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We, Slavs – Tools and Functions of (Re)Constructing Polish Pre-History in Fantasy Literature on the Example of Witold Jabłoński's Cycle *Słowiańska Apokalipsa**

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ABSTRACT: The article analyzes Witold Jabłoński's historical fantasy cycle *Słowiańska Apokalipsa* [*Slavic Apocalypse*] (2013–2021) as an example of creating an image of preliterate and pre-Christian Polish past in pop cultural circulation. The cycle is inscribed into the genre of Slavic fantasy which, to a large degree, is based on the "phantasm of Slavic tradition" as identified by Maria Janion, which serves important function as a source of collective identity or a reservoir of senses and symbols used to create identity models alternative to the official national and Catholic discourse. Jabłoński's cycle is focused on creating a model of a pagan martyr or pagan martyrology that would justify the moral superiority of pagans and anti-clerical tone of the novels. I analyze the eclectic and intertextual nature of the novels, multiplicity of sources and references used in creating an image of Poland's pagan past, and the result of using these particular tools in the context of the cycle's ideological message. In a broader cultural context, the article postulates considering Slavic fantasy in the context of the folk turn.

KEYWORDS: Slavic book, Slavic fantasy, Slavic mythology, Witold Jabłoński, phantasm

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Preliterate History of Poland in the Context of Contemporary Polish Cultural Identity

In the case of Poland, preliterate history, characterized by the lack of native written sources, lasts until the 10th century rise of the early Piast monarchy. There are few historical records concerning the time preceding the creation of the Piast state, or the stage of Slavic expansion and tribal organization; the oldest native historiographic text, that is, Gallus Anonymus's *Kronika i czyny książąt czyli władców polskich* [*Cronicae et gesta ducum sive principum Polonorum – Deeds of the Princes of the Poles*], written between 1112 and 1116, describes the history of the house of Piast from the legend about Popiel (a 9th century ruler of the Goplan and Polan tribes) and Piast, to partly mythical creation of the Piast state[1], the rule of Mieszko I and his descendants to the rule of Bolesław III the Wrymouth in the 12th century. As noted by Monika Brzóstowicz-Klajn (2022: 7), the popularization of the subject of preliterate – and, as can be surmised, pre-Christian – history of Poland is a way of seeking new collective identity, or tools for re-defining and re-interpreting contemporary Polish identity by assuming alternative – towards the official reading of history, transferred, for instance, during compulsory education – cultural models. If the official, mainstream models of Polish identity are Christian, patriotic (at times even Catholic and nationalist) and defined in reference to the West (with a sense of moral superiority or cultural inferiority towards the Western civilization, sometimes even both at the same time as a part of a deeply ambiguous concept), the alternative model would draw upon pre-Christian roots, would be pagan, referring not to the notion of a nation as much as "Slavic tradition", "an

1 The legend given in the *Cronicae* is as follows: Popiel was a ruler in Gniezdno. On the occasion of *postrzyżyny* (first haircut: in the culture of old Slavs, a ritual consisting in ritual cutting hair of a male child, usually at his 7th birthday, and naming him) of Popiel's sons, two mysterious guests came to the stronghold, but the ruler did not allow them to the feast, thus breaking the rules of hospitality. The strangers left to be hosted by a poor tiller named Piast, who also celebrated the first haircut of his son, Siemowit. Popiel is depicted as a bad ruler who was supposedly exiled from the kingdom and persecuted by mice, to be eaten by them in the end. This event is commemorated by the still extant so-called Mouse Tower on the shore of Gopło, near Kruszwica. Having grown up, Siemowit became a prince and started the Piast dynasty. Mysterious guests are interpreted as divine messengers, whose blessing predestines Siemowit to take the throne (Wróblewska 2019). Including a legend – the dynasty's founding myth – into a historiographic text is a common practice in Medieval chronicle writing, where "creating the most ancient state history was aided by the Old Testament" or "the relics of Greek writing and Roman antiquity" (Orzeł 2019: 716). By including the legend about the origins of the Piast dynasty, that is, Piast's descendants, the chronicle creates a bridge between oral culture, in which this legend probably originated, and written culture, as well as between pagan order in which the legend originally functioned (Kawiński 2022: 536) and Christian order, as the version presented in the *Cronicae* is a Christianized interpretation of the legend (Michałowski 1985: 461). Cases in which pre-Christian tradition has been retained are almost always mediated by Christian interpretation, separated from their original context, full of simplifications and understatements. The preliterate past of Poland is described as "the erased old time", "clean slate", "clean field" (Janion 2007: 13), additionally burdened with the trauma of "bad baptism", that is, joining the Latin civilization by force, conducted by the means of conquest (which especially pertained to Western Slavs [Janion 2007: 17]).

imagined – in an anti-essentialist meaning – Slavic collective" (Janion 2007: 22), finally, it would be self-referential in the sense that it would be its own reference point, devoid of a postcolonial complex towards the West. This search for alternative identity models is thus based on the "phantasm of Slavic tradition", or the conceptional apparatus developed by Maria Janion in such texts as *Projekt krytyki fantazmatycznej* [*The Project of Phantasmic Criticism*] (1991) and *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury* [*The Uncanny Slavic Tradition. Phantasms of Literature*] (2007). The latter title is of particular significance, as it contains a detailed proposal of basing a new identity model on "a turn towards our past: remote, pre-Slavic and pagan" (Brzóstowicz-Klajn 2022: 6).

The aim of the present article is to analyze tools serving to (re)construct the preliterate pagan Polish past in the field of fantasy literature and the identity-forming function of these representations in context of the so-called folk turn that is taking place in Poland. While Slavic fantasy as such has already been a subject of analyses, the way this trend is inscribed into a broader social context, namely, the folk turn, has not yet been discussed. The main thesis of this article is viewing Slavic fantasy as a manifestation of "folk pop culture", that is, an articulation of the folk turn on the levels of pop and mass culture. One could even go as far as to suggest an analogy between contemporary Polish Slavic fantasy and English-language neo-pagan fantasy of the 1980s, connected with the popularization of the Wicca movement and neo-pagan religion, whose major example lies in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* (1982). Analytic material consists herein in Witold Jabłoński's series *Słowiańska Apokalipsa* [*The Slavic Apocalypse*], which, at present, consists of three volumes: *Słowo i miecz* [*The Word and the Sword*] (2013), *Ślepy demon. Sieciech* [*The Blind Demon. Sieciech*] (2015) and *Ślepy demon. Zbigniew* [*The Blind Demon. Zbigniew*] (2021). The series was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, the place of publication and the author's body of work is of considerable importance. Witold Jabłoński is a writer of a stabilized position at the publishing market, associated mainly with historical fantasy due to his earlier series – *Gwiazda Wenus, Gwiazda Lucyfer* published in the years 2003–2008 – in which he depicted the life of Witelon, a Silesian scholar and philosopher from the turn of 13th and 14th centuries, who, in the version presented in the novel, is also a sorcerer who sells his soul to the devil. Both of Jabłoński's series were published by SuperNova, a company that published the works of the best representatives of Polish fantasy: Andrzej Sapkowski, Anna Brzezińska, Jacek Dukaj or Szczepan Twardoch, which means that *Słowiańska Apokalipsa* functions among literary "quality" fantasy, that is, one that displays artistic aspirations. Moreover, the series constitutes interesting material for study due to its construction: not creating alternative history in the sense of altering known historical events (as there is no divergence point in which history and fiction part ways) which is a narrative conceit familiar from fantasy literature, as much as presenting an alternative interpretation of history, based, in the first order, on

positive valuation of paganism[2] (and, as follows, Slavic culture) and negative perception of Christianity (identified with European Western culture). Simultaneously, Jabłoński's novels are inscribed in standard convention of fantasy, introducing magical abilities of the characters, supernatural powers and fantastic creatures connected with pagan (or folk, folkloric) system of beliefs, while the plot of the first volume is based on the archetype of a quest. Thirdly, the series bluntly emphasizes certain tendencies and mechanisms visible in historical fantasy that undertakes the subject of Poland's pagan history (increasingly referred to as Slavic fantasy), such as eclectic sources of inspiration and knowledge regarding Slavic pagan beliefs and practices, intertextuality (meaning the text borrowing from conventions and motifs of fantasy, as well as other literary texts or broadly understood popular culture, including global media culture), using prefiguration in regard to significant historical events or contemporary cultural trends, and the presence of a particular ideological background of the text, which, in the case of *Słowiańska Apokalipsa* can be described, in the first order, as anticlerical[3], and only then as Slavic and folk-related.

The first volume, *Słowo i miecz,* concerns the period between 1008 and 1047, that is, the rule of Bolesław the Brave, Mieszko II and Casimir I the Restorer. The novel focuses on the conflict between the Christian house of Piast and the pagan family of Liw. In a broader perspective, this conflict represents an antagonistic relation between Christianity and paganism, wherein Liws and pagans are situated in the role of innocent victims of the expansion of Western Christianity, whose efforts are motivated politically rather than metaphysically. The protagonist is Dziewanna/Donata/Żywia, the last representative of the Liw family, murdered by Bolesław the Brave for not renouncing the faith of their ancestors for the sake of Christianity.

Dziewanna is raped by the ruler, locked in a nunnery, where she takes on the name Donata and gives birth to a son, Miecław. In the end, the woman escapes with her son, takes on the name Żywia to honor the Goddess Żywia

2 I use the terms "pagans" and "paganism" for the purposes of this article; the series as such uses the notion of "Lud Słowa" (the People of the Word) and references to Rodzimowierstwo – Slavic Native Faith, avoiding the term "paganism" as rooted in the Christian paradigm.

3 When talking about the anti-clerical nature of the series it is worth mentioning two important contexts. The first of these is the presence of anti-clericalism in Polish fantasy of the transformation era. Back at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s religious subjects were already very popular among the then-debuting fantasy writers, as evidenced by a number of titles published in the magazines "Fantastyka", "Feniks" and "Nowa Fantastyka", a majority of which had an anti-clerical dimension, as resulting from the Catholic Church's interference into the social and political life at the time. As a result, the social image of the Church at that point worsened and anti-clerical attitudes increased; they were frequently expressed in literature of that period, not just fantasy. The stabilization of new post-transformation reality definitely mollified these social attitudes, which was also connected with the strengthened role of the Church as a political force in Poland. The second important context is Jabłoński's earlier oeuvre, above all the series *Gwiazda Wenus, Gwiazda Lucyfer*, which also contains strong criticism of the organization and role of the Church in social and political life. Due to the political nature of the Catholic Church's actions, anti-clericalism remains an enduring sentiment in Polish social tissue until today.

(Zhiva), or the Mother Earth, whose highest priestess she is; she takes on the mission of freeing Czernobóg (Chernobog), bound at the dawn of time, in the hope that his power will destroy the Christianity spreading in Eastern Europe, and especially the hated Piasts, on whom she swore revenge. The novel utilizes the historical figure of Miecław, who is known to have been Mieszko II's cupbearer and who declared himself a prince of Masovia, to be finally defeated by Casimir I in a 1047 battle that Gallus Anonymus's *Cronicae* described as the "great slaughter of Masovian people" (see Jabłoński 2013: 643). An important conceit in the novel consists in referring to a series of folk and pagan uprisings that marked the first years of the Piast monarchy's formation (the uprisings took place in the years 1022, 1025, 1030–32, 1038), as an expression of resistance both towards introducing feudal order and foreign religion. Describing these uprisings as "pagan reactions" is connected with many controversies[4] (the main of which is lack of evidence for paganism being reborn during the rebellions), however, in the *Słowiańska Apokalipsa* series it is assumed that the rebellions were mainly religiously motivated. The following two volumes tell the story of behind-the-scenes actions of Kościej[5], an immortal priest of Chors (in the series depicted as the god of the moon and the night) between 1057 and 1093. Kościej assumes false identity of a monk, and in this guise teaches Sieciech about the faith of his ancestors and hatred towards Piasts, to subsequently take over the care of Zbigniew while intriguing in the Piast court.

What is extremely interesting in the context of the present reflections is that the third volume ends at a point when a young learned monk, Martin of Gaul, a figure who clearly represents Gallus Anonymus in the novel, becomes employed by the court chancellor where he will shortly begin writing down the *Cronicae* describing the official history of the Piast house. Thus, the series ends in the symbolic moment of Poland entering the tracks of history. Martin's advancement is also connected with kidnapping, torturing and forced converting of the eponymous Zbigniew, the avenger of persecuted pagans foretold in a prophecy. The bookend that connects the two versions of *Ślepy demon* is Zbigniew's escape from Christian imprisonment, foretelling the fall of the house of Piast and the death of Martin, whom Zbigniew swore revenge upon. Zbigniew, Władysław I Herman's illegitimate son and Sieciech, a palatine,

4 For instance, Gerard Labuda (1989: 77) cites mentions in *Powieść minionych lat* (*Powieść doroczna*) [*The Primary Chronicle or the Tale of Bygone Years*], dated at about 1113, where there appears a record of events in Poland ca. 1030, when mutinous folk killed bishops and priests; similar mentions appear in Cosmas's *Chronicle of the Czechs* (1110–1125). Gallus Anonymous already mentions "abandoning Catholic faith" and "rising mutiny against priests and God's bishops" (Labuda 1989: 77). Labuda himself notes that the chronicles "bring us the perspective of their clergy authors, who treated acting against bishops and priests as 'pagan reaction' [...] it seems however, that in these uprisings against the clergy economical and social motivations are also in the first place; bishops and priests were treated as a part of the authorities" (Labuda 1989: 78).

5 Kościej the Immortal is a figure from Eastern Slavic folklore, a powerful mage usually playing the role of an antagonist in folk tales.

Krakow voievode and magnate of the Lesser Poland are key figures in political actions that led to Poland's division into provinces in the period between 1138 and 1320. In Jabłoński's interpretation, it is division into provinces that appears as fulfillment of Zbigniew's revenge, a symbolic fall of the Piast might and political ambitions, as the dynasty is depicted, above all, as oppressors of pagans.

The Phantasm of Slavic Tradition, the Phantasm of Paganism

In the field of national fantasy literature, introducing plots and subjects connected with Poland's pagan history is nothing new. Dariusz Piechota (2020: 365) noted that Slavic fantasy has a long tradition in Polish literature, and preminescences of the genre can be seen in Ignacy Kraszewski's 1876 *Stara baśń*, a novel opening his historical cycle *Dzieje Polski*, or Władysław Orkan's 1912 *Drzewiej*. A new phenomenon consists in the popularity of the so-called Slavic books (Brzóstowicz-Klajn 2022: 9), increasing steadily since 2016, which "include all books with Slavic motifs, in addition to fiction of various genres also bestiaries, herbal medicine manuals, books with spells and rituals of 'Slavic witches' and 'whisperers', historic, folklore and religious studies, or even botanical books" (Brzóstowicz-Klajn 2022: 7). The increasing popularity of Slavic fantasy is clearly visible. Elżbieta Żukowska defined "Slavic fantasy" as "a group of fantasy texts openly referring to the history and culture of Old Slavs" (Żukowska 2009: 208). The scholar also noted that the genre is characterized by an "exceptional cohesion of the presented world": "based in pre-Christian culture, rooted in pagan perception of the world, fantasy literature draws, above all, from the most representative elements, such as the religious ceremony, pantheon of gods, definition of the spacetime" (Żukowska 2009: 209). According to Żukowska, Slavic fantasy is a subgenre of historical fantasy, as evidenced by the care for historical realism in the construction of novels of this kind (Żukowska 2009: 209); however, open references "to the history and culture of Old Slavs" also appear in fantasy novels set in contemporary times. Thus, the notion of Slavic fantasy exceeds all heretofore functioning genre divisions, such as into historical fantasy and urban fantasy, which operated within the contrast between the urban, modern, industrialized space and the magical element filling it, frequently drawing upon folk myth and tradition, and rural fantasy, which, analogically, introduced magical and supernatural elements into contemporary rural or small town communities. Some examples of using Slavic elements in contemporary Polish fantasy consists in Marta Kisiel's 2010 rural fantasy *Dożywocie* or Aneta Jadowska's urban fantasy series *Heksalogia o Dorze Wilk*, started in 2012, although in these titles Slavic elements do not yet come to the foreground and they co-exist with beliefs from different cultural circles (in the case of *Dożywocie* Licho, that is, a minor demon heralding bad fates from Slavic folk mythology is the name of a guardian angel, while *utopce* and *wodniki* (both meaning water-related beings) live next to dryads. Significantly, subsequent titles in the *Dożywocie* series, that is, the 2017 short story *Szaławiła* (which has received the prestigious Janusz A. Zajdel's Award) and the 2019

novel *Oczy uroczne* operate entirely within the world of Slavic mythology and folk superstitions and customs. This confirms Brzóstowicz-Klajn's thesis regarding the turn that took place in the Polish publishing market in 2016, which marks an increased interest in the Slavic culture and mythology. Other examples of the growing popularity of Slavic fantasy are Marta Krajewska's cycle *Wilcza Dolina* (since 2016), Franciszek M. Piątkowski's series *Uniwersum Powiernika* (since 2021), Katarzyna Wierzbicka's cycle *Między światami* (since 2021), Anna Lewicka's *Pełnik* (2021), Maciej Szymczak's *Klątwa żercy* (2022), Justyna Hankus's *Dwie i pół duszy. Folk noir* (2023), Agnieszka Kulbat's *Wezwanie żmija* (2025), Joanna Kanicka's *Bezkost* (2025) and numerous anthologies of fantasy stories. There also appears a certain chaos as pertaining to terminology: Slavic fantasy is sometimes described as sub-genre which, as the examples above show, is not always justified, especially given that the boundaries between the still multiplying sub-genres are often fluid, context-dependent and resulting from the authors' own declarations. Therefore, I suggest that we define Slavic fantasy as a trend within contemporary Polish fantasy literature, as it is a more flexible notion than sub-genre. However, in the case of quotations from other works which contain the term "sub-genre", I will retain original terminology.

Brzóstowicz-Klajn noted that "the choice of fantasy convention in texts containing Slavic motifs points towards the awareness of the phantasmic nature of how we imagine these distant beginnings of both the Polish society and state being larger than in the 19th and 20th centuries" (Brzóstowicz-Klajn 2022: 7). Here, the scholar refer to Janion's conception, wherein a phantasm is a product of social imagination, at the same time rooted in reality (through influencing social practices and attitudes) and exceeding it in order to fulfill collective needs and wishes in the symbolic field. A phantasm fulfills defensive, compensatory and legitimizing functions for the collective consciousness of the group and, by becoming present in the texts of culture of a given community, it becomes a kind of a script of social desire (the function of fantasy in Freudian conception). Brzóstowicz-Klajn gives the example of "Wielka Lechia" (Great Lechia), a pseudo-historical conspiracy theory assuming that the pre-Piast Poland was supposedly an empire ranging from the Ural to the Rhine, and from the Baltic to the Black Sea, expressed, above all, in Janusz Bieszek's 2015 publication *Słowiańscy królowie Lechii*[6]. The scholar distinguishes between several functions fulfilled by the phantasm of Slavic tradition, understood as the pan-Slavic religious and cultural community, which:

> [...] would be a response to the Romantic awareness of the state of forgetting the trauma, hidden deep in our past, of Christianization tearing us away from our pagan roots. What it is connected the sense of belong-

6 The popularity of the "Lechitic" compensatory phantasm has become so significant that Artur Wójcik devoted his monograph *Fantazmat Wielkiej Lechii. Jak pseudonauka zawładnęła umysłami Polaków* (2019) to the subject.

> ing to [a community of – A. K.] harmed and weaker ones, whom "bad baptism" deprived of the right to a part of our pre-Slavic identity. This is why Slavic tradition is marked with eeriness as an experience of what is repressed, forgotten, but returns as important, necessary, but, at the same time, alien, unknown [...]. [In] the beginning of the 21st century the phantasm of Slavic tradition is also seen as an expression of resistance towards the technocratic way of ruling in Poland after the [system] transformation and a form of asking about the value of national culture in the face of violent changes connected with a crisis of Polish identity. [...] The popularity of Slavic book can also be interpreted anthropologically, as a response to accelerated globalization. A response that consists in a turn towards what is local. Simultaneously, this response is an acceptance of post-colonial state, as it expresses praise of what might be peripheral, "lower", "weaker" when compared to the dominating center of culture, but it describes our exceptional identity and experiences (Brzóstowicz-Klajn 2022: 7–8, 11).

In the first rank, the phantasm of Slavic tradition remains an identity problem, to a large degree an open question about the sources of Polish collective identity and the contemporary models of constructing this identity. Similar conclusions were presented by Żukowska, who wrote about the beginnings of Slavic fantasy: "the first texts of this trend appeared in the early 1990s, clearly as a response to several key issues of those times: system transformation, questions concerning national, cultural and historical identity, and the readers' unusual need for this kind of literature" (Żukowska 2009: 208). The increasing popularity of the phantasm of Slavic tradition in the literary field can be also interpreted as a symptom of the exhaustion of the Catholic-national model, undergoing increasing corrosion as a result of the globalization process: here, the model of Slavic tradition could become an attractive alternative, if only due to how easily it could be squeezed into patterns of consumerism and progressive (or quasi-progressive) identity models (such as a feminist reinterpretation of a witch as "a woman who knows", who enjoys the respect of local community, as shown in Monika Maciewicz's *Wiedma* trilogy).

Moreover, the phantasm of Slavic tradition also includes the issue of religion of the Slavs, above all, as a cultural alternative towards the adopted or (according to the narration of the phantasm) imposed Christianity. The very existence of Slavic mythology remains an issue of debate within ethnology or religion studies, which does not preclude the creation and functioning of numerous religious associations of *Rodzimowierstwo* (Slavic Native Faith) in Central and Eastern Europe[7]. No direct sources concerning Slavic faith and religion were

7 First religious associations of *Rodzimowierstwo* were registered in Poland just a few years after system transformation in 1995 and 1996, similarly to associations for Slavic culture and tradition (Żukowska 2009: 208).

preserved, and the reconstruction of pagan beliefs is based on research into particular folk traditions, comparative linguistic and archaeological studies. As a result, some scholars take up a skeptical approach, questioning the existence of a cohesive religious system and Slavic mythology, as has been expressed, for instance, in Dariusz Andrzej Sikorski's publication *Religie dawnych Słowian. Przewodnik dla poszukujących* (2018). However, a much more popular approach (especially as a source of inspiration for Slavic fantasy) is the one contained in Aleksander Gieysztor's *Mitologia Słowian* (1982) and Andrzej Szyjewski's *Religia Słowian* (2003), namely, the assumption that there existed a Slavic pantheon, including, among others, such deities as Perun, Weles, Swaróg, Chors, Mokosz, and that there functioned an institutionalized cult of Slavic gods, which consisted in cult places with relevant rituals and holidays, and a specialized priest cast (here, above all, the figure of a *żerca* – a priest who offers a sacrifice – *żertwa* – to the gods). Slavic mythology is supplemented by folk demonology, namely, folklore tales, customs and rituals from the 19th and beginnings of the 20th century, considered to be remainders of pagan beliefs in Christian world, Christianized pagan tradition[8].

Interestingly, many fictional Slavic books contain, usually as an afterword or as a glossary or even bibliography, direct references to academic works. For example, in *Słowo i miecz* there is a bibliography including the aforementioned positions by Gieysztor and Szyjewski[9], while in the "From the Author" section Jabłoński (2013: 643) refers to Zorian Dołęga Chodakowski's famous 1818 overview *O Sławiańszczyźnie przed chrześcijaństwem* [*On Slavic tradition before Christianity*] – which firmly states that Christianity destroyed the cultural achievements of the Slavs, and a spiritual rebirth of the nation is only possible via a return to pagan roots and rejection of Christianity. Obviously, the aim of referring to academic studies is to legitimize the way pagan faith, as well as religious and cultural practices are depicted in the presented world of the novels; this, as such, constitutes an interesting mixture of fiction and (historical) reality, characteristic for a phantasm. It was already Żukowska who pointed out that the creators of Slavic fantasy are characterized by "excellent knowledge of history", while "studies into the early Middle Ages undertaken by [local] fantasy authors result in an extraordinary cohesion of the presented world" (Żukowska 2009: 209). Thus, the presented world in Slavic fantasy allows for the objective existence of gods, spirits and demons, working of supernatural powers and existence of fantastic creatures, yet it takes care to retain a certain historical probability. Certain, for it is based on reconstructing the reality of preliterate era, meaning that Slavic fantasy is an attempt at creating

8 In the context of research on Slavic mythology it is worth mentioning very interesting works by Michał Łuczyński: *Bogowie dawnych Słowian. Studium onomastyczne* [*God of Old Slavs. An Onomastic Study*] (2020) and *Mity Słowian. Śladami świętych opowieści przodków* [*Myths of the Slavs. Tracing the Holy Tales of the Ancestors*] (2022).

9 Moreover, Jabłoński is the author of text for the radioplays *Dary bogów* (2017) and *Popiel. Syn popiołów* (2019), later published as the first two volumes of the *Seria Słowiańska.*

historical probability or historical credibility for a time before history, time not included in historiography, and rending beliefs and practices of a religious system whose image was created, to a large degree, as a result of interpretation and speculation.

The creators of Slavic fantasy select their sources in a preconceived, selective way, choosing those that offer a particular vision of Poland's pagan past. Paradoxically, references to academic work in Slavic fantasy legitimize not the latter, but, rather, the former: the image of Slavic religion and culture that draws upon the spirit of Chodakowski's and Gieysztor's works and thus becomes confirmed as trustworthy, objective and real imagine of preliterate culture of the Slavs. This oscillation between phantasm and fantasy (within the literary genre of fantasy) is analogous to the process of myth creation in Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis: "without material basis, material carrier, that is, *signifiant*, the myth uses the entire – the object of its parasiting – as its own *signifiant* [...], but it needs to deform this sign, distinguish it in a way [...] so that it would be filled with the myth's new *signifié* [...]. But it cannot rid it of meaning [...] as then it would cease to be a myth, becoming, again, a new sign of the first level [...]" (Kłosiński 2020: 8). Therefore, a myth is "a theft and a return" (Kłosiński 2020: 18). The imagined Slavic past present in academic and popular science (or even journalistic) discourse appears in deformed forms (due to the texts' artistic aims) in literature in order to confirm and validate its existence, provide it with a certain surplus of meaning as objective historical reality that can constitute the framework for assessing the credibility of fictional texts. The fictional nature of literature masks the phantasmic nature of studies. Mythologization is connected with legitimization. We can see how risky this conceit is in the context of the conventions of the fantasy genre and popular circulation of culture on the example of *Słowiańska Apokalipsa*.

A Pop Cultural Remix

Słowiańska Apokalipsa, especially its first volume, is an interesting collage of cultural motifs and tropes. In addition to references to Slavic mythology in a version familiar from academic overviews and folk customs subjected to pagan interpretation (e.g., referring to a *pisanka*, an Easter egg, as "a symbol of the Great Goddess" [Jabłoński 2013: 21]), the novel also contains more general references to Wicca, that is, the neo-pagan movement connected with practicing witchcraft. Wicca assumes a dual cosmology with the central figures of the Great Triple Goddess (Maiden, Mother and Crone-Death) and the Horned God, whose aspects are numerous deities of polytheistic religions. In Jabłoński's novels the Great Goddess appears as the trinity of Dziewanna/Żywia/Marzanna (Jabłoński 2013: 76–82), while the "Horned Lord" becomes a term for Weles (Jabłoński 2013: 211; 2015: 6), and numerous characters practice ceremonial magic (Jabłoński 2013: 213–221). Moreover, *Słowo i miecz* presents certain analogies between not only various traditions of Slavic peoples (for instance, Polabian Slavs and Eastern Slavs), but also between Slavic tradition and those

represented by the neighboring peoples, such as Yotvingians or even Nordic peoples. For example, Sigruna, the mother of the protagonist, comes from "the free Land of Lakes in the North" (Jabłoński 2013: 14), where the goddess Żywia is simply called Żemine (Jabłoński 2013: 15), while the Vikings in Jomsberg (a legendary settlement at the mouth of the Oder river) have the Spear of Perun, which they call the Spear of Baldur, in their treasury (Jabłoński 2013: 497). In turn, they recognize Swarożyc's hammer as Thor's Hammer (Jabłoński 2013: 536), not without foundation, as it is exactly Nordic mythology that becomes the canvas for the Slavic storyteller to spin a story on the origins of the Hammer. Indeed, Widun, Weles's priest, talks about a battle between giants, described by a familiar moniker of Stolems, and gods, from whom the former stole a powerful weapon, Swarożyc's hammer. The strongest of the giants promised to return the hammer if in return he could marry the goddess Dola. As she did not agree, Weles advised Swarożyc to disguise himself as the bride and take back the hammer, which led to a slaughter of giants during the wedding feast (Jabłoński 2013: 330–336). This tale is a direct transposition of the Nordic myth concerning the theft of Mjöllnir by the giant Thrym, except Swarożyc appears in the place of Thor. An interesting element of the novel lies in the attempt at ascribing the swastika (a sign of an even cross appearing almost all over the world since Neolithic times) Slavic nature, making it into a plot-relevant sign of the Swarożyc (Sweistiksa for the Borans). Taking into account the historical context of Nazism, which made swastika into its distinctive symbol, including the attitude towards Slavs as a "lower race", or the nationalist and Neo-Nazi tendencies appearing in the circles of Slavic Native Faith religions, introducing a plot motif based on the swastika brings about concerning political connotations, also when it is an attempt at appropriating and re-interpreting this symbol, as in the context of history of European culture this attempt will always fail.

Additionally, the presented world of *Słowiańska Apokalipsa* is filled with figures taken from folklore, such as rusalkas, werewolves, strzygons (male strigas), and even berserks (Jabłoński 2013: 8) and shape shifters – Mścigniew turns into a bear (Jabłoński 2013: 157). The protagonists of the novel are also attacked by zombie, undead corpses risen from the earth that can only be killed through destroying their heads – "When you remove the rotten brain, you will rid the dead of the remainder of consciousness that directs them" (Jabłoński 2013: 428) – which illustrates the eclectic nature of inspirations, drawing boldly from every possible tradition, including that of pop culture. Indeed, destroying a zombie's head is an archetypal solution familiar from horror movies. Although described in a terrifying manner, the zombie attack mostly has entertainment value, becomes a source of satisfaction from the intertextual reference, similarly to the myth told by Widun and borrowings of clearly literary, fictional nature.

The mission of Żywia and her team leads to Chernobog's prison in the drowned city of Weneda (Veneda), whose legend is modeled after the myth of the Atlantis, where the city beloved of gods undergoes increasing corruption

until it is drowned as an expression of divine anger (Jabłoński 2013: 572–575; 587–588). Wenedowie – the Venedi or Veneti – is the name of a people (assumed to be Slavic) who inhabited the lands over Vistula and the Baltic Sea in the Roman period, that is, between the 1st and the 4th century AD. The history of the Venedi people inspired Juliusz Słowacki's[10] 1840 tragedy *Lilla Weneda*. In the Romantic poet's version the Venedi become a Celtic people, settled at the shore of the Gopło lake, awaiting unavoidable failure in their fight against Slavic conquest. Indeed, the Venedi are victims of an undefined curse and can be saved only by the sound of the royal harp, which had been taken by the conquerors. The protagonist of the drama is the eponymous Lilla, a daughter of the Venedi king – Derwid – a gentle harp player, who undertakes fruitless efforts to save her close ones. In Jabłoński's novel Słowacki's drama undergoes far-reaching transformations:

> The last ruler of Veneda, the queen Allil was the worst [...] Beautiful as a spring goddess and corrupt to the bone. She had given up her soul and heart to the Lord of Darkness. With her magic, she made her old father, the king-harp player Derwan, lose his hearing and the ability to play the magical instrument, from which he drew his ruling power and strength. It was said that the harp was given to him by Weles himself. The heartless daughter ordered for the helpless old man to be hung at the ceiling of the throne room, and then talked two younger twins [Lel and Polel] who were in love with her to use this living effigy for target practice in shooting their bows and throwing axes (Jabłoński 2013: 587).

Allil is an obvious anadrome of the name Lilla, the Venedi king Derwan is Słowacki's Derwin, while the Lel and Polel twins (appearing, for the first time, in a 16th century text as counterparts for Castor and Pollux in the Slavic pantheon) from Jabłoński's novel are called Lelum and Polelum in the drama. The storyline concerning Waneda in *Słowo i miecz* is not a retelling of a famous Romantic drama, wherein the Venedi are no longer innocent victims of historical circumstances, but active agents of their own doom as much in an ironic reference that serves, above all, a post-modern literary game of recognizing sources. It is a string of references that is actually devoid of meaning and possessed only of stylistic value. The same role is played by hidden quotations from Stanisław Wyspiański's[11] drama *Legenda* [*The Legend*] (Jabłoński 2013: 41;51), supposed to represent "pre-Slavic" songs, and references to William Shakespeare's works. Mac Bethad initially appears in *Słowo i miecz* as a his-

10 Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849) was a Romantic poet and playwright, described as one of the national bards. Together with Adam Mickiewicz, he was the main representative of Polish Romanticim.

11 Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907), described as an "epigone of Romanticism" was a Polish writer (poet, playwright) and artist (painter, architect, designer). His dramatic oeuvre is the reason for him being termed a national bard.

torical figure, yet his description – "a vicious and traitorous usurper [...] [who] murdered the good, pious king Duncan" (Jabłoński 2013: 400) reveals that the actual source of "historical truth" propagated by the characters (the Emperor Henry III and the Bromberg bishop) is the Shakespearean drama. Duncan I died in 1040 during an attack on Moray and was not murdered by Macbeth. However, in *Ślepy demon. Zbigniew* Bolesław II the Bold carries a dagger with which "the son of the rightful ruler, Malcolm, won with the tyrant" (Jabłoński 2021a: 131), which is not consistent either with Shakespeare's drama or historical facts. A reference to *Midsummer Night's Dream* in *Słowo i miecz* is similarly perplexing: there appears the *nietota* herb (possibly *juniperus sabina*, juniper) with the same properties as love-in-idleness, or the wild pansy, which Oberon orders Puck to find. Once a sleeping person's eyes are sprinkled with this plant's juice, they will fall in love with the first person they see upon waking up. Widun plans to use *nietota* on Żywia so that she falls in love with his nephew Mścigniew (Jabłoński 2013: 355). However, the plan is not carried out: Żywia and Mścigniew fall in love without the aid of a magic herb, and so the question concerning the point of the conversation about it arises. Once again, the reference to Shakespearean comedy is an entirely empty stylistic conceit with no meaning for the plot. Additionally, it introduces a concerning tone to the gender relations within the protagonist team: three men (Widun, Mścigniew and Andaj) discuss a potential sexual assault on the woman protagonist, and the narration does not deem it an inappropriate or concerning behavior. While this is in accordance with the misogyny of the presented world in Jabłoński's books, the latter surprises in that an appropriate comparison for *Słowiańska Apokalipsa* would not be George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* – an analogy that frequently appears in the reviews and discussions of the cycle – but Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, or even the *Valdemar* series by Mercedes Lackey, cliched examples of the so-called "women's fantasy". In her classic trilogy *The Queen's Arrows* (published between 1987 and 1988) Lackey introduced the motif of a Companion, that is, an intelligent, magical creature that looks like a horse, and established a telepathic connection with the human of its choosing. In *Słowiańska Apokalipsa*, Andaj has his faithful companion, the pony Pukis, with whom he shares a telepathic connection; what is more, Pukis has magic powers. It is possible that using a motif identical to that of the famous writer was not intentional on Jabłoński's part, as Lackey created and popularized a certain archetypal motif that entered the permanent repository of storylines and motifs of fantasy literature.

Comparing *Słowo i miecz* with *The Mists of Avalon* is particularly interesting due to far-reaching analogies between these titles: both depict the twilight of the pagan world losing its struggle against Christianity, and the protagonist is a priestess of the Mother Goddess, described as "the seer" due to her prophetic visions (Żywia and Morgaine, respectively), which also serves to emphasize misogyny present in Christian rhetoric and worldview in the novels. Both titles refer to the myth of the Atlantis as the ur-beginning of pagan civiliza-

tion; in both, religious artifacts (Swarożyc's Hammer; Excalibur and the Grail) are important for the plot. Moreover, both novels showcase an alternative interpretation of preliterate history (in *The Mists of Avalon*, this is a retelling of the Arthurian legend from the perspective of Morgaine) at the point when collective identity is being shaped. *The Mists of Avalon* are also perceived as a certain manifesto of Neo-Paganism in the spirit of Wicca due to its numerous references to cosmology and the symbolics of movement, as well as the author being engaged in Neo-Pagan beliefs while she was writing the novel. Kelly Budruweit summed up Zimmer Bradley's religious inspirations, which turn out to be almost as eclectic as in Jabłoński's case, the following way:

> In studying the Goddess religion, or "the Old Religion," Bradley apparently referred to Wiccans like Margaret Murray and Gerald Gardner, as well as to Starhawk's *Spiral Dance* (1979). In addition to these sources, Bradley drew on her experiences with alternative religions. The resulting mixture of beliefs in *Mists* includes esotericism (in both Christian and druid forms), the ancient forms of Goddess worship posited by Wiccans and neo-pagans, and the contemporary neo-paganism of women who were rediscovering the Goddess in the late 1970s (Budruweit 2019: 4).

The Neo-Paganism of the 1970s developed a phantasm of "the Old Religion" significant for the present reflections: the leading role was taken by the Goddess interpreted in a feminist spirit (Budruweit 2019: 1), which Jan Shaw terms "a fantasy of female agency" (Shaw 2009: 474) in the form it is present in The Mists of Avalon. Just as *Słowiańska Apokalipsa* is inspired by the phantasm of Slavic tradition, *The Mists of Avalon* present a Neo-Pagan phantasm of "Old Religions". However, despite these analogies, Jabłoński's series cannot be described as feminist, mainly due to the misogyny of the narration and fetishization of women's suffering[12].

To conclude the overview of elements creating an image of Slavic pre-history in Jabłoński's cycle, it is also worth mentioning that the author uses prefigurations: Richeza of Lotharingia, mother of Casimir I the Restorer, shares with her son a mystical vision that she has experienced and that paraphrases the famous vision by Teresa of Ávila (Jabłoński 2013: 391); the village of Chatyn in Western Russia is remembered "as a site of unprecedented massacre against one's own subjects" (Jabłoński 2021a: 29) in an open reference to the Katyn Massacre, when the NKVD shot over twenty thousand Polish citizens[13]; Slavic

12 The gender and sexual politics of the cycle are a subject too broad to be discussed here, it is, however, worth signaling that it is an interesting research subject, especially the portrayal of the "natural" pansexuality of the Boran tribe (who do not even consider incest a taboo), shown as the final refuge of paganism, or the queer figure of Bolesław the Bold in the second and third volume of the cycle.

13 The Chatyn pre-figuration also points towards national narrations permeating the novel; however, the cycle itself enters into debate with those.

warriors shout "Glory has not yet succumbed as long as we remain" (Jabłoński 2013: 466), paraphrasing the Polish national anthem, Dąbrowski's Mazurka, with its, "Poland has not yet succumbed as long as we remain". Additionally, the novel introduces conspiracy theory in the form of the Gladius Dei, a secret "organization within the Church" (Jabłoński 2013: 109), whose members steer European politics and practice forbidden magical and pagan practices with a goal of achieving greater knowledge and power.

Juxtaposing elements of Slavic mythology and numerous literary and pop cultural references creates a mosaic whose nature is difficult to identify. Indeed, one cannot resist the impression that in Jabłoński's cycle, Slavic mythology is reduced to a literary set of decorations whose only goal is to conduct an intertextual game with the reader, in which it does not matter if the text pertains to Swarożyc or to Thor. Analogies between various referenced mythologies can, obviously, be explained with an attempt at representing similarities or even commonality of pagan beliefs in the novel, which could constitute their certain legitimization – pointing out that disseminating some stories, beliefs or practices demonstrates their authenticity. However, the inclusion of openly pop cultural elements, such as zombie or the motif of a pony companion in this image entirely disturbs all attempts at authentication or legitimization. Thus, *Słowiańska Apokalipsa* represents a type of literature that had already been repeatedly criticized in Polish literary field: irreflexive usage of Slavic costume. Such negative attitudes towards the possibilities of Slavic fantasy were discussed by Brzóstowicz-Klajn, they were also expressed by Andrzej Sapkowski: "All out of a sudden, vampires spelled as *wampiry* disappeared, while *wąpierze* and *strzygaje* (sic!) showed up, instead of elves there are *bożęta* and other *niebożęta*, instead of giants and trolls there are *stolemy*" (Sapkowski 1993). Similarly, "in 2014 Piotr Muszyński argued that Slavic motifs are a kind of a trap for native fantasy and only inspire the creation of 'Slavic-like products' of little artistic value" (Brzóstowicz-Klajn 2022: 9). The eclectic and intertextual nature of Jabłoński's novels only demonstrates that *Słowiańska Apokalipsa* is more of a construct (imagined version, fantasy, or even a phantasm) than a reconstruction (an attempt at reproduction) the preliterate history of Poland. This is very interesting in the context of the function played by the image of pre-Christian world created by Jabłoński, that is, developing pagan martyrology.

Pagan Martyrs

The title *Słowiańska Apokalipsa*[14] also points towards the main subject of the cycle: depicting the fall of the pagan world of the Slavs (the novel's "People

14 The usage of Christian terminology in the cycle title (Apocalypse) in order to describe the state of paganism at the time of the plot is also interesting, as it inscribes the attempt at depicting/reconstructing/saving (at the symbolic and narrative levels of the cycle, respectively) Slavic Native Faith into Christian paradigm, something that Jabłoński tried to avoid by using the term "People of the Word" rather than "pagans" (which is used in the cycle almost exclusively by Christians).

of the Word") and the twilight of the rule of Slavic gods. The fatalistic fate of the Slavic world is emphasized by the novel's construction, which is based on retrospection: *Słowo i miecz* begins with preparations for a battle between Miecław and Casimir I in 1047, and the awareness that together with Miecław's fall the final refuge of native faith will die, while the events leading up to that battle are reconstructed later. Within the retrospection, considerable attention is dedicated to the brutal process of Christianization:

> The new God was very selfish, jealous, and thus, in his name the Piast ruler burned the holy groves, destroyed the statues of native deities, tore down beautifully decorated temples, putting dreary chrams of Iesu Krist in their place [...] The despot brought over from distant lands whole crowds of black-clad men, speaking in unintelligible gibberish and performing strange rituals in their secret language. They held local deities and customs in contempt. They forbade [people] to work on the seventh day, for the strange God demanded sacrifice that often. They forbade eating meat. [...] They interfered in marital issues, usurping the authority of family patriarchs. [...] They did not allow for corpses to be burnt, but enforced earth burials, thus leading to an immeasurable increase of ghouls (Jabłoński 2013: 13–14).

> For since traitorous Piasts started to propagate foreign faith in the land of the Word, and some succumbed to its deceitful teachings, while others worshiped the German God out of fear or to be comfortable, offended deities became rageful and mean, especially towards the [converts]. They retreated to the Otherworld and rarely did they show themselves to the mortals (Jabłoński 2013: 15).

In the novel, Christianity is presented as a culturally strange formation coming from the West and imposed forcefully on the local people together with the feudal order, which is the foundation of the shaping statehood and monarchy. The tone of this narrative is fairly ironic in the context of Polish political discourse, as it reiterates what is contemporarily said with regard to politics by right-wing conservative communities (including Catholic, traditionalist ones) about various progressive social and political initiatives, for instance, about the so-called "gender ideology" which comes from the West in order to destroy Polish culture and social order[15]. The novel's presented world is clearly polarized, divided into good, beautiful pagans and morally repulsive representatives of the Church (Jabłoński 2013: 17, 30, 321).

15 This term is a rhetorical device in right-wing journalism whose aim is to invoke negative associations with various initiatives pertaining to gender equality. The negative valuation of the term "ideology" in Polish political culture results from the functioning of this notion within Marxism, which the right-wing journalism equates with Communism, that is, the political regime present in Poland since World War Two until 1989.

The novel also contains a critique of Christian practices and morality:

> The followers of Iesu Krist [...] delight in suffering. They don't just torture others, but also themselves. Priests tell them that earthly existence is futile, full of distress and torment. They will only be rewarded after death, in the Christian paradise. Among them there are such who purposefully cause themselves pain, wound their bodies [...]. They live in dirt, as the worst beasts. [...] They want to martyr themselves like their horrid, crucified God [...] The rich do so in religious exaltation, the poor are drawn to such practices by poverty and ignorance (Jabłoński 2013: 118). [...] I saw that order of yours. [...] I saw entire tribes slaughtered with prayer on the lips and towns destroyed due to one line in a psalm. Thousands of people burned on stakes for they were too wise or too fair to live among you. Processions of flagellants and other mad people, torturing themselves in various ways. The nations suffocating in the claws of the Black Plague... What kind of a brave new order do you want to build in the ashes of our temples, in the despair and suffering of countless victims? (Jabłoński 2013: 493)

The goal of this critique, similarly to the caricatural description of Christian sadism, is precisely to construct pagan martyrology, showcasing the innocence of the victims and fanaticism of Christians. This is shown directly in the text of the novel in the scene where Dziewanna is flogged in the nunnery: "The face of the tortured [woman] froze in a strange grimace akin to a smile, although her back flowed with blood. Why do they never mention pagan martyrs?, she wondered" (Jabłoński 2013: 87). *Słowiańska Apokalipsa* fills in the blank noticed by the protagonist, representing pagans martyred for their faith, warriors dying for the lost cause. Again one notes a certain irony and an attempt at re-evaluating cultural norms.

In Polish cultural context martyrology is strongly connected with the political idea of messianism, whereby the trauma of losing independence in the time of the Partitions[16] is described as the martyrdom of the Polish nation; this was supposed to predispose Poland to play a particular role in the process of history creation. Messianism can be seen as the most important element of Polish Romanticism and an important contribution to connecting Polish collective identity with Christianity. In *Słowiańska Apokalipsa*, Jabłoński introduces the idea of a kind of pre-martyrdom, that is, he constructs a new (and, at the same time, another one) martyrological founding myth of Polish collective identity, pointing towards the suffering of Poles (Slavs) long before the Parti-

16 The Partitions of Poland are a period in the history of Poland and Lithuania (1772–1795) when the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth gradually lost its territories and independence for the sake of neighboring countries: the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and the Hapsburg Monarchy. As a result, the independent Second Polish Republic only appeared after World War One.

tions, but also at the hand of a partitioning, colonizing power, which is the organization of the Church. Indeed, the Church's sadistic actions are motivated by secular, political, and not metaphysical aims, such as colonizing Eastern Europe and making it into a vassal of the Holy Roman Empire: "No dreams, brothers. Bolesław's times shall not return. *Polania* must become a fief of the Holy Empire!" (Jabłoński 2013: 397). There is a reason why the emperor Henry III speaks the famous words of Tsar Alexander II, uttered during a speech in Warsaw on 23rd May 1856: *Point de reveries, Messieurs!* "No dreams" dispelled the hopes for regaining independence which the Polish nation put in the new liberal tsar. In *Słowo i miecz* they mean that, in accordance with the German political doctrine, Poland cannot remain an autonomous duchy, and the means towards that end lies in destroying native culture:

> "Eradicate to the last. Only thus will we tear these unfortunate provinces out of devil's claws. Cut off all heads of this horrid hydra, burn dragon tongues in fire. We will rebuild the Holy Church with the blood of sorcerers!"
> "Then, by educating Slavic simpleton," the ruler said, in a flash of inspiration, "you need to make them ashamed of their roots, turn away from native traditions, start hating what is familiar and learn to worship all that comes from the West".
> "This is a task for many generations..." (Jabłoński 2013: 385)

The emperor's words resemble fragments from Dołęga Chodakowski's *O Sławiańszczyźnie przed chrześcijaństwem*, although they are given as an instruction of what is to come rather than a description of an already finished process. Jabłoński's cycle does not answer the question whether the process of erasing Slavic identity will succeed in historical perspective, but it points out the factors in favor of the emperor's political strategy: the lack of written tradition (Jabłoński 2021a: 269) and easiness with which pagan folk practices can be reinterpreted in the spirit of Christian theology: "Country women still give offering for the pagan she-devil under the linden tree? [...] Let us put altars on these trees and make them pray to Mother Mary" (Jabłoński 2021a: 271).

However, it is not difficult to note that the Romantic messianism played the function of a compensatory phantasm, similarly to national martyrology, providing one with the sense of moral superiority: these are political positions of a colonized subject, agreeing to its inferior position towards the colonizer. In the novel, Brother Lucjusz teaches the poor folk "Let them practice fear of God and learn to delight in failure" (Jabłoński 2013: 467), which is the novel's thesis concerning Christian martyrology. This delight is also visible in the descriptions of Christian cruelty, where "cruel imagination of the humble servants of the good and merciful God seemed to have no bounds" (Jabłoński 2013: 376), and the narration as such takes on the position of a colonized subject which delights in the suffering it experiences, as it provides a sense of moral superi-

ority contained in the image of innocent pagan victims of Christian fanaticism and cynical colonial politics.

This calls into question the actual value of the (re)construction of Slavic past and martyrology in Jabłoński's approach as an alternative identity model. Not only is the image built in the series inauthentic and incredible as an eclectic mosaic of Slavic religion, Slavic and Nordic mythologies, literary fictions and pop cultural references, but also it is ideologically unconvincing, or immature. Firstly, because it is built on a negative foundation, where it is the anticlerical attitude that becomes the starting point for spinning a tale set in the last days of the pagan world, and thus, the novel serves to present the cruelty of Christians more than the customs and practices of the Slavs. The latter are only interesting inasmuch they suffer due to Christianity or struggle against it, but they have no autonomy against Christianity, which is a constant reference point, thus retaining the complex of the West in the narrative and symbolic layers. Secondly, the presented world is exaggerated and devoid of nuance, almost fairytale-like, with a clear and impassable division into Good and Evil: this does not work in historical fiction, as both sides of the conflict appear as caricatures. What negates the effectiveness of the ideological dimension of the series is also the aesthetics consisting in escalating violence and cruelty: in the third volume, sadistic experiments on children conducted by the monks in the Pieczerski Monastery, on the initiative of Agapit Pieczerski, turn out to be magical practices undertaken due to the monks being possessed by the demon Korgs, in the end defeated by Kościej (Jabłoński 2021a: 119–123). Moreover, Korgs turns out to be an aspect of Chors, the deity Kościej serves, meaning that the sorcerer defeated his own god due to backstage intrigues of Slavic gods, proving they are as cruel as Christians. From volume to volume the moral difference between the sides of the conflict fades, but the clearly anti-clerical tone of the cycle remains. Even the last volume repeats the basic task of the Church in the territory of Poland: "We will remove, or, rather, erase, their past in their memory, and then they will no longer be able to resist. And the most resistant remainders of the old faith will be destroyed with fire and iron" (Jabłoński 2021a: 271). *Słowiańska Apokalipsa* is a failed attempt at regaining the violently lost past, but it does not mean that efforts to that end have stopped. This is evidenced by the current folk turn (also described as the peasant or plebeian turn).

Conclusion: Folk Pop Culture

The folk turn can be defined as an increased interest in the history and culture of lower social strata and social relations of power, as well as, connected with former, re-evaluation of social attitudes and the official version of history as rooted in paradigms such as that of nobility and intelligentsia or the post-Romantic one (Leszczyński 2024: 163). The folk turn is visible both in discourse of humanities and arts, and in a broader social discourse; this differentiates it from the majority of research turns of contemporary humanities

which were unable to exceed the hermetic academic and artistic community[17]. In the academic ground, early harbingers of the folk turn can be seen in Jan Sowa's *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą* [*The King's Phantom Body. Peripheral Struggles with the Modern Form*] (2011), while a kind of a manifesto of the folk turn consists in Adam Leszczyński's *Ludowa historia Polski* [*The Folk History of Poland*] (2020); on the level of popular science, a title inscribing itself into the folk turn is Andrzej Leder's *Prześniona rewolucja. Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej* [*A Dreamed-Through Revolution. An Exercise in Historic Logic*] (2014). On the level of practices of popular culture one can point towards such manifestations of the folk turn as the albums *Gore – pieśni buntu i niedoli XVI–XX wieku* (2011) and *Na Uschod. Wolność albo śmierć* (2012) by the band R.U.T.A., the activity of such music bands as Żywiołak, Leśne Licho, Łysa Góra, Tulia, Pochwalone and Kwiat Jabłoni, and many others that connect traditional folklore songs and contemporary musical arrangements. It is also worth mentioning the bestselling status of such publications as Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak's *Służące do wszystkiego* (2018) and *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach* (2023), or, written in a similar vein, non-fiction books such as Marta Strzelecka's *Ziemianki. Co panie z dworów łączyło z chłopkami* (2023) and Alicja Urbanik-Kopeć's *Panny służące. Historia nadużycia* (2019), or numerous works by Kamil Janicki, e.g. *Pańszczyzna. Prawdziwa historia polskiego niewolnictwa* (2021), *Warcholstwo. Prawdziwa historia polskiej szlachty* (2023) and *Życie w chłopskiej chacie* (2024). Finally, of particular importance in the sphere of audio-visual media are such productions as the streaming shows *Krakowskie potwory* (Adamik, Chajdas 2022) and *1670* (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023). I intentionally refrain from listing numerous fictional positions, as they would exceed the volume of this article; for the same reason, the overview above is selective. As Przemysław Wielgosz noted, the folk turn results, to a large degree, from the end of a certain narrative concerning the contemporary times and consisting in the faith that capitalist market and democracy are mutually conditioned (Wielgosz 2022). From this perspective, the increasing capitalist exploitation and the glocal processes of oppression, marginalization and violence connected therewith draw attention to the class dimension not only of modernity, but also of history (Wielgosz 2022). Wielgosz thus summarizes the heretofore achievements of the folk turn: "folk history, as one can see in the works published under this moniker, means as much as: non-statue-like, non-monumental and non-heroic" (Wielgosz 2022). It is a history that subjectivizes those who are dispossessed, omitted and forgotten, which justifies considering the increasing popularity of Slavic books in the context of the folk turn, where the subject of Slavic tradition turns into a search for forgotten and omitted past.

In the quoted interview with Wielgosz Antonina Tosiek asks if we are waiting for "folk pop culture" – I claim that this kind of pop culture already exists,

17 I leave reflections concerning the multiplication or justification behind numerous turns in humanities in the last decade in the sidelines – discussing them exceeds the scope of this article.

with *Słowiańska Apokalipsa* and other titles in the genre of Slavic fantasy being its manifestation, similarly to the aforementioned streaming shows and music albums. The realizations of the phantasm of Slavic tradition in the literary field (not just fantasy, but also romance, contemporary and historical novels) emphasize the folk character of the imagined preliterate past through such means as referring to "folk wisdom", rural culture, unofficial systems of knowledge (such as herbalism or herbal medicine), depicting characters from lower social classes, or appreciation of folk cultural forms and focusing on the egalitarian nature of Slavic culture. At the same time, Slavic fantasy needs not be set in faraway past or alternative reality, as evidenced by the Slavic urban fantasy such as Paulina Hendel's 2017 *Żniwiarz* cycle or Mika Modrzyńska's 2024 *Welesówna* cycle, which transpose folk customs and traditions into contemporary urban culture. Slavic fantasy provides folklore with attractiveness, introduces it into the circle of popular culture, although obviously it is frequently connected not just with a loss of original context, but also considerable deformation of folk forms for the means of entertainment and artistry, which should not surprise in pop cultural circulation. However, this means that Slavic fantasy is, to a degree, sentenced to be a construction rather than re-construction of preliterate past due to the element of creation and artistic values, borrowing genre conventions, finally, a postmodern play with intertextuality (especially prominent in Polish fantasy due to Sapkowski's oeuvre). This does not change the fact that this genre disseminates knowledge and memory about preliterate Slavic history and about Polish folk culture, with the latter being, to a large degree, a Christianized reminiscence of the former. Folk pop culture is in the process of developing, becoming a significant tool of regaining lost or marginalized past and an alternative model for building collective identity, creating "a healthy approach to one's own history" (Wielgosz 2022).

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