

Marcelina Kuc

Jagiellonian University in Kraków

marcelina.kuc@outlook.com

ORCID: 0009-0006-8285-1483

Władysław Orkan's Peasant Narrations, Or On the Benefits of History of Literature for the Folk Turn*

DOI: 10.12775/LL.3-4.2025.009 | CC BY-ND 4.0

ABSTRACT: The aim of the article is to examine Władysław Orkan's oeuvre from the perspective of the contemporary folk turn. Having debuted in 1897, the writer can be seen as a precursor of the peasant trend in Polish prose. Analyses of his novels *Komornicy*, *W roztokach* and *Kostka Napierski*, as well as his journalistic cycle *Listy ze wsi* lead in a reflection on the way the writer strove to create a new peasant-based paradigm in literature, as an alternative to the culture of nobility and intelligentsia. These considerations culminate in addressing the extent to which the current folk turn continues the tradition of Orkan's peasant narratives.

KEYWORDS: folk turn, Władysław Orkan, folk history of Poland, peasants, micro-history

The Folk Turn in Poland: A Reconnaissance

As observed over the course of the past several years, the popularity of publications dedicated to peasant history of Poland, together with the record-breaking number of sold copies of Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak's¹ book *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach* [*Peasant Women: A Story About Our Grandmothers*],

* The article was written as part of the research subsidized by "National Program for the Development of Humanities" project no: NPRH/DN/SP/0146/2023/12; subsidy amount PLN 429 804,19

1 By the end of 2024 the number of copies sold exceeded half a million. In Kuciel-Frydryszak's book, describing folk history from the perspective of the eponymous peasant women, the audience found an almost therapeutic potential, resulting from discovering the heretofore silent histories of "our grandmothers" (Kuciel-Frydryszak 2025).

published in 2023, makes it possible to state that the folk turn², also termed a peasant turn or a plebeian turn, has taken roots in Polish consciousness. In 2021 Małgorzata Litwinowicz-Droździel, sharing her experiences of teaching at the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw, said that

Over subsequent seasons I was able to begin these classes with sentences about “forgotten folk history”, about its absence in contemporary research, about the dominating – still! – Romantic paradigm and the source-making and culture-making power of the elites who appropriated the entirety of history, leaving only a humble niche to the illiterate, that is, the majority of 19th century Polish society. This story provided glamour to usual classes – as a result, they became a pioneering journey through the still undiscovered lands (whose location we were, after all, perfectly aware of). However, this introductory narration had been losing its tightness and strength from year to year, and within the last two years, it completely collapsed. In the end, this year I had to change my tried-and-true sentence opening my meetings with students to: “Folk history is currently at the center of interest of Polish historians” (Litwinowicz-Droździel 2021).

It is worth adding that it is not only historians who are interested in peasant past; after all, Adam Leszczyński, the author of the excellent *Ludowa historia Polski [Folk History of Poland]* (2020), which is modeled on Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, is a sociologist by education, Kacper Pobłocki in *Chamstwo [Rabble]* (2021) takes an anthropological point of view, while Jan Sowa, a sociologist and cultural studies scholar, uses the tools of psychoanalysis in *Fantomowe ciało króla [The King’s Phantom Body]* (2011). The variety of approaches proves that the project of describing the folk history of Poland is, by definition, interdisciplinary, as well as intermedial – after all, some of the milestones for the folk turn consisted in such artistic endeavors as

2 Adam Leszczyński defines the current folk turn as “a wave of books, both academic and popular, as well as texts of culture, from novels to music and feature films – whose interest is focused on the power relations in Polish society in the time past and on the fate of the lower social strata or classes” (Leszczyński 2024: 163). An important aspect of the interest in folk past is noticing that the majority of Polish society has peasant roots. According to statistics “[people – M. K.] employed in agriculture constituted about 61% of general economically active population” (Wasilewski 2011: 259), and “if we take into account the generation of grandparents, it would definitely turn out that only about 15% of contemporary Polish families have no rural or peasant roots” (Wasilewski 2011: 362). Still, the heretofore cultural and historical paradigm can be termed as focused on nobility and intelligentsia. Although the 1921 March Constitution abolished the nobility and all its privileges in Poland, still, as Magdalena Bartecka notes, “post-noble thinking dominates in symbolic sphere – and with real consequences. For instance [...] re-privatization, which is based in the conviction that the old noble owners have moral right to regain these properties. Our thinking is filtered through noble culture. We still strongly identify our past with the past of the nobility. There is social aspiration there: to belong to that group” (Bartecka 2015).

Paweł Demirski's play directed by Monika Strzępka *W imię Jakuba S.*³ (2011), the album *Gore* by the band R.U.T.A. (2012), containing musical performances of anti-feudal peasant songs, or the film *Niepamięć*⁴ (2015) directed by Piotr Brożek. The folk turn also appeared in literary fiction bringing such novels as *Baśń o wężowym sercu albo wtóre słowo o Jakóbie Szeli* (2019) by Radek Rak or *Sońka* (2014) by Ignacy Karpowicz.

And while one could list multiple other examples of works of contemporary literature inscribed into the interest in peasant heritage, it seems that the history of literature has not found its place in this turn yet⁵. This is clearly evidenced by the reviews of the latest adaptation (2023) of Władysław Reymont's novel *Chłopi* [*The Peasants*], which, compared with the original, was deemed to be a simplification and aesthetization of life in the 19th century countryside⁶. This is why I suggest taking a step back and considering what the perspective of literary history can contribute to the folk turn. Can the folk turn, in this context, be seen as a strictly contemporary trend, or should we look deeper for its sources? After all, as Franciszek Ziejka noted in 1991, summarizing the history of political and cultural peasant emancipation:

This enormous transformation of the peasant class has not yet been described academically. [...] However, what has not been done by Polish academia up to this day, fiction has long achieved. After all, it is on the pages of novels, dramas and epic poems written at the turn of the 19th and 20th century Polish peasant, liberating himself from the serf soul, becoming a citizen, came to life (Ziejka 1991: XXIV–XXV).

-
- 3 Demirski and Strzępka conducted a staged resurrection of Jakub Szela – the leader of Galician Rabacja, a peasant rebellion of 1846. By revealing the peasant roots of Polish society, the play also uncovers similarities between the condition of contemporary middle class and a peasant serf exploited by his lord.
 - 4 As the creators describe it, “the film depicts the issue of remembering serfdom from the perspective of two characters: Magdalena, with a rural background, and Franciszek, of aristocratic background, a painter. Together, these two undertake a reflexive and emotional journey to the Lublin and Subcarpathia countryside, where meetings with other participants in post-serfdom drama assist them in facing their own past: countryside landowners, a beekeeper and an aged count. Will a descendant of exploited peasant serfs and a descendant of aristocratic elites find common ground? Is a reconciliation between them possible?” (Stowarzyszenie Folkowisko 2015).
 - 5 One of the exceptions is Monika Śliwińska's *Panny z Wesela*, a biographical book tracing the stories of the Mikołajczyk sisters, portrayed in Stanisław Wyspiański's drama *Wesele*. It is also worth mentioning two collective works exploring the entanglements between history of literature and folk history – *Chłopska (nie)pamięć. Dziedzictwo chłopskości w polskiej literaturze i kulturze* edited by G. Grochowski, D. Krawczyńska and G. Wołowiec (2019) and *Warstwy ludu. Chłopki, chłopci i inni w literaturach regionalnych (XIX–XXI wiek)* ed. by M. Mikołajczak, D. Zawadzka and K. Sawicka-Mierzyńska (2024).
 - 6 According to the ethnologist Joanna Skowrońska, “*Peasants* is a missed opportunity to show and learn about Polish traditional culture” (Drózd 2023). As Agnieszka Graff and Magda Staroszczyk state, “Constructed entirely out of hand-painted frames, the adaptation keeps aesthetizing and exoticizing Polish countryside, ignoring poverty, dirt and toil” (Graff, Staroszczyk 2023).

Still, when treating the history of literature as an important link of the folk turn, one should approach it with a large dose of suspicion. For although fascination with the folk accompanied Polish culture throughout the 19th century – from Romantic folk-philia to the Positivists' social betterment programs to peasant-mania of the Young Poland period – the interest in Polish peasants at the time was connected with a certain paradox. As Iwona Węgrzyn notes,

peasant themes appearing in Polish literature of the 19th century only marginally concerned peasants as such. Rarely did someone ask who the peasant character was or what he felt. An interesting issue consisted in, above all, the peasant question (granting freehold and its political and social consequences), peasant poverty, which, following freehold granting, spread over the entire country [...] and became an economic problem, but even more so, an ethical one, and, finally, after 1846, a threat that each subsequent peasant rebellion could turn into (Węgrzyn 2017: 228).

There were, obviously, exceptions. Józef Ignacy Kraszewski wrote his folk novels in contrast to the Romantics idealizing the relations between lords and peasants. Later, non-stereotypical portrayals of folk characters appeared in Bolesław Prus's *Placówka* or Eliza Orzeszkowa's *Cham* and *Dziurdziowie*. However, "the literary freehold granting of peasants" (Pigoń 1974: 239) was a slow process, a proper turn in which did not occur until the end of the 19th century, when – as scholars emphasize – Polish peasants gradually started to become political subjects⁷. This was the moment of a rapid development of folk political movements⁸, and literature featured first authentic peasant narratives.

"A Songster of the Land of Tussocks and Eternal Poverty"

Ziejka chose three names to sign the literary revolution taking place at the turn of the 19th and 20th century in response to political subjectivization of peasants: Żeromski, Reymont and Orkan (Ziejka 1991: XIV). Out of these three writers, Władysław Orkan seems to be the figure most covered by dust of history. Quite wrongly so, as his writing can be seen as precursory to the peasant trend in Polish fiction, as defined in the 1970s by Henryk Bereza⁹

7 "By the turn of the 19th and 20th century peasants of Congress Poland, cultivating their mother tongue, native traditions, customs and religion, were a permanent foundation of Polishness. Some peasants had already achieved the first level of national consciousness – not only in the passive meaning, but sometimes even in the active one" (Przeniosło 1996: 209–210).

8 On peasant political movements, see e.g. Gmitruk 2003; Woś 2020.

9 Among the most prominent writers of this trend are Wiesław Myśliwski, Tadeusz Nowak and Marian Pilot. It is, however, worth noting that a canonical reading of their writing as the rural trend of the Polish novel increasingly meets with reservations on the part of scholars who take this approach to be too limiting, and obscuring the universal dimension of some of these works of prose. In relation to Myśliwski's body of work this issue was discussed by e.g. Jędrzej Soliński (2022).

(1978). According to Kazimierz Czachowski, Orkan was “about the only authentic peasant writer¹⁰ in pre-war Polish literature” (Czachowski 1936: 606), and – as Edward Chudziński notes – his reflections connected with the peasant condition of the time anticipated many discussions conducted in the 1930s (Chudziński 1975: 81–82).

It is a fact that the writer frequently prioritized the aesthetic side of his works over their ideological dimension, which partly explains why his legacy is not well rooted in Polish culture¹¹. However, the writer's peasant origins provided his prose with a considerable dimension of authenticity, as appreciated by his contemporary literary critic, Stanisław Brzozowski. According to Brzozowski, Orkan's writing, although never rising to the epic momentum of Reymont's *Chłopi*, in a way outranked the latter's work, for, as he put it, “the spiritual life of Reymont's peasants is observation stylized as a lack of spirituality, while in Orkan[’s texts] we can see how souls are born in cottages” (Brzozowski 1910: 460). Thus, the fairly faint presence of Orkan in the contemporary folk turn is all the more puzzling – while Leszczyński quotes Orkan's writing at one point in his monograph, he does not devote more time to his case. Meanwhile, the writer's biography as such could serve to illustrate the process that Stanisław Pigoń described as “the phenomenon whereby talented peasant sons grow into the spiritual tissue of the nation” (Pigoń 1965: XII).

Władysław Orkan was born in 1875 in Poręba Wielka as Franciszek Smaciarczyk (the family later changed their name to Smreczyński). He was the son of Goral peasants farming a small piece of land. Although his father also worked as a lumberjack, the household of the future author of *Komornicy* remained poor. However, his mother's efforts made it possible for Orkan to attend gymnasium (at the time, a type of high school preparing for maturity exams). In the end, he never graduated – he was more interested in literature than in learning. He started writing when he was at school – first poems, then also dramas. After the juvenile creative period, during which he mostly considered himself to be a poet and a playwright¹² (Pigoń 1958: 95), he directed his attention to-

10 Jan Kasprowicz (1860–1926) was a contemporary of Orkan, but older; nonetheless, as Pigoń notes, his class advancement was not, in contrast to Orkan's case, “a sign [...] of a broad social process that could be described as spontaneous transition of peasant sons from one state into another by the means of the gate of a high school” (Pigoń 1958: 19). For Kasprowicz, in another contrast to Orkan, the countryside was not the main theme of his writing, although out of Kasprowicz's major texts undertaking this issue it is worth noting the volume *Z chłopskiego zagonu* (1891), constructed out of poems-pictures showcasing various images of the rural folk's misfortunes. Orkan's short stories carry out a very similar plan.

11 The faint presence of Orkan's legacy in contemporary Polish consciousness is evidenced by, e.g., a lack of new editions of his novels. The last edition of *Komornicy* was published in 1965, while *W roztokach* in 1975, unlike during the author's lifetime, when his works were read at school: “Polish lessons of the 1920s and 1930s made a comprehensive use of the talent of the author of *Komornicy*” (Budrewicz 2015: 249). It seems that at present, Orkan's cult is limited to regional memory (see Matras-Mastalerz 2015).

12 Two of Orkan's more notable dramas addressing peasant issues are *Skąpany świat* and *Wina i kara*. Both are tragedies following love and family storylines.

wards prose, subordinating his writing to a specific ideological goal – from now on, the writer’s literary path can be described as a conscious and consistent search for such a literary form that would be able to describe the condition of countryside inhabitants, while, at the same time, serving to improve their social and political situation.

But the idealistic dreams of a reform-maker are just one side of Orkan’s personality. Since his first literary attempts, the writer is torn by a decadent sense of fatalism (Pigoń 1958: 80). There is a reason why Julian Krzyżanowski entitled his text about Orkan “Pieśniarz krainy kęp i wiecznej nędzy” (“A Songster of the Land of Tussocks and Eternal Poverty”) (Krzyżanowski 1927). What recurs in the prose of the Gorce writer is the motif of poverty and destitution, that is, the issues that his predecessors, although interested in peasants and countryside, were unable to see. The peasant-obsessed Young Polish creators, looking at the peasant stratum for an arsenal of true moral and aesthetic values, did more to spread stereotypes about rural culture than to give the peasants their subjectivity. Frequently, the harmful impact of this kind of fascination with folk led to the phenomenon of self-folklorization among peasants¹³ (Klekot 2014). As Orkan recognizes in the introduction to *Komornicy* (1900), expectations of civilization made the peasant take on a specific mask in accordance with these simplified models. And as follows, a Goral, although experiencing great suffering, must be joyful, for Goral culture is perceived as joyful. In the writer’s literary project the aim would be, therefore, to tear off this false joyful mask, noticing the sadness that “yanks at peasant soul” (Orkan 1975: 7–8).

According to the writer’s observations, a peasant finds himself, as one of the titles of Orkan’s collected short stories has it, at the precipice (Pigoń 1958: 71). As Regina Gerlecka specifies: “Hunger for land and overpopulation – these are the main sources of poverty in the Gorce countryside” (Gerlecka 1959: 40). It is worth emphasizing that when facing the problems of contemporary countryside, Orkan never abandons a regional perspective – it is the landscape of his family’s parts where the action of a large part of his texts is set. Thus, his ethnographic interest lies in a very particular variety of folk culture – the culture of the Gorals, who, due to their territorial isolation, managed to retain relative freedom. As also noted by Michał Rauszer, “historically, Podhale was an area particularly well-suited to peasant resistance. The mountains were an excellent hideout for rebels and robbers. [...] The Gorals, who were subject to Vlach laws, were reluctant to have serfdom imposed upon them” (Rauszer 2020: 174).

However, freedom meant little in the face of increasing fragmentation of land which ceased to suffice for one family to make a living. In fact, the issue described by Orkan pertained not just to one region, but, rather, consti-

13 The scholar argues that “despite the emancipatory program inscribed into the notion of folk art by its intelligentsia creators the phenomena under this name, having undergone reification, essentialization and instrumentalization have been used to produce and confirm social inequalities with the participation of the subordinated people themselves” (Klekot 2014: 87).

tuted a common problem in post-freehold villages¹⁴. And yet, poverty did not touch everyone equally, instead increasingly emphasizing the internal hierarchy of the village. What draws one's attention is the fact that the writer hardly touches upon the subject of the legacy of serfdom, highlighting the fact that social antagonisms do not pertain simply to the peasants-manor line. For, as Orkan emphasizes, even "the smallest of little villages has its born aristocracy, cottage-owners of moderate wealth and the homeless throng separated from the common table of life" (Orkan 1975: 9).

It is that last group that hides under the eponymous name of *komornicy* – landless tenants, peasants without their own land, forced to live with wealthier landowners. Orkan, the champion of the poorest among the poor, draws a strict portrait of people placed at the very bottom of rural hierarchy, as represented by Margoška, Jagniesa and Wikta. At the opposite end of social ladder there are, in turn, affluent landowners – Chyba and Satrowa. In *Komornicy*, Orkan comes to the tragic realization that interpersonal relations, including those among neighbors, or even family, are ruled by soullessness and violence¹⁵.

Thus, the subject of rural poverty recurs ceaselessly in the pages of short stories written by Orkan. One ought to appreciate the very form of these works – on the one hand, in these short texts, the writer depicts individual experiences of particular people living in poverty, while on the other, when collected in one volume, the repeated motifs turn out to be representative of the most common problems tearing countryside of the time.

It is in the novel *Pomór [Plague]* (1910) where Orkan faces the brutal reality of Polish countryside in the most radical manner. In this text, drawing inspiration from historical events of 1847–1848, the writer tells a story about a disastrous famine and epidemic. The novel is steeped in the macabre, and the earlier realist and naturalist conventions of writing about peasant poverty become blurred in the narrative (Pigoń 1958: 294–307), to end in a description of the madness of one of the characters, Łukasz, who, after the deaths of his closest family, starts leaping on trees, pretending to be an owl. The context of events, taking place right after the peasant rebellion – the bloody Galician *Rabacja* – makes it possible to consider the unraveling misfortunes not on the social plane as much as on the metaphysical one, seeking in them punishment for sins (Gerlecka 1959: 156).

However, in his later reflections the writer abandons a social or metaphysical concept of poverty and misfortune. He arrives at the conclusion that "it is not poverty in the countryside that is the worst evil, and not ignorance; but, rather, evil coming from various people living together" (Orkan 1969: 326). The differences between individuals are described as "spiritual races" in the unfinished *Teoria socjalna [Social Theory]*. As the writer states, "The human species consists of various spiritual races, of people at various stages of intellectual development" (Orkan 1969: 318).

14 In the territory of Galicia, serfdom was abolished in 1848.

15 On violence in peasant communities see Korczak-Siedlecka 2021.

The problem of differences in spiritual development of individuals is best illustrated by Orkan's probably best novel – *W roztokach* [*In River Valleys*] (1903). To briefly summarize the plot: the story follows Franek Rakoczy, a young peasant who strives to reform the ossified power structure in the village, remaining in the hands of the elders led by the mayor Suhaj. The protagonist comes up with an idea of setting up a Christian Communist commune:

The land is farmed together and all things harvested are stored in the common granaries in the commune. Once everything has been gathered, [people] share the harvested fruits of their work. Everyone receives enough of all the earthly gifts so that they would be able to easily feed their families for the entire year, until future harvest. If the grain doesn't suffice, there is commune money, there is ready capital from various incomes. And if the summer is beautiful, the grain successful, and after a rich division there are still crops left over, they should be put into granaries for the period of scarcity. And there is no fear of a bad year that would trouble the nation with hunger and continue to trouble it (Orkan 1965: 257).

This is when, Rakoczy assumes, "evil will melt in human hearts as gray snow during spring. And geniality will take over human nature" (Orkan 1965: 270).

The protagonist's Utopian projects, which the entire commune laughs at, are never carried out. Rakoczy struggles with God and, due to his youthful arrogance, enters into conflict with Suhaj. And given the fact that the former is in love with the latter's daughter, an additional tragic conflict between personal happiness and strife for general good is introduced in the novel. The protagonist's story finds no happy ending. Rakoczy loses at all fronts – deprived of hope for marrying Hanka and conflicted with the whole community, he leaves the village, emigrating to Transylvania.

Despite the tragic end of the story, the reader's attention is drawn to the revolutionary dimension of the individual's act of rebellion against the collective. Not only does this gesture establish Rakoczy's strong subjectivity, providing him with features of a Romantic individualist, but it also shakes up the structure of the countryside, seen as stable and unchanging. In contrast to Reymont, who orders the stories of his characters according to the changing seasons of the year¹⁶, Orkan shows the moment in which the countryside enters

16 It is worth noting that this traditional interpretation of Reymont's *Chłopi* has recently met with Ryszard Koziółek's objections, as he observes a "piercing study of Polish countryside at the threshold of modernity" in the novel (Koziółek 2023: 140). According to Koziółek, "the image of passive rural crowd plugged into the mythical and naturalistic turnstile of nature is an ideological abstraction that masks, but also explains and justifies political violence responsible for the characters' individual dramas, as well as for unsolvable conflicts permeating the Lipce community" (Koziółek 2023: 142–143). Thus, Reymont's novel expresses his conservative political opinions that can be juxtaposed with Orkan's reformatory and Utopian dreams.

modernity. By rooting his protagonist's ideas in the discussions of the time¹⁷, he foresees the peasant society entering the trend of modernizing changes. Above all, what he shows in the novel is the struggle of the traditional conservative patriarchal system that put its roots into the post-serfdom countryside¹⁸ against progress and democracy (Pigoń 1965: LVI–LVII).

Over a decade later, this issue of peasant communities not being prepared to live in a democratic state will turn out to be extremely significant. After Poland regains its independence, Orkan will develop these reflections in the journalistic cycle *Listy ze wsi* [*Letters from the Countryside*], (1918, 1924–1926), whose goal was to show the intelligentsia the truth about the peasants. As the writer informs his readers, “the folk are, in fact, the nation – although the latter is not aware of that *en masse*. To know the nation should be the first duty of any citizen. Before one [educates] the folk – one needs to be educated about the folk” (Orkan 1970: 9).

Orkan advocates for “living statistics” of folk, drawing a project that resembles contemporary attempts at synthesizing the history of Polish peasants; however, for Orkan the description is not historical, but, rather, current:

Statistics made by institutions should be supplanted with the living one. To that end, it would be advisable to create a separate department by the central government institutions, equipped with necessary resources, which would need to [...] turn to [...] all [...] intelligentsia members living in the countryside so that they wrote down all about their village or the area which they have inhabited for a while, in the field of farming, economy, but also everything regarding customs, habits, everything else. This would not need to be a beautiful description, but the truth, even if not very well written. [...] And then perhaps – when one compares those [accounts] of our very varied countryside – it would be possible to create some basic synthesis that could save us in the future (Orkan 1970: 275–276).

Thus, Orkan attempts to prepare a *micro* description of his native land, which, after all, he knows best. In *Listy ze wsi*, he portrays various customs, beliefs, superstitions of the country folk with an ethnographic flair (Orkan 1970: 181–195). On the one hand, he showcases the complexity of peasant etiquette – which, as he claims, is much richer than the aristocratic one – and the lack of familiarity with it makes it impossible for outsiders to connect with this community (Orkan 1970: 21–31). At the same time, Orkan is very interested in the changes that countryside is undergoing. He analyzes such social phenomena as emigration

17 Orkan most likely drew the project of Christian Communist commune from Bolesław Limanowski's *Historia ruchów społecznych XIX wieku* (1890), from the ideas of the socialist Edward Abramowski and from his reading of Leo Tolstoy (Pigoń 1965: XXXIV–XXXVIII).

18 According to Pigoń's calculations, Suhaj was born around 1830, and thus represents the serfdom generation (Pigoń 1965: LV).

abroad, the participation of peasants in the First World War or the influx of summer visitors to Podhale, always enumerating the resulting gains and losses. Although these changes should seemingly lead to the countryside and the city becoming closer, the differences do not cancel each other out, but, rather, even serve to deepen each other (Orkan 1970: 149). The peasants are still unready to mark their political place in new society. Their way of thinking, still rooted in monarchy, is incapable of grasping the meaning of democracy (Orkan 1970: 15). But, in Orkan's opinion, the process of rising national consciousness of peasants can be accelerated by showing the folk its true meaning for the nation. The solution will not lie in assimilating rural traditions into town social norms at all, but, rather, in grounding peasant identity by drawing upon their own history. In *Wskazania dla synów Podhala* [*Indications for the Sons of Podhale*], the writer tells his compatriots:

Remember, active peasant protests against exploitation came out of this land – here the *soltys* [village leader] had the power to start levy in mass against the traitorous count Komorowski – here Kostka (Napierski) set his premature plan of renewing the Commonwealth by this freedom-loving folk – here rose the only armed peasant protest in the taken lands against perfidious Austria – the *chochoł* rebellion (Orkan 1970: 370).

Thus, the path to the peasants' political independence leads through rebellion: “be a rebel, that is, rebel against everything that crumples, squashes the spirit, that puts a dam on the path to growth” (Orkan 1970: 370).

Therefore, it is not surprising that the writer is interested in the figure of Aleksander Kostka-Napierski – the leader of a peasant uprising from 1651. He had probably been planning to write the historical novel *Kostka Napierski* since 1899 (Pigoń 1958: 335), to publish it, in its final shape, only in 1925. Overall, Orkan displayed little originality in approaching this subject: Napierski's legend enjoyed considerable popularity in literature of the time, starting with Romantic poets – Seweryn Goszczyński and Lucjan Siemieński, and ending with Kazimierz Tetmajer and Jan Kasprowicz (Ziejka 1984: 114–122). Why repeat the already written history?

I believe that this literary project reveals a strong wish for the Napierski story to become rooted in collective consciousness of peasants¹⁹. And the legend as such was very attractive to the writer. Firstly, Orkan must have been interested in the regional rootedness of this story, as taking place in Podhale. For, when talking about a Polish peasant, the writer never lets himself generalize, emphasizes the local context. As he noted:

To treat about the peasant race as such, and to say it is uniform, would be false. But one can talk about this race or the other. Grown on a given

19 As a side note, it is worth mentioning Orkan's polemic attitude towards the Sienkiewicz model of historical novel. This issue is discussed by Bujnicki 2015.

land. On an ethnographic map, not yet drawn from this perspective, clearly separate ethnic types can be marked: people from around Krakow, Podhale, Sądec, Lublin, Łowicz, Księż, Silesia, etc., whose racial features strike to the fore of the land (Orkan 1970: 151).

Secondly, the temporal distance separating this history from contemporary times was important: on the one hand, it emphasized the participation of peasants in building the centuries of Commonwealth history, on the other – it was much less antagonizing than the still surviving memory of the 1846 Galician *Rabacja*²⁰. After all, the story of a “protector of peasant liberties” of supposedly royal background creates a very conciliatory myth. Here, an assessment of Kostka Napierski’s actions in accordance with historical truth does not matter, and neither does the anachronous nature of postulates that Orkan has his protagonist spread – in the novel, Napierski declares “I want to give power to the peasant nation: for this Wealth, today noble, to be turned into a true and mighty Commonwealth” (Orkan 1925: 58); such an idea, as Pigoń aptly notes, could not have appeared in the 17th century (Pigoń 1958: 353). Nevertheless, for the writer, the example of Napierski is supposed to prove the potential for creating a folk commonwealth. As Franciszek Ziejka commented in *Złota legenda chłopów polskich*: “Orkan gave the Napierski uprising the rank of model history, one that should be postulated, and the protagonist of this upheaval, Napierski, was ascribed the function of a hero of the future who will create a new shape of Poland, who will lead the entire folk into a battle and bring about a great transformation of the Commonwealth” (Ziejka 1984: 135).

The impact of this rebellion is not diminished by the fact that, similarly to the story of Franek Rakoczy, the story of Kostka Napierski ends tragically – as we learn at the end of the text, the protagonist was executed for his actions. For perhaps in the project of a novel about Napierski, erasing a white spot in the history of peasant resistance (Wasiewicz 2019)²¹, one should see an attempt to write a potential history “reconstructed out of very concrete events, aspirations, claims, and formations that were crushed by the imposition of the course of history” (Azoulay 2021: 286). As Ariella Azoulay, theoretician of potential history, would have it, “It is only the confinement of these actions to the past that makes their potentialization unheard of” (Azoulay 2021: 280). Therefore, even if Napierski’s rebellion ended in failure, his endeavors can become a postulate directed towards the following generations.

20 For more on the ambiguous legend of the rebellion’s leader, see Jamka 2023.

21 At this point, it is worth drawing attention to the motif of robbery, which appears at the beginning of the novel – the eponymous protagonist frees cutthroats sentenced to hanging, who, as it turns out, enjoy considerable support of the folk community. One can note the symbolic dimension of this gesture – as Rauszer writes, robbery was one of the forms of folk resistance against oppressive authorities (Rauszer 2021: 244–263).

From Stories about the Folk to Folk History

Władysław Orkan's premature death in 1930, when he was barely 54, made it impossible for him to witness the end of processes connected with changes in the Polish countryside, whose development he registered in his novels and short stories. In the post-war years in Poland a social revolution took place that overturned the erstwhile class hierarchy. While there will always be considerable ambiguity in assessing the actions of the authorities of the Polish People's Republic, it has to be admitted that the modernization of the country at the time resulted in the social advancement of many peasant families (Szcześniak 2023). Simultaneously, it became the beginning of the twilight of peasant culture, whose definitive death was proclaimed in 2003 by Wiesław Myśliwski:

To use the terminology of war, peasant culture lost a battle with the impeding civilization, even as rickety as it was in Poland. It had to lose. What civilization offered to the culture of poverty and isolation was improving the quality of life and work and opening to the world. These were temptations too large to be resisted (Myśliwski 2019: 528).

Thus, if the aim of literary and cultural interest in peasants on the part of writers of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was noticing their place in the national community, the latest literature has been dominated, mainly, by prose that aims to reckon with the folk past of Poland. The countryside described by Orkan no longer exists, and the project behind his *Listy ze wsi* – introducing intelligentsia to the rural folk, increasingly well cognizant of their political meaning – lost its topicality. However, this does not mean that the writer's oeuvre should be deemed anachronous and bringing little to contemporary reflections on the peasant roots of Polish society – to the contrary.

Folk history, breaking out of paradigms of traditional historiography, demands answers regarding the way historical narration is constructed. The proponents of the folk turn openly abandon the belief that it is possible to reach objective truth about the past, and so, following in Hayden White's footsteps, prove how much connection there is between historiography and literary fiction (White 2000; Leszczyński 2020).

On the one hand, such a perspective makes it possible to assume the role of an engaged scholar, who "is always at the side of the weaker ones and tries to give them their voice" (Leszczyński 2020: 15), but, on the other, it can lead to rather pessimistic reflections. As, for instance, Agnieszka Dauksza says:

It is likely that peasant history will never be written. Or, at least, it will not be a story that we are used to seeing as history with a capital "H". The shortage of sources, as well as the fact that archives are oriented towards nobility and townspeople or intelligentsia are probably not the only obstacles. Indeed, there remains the key issue of identification and mediation (Dauksza 2017: 96).

As touched upon by the scholar, the issue of who should create the narration about folk history is not just a problem made up by theoreticians of the folk turn, but, rather, an actual question asked by people discovering the folk root of their own ancestors. It suffices to mention Antonina Woźniak's text published by *Magazyn Kontakt*. There, the author shares a private history of a grandmother of peasant background who "never talked about her life within the narrative of social advancement":

Only after reading Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak's *Chłopki* did grandma confirm that this is what it actually looked like – and that this was also her story. Together, we started to draw a picture of our family's cross-generational advancement. We were building it, simultaneously, on the basis of two perspectives – mine, post-advancement, and my grandma's, who has actually lived this experience. At this point, similarly to other narrations about advancement, the question appears – who actually produces [these narrations]? Does the voice in these stories belong to people such as myself – watching the events from a certain distance – or to people such as my grandmother? (Woźniak 2024)

As Katarzyna Chmielewska once aptly stated, "folk history is a balancing act between a story about folk and folk's story. Between first and third person narrative" (Chmielewska 2021: 301). Attempting at reconstructing Poland's peasant past makes us, thus, seek such stories that would be able to connect both these perspectives. And it is literature, created by writers of peasant background, that favors such narratives. After all, Orkan's fiction concerns, to a large degree, his own story of class advancement, registering a broader process of how intelligentsia of folk background was created. Scholars are right to see an *alter ego* of the author himself in the figure of Franek Rakoczy (Pigoń 1958: 423–424; Gerlecka 1959: 159) – a reformer wishing for the development of the peasant community and for conducting the necessary modernizing changes, who is forced to confront an unfavorable reality.

And these dreams do not disappear when the writer is gone: his legacy inspires subsequent folk activists, such as Stanisław Pigoń (1885–1968) – a literature studies scholar of peasant background. The monograph dedicated to Orkan published by Pigoń in 1958 is a sign of his intimate dialogue with the writing of the Gorce author. As he emphasizes in the introduction, "it has developed, above all, from the heart's need. Since my school years, when I first encountered Władysław Orkan's texts, for many reasons this writer became close to me, one I liked and favored"²² (Pigoń 1958: 5). Moreover, Orkan's oeuvre becomes Pigoń's inspiration when creating the project of "the folk national culture" (Wołowicz 2017).

22 For more on the subject, see: Faron 1997.

Thus, folk history can be also a story of such individual experiences, such relationships. As Litwinowicz-Drożdziel states, “it is possible to write folk history in an entirely different way – one that abandons synthesis and describing a wide-ranging totality for deep work which results in extracting particular figures and providing them with actual audibility” (Litwinowicz-Drożdziel 2019). For, in fact, any social and cultural practice that unseals the paradigm of Polishness based on nobility and intelligentsia in favor of folk narratives co-creates folk history of Poland.

When writing about the history of folk resistance, in addition to such obvious forms as peasant rebellions or flights, Michał Rauszer lists folklore culture (Rauszer 2021). The history of literature since the end of the 19th century will continue this resistance, now not against serfdom, but, rather, against the system that turns out to remain oppressive for lower social strata. Władysław Orkan’s oeuvre, subordinated almost entirely to the peasant issue, inscribes itself perfectly into this program, becoming a space for discovering alternative narratives about history, constructing a project that Jan Wasiewicz termed “the meta-peasant community of memory” (Wasiewicz 2021).

REFERENCES

- Azoulay, A. (2021). Historia potencjalna. Bez narzędzi pana, bez narzędzi w ogóle. *Teksty Drugie*, 5, 268–292. <https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2021.5.16>
- Bartecka, M. (2015, 13 lutego). *Jestem dumną wieśniaczką* (rozm. J. Kapela). Krytyka Polityczna. <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/bartecka-jestem-dumna-wiesniaczka>
- Bereza, H. (1978). *Związki naturalne. Szkice literackie*. Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza.
- Brzozowski, S. (1910). *Legenda Młodej Polski. Studia o strukturze duszy kulturalnej*. Księgarnia Polska B. Połonieckiego – E. Wende.
- Budrewicz, Z. (2015). Orkan (w) szkole międzywojennej. W: B. Faron (red.), *Władysław Orkan. Piewca Gorców i Podhala* (s. 249–268). Oficyna Wydawnicza „Wierchy”.
- Bujnicki, T. (2015). Orkan i Sienkiewicz. Dwie koncepcje powieści historycznej. W: B. Faron (red.), *Władysław Orkan. Piewca Gorców i Podhala* (s. 63–76). Oficyna Wydawnicza „Wierchy”.
- Chmielewska, K. (2021). Lud w perspektywie, perspektywa ludu. *Teksty Drugie*, 5, 293–309. <https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2021.5.17>
- Chudziński, E. (1975). Chłopski ruch literacki w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym. *Pamiętnik Literacki*, 3, 59–96.
- Czachowski, K. (1936). *Obraz współczesnej literatury polskiej. 1884–1934*. (t. 3). Państwowe Wydawnictwo Książek Szkolnych.
- Dauksza, A. (2017). O pewnym chłopskim gościu. Od rabacji do Zagłady. *Teksty Drugie*, 6, 95–106. <https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2017.6.6>
- Drózdź, D. (2023, 9 listopada). Czy Jagna może mieć zsunięte ramięczko i sexy koszulę? Spór o film „Chłopi”. *Wyborcza.pl*. <https://wyborcza.pl/7,101707,30354659,lipce-w-chlopach-nie-przypominaja-lowickiej-wsi-a-czy-powinny.html>
- Faron, B. (1997). Stanisław Pigoń o Władysławie Orkanie. W: Cz. Kłak (red.), *Non omnis moriar. Studia i szkice o Stanisławie Pigoń* (s. 97–111). Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej.
- Gerlecka, R. (1959). *Wczesna twórczość Władysława Orkana 1897–1902*. Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.

- Graff, A., Staroszczyk, M. (2023, 23 października). „Chłopi” – towar eksportowy czy wyrób chłopotodobny [RECENZJA]. *Oko.press*. <https://oko.press/chlopi-towar-eksportowy-czy-wyrob-chlopotodobny-recenzja>
- Gmitruk, J. (2003). *Ruch ludowy w Polsce. Zarys dziejów*. Muzeum Historii Polskiego Ruchu Ludowego.
- Grochowski, G., Wołowiec, G., Krawczyńska, D. (red.) (2019). *Chłopska (nie)pamięć. Dziedzictwo chłopskości w polskiej literaturze i kulturze*. Universitas.
- Jamka, R. (2023). *Panów piłą. Trzy legendy o Jakubie Szeli*. Marginesy.
- Klekot, E. (2014). Samofolkloryzacja. Współczesna sztuka ludowa z perspektywy krytyki postkolonialnej. *Kultura Współczesna. Teorie. Interpretacje. Praktyka*, 1, 86–98.
- Korczak-Siedlecka, J. (2021). *Przemoc i honor w życiu społecznym wsi na Mierzei Wiślanej w XVI–XVII wieku*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK.
- Koziółek, R. (2023). *Wiele tytułów*. Wydawnictwo Czarne.
- Kuciel-Frydryszak, J. (2023). *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach*. Marginesy.
- Kuciel-Frydryszak, J. (2025, 6 lutego). Wydarzyło się coś niewytłumaczalnego, ale mam nadzieję, że ten sukces mnie samej nie zmienił (rozm. W. Szot). *Wyborcza.pl*, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75517,31663607,kuciel-frydryszak-chloпки-sa-zywym-dowodem-na-to-ze-to-czytelnicy.html>
- Krzyżanowski, J. (1927). *Pieśniarz krainy kęp i wiecznej nędzy. Rzecz o Władysławie Orkanie*. Muzeum Tatrzańskie.
- Leszczyński, A. (2020). *Ludowa historia Polski*. Wydawnictwo W.A.B.
- Leszczyński, A. (2024). „Dopieszczeni przez pana”. Czy istnieje alternatywa dla „zwrotu ludowego”? *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 2, 163–173. <https://doi.org/10.35757/KiS.2024.68.2.7>
- Litwinowicz-Drożdźiel, M. (2021). Wielogłosy. O ludowych historiach, *Widok. Teorie i praktyki kultury wizualnej*, <https://www.pismowidok.org/pl/archiwum/2021/31-wizualnosc-klas-spolecznych/wieloglosy-o-ludowych-historiach>. <https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2021.31.2462>
- Matras-Mastalerz, W. (2015). Pamięć o Władysławie Orkanie i Zosi Smreczyńskiej w edukacji regionalnej w szkołach i instytucjach kultury miasta Limanowa. W: B. Faron (red.), *Władysław Orkan. Piewca Gorców i Podhala* (s. 269–282). Oficyna Wydawnicza „Wierchy”.
- Mikołajczak, M., Zawadzka, D., Sawicka-Mierzyńska, K. (red.) (2024). *Warstwy ludu. Chłopki, chłopcy i inni w literaturach regionalnych (XIX–XXI wiek)*. Universitas.
- Myśliwski, W. (2019). Kres kultury chłopskiej. W: M. Hałamska, M. Stanny, J. Wilkin (red.), *Ciągłość i zmiana. Sto lat rozwoju polskiej wsi* (t. 1, s. 521–531). Instytut Rozwoju Wsi i Rolnictwa PAN. <https://doi.org/10.53098/9788373839984>
- Orkan, W. (1910). *Pomór*. S. A. Krzyżanowski.
- Orkan, W. (1925). *Kostka Napierski. Powieść z XVII wieku*. Instytut Wydawniczy „Biblioteka Polska”.
- Orkan, W. (1965) *W roztokach*. Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.
- Orkan, W. (1969). *Czantoria i pozostałe pisma literackie*. Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Orkan, W. (1970). *Listy ze wsi i inne pisma społeczne*. Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Orkan, W. (1975). *Komornicy i opowiadania wybrane*. Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza.
- Pigoń, S. (1958). *Władysław Orkan. Twórca i dzieło*. Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Pigoń, S. (1965). Wstęp. W: W. Orkan, *W roztokach* (s. III–LXXVIII). Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.
- Pigoń, S. (1974). *Na drogach kultury ludowej. Rozprawy i studia*. Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza.
- Pobłocki, K. (2021). *Chamstwo*. Wydawnictwo Czarne.
- Przeniosło, M. (1996). Rozwój świadomości narodowej chłopów Królestwa Polskiego w latach I wojny światowej (okupacja austro-węgierska). W: J. Jachymek, K. Sowa, M. Śliwa (red.), *Chłopi – naród – kultura* (t. 1, s. 209–218). Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej.
- Rauszer, M. (2020). *Bękart pańszczyzny. Historia buntów chłopskich*. Wydawnictwo RM.
- Rauszer, M. (2021). *Siła podporządkowanych*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

- Soliński, J. (2022, 4 sierpnia). Pisarz i jego opowieść. Wiesław Myśliwski na bezdrożach „nurtu chłopskiego”. *Nowy Napis Co Tydzień*, 163. <https://nowynapis.eu/tygodnik/nr-163/arttykul/pisarz-i-jego-opowiesc-wieslaw-mysliwski-na-bezdrozach-nurtu-chlopskiego>
- Sowa, J. (2011). *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*. Universitas.
- Stowarzyszenie Folkowisko (2015). *Niepamięć. Pierwszy film o dziedzictwie pańszczyzny*. Stowarzyszenie Folkowisko. <https://stowarzyszenie.folkowisko.org/film-dokumentalny>
- Szcześniak, M. (2023). *Poruszeni. Awans i emocje w socjalistycznej Polsce*. Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
- Wasiewicz, J. (2019). „Chytrze bydłą z pany kmiecie...” Prolegomena do badań nad obecnością oporu chłopskiego w polskiej pamięci kulturowej. W: G. Grochowski, G. Wołowiec, D. Krawczyńska (red.), *Chłopska (nie)pamięć. Dziedzictwo chłopskości w polskiej literaturze i kulturze* (s. 163–177). Universitas.
- Wasiewicz, J. (2021). Metachłopska wspólnota pamięci. Poza chłopomanię i chłopofobię. W: A. Klarman (red.), *Historia. Pamięć. Świadomość* (s. 158–187). Instytut Pamięci Narodowej.
- Wasilewski, J. (2011). Społeczeństwo polskie, społeczeństwo chłopskie. *Studia Socjologiczne*, 1, 353–368.
- Węgrzyn, I. (2017). Chłopscy bohaterowie XIX-wiecznej literatury polskiej. Rekonesans badawczy. W: D. Michaluk (red.), *Wolni i uwłaszczeni. Chłopi a przemiany społeczne, gospodarcze i polityczne w Europie Wschodniej w XIX i na początku XX wieku* (s. 223–231). Muzeum Rolnictwa im. ks. Krzysztofa Kluka w Ciechanowcu.
- White, H. (2000). *Poetyka pisarstwa historycznego*. Universitas.
- Wołowiec, G. (2017). Filologia i nacjonalizm. Stanisław Pigoń jako ideolog kultury ludowo-narodowej. *Teksty Drugie*, 6, 107–141. <https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2017.6.7>
- Woś, P. (2020). Galicyjski ruch ludowy w początkowym okresie działalności Stronnictwa Ludowego. *Galicja. Studia i materiały*, 6, 492–506. <https://doi.org/10.15584/galisim.2020.6.22>
- Woźniak, A. (2024, 31 grudnia). Być blisko źródła. Kto opowiada historię ludową w Polsce? *Magazyn Kontakt*. <https://magazynkontakt.pl/byc-blisko-zrodla-kto-opowiada-historie-ludowa-w-polsce/>
- Ziejka, F. (1984). *Złota legenda chłopów polskich*. PIW.
- Ziejka, F. (1991). Wstęp. W: W. Reymont, *Chłopi* (t. 1, s. VII–CXXV). Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.