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Introduction. Phantasmatic Roots of the Present

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The articles contained in the present volume are the aftermath of the conference *Przeszłość – fantazmat – fantazja. Symboliczne rekonstrukcje historii Polski* [*The Past – Phantasms – Fantasies. Symbolic Reconstructions of Poland's Past*] that took place on 27–28 February 2025 at the Faculty of Humanities, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. The two days of intense deliberations revealed a multitude of references to Polish history that actualize the past in contemporary texts of culture, as well as a wealth of contexts and methodologies. This should not come as a surprise, given that it is texts of culture – above all, literature, painting and music – that played a considerable role in maintaining Polish sense of national identity during over one hundred years of the Partitions, while contemporarily, culture constitutes the field of struggle for Polish identity, the place of strives with Polishness which is frequently seen as an identity historically burdened: with martyrology, *warcholstwo* [trouble-making], colonial experience, serfdom, and the tradition of liberation (we recognize that

it is under the shape of such constructions that history turns into memory, and thus, we do not seek to analyze to what degree they reflect the actual events of the past). Over the recent years we have seen a true outcrop of titles inspired by Poland's complicated history, both in circulation aimed at a narrower audience (here it is worth referencing such titles as Olga Tokarczuk's *The Books of Jacob* [Księgi Jakubowe] (Tokarczuk 2014) and Radek Rak's *Baśń o węzowym sercu albo wtóre słowo o Jakóbie Szeli* [A Tale of Serpent Heart, or Another Word on Jakób Szela] (Rak 2019), or Paweł Demirski's play *W imię Jakuba S.* [In the Name of Jakub S.] (Demirski, Strzępka 2011), and in popular circulation, in the works by Jacek Komuda, Witold Jabłoński, Krzysztof Piskorski, Anna Kańtoch, Marek Krajewski, Elżbieta Cherezińska, Marta Kisiel, Katarzyna Berenika Miszczuk. Similarly, in the field of audiovisual culture we can also observe considerable interest in Polish history, as evidenced by such productions as *Jack Strong* (Pasikowski 2014), *Miasto 44* [Warsaw 44] (Komasa 2014), *Rojst* [The Mire] (Holoubek 2018–2024), *Wielka woda* [High Water] (Holoubek, Ignaciuk 2022), *Kos* [Scarborn] (Zieliński 2023), *1670* (Buchwald, Kądziała 2023–present) and *Heweliusz* (Holoubek 2025), as well as increased inspirations in folk music (the oeuvre of such groups as R. U. T. A., Percival Schuttenbach, Furia, Wędrowiec, Żywiołak, Żywizna, Odpoczno, Pochwalone and many others). At least in some of the aforementioned phenomena, we are dealing with an interesting notion of the so-called peasant or folk turn, which, as can be seen, exists not only in research in the field of the humanities, but, above all, in reference to social interest in the life of lower classes over the course of history, as evidenced by the popularity of such positions as Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak's non-fiction books *Służące do wszystkiego* [Women Servants for All Tasks] (Kuciel-Frydryszak 2018) and *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach* [Peasant Women. A Story of Our Grandmothers] (Kuciel-Frydryszak 2023). In this context, the peasant turn offers an alternative view of history: not through the lens of rulers and wars, but, rather, through that of intimate experiences of the daily life on the part of those traditionally omitted or openly excluded from the narratives of "grand history".

In the struggle for the meaning of Polishness a considerable role is played by various kinds of phantasms, particular scenarios of desires, substitute realizations of "dreams of might" that are, most frequently, impossible to be fulfilled. It was already Maria Janion in her *Projekt krytyki fantazmatycznej* [The Project of Phantasmic Criticism] (Janion 1991) that convincingly showcased that phantasms overcome reality, that is, they become more important than actual social practices or historical facts as a tool for filtering reality, a particular perspective of looking at reality. The still vivid phantasms of Polish history and their current influence on reality can be seen on many levels of contemporary social practices, from popularizing the conspiracy theories of the so-called Great Lechia to (re)constructions of Poland's pagan history in the genre of Slavic fantasy to a candidate for president in the latest election being gifted a copy of the Szczerbiec sword by members of Towarzystwo Rycerskie Braci

Kurkowych [The Knight Fraternity of Fowlers], dressed in a way supposed to imitate copies of Sarmatian clothes.

The aforementioned conference and the translation of articles¹ contained in this volume, as well as its publication, was subsidized from the state budget under the program of the Minister of Education and Science called “National Program for the Development of Humanities”². To a large degree, the aim of the conference was to establish the place occupied by Sarmatism among national phantasms. It is revealed to be a significant one; indeed, half of the texts contained herein oscillate around contemporary references to this cultural formation of the nobility. In his article “*A Pole Is a Selfless Host*”: *Old Polish Hospitality, or a Post-Partition Phantasm*, Dariusz Śniezko describes the phantasm of Polish hospitality in the works of writers of the post-Partition era, noting that this myth was, to a large degree, created in reaction to the political violence of the Partitions as an attempt to re-create glorified past. Zbigniew Jazienicki’s text, *The Baroque Crisis of the Third Polish Republic. System Transformation, Sarmatian Traditions and Krzysztof Koehler’s Classicism*, constitutes an in-depth analysis of Krzysztof Koehler’s poetic oeuvre in the context of system transformation, seen as a particular cognitive crisis, a result of functioning in the state of chaos. In the article *Is the Place of Women in Neo-Sarmatian Social Hierarchy Always Below Men? On the Example of Borderland She-Wolves in the Prose of Jacek Komuda, Andrzej Pilipiuk and Others*, Sebastian Tauer interprets the position of women characters in social hierarchy in the presented world of Neo-Sarmatian novels by Jacek Komuda, referring to the figure of a “Borderland she-wolf”, a venturesome and resourceful maiden who carries out the libertarian principle of self-ownership. Within the article *On the Margins of Category. Liberty as Cooperation in a Non-Prototypical Neo-Sarmatian Novel*, Paweł Bohuszewicz examines Konrad T. Lewandowski’s cycle of novels entitled *Diabłu ogarek* [*Candle-End for the Devil*] in order to showcase that there exists a democratic alternative for the popular right-wing Sarmatism. Ireneusz Szczukowski and Joanna Orzeł, in the texts *The 1670 TV Show as Seen by a Historian of Old Polish Literature* and *Demolishing “the Dream of Might” of the Nobility of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, or on the Discussion Concerning the 1670 TV Show*, respectively, analyze the TV show 1670, discussing in detail its historical contexts. This production evoked considerable (and not just aesthetic!) agitation among Poles, presenting Polish history through the lens of contemporary mentality and ridiculing many phantasms rooted in social circulation. Thus, the Netflix production demonstrates that the strife between tradition and modernity, which had begun with the dispute between Sarmatism and the Enlightenment, remains vivid and important to us. Finally, Jędrzej Wijas in his article “*True Is the Pole when He Gets Drunk*”. *On the Persistence of Romantic Sarmatism*

1 All articles in the present volume were translated by Ewa Bodal.

2 „Neosarmatyzm w kulturze polskiej po 1989 roku” [Neo-Sarmatism in Polish culture after 1989]; project no: NPRH/DN/SP/0146/2023/12; subsidy amount PLN 429 804,19 total value of the project: PLN 429 804,19.

tism in a Contemporary Liquor Store presents inspirations with Polish Romantic and Enlightenment culture in the alcohol market, noting how producers of high-proof beverages utilize and create their own national myths, for instance, by re-interpreting forced migrations and escapes from the country as travels.

The second part of the present volume is dedicated to issues that could, in many respects, be inscribed into the ongoing folk turn. In her article *Władysław Orkan's Peasant Narrations, Or On the Benefits of History of Literature for the Folk Turn*, Marcelina Kuc describes Orkan as a "precursor of the peasant turn" and draws attention to how the writer aimed to create a new peasant paradigm in literature, an alternative to the culture of nobility and intelligentsia. Aldona Kobus's text *We, Slavs – Tools and Functions of (Re)Constructing Polish Pre-History in Fantasy Literature on the Example of Witold Jabłoński's Cycle "Słowiańska Apokalipsa"* showcases various strategies undertaken in the field of popular fantasy literature that serve to (re)construct the pagan past and the system of beliefs and practices in pre-Christian Poland. In the article *Between a Phantasm and the Daily Life. Herstoric In(ter)ventions in Latest Polish Women's Literature*, Joanna Szewczyk describes herstoric in(ter)ventions in Polish women's literature of the last decades; she also addresses the need to reconsider women's phantasms present in Polish national imaginarium, as noticeable in the history of the Third Polish Republic, and the women authors' struggle with the phantasm of the Polish Mother or systemic exclusion of women from narratives concerning national liberation and the Solidarity movement. Alicja Budzyńska, in the text *How Does Contemporary Polish Literature Tell Minority Stories of Women? On the Example of the Novels "Sońka" by Ignacy Karłowicz and "Krótka Wymiana Ognia" by Zyta Rudzka*, focuses on how selected contemporary Polish novels utilize figures of women from the rural working class, belonging to ethnic minorities, to represent a minority perspective of understanding Poland's 20th century history and to demonstrate the sources of the contemporary middle class. Finally, Włodzimierz Pessel devotes the article *Maritime Turn and the Sinking of Heweliusz* to formulating a postulate of a maritime turn in research and public debate in Poland, grounding it in the context of the ongoing folk turn and in the context of the disaster of the Heweliusz ferry.

The texts contained herein are an invitation to a discussion over the functioning and meaning of phantasms in contemporary social life. They do not exhaust the subject; to the contrary, they only sketch a broad scope of phantasms' influence over reality, with the latter never being as rational as it would like to be seen. Not only has the dispute between tradition and modernity not ended, but, perhaps, it continues to provide structure to our lives and reception of reality, taking on the form of contemporary social polarization along worldview and political lines. Therefore, a better understanding not only of history as such, but also of its phantasmic reception, is necessary for the comprehension of burning issues of contemporality, many of which derive from historical resentments.

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