot: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "Ash Wednesday", *Murder in the Cathedral*

James Joyce: *Dubliners* or *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*

David Herbert Lawrence: *Women in Love*

William Faulkner: *The Sound and the Fury*

Marianne Moore: "An Octopus," "When I Buy Pictures," "The Paper Nautilus", Letters (to Ezra Pound, January 9, 1919; to Bryher, July 7, 1921)

6. Modern British Fiction

Kazuo Ishiguro: *The Remains of the Day*

Extract: part of “Day One – Evening: Salisbury”

Other recommended works:

Salman Rushdie: *Midnight’s Children*

Anthony Burgess: *A Clockwork Orange*

David Lodge: *Changing Places*

Ian McEwan: *The Cement Garden*

Irvine Welsh: *Trainspotting*

Zadie Smith: *White Teeth*

7. Modern American Fiction

J. D. Salinger: *The Catcher in the Rye*

Extract: Chapter I

Other recommended works:

Jack Kerouac: *On the Road*

Vladimir Nabokov: *Lolita*

Philip Roth: *Human Stain*

Toni Morrison: *Beloved*

Cormac McCarthy: *Blood Meridian*

Jeffrey Eugenides: *Middlesex*

8. Modern British and American Theatre

Samuel Beckett: *Waiting for Godot*

Extract: Act 1 from the beginning until Pozzo enters (last sentence: “Nothing to be done.”)

Other recommended works:

John Milington Synge: *The Playboy of the Western World*

Tennessee Williams: *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Arthur Miller: *Death of a Salesman*

Harold Pinter: *The Caretaker*

Tom Stoppard: *Rock’n’Roll*