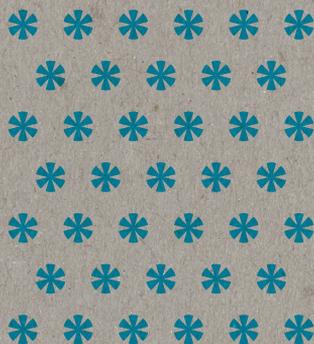


# LITERATURA LUDOWA



## Journal of Folklore and Popular Culture



THE PAST – PHANTASMS – FANTASIES

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Founded by The Polish Ethnological Society in 1957  
vol. 69 (2025) no. 3–4



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Guest Editors  
Paweł Bohuszewicz  
Aldona Kobus  
Sebastian Tauer



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## Literatura Ludowa / Journal of Folklore and Popular Culture

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**OD REDAKCJI**  
**EDITORIAL**



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## **Introduction. Phantasmatic Roots of the Present**

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

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

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

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

The aforementioned conference and the translation of articles<sup>1</sup> contained in this volume, as well as its publication, was subsidized from the state budget under the program of the Minister of Education and Science called “National Program for the Development of Humanities”<sup>2</sup>. To a large degree, the aim of the conference was to establish the place occupied by Sarmatism among national phantasms. It is revealed to be a significant one; indeed, half of the texts contained herein oscillate around contemporary references to this cultural formation of the nobility. In his article “*A Pole Is a Selfless Host*”: *Old Polish Hospitality, or a Post-Partition Phantasm*, Dariusz Śniezko describes the phantasm of Polish hospitality in the works of writers of the post-Partition era, noting that this myth was, to a large degree, created in reaction to the political violence of the Partitions as an attempt to re-create glorified past. Zbigniew Jazienicki’s text, *The Baroque Crisis of the Third Polish Republic. System Transformation, Sarmatian Traditions and Krzysztof Koehler’s Classicism*, constitutes an in-depth analysis of Krzysztof Koehler’s poetic oeuvre in the context of system transformation, seen as a particular cognitive crisis, a result of functioning in the state of chaos. In the article *Is the Place of Women in Neo-Sarmatian Social Hierarchy Always Below Men? On the Example of Borderland She-Wolves in the Prose of Jacek Komuda, Andrzej Pilipiuk and Others*, Sebastian Tauer interprets the position of women characters in social hierarchy in the presented world of Neo-Sarmatian novels by Jacek Komuda, referring to the figure of a “Borderland she-wolf”, a venturesome and resourceful maiden who carries out the libertarian principle of self-ownership. Within the article *On the Margins of Category. Liberty as Cooperation in a Non-Prototypical Neo-Sarmatian Novel*, Paweł Bohuszewicz examines Konrad T. Lewandowski’s cycle of novels entitled *Diabłu ogarek* [*Candle-End for the Devil*] in order to showcase that there exists a democratic alternative for the popular right-wing Sarmatism. Ireneusz Szczukowski and Joanna Orzeł, in the texts *The 1670 TV Show as Seen by a Historian of Old Polish Literature* and *Demolishing “the Dream of Might” of the Nobility of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, or on the Discussion Concerning the 1670 TV Show*, respectively, analyze the TV show 1670, discussing in detail its historical contexts. This production evoked considerable (and not just aesthetic!) agitation among Poles, presenting Polish history through the lens of contemporary mentality and ridiculing many phantasms rooted in social circulation. Thus, the Netflix production demonstrates that the strife between tradition and modernity, which had begun with the dispute between Sarmatism and the Enlightenment, remains vivid and important to us. Finally, Jędrzej Wijas in his article “*True Is the Pole when He Gets Drunk*”. *On the Persistence of Romantic Sarmatism*

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

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

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

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

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

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## “A Pole Is a Selfless Host”. Old Polish Hospitality, or a Post-Partition Phantasm\*

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**ABSTRACT:** The article discusses the image of Old Polish hospitality in the version presented by Polish writers of Post-Partition era. The analysis conducted uses the categories of myth, stereotype and phantasm. In the conclusion, the material is interpreted in the supernatural, ethical, aesthetic and political order.

**KEYWORDS:** hospitality, Sarmatism, Romanticism, phantasm

Two quotations to begin with. This is an earlier one: “There are no higher lower ones, our other ones, familiar stranger ones, friends enemies, a Pole is a selfless host” – so says Łukasz Gołębiowski in *Domy i dwory* [*Houses and Estates*] (Gołębiowski 1884: 100), a book first published four years before *Pan Tadeusz* [*Sir Thaddeus*]. And another quote, or, more precisely, a contamination of two quotes: (*Paper Machine; Step of Hospitality / No Hospitality*) “the site of what turns up unexpectedly, inevitably, defying any horizon of expectation” (Derrida 2000: 83–85) “when the host says *yes* to the coming or the unexpected and unforeseeable event of who comes, at any moment, in advance or behind, in absolute anachrony, without being invited, without introducing themselves” (Derrida 2005: 194). These, in turn, are two statements of similar meaning by Jacques Derrida on the subject of neverending hospitality, which, in his opinion, should not be guided by the logic of invitation, but, rather, that of a visitation, that is, the host’s readiness towards conditionless openness to a guest-messiah. Thus, Łukasz Gołębiowski’s patriotic elation has found its expression in a formula strikingly close to the categorical expectations of the

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French philosopher. This formula is also representative – by the rights of a hyperbolic shortcut – for the stereotype of erstwhile, noble Polish hospitality: self-sacrificial and hearty, as well as exceptional against the backdrop of foreign practices. A Pole has drunk hospitality with mother's milk (Gołębiowski 1884: 99), which is why he hosts everyone generously and selflessly, which is what distinguishes him from non-Poles:

he does not seek within it glory like a Frenchman, neither is he proud like a Spaniard, or, like Italians, hearty and stopping at only light treat; nor is he frugal like the Swiss or the Dutch, does not eat [food – D. Ś.] as fatty as a German, or, inviting someone to an inn, does he pay only for himself, demanding equal payment from the invitee; nor will he be as gloomy as an Englishman who pushes aside women so that he can drink more and talk politics; without the fair sex and politeness towards it, there is no feast for a Pole (Gołębiowski 1884: 99–100)<sup>1</sup>.

As it is known, Derrida examined paradoxical entanglements of hospitality which – if it is supposed to meet its own maximalist requirements – must deny itself, as it is denied by the very existence of a house, a threshold, and the role of a host. It is significant that Cezary Wodziński, when drawing upon the French philosopher's reflections in his book *Odys. Esej o gościnności* [*Odysseus. An Essay on Hospitality*], began by excluding Old Polish hospitality from his analysis as a peripheral phenomenon (Wodziński 2015: 6), and – as I would guess – one not fitting the mold, as it eccentrically approached the ideal, loosening the tensions of a theoretical paradox. It could be thus surmised that by not including the experiences of his own ancestors, Wodziński, let us imagine it that way, to a degree trusted Gołębiowski, whose opinion came to be preserved in the continuously active stereotype.

My goal is to take a more careful look at the career of this cliché, or, more accurately, one of its episodes drawing on the myth-making energy of a trend that Andrzej Waśko calls Romantic Sarmatism (Waśko 2001: 8). As well as to provisionally locate this entry in the Romantic “encyclopedia”. I had the opportunity to talk about Old Polish hospitality during a conference in the “Kolokwia Staropolskie” series (2024). I finished my presentation with two remarks: pointing out that – firstly – in the light of old texts, Old Polish hospitality appears in a much more complicated manner than it would seem on the basis of contemporary common conceptions thereof, and – secondly – that we owe this common image to nostalgic filters of Post-Partition literature. In the eponymous quote from Gołębiowski, the Pole is obviously a nobleman<sup>2</sup>, and the so-called Old Polish hospitality, today involving an apparently national tradi-

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1 The particularity of Old Polish hospitality was repeatedly reported on by foreigners or even neighbors from the same geographic territory, however – frequently – in the guise of mismanagement and burdensome eccentricity (cf. Usatenko 2021).

2 As it turns out further on, anyone can enter if he carries a saber (Gołębiowski 1884: 80).

tion, consists in practices cultivated by a social state deployed in a social and spatial order that Andrzej Zajączkowski refers to – very aptly – as a federation of neighborhoods (Zajączkowski 1961: 71). Let us add: dispersed and lonely<sup>3</sup> neighborhoods, in which melancholia is easy to come by. In order to avoid it, as a Renaissance chronicler, Marcin Bielski, wrote, “one rides out to another, having no measure in drinking”, and, as follows, he postulated for the nobility to settle in towns (Bielski 2019: 10). Gołębiowski saw it in a different, or even opposite, manner: according to him, isolation protected native customs:

This loneliness makes it possible to maintain, untainted, customs, far from any corruption we keep seeing in crowded towns, they lead an independent and peaceful life, free of hatred and jealousy, truly patriarchal, and it is one of main reasons why Poles have retained their ancestral virtues for so long (Gołębiowski 1884: 7–8).

Obviously, these two points of view are not mutually exclusive, but the shift on a scale of values is clear.

I was less concerned with testimonies of fortunate hospitality, that is, hospitality in accordance with the norm and the ideological program popularized, especially, by gentry literature, poetry of worldly pleasures and popular guides. More with those – which imposed themselves in the material sample – that reported hosting guests as an arrangement demanding, tense and risky: for one’s reputation, fortune, health and, sometimes, life, as within its paradoxes there is mutual conditioning of protection and violence, particularly easy to set off in the circumstances of the time. Some of these testimonies are simply aware of the burden resulting, for instance, from the double compulsion: taking in an unannounced guest (who could also be an *importun*)<sup>4</sup>, or – conversely – seeking accommodation while traveling and taking on the role of an intruder. There is, however, no shortage of examples (I must omit names and titles here) dominated by the poetics of excess: from Dionysian drinking and abject loss of control over physiology to altercations and bloody fights to the death (*biesiada* [a feast] – *bies siada* [devil appears] was a frequent play on words of the time). Based on his own experiences, Szymon Starowolski advised not to take firearms when visiting, and to put melee weapons aside (Starowolski ca. 1650–1653: 79). The rhetorics of wedding speeches foresaw appeals to the guests that they remain peaceful (Trębska 2008: 118–120). The historical representative nature of literary documentation is an obviously complex issue (e.g., excess is more attractive in storytelling than satisfying hospitality), but it is not reconstruction of actual social practices that has been my subject, but the literary history of the notion.

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3 Cf. the landscape sketched by Hieronim Powodowski (Powodowski 1578: 27).

4 Cf. the adage *Hospes non invitatus, recedit saepe ingratus* – A guest not invited to the feast will not be much celebrated (Chodźko 1898: 72).

When analyzing the Post-Partition project of Old Polish hospitality, I freely use such concepts as myth, stereotype or – finally – phantasm<sup>5</sup>. I assign two scopes to myth. I understand the first one – following Marcin Czerwiński – as a discursive myth-like structure (Czerwiński 1973: 134–142). This type of activity of the presence of myth provides validation to the debate on the myth of Old Polish or simply Polish traditional hospitality – an important position in the axiological order ascribed to the narcissistic *imago gentis*. Another, narrower scope concerns hospitality as a significant attribute of the myth of the Golden Era of the First Polish Republic, that is, in historical phraseology, of the times of honest ancestors; a myth revealing itself here in another variation, key to Sarmatian Romanticism, which found a familiar equivalent of Western European Middle Ages in the Old Polish times (Waśko 2001: 204–205). “The mighty of the world – as Seweryn Soplica claimed – would be jealous of a Polish noble if they had only witnessed how he entertained himself and his guests in an equal field” (Rzewuski 1983: 39). Given the conviction that there was a radical difference between the Pre-Partition generation and the contemporary<sup>6</sup> one, as well as that hospitality was disappearing everywhere (e.g., according to Niemcewicz, this process began already in the second half of the 18th century; cf. Niemcewicz 1868: 39), this myth takes on the marks of retrospective utopia<sup>7</sup>. However, each of these senses relies on mechanisms of stereotypization, that is, generalization, simplification, selectivity, dissemination and consolidation. Stereotypization standardizes a myth (which is, by nature, variable), and, simultaneously, extends its duration beyond the direct historical necessity (Post-Partition times). In its current state, “Old Polish hospitality” remains an important motif in the collective self-portrait, but its essential noble provenance is definitely not experienced as a foreground determinant. Frequently, it is also reduced to the general formula of “Polish hospitality”.

The Post-Partition era discovered for itself a fascinating corpus of Old Polish texts from outside the school canon of the Enlightenment (Waśko 2001: 144), but it did not yet know several important titles (such as Potocki’s *Ogród nieplewiony* [*Unweeded Garden*]), which from today’s perceptive are fundamental for recognizing the notion. Instead, it drew upon resources of memory: individual, and, in the longer temporary perspective – post-memory and collective memory. The utmost importance of this kind of sources for creative endeavors is shown in the *topos* of an old man telling stories of what the ancient times were like (Waśko 2001: 139–140, 167). As it is known, the Romantic discovery of primary tradition in Sarmatism was accompanied by Henryk Rzewuski’s dis-

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5 This term has already been used in reference to hospitality (cf. Loska 2015: 214).

6 See e.g. Gaszyński: “Nowhere are we struck by such a big leap, such a large difference, – as between the generation that lived prior to the Partition of Poland – and ours” (Gaszyński 1908: 6–7).

7 It is, however, necessary to mention here the experience of hospitality (frequently long-term one) as a gesture of national solidarity after the fall of the November Uprising (see Wybranowski 1898: 5–6).

covery of *gawęda szlachecka* (noble storytelling), which turned out to be something akin to a genealogical calling card for Sarmatian heritage. Storytelling imposed the tone in a double way: as a ready literary form and as a modality suggesting an oral communication scheme as a primary scheme, with a particular stylistic marking, which Konstanty Gaszyński aptly referred to as *kontusz style* (Gaszyński 1847: 11–12). Significantly, the modality of storytelling also organized the narration in a genre graphemic by definition, namely, a memoir – however, this pertains to a falsified noble memoir (such as Gaszyński's diaries of Maciej Rogowski, or Rzewuski's diary of Bartłomiej Michałowski), which explains a lot. Moreover, one should not forget the encyclopedic efforts (including tourist, ethnographic, historical compendia), starting with Łukasz Gołębiowski and finishing – roughly – with Władysław Łoziński and Zygmunt Gloger. It was a discourse that mediated between a corpus of sources (written and oral) and literary creation, and thus, it considerably influenced the shaping of the model of Sarmatian hospitality; its impact has not waned to this day.

One can have the impression that this model, despite editorial achievements increasing the access to original testimonies from the old eras (with Kitowicz and Pasek in the lead) was headed towards autarky of a kind, meaning also: a kind of immutability particular for mythical depictions. A myth established itself by ignoring contradictions in historical testimonies (e.g. the idea of an open house *versus* being allergic to nuisance guests), as well as selecting features and motifs affirming Old Polish hospitality against the negative (as was emphasized eagerly and frequently) background of "customs [influenced by] foreigners". This meant silencing or muting reports that did not serve this goal: excess, criticized by Old Polish authors, now becomes renamed to generosity juxtaposed with foreign avarice, or directly ascribed to foreign influences (Goczalkowski 1862: 2); regional dietine assembly feasts, who can believe, were celebrated entirely selflessly (Gołębiowski 1884: 100), and drunkenness, difficult to omit, was presented with understanding (e.g. Rzewuski 1841: 240–267), as an expression of honest "will" and morally sound habits (Orpiszewski 1838: 176). As expressed by Władysław Syrokomla in a nostalgic rhyme (Syrokomla 1856: 148):

Bo tu była zamożność i wiosną i zimą,  
Wiesz, jaka była tu cnota?  
Každy, kto tu przyjechał lub zbłądził mimo,  
Nie wyszedł trzeźwy za wrota.

Here we had wealth in the spring and in winter  
Do you know the virtue that was had?  
Nobody who came here or lost his way  
Would leave sober these parts  
(trans. E.B.)

Regional differences did not particularly influence the coherence of the stereotype: while the Eastern territories were especially remarked upon, the cordiality of inhabitants of the Greater Poland also made an impression on Pol and Syrokomla. Simultaneously, desired attributes were depicted in the mode of hyperbole and emphasis, for the hospitable Soplicowo gate invited "all" but not everyone; and although it was open wide, it was not so day in, day out. Moreover, in the symbolic dimension, it was closed off to anything that was

new (see Kuziak 2015). Some motifs became preserved in series of “common places”. As we know, a Pole asks not who and where from. A good example was pointed out by Teofil Lenartowicz in the poem *Wincentemu Polowi* [*To Wincenty Pol*], whose addressee supposedly gave him this very kind of welcome in the doorway of his countryside residence:

Do twojej piersi garnąłem się młody,  
A kto ja taki, tyś się i nie pytał,  
Tylkoś mnie w progach wiejskiej swej zagrody  
Sercem powitał.

A youth, I flocked to your breast  
and you never asked who I was  
but welcomed me in the doorway to your country  
house with your heart.

Prosto, poczciwie, pychy ani cienia,  
Choć czoło złotym kraj otaczał liściem,  
Jak gdybyś czekał u domku przedsienia  
Za brata przyściem  
(Lenartowicz 1881: 91–92).

Simply, nicely, no trace of pride  
though the country adorned your forehead with gold leaf  
as if you waited in the hallway  
for your brother to come  
(trans. E.B.)

The older poet is here ascribed the role of a devoted custodian of the old customs, in accordance with the assumption that rustic province (countryside or *zaścianek* – backwater, a poor nobleman’s estate) favors best relics of the golden age – the further the province from civilization, the better, which put the Eastern territories in a privileged position (e.g. Pol 1876: 36, 43–44; Chodźko 1880; Wybranowski 1897: 71–72; Janion 2007: 170; Sokołowska 2022: 302). This motif of an old generation mediating, as if in a “county song”, between the old and the new years, underwent, as I have mentioned, broadly documented topoization: “there is nothing more holy for today’s Polish youth than an old Pole in a *kontusz*; nothing more desirable than his conversation, cheerful yet serious; simple yet dignified and firm” (Orpiszewski 1838: 126; see also Syrokomla 1868: 180). Let us go back to Gołębiowski. He wrote that in a manor of old a place was always reserved for “gentlemen from beyond the mountains” (Gołębiowski 1884: 80), that is, unexpected arrivals. These gentlemen later appeared in Pol’s *Pieśni o ziemi naszej* [*The Song of Our Land*] (Pol 1876: 60 [separate pagination], Aleksander Wybranowski’s *Drobi-azgach z różnych czasów* [*Trifles from Various Times*] (Wybranowski 1897: 71) and other places too numerous to list them here. Suffice it to say that they were included (with a direct reference to Gołębiowski) by Gloger in his *Encyklopedia staropolska* [*Old Polish Encyclopedia*] (Gloger 1985: 208), and finally – with a reference to Wincenty Pol – noted by the so-called *Słownik warszawski* [*Warsaw Dictionary*] (Karłowicz, Kryński, Niedźwiedzki 1927: 92).

It is a thread closely connected with the picture of an imaginary house as e.g. envisioned – in the mode of Piast’s hospitable cottage – by Teofil Lenartowicz in the poem *W rocznicę listopadową* [*On the November Anniversary*] (Lenartowicz 1848: 4), a piece I will return to; a house larger “in case”, in anticipation of guests (Gołębiowski 1884: 8), small, but surprisingly spacious inside (Łoziński 1999: 198), or becoming larger while more banqueters arrive (as a metaphor of the hospitable heart). Such an estate was provided by

Henryk Rzewuski in one of his stories (Rzewuski 1983: 32), its flexible architecture was sketched out by Wincenty Pol in *Pieśń o ziemi naszej*:

<p>Wielkie domy za granicą, A w nich ciasno, choć nieludno. U nas mury się nie świecą, A o kącik nie tak trudno. Ledwo człek by czasem wierzył, Dom niewielki – wtem gość wchodzi, Ot i domek się rozszerzył, I wnet miejsce gdzieś się rodzi. Przybył drugi i dziesiąty, I nie ciasno jest nikomu: Wyprzątnięto wszystkie kąty,</p> <p>Coraz szerzej w małym domu. Zda się, że pan domu sobie Ścian i miejsca gdzieś przysporzył, A on tylko w domu tobie Drzwi i serce swe otworzył (Pol 1876: 59)<sup>8</sup>.</p>	<p>Grand houses abroad Crowded but not with people Our walls do not shine But a nook will be found Sometimes a person can't believe it A small house – then a guest comes in And the house grows in size And a place appears Another comes, soon a tenth one And nobody lacks for space: All corners cleaned out</p> <p>More and more space in the small house Seems that the host has Built more walls and space But he only for you Opened his door and heart (trans. E.B.)</p>
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And further: such a house was mentioned by Antoni Odyniec in *Listy z podróży* [*Letters from Travels*] (Odyniec 1875: 45), while Tadeusz Pini in his book about Władysław Syrokomla wrote that the poet's little estate grew larger for his guests, according to the adage (Pini 1901: 55–56). Indeed, the adage is noted in Samuel Adalberg's *Księga przysłów, przypowieści i wyrażen przysłowiowych polskich* [*The Book of Polish Adages, Parables and Proverbs*] (Adalberg 1889–1894: 154). It is worth mentioning here not a house, but a single chamber, which in Aleksander Groza's *Starosta kaniowski* [*The Starosta of Kanie*] resisted historical catastrophes "as a seed in ash" (Groza 1855: 7) – it is clearly possible to note the similarity with the romantic allegory of a seed.

I propose at the end to categorize all this myth-making intensification into four mutually non-exclusive orders: supernatural, ethical, aesthetic and political. In the supernatural order, hospitality is, as Wincenty Pol put it in his cycle *Z podróży po burzy* [*From Travels in Storm*] "inheritance from God" (Pol 1876: 52), a divine gift funded by an act of epiphany, preserved in the adage "Gość w dom – Bóg w dom" ("A guest at home – [is like] God at home"). In our tradition, these are obviously the angels visiting Piast and Rzepicha, who, to quote Kazimierz Stadnicki: "find shelter under the peasant roof. They crown his hospitality with the miracles of their grace, and, [as] bearers of divine judgments, give a scepter to the offspring of this peasant, and existence to a nation" (Stadnicki 1842: 2). In his treatise *O duchu poetyckim polskiego narodu* [...] [*On the Poetic Spirit of the Polish Nation*] Stefan Witwicki points directly to the aspect of epiphany in Piast's hospitality: "These same angels who visit

8 Similarly, although shorter, in *Mohort* (Pol 1855: 80).

the wheelwright's poor cottage connect us visibly to another, otherworldly plane, attach our thought to heaven, and will become a symbol of our faith" (Witwicki 1866: 18).

The ethical order puts hospitality into the countryside fences, that is, into georgian tradition. Here, only one quotation, but from *Pieśń o ziemi naszej*:

Chwała świętych i rogoża	Glory to the saints and a knight's hard bedding
I ta służba gościnności,	And the service of hospitality
Miłość ludzka – bojaźń Boża,	Human love – fear of God
Czułość serca i sumienia,	Sensitive heart and conscience
I co tylko nam z przejrzenia	And what only from a glance
Opatrzności było dane,	Of Providence was given
Wszystko pługiem wyorane	All plowed over
(Pol 1876: 8).	(trans. E.B.)

This tradition, fading very slowly in Polish conditions, now aided Romantic moralistic xenophobia, aversion to towns and achievements of civilization (Janion, Żmigrodzka 1978: 55). An estate or a castle remains an axiological "orientation point" (Waśko 2001: 151), but particular moral privileges were ascribed to *zańcianek*.

In the aesthetic order the ideal of hospitality, generous as much as irrational, is associated with the "cordial noble whim" („serdeczną fantazyją szlachecką”; Gaszyński 1908: 8; see also Waśko 2001: 76–77, 100); “if only it were possible to carouse today as in the days of old!...” Syrokomla would sigh. However, both the world and the poet himself had become older: “It is not the same with people, and not the same in the heart!” (Syrokomla 1856: 51), which sounds like a weakening echo of the timeless analogy between the macrocosmos and the microcosmos. Wincenty Pol attempted to resurrect the old-time zest by composing a behavior code of a sort (*W pamiętniku Pani Włodzimierzowej Dzie duszyckiej* [*In the Album of Mrs Włodzimierzowa Dzie duszycka*]), which advocated for unrestrained, or even extreme behaviors:

Kiedy zbrojnie – to ze szablą,	If [one's] armed – then with saber
Kiedy z miną – to już z djabła,	if making faces – then demonic
Kiedy strojnie – to we złocie,	If well-dressed – then in gold
Gdy pracować – to już w pocie,	If working – then to sweat
Bankietować – to już szumnie,	If banqueting – pompously
Sejmikować – to już tłumnie.	Rallying – in a crowd
Kiedy spać się – to jak Bela,	If drinking – into stupor
Kiedy pić – przyjaciele,	If drink-offering – to friend
Gdy pomagać – to sownie,	If helping – then generously
Kiedy bić – to naleźycie,	If beating – then painfully
Kiedy pościć – to na sucho,	If fasting – then while dry
Kiedy palnąć – to już ucho!	If hitting – someone's ear!
(Pol 1876: 360)	(trans. E.B.)

In the eyes of the Romantics, rampant "whims" were seen as a peculiar manifestation of the nation's poetic spirit:

this boundless hospitality, humor unperturbed by any adventure, focused on good thought and pomp, burning through the largest fortunes, a common, unanimous trust in tomorrow, blind reliance on Providence, finally, the national slogan and deep faith that Poland is based on misrule... Indeed, one does not require the aforementioned primacy<sup>9</sup> for this tangled ball of many peculiarities, for this compact mix of the most contradictory God-knows-what, and things heard nowhere else a ribbon of as varied poetry as possible was span

– Stefan Witwicki wrote, and he noticed this "poetry" on all pages of old and new histories (Witwicki 1866: 19n). Rzewuski chimed in by saying that the Pole's element is "full of poetry" which is revealed in conversations, feasts, arguments, travels and "disorder at home", which differentiated him (positively!) from a German or a Muscovite (Rzewuski 2003: 17–18, see also 21).

In a conservative<sup>10</sup> political order, in my opinion the superior one, the social phantasm of Old Polish hospitality (that is, the active and historically conditioned side of the myth<sup>11</sup>: a compensatory set of reading, imagination, emotions and memory) seems to be an important factor of integration, especially in the experience of colonization (also in its modernizing aspect) or emigration otherness, in the traumatic process of going from a community of actual privileges within a social state to the national imagined community (referring to Benedict Anderson's well-known concept), devoid of background in the form of state and forced to rely on cultural ties, including – creative collective memory. In a broader dimension, this phantasm spread over the entire Slavic tradition. As we know, the Romantics were diligent, if selective, students of Johann G. Herder, who seemed to recognize another version of the "noble savage" in Slavs: "they were helpful, hospitable to the point of profligacy, they were lovers of countryside freedom, but, at the same time, submissive and obedient, they were foes to robbery and burglary" (Herder 1962: 326). Protecting this depository of virtues was supposed to open the road to a dominating position for the Slavs. This is exactly how, in the formula of *long durée*, Wincenty Pol commented upon the durability of this Slavic heritage (*W podróży po burzy* [*From Travels in Storm*]):

9 The paradox of first among equals (Lat. *primus inter pares*). It concerns the king, whose status in the noble Commonwealth was equal to that of the poorest nobleman.

10 Generally, in the sense used by Andrzej Waśko (2001: 67), who, using Karl Mannheim's distinction (conservatism v. traditionalism) is too strict in eliminating the traditionalist aspect. Traditionalism can become conservatism's tool as a quotation from the past or a reference to residuum (enclaves of old custom are presented as pattern-generating), otherwise this distinction is not upheld consistently, e.g. 74–75.

11 I am referring here to Maria Janion's approach; she excavated this notion from its psychoanalytic terminological field (Janion 1998).

Bo tam gościna puścizną po Bogu,  
 Więc głosy serca nie cedzą przez zęby,  
 Lecz chlebem gościa witają u progu  
 I plackiem do nóg, pirogiem do gęby...  
 I po te czasy obyczaj ten samy,  
 Choć lis borsuka wyparował z jamy  
 (Pol 1876: 52).

For there, hospitality is legacy from God  
 so voices are not frugal with heart  
 but welcome a guest with bread in the doorway  
 bow down, feed with pierogi  
 and until now, the custom remains  
 even if fox hunted the badger out of the den  
 (trans. E.B.)

Therefore, the phantasm of ancient hospitality (together with other distinguishing virtues) could soften the feeling of civilizational loss. And it was all the more acute given that it was unfamiliar to Sarmatian ancestors, or, at least, not on this scale and with this profile. Imaginary hospitality was to consolidate in the face of violent political changes, as a tool of resistance against the pressure of history. It was active (although in an undefined perspective) in the pen of Teofil Lenartowicz (I return to the poem *W rocznicę listopadową* [*On the November Anniversary*]): it is the Piast's hospitable cottage that will give shape to national awakening, understood as resurrecting the past:

Wybudujcie domek mały,  
 A poważny jak świątynia,  
 W gruncie mocny jako skały,  
 A tak czysty jak źrzenica.  
 A niewola i zamieszka  
 W naszym domu niech nie mieszka:  
 Lecz gościnność i prostota  
 Niech otwiera drzwi ubogiem,  
 Bądźmy rzewni jak sierota,  
 A rządźmy sie Panem Bogiem  
 (Lenartowicz 1848: 4).

You should build a little house  
 Serious like a shrine  
 On foundation of rock  
 Clean as an eye's pupil  
 And slavery and unrest  
 Shall not live in our house  
 But hospitality, simplicity  
 Shall open the doors to the poor  
 Let us be tender like orphans  
 and let God be our ruler  
 (trans. E.B.)

This poem, contextually connected with the 1848 events, and found in a volume published in a lithographic form, probably due to censorship (Bełcikowski 1893: 37–38), is a kind of a call-to-arms – fiery as much as poetically weak – calling “brothers” to unite around the traditional order of values, for it is what marks the right directions towards the “true miracle” of political freedom.

A decade later, Piast's humble abode was referenced by Władysław Syrokomla, touched by seeing Gopło and Kruszwica. However, he shifted the responsibility for the motherland's resurrection from Piast's heirs to the angels themselves:

But let these tears not be poisoned with bitterness – it is just the cradle, not yet the tomb of the past! After all, this is the soil upon which angels went to be hosted by Piast... An angel blessed the cradle, the angel ate our bread, tasted our mead... If only by a prayer, the angel should pay for Lechitic hospitality (Syrokomla 1914: 133).

However, as can be seen, this is a reference of another kind: although in both cases visions of the future are lit up by a miracle (and thus the political order

meets, however else, the supernatural one), Lenartowicz connects it with an exceptional communal effort, while in Syrokomla's approach, resistance seems resigned and passive – since one can only count on the angel's good manners as he reciprocates a favor. Let us remind the reader that hosting a visitor from the otherworld is an important founding myth not just for the Polish ethnic community (see Pitt-Rivers 2012: 508–509; Rancew-Sikora 2021: 20–23). It can thus be said that the "countryside lyre player" (as Syrokomla was called, following the title of his poem) recognized a chance for independence in reformulating linear historical time into sacral time, assuming the possibility of return to the starting point, an actualization of the *illo tempore* era (as Mircea Eliade, the classic scholar of these problems, was fond of calling it). Thus, the convention close to a travel journal, particular for the text under discussion, is summarized by a sample of prophetic vision. Not for nothing was the lyre player's instrument made of enchanted wood (Syrokomla 1890: 203).

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# The Baroque Crisis of the Third Polish Republic. System Transformation, Sarmatian Traditions and Krzysztof Koehler's Classicism\*

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**ABSTRACT:** The article takes up reflection on the concept of classicism as formulated by Krzysztof Koehler, a representative of the “bruLion” generation. According to the young poet, contemporary classicism cannot be separated from extra-literary reality; on the contrary – it is to document its condition already at the level of its form. Therefore, for a poem to be able to articulate the system crisis as recognized by Koehler in the beginning of the 1990s, far-reaching formal changes turn out to be indispensable. Lyrical poetry must be de-formed so radically that it will be possible for it to be in tune with extra-literary instability even on the level of the form. An unexpected inspiration for such a diagnostic endeavor turns out to lie in Baroque traditions, especially the traditions of Polish Sarmatian poetry. Sarmatian poetics provides the “bruLion” writer with a repertoire of means that he consistently uses in his poetic project that “recognizes the crisis”, so as to grasp the drastic nature of changes taking place in the beginnings of the Third Polish Republic.

**KEYWORDS:** classicism, latest poetry, the “bruLion” generation, political conservatism, system transformation, Baroque traditions, Sarmatian models

Krzysztof Koehler is one of the most interesting, and, simultaneously, most controversial Polish poets of the last thirty-five years. Belonging to the formation of “bruLion” (a journal published in the years 1987–1999, which became an outpost of independent culture at the end of Polish People’s Republic), he was

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one of those poets who demanded a new poetic language in the post-Communist reality. Soon, Koehler also turned out to be – as I will try to showcase – one of the most vigilant chroniclers of the 1990s political transformation, when, after the fall of Communism, Poland becomes a democratic liberal country. By entering into a debate with Marcin Świetlicki (Koehler 1990), a colleague from the “bruLion” editorial board, and, at the same time, one of the leading representatives of young poetry, Koehler initiated the first important literary discussion in free Poland, which raged between “our barbarians” and “our classicists” (Maliszewski 1995). In opposing Świetlicki, the author of the pamphlet *Dla Jana Polkowskiego* [*For Jan Polkowski*] (Świetlicki 2002: 54), considered to be a manifesto of new poetic approach, Koehler declared himself in favor of classicism; however, he subjected its understanding to extensive re-definition. Indeed, the choice of classicism did not mean formal classicism. While demanding, as other young poets, a new poetic idiom, Koehler opts in favor of such understanding of classicism that will become a record of the transformation processes of the time.

The variant of classicism as formulated by Koehler turned out to be so non-standard and distant from its usual visions that it remained impossible to understand for literary criticism of the time. It is symptomatic that in time, Koehler will describe himself as “avant-garde classicist” (Koehler 2019b), as he reached that far in transforming poetic form. In Koehler’s variant, classicism is definitely not reduced to formal pedantry. Even if it used to be identified with lyric mode of beautiful words or high style in Polish reception, it takes on a radically different form in Koehler’s variety. A classicist makes allowances for far-fetched formal changes that are supposed to make poetic language more flexible, so that the latter would swerve in the spectrum of contemporary life. A change in poetics is indispensable if classicist poetry is to become an alternative for poetic mainstream of the 1990s, that is, a model of conversation poetry inspired by American poets (Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery). Koehler describes his species of classicism as “progressive” (Koehler 1999b) due to the fact that the changes taking place in its poetic structures are supposed to be connected to transformations in extra-literary reality. What would classicism after 1989 even be for – its provocative theoretician asks – if it were reduced to formal pedantry, humble subordination to rules of poetics?

Exceptional due to their polemic temperament, Koehler’s manifestos do not remain hollow. Their extension can be found in the poems as such: there, the classicist experiments with formal solutions with an almost avant-garde vigor. The evolution in Koehler’s body of work takes place at lightning speed, as it covers a brief period of only three years that pass between the debut *Wiersze* [*Poems*] (1990) and the more mature *Nieudana pielgrzymka* [*Failed Pilgrimage*] (1993). The extent of changes taking place between these volumes is so considerable that they seem to have been written by two authors of diametrically different sensibilities. In a poem published at the end of the 1980s we still read:

Podniosłem oczy i wolno się wdarła  
W przestrzeń pokoju zatłoczonych rzeczy  
Cicha, jak kryształ czystej górskiej rzeki  
Majestatyczna sygnaturka z wieży.

I raised my eyes and slowly there broke  
Into the space of crowded things in the room  
Quiet as the crystalline pure mountain river  
Majestic signature of the tower.

Nim oczy przykryć zdążyłem zawtórowały  
Jej głośne dźwięki dzwonów,  
I rozgadały się w godzinie zmierzchu  
Wieże tych wszystkich, które są, kościołów.

Before I covered my eyes, there sounded  
Loud bells in accompaniment  
And in the hour of twilight there talked  
the towers of all churches there are.

Aż przebrzmiał dźwięk. I tylko echo niosło,  
Jak z dala szum bitewny, kiedy wiatr przywieje  
Do wojska, które jeszcze czeka na swój los,  
Radość i strach, i gniew, i nadzieję...

Until the sound stopped. And only the echo carried  
As battle noise from afar, when wind brings  
To the army still waiting for its fate  
Joy and fear, and rage, and hope...

(Koehler 2019a: 23)

(trans. E.B.)

The poems created after 1990 already take on a different shape. Instead of a (albeit not consistent) rhyme scheme of AABB within 11-syllable verse there appears a poem that is ostentatiously deregulated, in which the principles of versification are no longer respected. The lines undergo drastic contractions, as if their very form was to confirm changes taking place outside literature:

Teraz to już  
tylko będzie  
skrót. Nocą –  
pociągi przebijają  
się przez tunel  
mroku. Świerszcze  
zamierają  
nad ranem.  
Ogień pochyla  
wiatr. To,  
co się dzieje,  
trwa jak  
znak. Tylko  
ja chylę się  
i pochylam  
nad zapominaniem.  
(Koehler 2019a: 58)

Now it  
will only  
be brief. At night –  
trains pierce  
the tunnel  
of darkness. Crickets  
fade  
before morning.  
The fire is bowed  
by wind. What  
happens  
lasts like  
a sign. Only  
I bow down  
and bow  
to forgetting.  
(trans. E.B.)

Or:

Droga, jak  
fala, wzgórze,  
słowa

The road like  
a wave, a hill  
words

wiatr  
chwieje  
korony  
drzew–

wind  
bends  
the tree  
tops–

już bez szczeliny dłużej.	now no longer with a chink.
Wiatr, na ostatek, wiatr kroi te słowa	The wind in the end wind cuts these words
w sylaby, tak samo drogi żłobi wzgórze w ślady (Koehler 2019a: 70)	into syllables just as roads are grooves in the hill in footsteps (trans. E.B.)

“The wind / in the end / wind cuts / these words // into syllables”, we read in the meta-poetic commentary. And indeed, this recognition turns out to be confirmed by the very poetic order cut into short, very short lines. Koehler debuted as orthodox classicist, with conventional pieces, so as to let his diction undergo such a significant change after barely three years. Although in his debut pieces he introduces himself as proponent of numerical poem, in the pieces from the following volume he demonstratively breaks up with metric limitations. Flirting with avant-garde trends and avant-garde self-identifications, Koehler gifts the words with freedom (“give / words / freedom”; Koehler 2019b: 73), so that they were no longer limited with schemes of versification (let us remind the reader that “words in the wild” is Filippo Marinetti’s slogan from the futuristic manifesto, which Koehler appears to be paraphrasing). The difference in *Nieudana pielgrzymka* turns out to be so considerable that it could even be presented as a new debut.

Such radical changes in Koehler’s poetics would, perhaps, never take place, but for the circumstances of the Polish system transformation. The change in style takes place at a time when Polish reality becomes subject to processes aiming at democratizing politics and liberalizing economy (that is, the years 1991–1993, when the poems of NP are written). Heretofore familiar reality changes dynamically before Koehler’s eyes. In this context, Naomi Klein referred to carrying out “the shock doctrine” (Klein 2008), neo-liberal modernization whose price and condition turns out to lie in driving society into a state of shock. The neo-liberal “shock therapy” of Polish transformation (consisting, among others, in marketization of the economy and privatization of state assets, but also in mass firings, enforcing labor migration and increasing wealth disproportions) turns out to be such a drastic and dynamic process that it is difficult to imagine it would have no influence on the literary field, including Koehler’s classicism. Only if it manages to adjust formally to the condition of the reality of transforming Poland will it become a “progressive” idiom. Classicism – yes, but only if it manages to catch up with the speed of structural

changes; write down the acceleration of the epoche that deprives one of any kind of certainty. Koehler leaves no doubt as to what stake should be assigned to contemporary poetry: "There is, actually, only one such topic. Whoever can take it up, whoever can become it – is an artist. It is, obviously, MOVEMENT, BECOMING, but not dying out. The latter is maudlin and inevitably leads towards despair or catastrophizing" (Koehler 1991: 15). And should his position not be clear enough yet, in the same interview he specifies: "There are no other topics. This is the topic of THE WORLD. A poem that is not becoming is unnecessary" (Koehler 1991: 15).

At the same time, the choice of classicism on Koehler's part is not politically neutral. Indeed, with his non-standard variety of poetry the "bruLion" writer joins a long political tradition whose Polish representatives of the early 1990s belonged to a conservative formation that was more than reluctant towards the transformation. Koehler formulates his poetic manifestos at a time when the beginnings of the Third Republic of Poland are criticized, in numerous journalistic statements, by such distinguished representatives of this artistic formation as, for instance, increasingly politically radicalized Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz (the future author of *Wieszanie* [*Hanging*], an essay discussing the 18th century executions of the liberal, Enlightenment and Enlightened elite) or Zbigniew Herbert, whose problems with liberal democracy were equally large. Therefore, it is not surprising that for Koehler, who cooperated with leading anti-liberal journals ("Fronda", "Arcana"), the political transformation appears in this particular shape. Retaining a cool skepticism towards the undergoing transformations, the poet looks upon them from a conservative anti-liberal perspective, in which they appear as a process of systemic de-stabilization. In the face of inter-era chaos Koehler attempts to figure out an appropriate poetic formula that will be capable of capturing in a formal manner the cognitive crisis experienced at the threshold of new reality. In its beginnings, the Third Polish Republic is at the zero point, while the program assumption of Koehler's classicism is that it is supposed to be a poetic articulation of chaos experienced at the time.

Despite appearances, in its recording how the new reality is shaped, classicism is not an avant-garde project, even if within its framework, Koehler performs far-reaching formal modifications. While Koehler seems to experiment with his own language, unexpected allies in his poetic attempts can be found, mainly, in the representatives of Polish Baroque. In order to successfully confront the Third Polish Republic crisis, Koehler goes back several centuries to find methodological inspirations in Baroque poetry. One may wonder about the poet's preferences in history of literature. However, it cannot be forgotten that it is not the first time in literary history that a representative of modern classicism refers to Baroque heritage. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition an analogous gesture was, after all, made by T. S. Eliot, who, despite the disinclination of the academic community, rehabilitated the so-called English metaphysical school. In Polish tradition, in turn, such a gesture was made by Jarosław Marek

Rymkiewicz, the author of manifestos entitled *Czym jest klasycyzm* [*What Is Classicism*] (Rymkiewicz 1967).

The Baroque language turns out to be convenient and useful for Koehler, as it was developed in the era of a cognitive crisis of the 17th century and thus, it constitutes a model language of crisis poetry. How can one express the crisis of the Third Polish Republic? By indebting oneself to poetry that was specialized in voicing experiences of crisis. While comparing the 17th century crisis to the one caused by the transformation may appear disproportional, this does not concern Koehler. Indeed, what he seeks in Baroque past are specific clues as to how to transform his own language so that it became more alert to contemporary experience of the word. As the poet himself explains:

I want to consider myself a classicist, and for a classicist, the novelty of poetic form is not an issue. For me, the problem lies in the novelty of an intellectual approach to the world, to the encountered environment, ways of thinking, valuation, etc. Traditional forms do not prevent one from expressing that. To the contrary. They are like a good old house that cannot be abandoned just because a modern skyscraper was built right next door (Koehler, Baran, Świetlicki 1993: 11).

Thus, Koehler does not leave the “good old house” – or, rather, a noble manor house – of Baroque poetry. As I will show on the basis of selected examples, Baroque poetry is, for him, a prototypical reaction to crisis. And so, in order to find a word for “the disorientation of rapid political change combined with the collective fear generated by an economic meltdown” (Klein 2008: 181) or “the disorientation of rapid regime change” (Klein 2008: 176), Koehler becomes indebted to the repertoire of Baroque poetics in order to express the experiences contemporary to him. He takes the language into the literary past so as to document the acceleration of his own present by the means of classicism.

It is Koehler himself who emphasizes his connection to the Baroque tradition. He refers to his early efforts in brief: “Broad, Baroque, sad and happy” (Koehler 1999a: 6). What is more, while working on the *Nieudana pielgrzymka* poems, he also worked with Baroque in academia. In fact, in the first half of the 1990s he defended a doctorate in Old Polish literature; in time, he became a literary studies professor affiliated at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, and, as follows, the author of numerous academic publications dedicated to Old Polish heritage. At the time of the transformation, Koehler also became a popularizer of noble culture, and especially, the Polish variety of Baroque poetry, that is, Sarmatian poetry emerging among the nobles. In 1995, conservative Polish Television broadcast a three-episode program *Sarmacja, czyli Polska* [*Sarmatia, or Poland*] prepared by Koehler. He also promoted Sarmatian heritage in “bruLion”, where a review of an anthology of Sarmatian poetry released in a Biblioteka Narodowa series was published. While the review was signed by Jakub Teodor Trembecki, a *nom-de-plume*, Koehler was

most likely its actual author (Trembecki 1991). He presents Sarmatian poems almost as if they were poetic counter-culture or “cursed” tradition, which he has to stand up for against academic historians of literature. Can anyone – the “bruLion” author asks – “pierce the armor of philological antipathy towards Old Polish literature, heretofore so efficiently murdered at universities, where one does not read Old Polish poetry, and especially Baroque poetry, and when one does not read it, one does not grasp it?” (Trembecki 1991: 169). According to him, the contemporary situation of Sarmatian poetry may remind one of the situation of English metaphysical poetry at the point when Eliot stood up for it, also contrarily to academic circles. In the following years, Koehler will continue to promote Sarmatian heritage, for instance, in the shape of an authorial selection of noble poetry, for which he will provide an introductory essay (Koehler 2002).

Koehler remains a classicist in poetry, and a conservative in politics; in contrast to the 1990s liberal discourse, he supports a noble identity formula. According to him, noble identity has the same position as noble literature. Just as literary studies discredit Sarmatian poetry, so transformation politics discredit noble identity. Koehler himself was convinced that noble heritage should be a model for Polishness as identified with patriotism, Catholicism, but also, xenophobia or provincialism. It is not an identity formula that would find appreciation in liberal media that supported Polish transformation, particularly not in “Gazeta Wyborcza” (a daily newspaper of democratic opposition that reached a circulation of over a million copies and had a considerable influence on public opinion), which Koehler criticized. In “Sarmatian accounts”, he compares the newspaper to the 18th century “Monitor”, that is, the leading newspaper of the Polish Enlightenment, which has once conducted an anti-Sarmatian campaign. Its continuation would be found in “Wyborcza’s” publication policy, where, following the Enlightenment model, noble culture once again comes under criticism. In the newspaper pages one could find “a murder conducted on the noble manor. The ignoramus was ‘done away with’. Or – in other words – it was the most real end of the Commonwealth possible” (Koehler 1995: 96). The 1990s are, supposedly, the times of new Enlightenment, when attempts are made to substitute the Sarmatian model of Polishness with a more modern one, that is, European (cosmopolitan) Polishness that would be secular, tolerant and urban. Koehler does not agree with such a substitution: he returns to noble traditions as an alternative subject formula, a “formula for Polish national identity” that he pushes for in his journalistic texts (Koehler 2002: 5).

In Koehler’s private canon an important, if not the most important place is held by Waław Potocki (1621–1698), one of the leading representatives of Sarmatian poetry. He recurs several times in the classicist’s own comments, emphasizing Potocki’s influence on his own poetic abilities: “Waław Potocki is very important to me; important due to his ethics and good life” (Koehler 1996: 11). Koehler does not conceal the amount of his debt to the predecessor:

“I was taught this by Waclaw Potocki, *notabene*, a 17th century Baroque poet” (Koehler, Wencel 1997: 6). Simultaneously, he considers Potocki to be a Sarmatian representative of “broken classicism” (Koehler 1999b: 78), who no longer respects old rules of composition, but, as a result, he increases the representational potential of 17th century poetry. While favored by Koehler, Potocki’s case remains representative to Baroque as such. Indeed, in the sinusoidal history of literature Baroque constitutes a reversal of classicist aesthetics (of the Antiquity and the Renaissance). What we can see in Baroque is:

an anti-classicist era, if we understand classicism not as a period, but as a certain overriding attitude, common to various eras, whose main feature consist in strife for perfection based in European literature on Horatio’s and Cicero’s models, strife for unambiguous harmony and order, for simplicity and clarity of language at the cost of its colorfulness and variety (Vincenz 1989: XI).

Let us also keep in mind that the very notion of Baroque (from the Portuguese *barocco* – an irregularly shaped pearl or French *baroque* – a wealth of decorations) was an invective before it became a period-related term; it was used to describe aesthetics that did not respect classicist compositional principles. However, there is a method to the Baroque madness, and its significance is perfectly grasped by Koehler, fascinated with the potential of this diction. For him the Baroque “brokenness” of classicism is a reaction to the 17th century crisis. If the world is no longer well-formed, then form must be abandoned by the poetics that is a symptom of the crisis of the time and its poetic manifestation. In this sense, Koehler is also a representative of “broken classicism”: given the new reality, he gives up on the overly static and sterile language of his debut volume.

Let us add here that one of the main topoi of Baroque art is movement, and thus – as we remember – a subject that Koehler himself favors. As a specialist in Sarmatian poetry writes, “the aim of classicism was to lock eternal beauty in an immutable shape. Baroque is characterized by movement” (Vincenz 1989: XVIII). Analogous reflections concerning the 17th century topics are formulated by Jan Błoński in his by now classic work dedicated to Mikołaj Sep-Szarzyński as a representative of “Sarmatian *helicon*”.

By saying that the actual subject of Sep’s poetry is movement I want to say that in everything that surrounds him and in everything that he experiences within himself, Szarzyński feels, above all, change; that for him, movement is something more than one of phenomena: it is, rather, a mode of being, a form in which there exists reality, both external and spiritual [...] As an original and partly subconscious realization, it is most powerfully reflected in style: the sign of movement pertains both to the poet’s images and his versification (Błoński 1967: 77).

In trying to catch up to the speed of the transformation (“I have tried to catch up...”, as he says in one of his interviews; Koehler, Wencel 1997: 5), Koehler repeats methods of Baroque poets. “As is history, so the storyteller” [“jakie dzieje takie pienie”], as the Baroque motto goes; in the 1990s classicism, one should also let go of the metric order that limits one’s linguistic freedom. Koehler does so in a demonstrative way. The basic means aiding in deregulating a poem turns out to be the same means popularized by Baroque poets. This means consists in enjambment, which introduces a dissonance between the division into lines and the syntactic order. As noted by Błoński, the Baroque “wealth of [...] enjambment, systematic lack of symmetry in a sentence and a poem contribute to the effect of momentum in chaos, an effect that undoubtedly founds the poem” (Błoński 1967: 84). While using enjambment, Koehler turns out to be a creator even more radical than the Baroque authors, one almost abusing this poetic means. He uses it with such intensity that in “Koehler studies” he has already managed to earn the opinion of “an enjambment poet” (Staroń 2017: 101). And indeed, one does not need to conduct thorough research to find poems that exemplify this method:

Teraz to już  
tylko będzie  
skrót. [...]

(Koehler 2019a: 58)

Now it  
will only  
be brief. [...]

(trans. E.B.)

Brevity turns out to be a signature of Koehler who does not adhere to schemes of versification, building poems out of short, very short lines multiplied at a rapid speed. There is no other possibility: if poet is to give voice to new reality, he cannot use a “pure” poem: from now on, the poem undergoes cramping when it comes to the meter.

Już  
bardziej  
czysto  
nie potrafię  
trwać.

(Koehler 2019a: 65)

I  
cannot  
be more  
pure  
in enduring.

(trans. E.B.)

This passage can be read as an autothematic statement: as a declaration in which Koehler manifests the inability to make “pure” poetry any longer. This declaration is confirmed by the poetics in which every subsequent word is moved to another line. This is how Koehler radicalizes the poetics of Baroque so that it would make it possible for him to reflect the destabilization of the surrounding world, its acceleration enforcing “a race of enjambments” (Wążyk 1964: 19). Even if reality may seem to be well-ordered, this order is immediately countered by metric disorder and enjambments that interfere into the poetic image:

Jabłonie na tle  
nieba. Mrok  
jak gumka  
powoli je  
ściera.  
(Koehler 2019a, s. 62)

Apple trees against  
the sky. Darkness  
eraser-like  
wipes them  
away slowly.  
(trans. E.B.)

A cheerful, friendly landscape? Nothing more misleading. Having portrayed for a brief moment the familiar sight (of a Polish countryside? A house orchard?), Koehler suddenly plunges this view in the darkness “of dark conciseness” (Błoński 1967: 123), “eraser-like” wiping or erasing it with subsequent enjambments:

Rzeczywistość  
układa się  
we wzór:  
zwyciężony  
tropi tylko  
wątki klęski  
(Koehler 2019a: 57)

Reality  
arranged  
into a pattern:  
a loser  
only follows  
mentions of failure  
(trans. E.B.)

Given Koehler’s poetological choices, the possibility of arranging the world into a pattern seems a very distant horizon (although let us keep in mind that these are theological poems, whose “pilgrimage” expressed in the title has a clear metaphysical vector). How can one give order to the world in poetry which is presented itself as disordered? The order of a statement (“Reality / arranged / into a pattern”) seems to be denied by the performative order (the metric arrangement) which expresses reality turned inside out, devolving into subsequent lines which are not subject to any metric “pattern”.

By bringing the language to state of such despair that it would become an expression of a world broken by a crisis, Koehler also uses enjambment so as to set loose syntactic relationships in a language. The lines in *Nieudana pielgrzymka* are reduced to “sentence-like” gerund clauses, key words devoid of predicates which create asyndetic strings characteristic for Baroque epigrams:

Księżyc. Jęczmień.  
Świerszcze. Ile  
błyskawic jeszcze?  
(Koehler 2019a: 54)

Moon. Barley.  
Crickets. How  
much more lightning?  
(trans. E.B.)

Łagodne fale łąk  
pałaki gór w tle.  
Dęby. Lipy. Orzech.  
(Koehler 2019a: 63)

Gentle meadow waves  
bow-shaped mountains.  
Oaks. Lindens. Walnut.  
(trans. E.B.)

Ogień. Popiół. Dym.  
Woda. Szelest.  
(Koehler 2019a: 116)

Fire. Ash. Smoke.  
Water. Rustle.  
(trans. E.B.)

[...] Kroki.  
Świerszcze. Oczy.  
(Koehler 2019a: 55)

[...] Footsteps.  
Crickets. Eyes.  
(trans. E.B.)

Koehler's language becomes so cramped that the lines are made up of just several recurring words. The contraction of lines is such a consistent practice that for a reviewer of *Nieudana pielgrzymka*, the volume brought on associations with Japanese haiku, a record of the present moment constructed of seventeen syllables (Maliszewski 1994: 7). Koehler respects the principle of haiku inasmuch as he notes down his impressions by the means of the smallest number of words in poetry as compressed as possible. "Sound, shadow, smoke, wind, flash, voice, point, a human life celebrated. / A sun no longer rises once it has passed" (Naborowski 1961: 158), as Daniel Naborowski (1573–1640), a Baroque poet, wrote. Koehler also likes using asyndentons, juxtaposing this concise form with more developed description.

When it comes to the use of formal means, Koehler turns out to be an even more ingenious poet. Following Baroque poets, he attempts to compose contemporary *carmina figurata*, "figurative songs" that take on the shape of an object thematized within them (Rypson 1989: 129–249). And thus, when trying to express the experience of instability, the classicist subordinates to it the graphic design of the poem, arranging the lines in a two-dimensional plane:

W dalekie kraje.  
Mowa nie zniesie  
Tego: w bezlistne  
drzewa;

To distant lands.  
Speech won't bear  
it: into leafless  
trees;

w bezlitosne ramiona  
śmierci. Łąki  
schodzą się  
tam na spotkanie

ino merciless arms  
of death. Meadows  
come there  
to meet

i krasa gajów,  
nasze staranie,  
aby zostawić

and the beauty of woods  
our attempt  
to leave

w wielkim  
mroczniejącym  
spokoju  
to niestrudzone  
(Koehler 2019a: 99)

in great  
darkening  
peace  
the tireless  
(trans. E.B.)

Attempting, in accord with his program declaration to report "on what / happens" (Koehler 2019a: 55), with the very order of the lines in the poem Koehler tries to illustrate how wind blows, an element that symbolizes the changeability of the era. The *Wind of Change* from the 1990s hit by Scorpions also moves the constructions of the poem. In Koehler's variation of the Baroque *carmina*

*figurata* the changes are supposed to be expressed by the very jagged lines of the poem. By aligning the poem to the center and composing it of short lines, Koehler seems to experiment with “visual prosody” (Perloff 2009: 19) of the poem, whose short lines wave as a flag in the wind. “In such poetic fractions, enjambment almost plays the role of the subject of a statement, an independent creator of the meaning given, while the reader’s eye follows only the path of print on the page. It may happen for graphy to become an equivalent of something undefined, perhaps even metaphysical, wind” (Staroń 2017: 98), as Ireneusz Staroń noted.

It may seem controversial to term Koehler’s poetry as “songs”. However, despite appearances, his *carmina* turn out to be not only *figurata* (Latin for figurative), but also as *sonora* (Latin for sonorous) as possible, even if this sonority is not achieved by the means of metric schemes:

osaczony gra na trąbce pogoń: kołatki, bębny –	the hemmed plays pursuit on trumpet: knockers, drums –
to jedyny język.	the only language.
Coraz więcej rozumiem, lecz moja pieśń rozbrzmiewa tylko jedną melodią. (Koehler 2019a: 57)	I understand still more but my song sounds with only one melody. (trans. E.B.)

When in Koehler’s poems the “song sounds / with only one / melody”, it is not the melody of meter carrying out the principles of *ars poetica*. In this regard too does Koehler repeat a gesture of Baroque authors, who used a deregulated form so that in that shape could a 17th century world, devoid of regularity, properly sound out. “A listless and mean world can only afford listless and mean poetry” (Mrowcewicz 2005: 195), as Krzysztof Mrowcewicz wrote about 17th century poetics. Koehler’s songs, where metric order cannot be found, must also find themselves in such a state of listlessness. However, this does not mean that it is impossible to hear a peculiar kind of musicality within them:

It is musicality that is “breathless”, clanky, jerky, but, in a way, melodious, rounded up, considered and finished in terms of sound. What interested me was the original rhythm of this poetry, which I would call “the shame of sound”: musical restraint and fragmentation of the phrase, an extremely consistent syncope. As if the ideals of avant-garde became one with Leśmian’s syntax, and to that, a distant note out of Baroque mannerism

was added [...] The whole thing is endearingly his own, including the innovations and discoveries in the field of verse (Maliszewski 1998: 112).

Whether Koehler uses avant-garde poetics or, rather, poetics of “Baroque mannerism” remains up for debate. I would like to agree with the remaining statements by Maliszewski. If Koehler’s poetry retains sound, it is a sound by design devoid of harmony. Simple lines constructed out of basic metrical feet (trochees, amphibrachs) do not create complicated constructions. Their “nervous, syncopic trembling” (Śliwiński 1994: 75), unpredictable cuts in the lines (enjambments), irregular pulsing, as if taken from the Old Polish psalmody seem to reflect the trembling of the era itself.

Another feature subordinated to expressing the world in crisis is the sound structure that utilizes phonetic instrumentation. Not only are Koehler’s *carmina* shaped according to the way “the wind of change” blows, but also, these blows win in the phonic arrangement. Koehler’s poems are constructed so as to recreate the “rustle” of new times by the means of onomatopoeia. One could swear that lines set into movement by the wind really do “rustle”:

Doskonałe  
powietrze  
wypełniło  
tę przestrzeń.

Perfectly  
did the air  
fill  
this space.

Wiatr chce  
ją jeszcze  
nasyścić  
swym  
szelestem  
(Koehler 2019a: 73)

The wind  
still wants  
to saturate it  
with its  
rustling  
(trans. E.B.)

W topole  
wdziera się  
wiatr.  
Szelest.  
(Koehler 2019a: 74)

Wind  
enters  
the poplars.  
Rustling.  
(trans. E.B.)

Szelest papieru.  
Trzaski szczap.  
Cisza. Więcej  
nic. [...]  
(Koehler 2019a: 92)

Paper rustling.  
Logs cracking.  
Silence. Nothing  
more [...]  
(trans. E.B.)

Wciąż ten szelest,  
to parcie nieustanne  
jednej w inną  
rzecz.  
(Koehler 2019a: 116)

Still the rustle  
this constant pressure  
of one thing  
into another.  
(trans. E.B.)

“Rustle” is one of key words in Koehler’s poetry. Simultaneously, attempts are made at recreating “rustling” by the means of alliteration, that is, by putting together fricatives over the space of several lines:

świerszcze szurganiem wydeptują próg (Koehler 2019a: 67)	crickets shuffle to wear down the threshold (trans. E.B.)
a dalej – w mgle ściskającej przestrzeń jak puszka szklana – dach i chłodu śliska ściana.	and further – in a mist squeezing space as glass box roof and chill slippery wall.
Jesień. Słowa [...] (Koehler 2019a: 83)	Fall. Words [...] (trans. E.B.)

Like the metonymy of change, the wind forces its way into Koehler’s poetry in order to – as we remember – “cu[t] / these words // into syllables”, but also in order for them to be audible due to sonic orchestration. As a result, some poems both look and sound as if they really were impacted by the wind:

Mowa nie zniesie Tego: w bezlistne drzewa;	Speech won’t bear it: into leafless trees;
w bezlitosne ramiona śmierci. Łąki schodzą się tam na spotkanie (Koehler 2019a: 99)	into merciless arms of death. Meadows come there to meet (trans. E.B.)

“Speech won’t bear / it”, and thus, Koehler operates with phonetic instrumentation beyond the order of the statement. Sometimes he puts next to each other onomatopoeic words that enrich the irregular sound of his poetry, e.g. Gentle meadow waves / bow-shaped mountains. Or:

Wiatr i życie. Lipa, zżęte łąny. Jeszcze nas Czeka	Wind and living. Linden cut down fields. We are yet To see
długie pożycie (Koehler 2019a: 66)	long co-living (trans. E.B.)

Koehler's poetry might bring about associations with Baroque traditions for one other reason: the subject matter. Indeed, similarly to Baroque creators Koehler often uses "the language of paradox", as Cleanth Brooks wrote about John Donne's poetry (Brooks 1960: 3–20), or the "rhetorics of paradox", as Jan Błoński wrote about Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński's poetry (Błoński 1967: 98–130). For Koehler, reality appears as unknowable, and the impossibility to know it is expressed by the means of aporetic language. And thus, in many poems in *Nieudana pielgrzymka*, one goes blind in the (dark) brilliance:

[...] Ślepy blask, co nie otoczy	[...] Blind the brilliance that won't surround
światłem. (Koehler 2019a: 56)	with light. (trans. E.B.)
Oczy	Eyes
zalepia blask (Koehler 2019a: 65)	glued by brilliance (trans. E.B.)

In the vastness, one becomes small:

I tak to jest:	And that's how it is
malejemy w ogromie. (Koehler 2019a: 59)	we become small in the vastness. (trans. E.B.)

In silence, one becomes deaf:

Kiedy ich cisza tłoczy się we mnie. (Koehler 2019a: 62)	When their silence crowds inside me. (trans. E.B.)
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In a conversation, one is silent:

Póki rozmawiam z Tobą, milczę, patrzę w ogień; (Koehler 2019a: 97)	While I talk with you I am silent, looking into the fire (trans. E.B.)
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In strengthening, one becomes weak:

Wiatr. Coraz więcej wiatru we włosach,  
pomału potężniejac stajesz się martwy jak

Wind. Still more wind in the hair  
slowly strengthening, you become dead

brzask nad doliną Neckaru [...] (Koehler 2019a: 79)

as dawn over the Neckar valley [...] (trans. E.B.)

...and in living, one loses life:

Kopię  
życiu  
grób.

(Koehler 2019a: 95)

I dig  
a grave  
for life.

(trans. E.B.)

As I have tried to showcase, by the means of such methods derived from Baroque, Koehler attempts to write down his own experience of the world at the threshold of the 1990s, when he radically changes his own writing style. He abandons classicism, identified with formal polish, so as to open himself up to the perspective of transforming Poland with the “brokenness” inspired by the techniques of 17th century poetry.

Simultaneously, Koehler’s choice of classicism did not mean agreeing with the cognitive crisis as described in his poetry. The poem’s main task remains in almost journalistic “arduous” reporting on what is going on in Polish reality right after the fall of Communism, one that forces the writer to undertake formal changes (“Arduous reporting / On what / Is going on”; Koehler 2019a: 55). Indebted to Baroque aesthetics, Koehler fulfills this task in an exemplary way. However, favoring classicism at the threshold of the 1990s meant that Koehler’s ambitions remained larger than simple mimetic copying, in a poetic form, the crisis that he experienced and that disoriented the subjectivity of his poems. As Ryszard Przybylski wrote, in the contemporary world, the basic task of classicism turns out to lie in finding Orpheus’s lost lyre, that is, restoring harmony to a world irrevocably devoid of this harmony. It is one thing to reproduce the crisis one experiences in poetic structure, a more difficult task turns out to consist in getting out of this crisis. This also seems to be the task Koehler gives to his classicism which, in the end, becomes directed at metaphysical space that is impossible to put into words. The still point and the egress outside the speeding earthly world turns out to lie in *logos*, towards which the author, in accordance with the title of his volume, makes a humble pilgrimage. Although these pilgrimages must, out of necessity, end in failure, they point towards the existence of harmonic space. They are directed towards the divine order, which the young poet would also like to introduce into the crisis circumstances of the Third Polish Republic, even if such an effort must end in failure.

In this sense, even though Koehler’s poetry does not represent typical engaged poetry, it is difficult not to read it as political, in which an openly conservative poet expresses his resistance towards reality that appears to him in a crisis state of chaos. Does he want a nostalgic return to the stability of the

previous system? Absolutely not, as an anti-Communist poet, he would ever agree to such an option. Still, the space of the era change he records appears to him as a space of disharmony, which also demands an intervention that would put it in order. This is where Koehler's poems meet with politics, and he engages in it from conservative positions as a proponent of such orderly arranging of reality that would be modeled after Polish, or, to put it bluntly, Sarmatian past. If the world is no longer well-formed, Koehler suggests, in order for it to be re-organized one should use forms that already exist in our tradition.

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# Is the Place of Women in Neo-Sarmatian Social Hierarchy Always Below Men? On the Example of Borderland She-Wolves in the Prose of Jacek Komuda, Andrzej Pilipiuk and Others\*

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**ABSTRACT:** The article analyzes the characters of Borderland she-wolves in the context of Neo-Sarmatian literature in the novels by such authors as Jacek Komuda or Andrzej Pilipiuk. Borderland she-wolves, inspired by the image of strong independent women living in the border lands of the Eastern part of the Commonwealth constitute an interesting element of literary Neo-Sarmatism. The study analyzes how these characters are inscribed into the hierarchy that reflects the vision of social structure created by the radical right-wing Neo-Sarmatians. Due to the ability for self-determination, which carries out the libertarian principle of self-ownership and a particular sense of honor, expressed in the obligation to fight in an open manner, worthy of a well-born person, Borderland she-wolves can take a place at the top of the social ladder, together with the Cossacks or the noblemen. This also demonstrates that it is impossible to talk about women in Neo-Sarmatian writing as about a homogeneous group. Similarly to men, they are divided into sub-groups which – depending on the features displayed by their representatives – can take up higher or lower positions in social hierarchy determined by honor and the principle of self-ownership.

**KEYWORDS:** Neo-Sarmatism, Borderland she-wolf, radical right-wing, Jacek Komuda, Andrzej Pilipiuk

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## Introduction

A night somewhere in the province, Poland of the 17th century. A furious crowd armed with torches breaks down the doors of an inn, behind which a twenty-year-old noble woman is hiding. The woman, however, puts up resistance – fighting with a saber, she cuts a road out for herself... This description summarizes a scene from Andrzej Pilipiuk's novel *Kuzynki* [*Cousins*] (Pilipiuk 2018a: 30–31). On the surface, there is nothing unusual about it. However, after taking a closer look at its context – and especially the literary genre represented by the novels it features in – it is impossible to pass it by indifferently. In the present article I would like to showcase what is unusual in the figures of Borderland she-wolves in Polish Neo-Sarmatian literature, as well as what the appearance of female characters of this kind can tell us about the authors of the novels belonging to this trend, that is, about Neo-Sarmatians.

What, however, is the aforementioned Neo-Sarmatism? In the simplest approach, this trend consists of works that, one way or another, refer to Polish nobility of the Pre-Partition period: from the 16th to the 18th century, although the authors most frequently touch upon the 17th century. According to Obremski (1995: 122), Sarmatism was the worldview<sup>1</sup> of nobility that assumed its representatives to realize the Sarmatian personal model – connecting within it land-owning (as a nobleman made his living by selling the yield of his land) and knightly (as he had to defend the Commonwealth) approaches. Both these approaches were subordinated to overriding values, namely, faith and nobility. It is worth adding that Sarmatism is a subject present over several decades of Polish academic discourse, as it has been written about by such scholars as, e.g., Janusz Maciejewski (1974)<sup>2</sup>, Jakub Niedźwiedz (2015)<sup>3</sup> or Maciej Parkitny (2018)<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, some works written about Neo-Sarmatism cannot be de-

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1 The scholar defines “worldview” as a set of convictions that, in the eye of its proponents, create a complete image of reality together with the assessments and norms connected therewith that motivate behavior of an individual (Obremski 1995: 122); the construction of a worldview may be expressed directly by its proponents or described by scholars on the basis of various sources (including written ones). In a novel, a worldview consists of what is inscribed into the given text, creating a “superimposed” order” (Eile 1973: 5), in which the author’s judgments concerning the world and reality become visible and make it possible to formulate particular postulates.

2 He believed that the Sarmatian myth (assuming that a tribe of Sarmatians arrived in the future territory of the Commonwealth in antiquity and mixed with Slavs) connected states (townspeople and nobles) and nationalities (Poles, Lithuanians, Russians), confirming their belief that they all have common ancestors. Maciejewski also assumed that the geographic location of the Commonwealth was key to the formation of Sarmatian culture, as it was situated between the East, the West and the Orient, making it possible to draw on cultural models of these three areas.

3 According to whom, Sarmatism is a creation of scholars trying to study Pre-Partition noble culture.

4 He drew attention to the fact that Sarmatism did not compete with the Enlightenment but, rather, co-existed with it, creating Enlightened Sarmatism (as a result of a conjoining between philosophy of the Enlightenment and Sarmatism), as well as Sarmatian Enlightenment (whose expression was the transposition of ideals of the Enlightenment to noble culture).

scribed as objective, such as Janusz Tazbir's (1978)<sup>5</sup>, in whose texts can be found elements of socialist propaganda, or Jacek Kowalski's (2006)<sup>6</sup>, actively engaged both in overthrowing negative myths about Sarmatism, and in maintaining positive ones.

Various authors have referred to Sarmatism in their bodies of work over the course of centuries; however, due to spatial limitations, I will focus on contemporary references to this culture. The phenomenon has been studied by Paweł Bohuszewicz, who states that it is “a reference to Sarmatian cultural formation whose aim is to construct one's own and collective identity” (Bohuszewicz 2011: 99), and that “[Neo-Sarmatism – S. T.] constitutes a conscious choice of inscribing the action one undertakes into a system of signs referring to noble cultural heritage” (Bohuszewicz 2011: 77). In their works, Neo-Sarmatians, including the authors of the texts to be analyzed herein, use those elements of Sarmatian cultural formation they have chosen themselves – and the way they do so is not accidental. Indeed, these are fragments of noble culture that are, above all, particularly close to the authors (that is, correspond to their worldview – to be discussed in more detail later in the present article). Against the backdrop of specific works, the audience (as well as the creators) can build (or perhaps: strengthen) their own identities, based on imaginary visions concerning Sarmatian nobility.

I have already mentioned Borderland she-wolves, and thus, it would be necessary to explain who they were. It is Józef Apolinary Rolle (1883) who was responsible for creating the myth of the Borderland woman: a noblewoman who, during the existence of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, lives in the vicinity of troubled, war-torn South-Eastern borders of the Commonwealth. According to Rolle, a she-wolf was supposedly vastly different from women coming from other territories – with regard to both her mental and physical aspects. As Maria Korybut-Marciniak (2023: 179) points out, in Rolle's oeuvre Borderland she-wolves are masculinized women, endowed with characteristics seen as masculine, among which the scholar lists: strength, independence, ability to make one's own decisions, ability to fight and ride horses, or cruelty. Therefore, due to the dangers that the Borderlands were rich in, the she-wolves were supposed to be women who openly enter masculine social roles while, simultaneously, not losing their femininity. This type of a heroine is also attractive to contemporary Neo-Sarmatian creators.

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5 Tazbir wrote that Sarmatism was the peak form of defense of the political system of the Commonwealth (noble democracy, in which nobility enjoys numerous privileges, such as the possibility of electing the monarch), the representatives of noble culture as such were supposedly xenophobically closed towards all ideas coming from the abroad or attempts at introducing any kinds of changes.

6 He considered “Sarmatian” to denote everything that surrounded a nobleman during the existence of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: thus, an expression of *sarmackość* (as he refers to Sarmatism) was art, music, literature, architecture, clothes, weapons and all other things one could encounter in Poland and Lithuania.

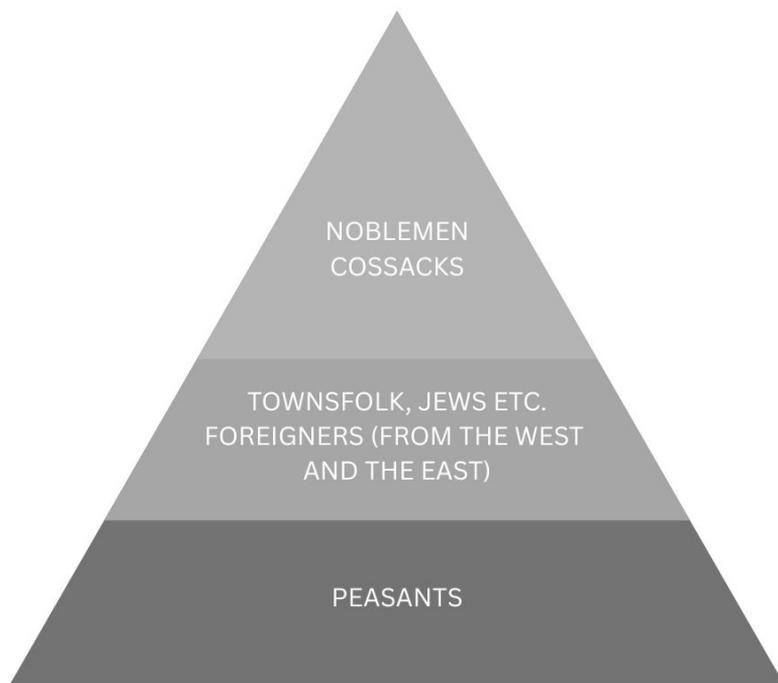
## The Hierarchic Nature of Society in Neo-Sarmatian Radical Right-Wing Narratives

There is no doubt that Neo-Sarmatism is a diverse trend. This is pointed out by Paweł Bohuszewicz (2021: 79), who introduces a two-level division of the phenomenon. Firstly, it could be divided into two large and non-competing sets: one post-colonial<sup>7</sup> and one right-wing. Subsequently, at a lower level, the trend would be divided into further sub-sets (Bohuszewicz lists, e.g., anarchic Neo-Sarmatism) which are not permanently assigned to overriding categories, and can enter into relations with any of the two overriding sets (that is, some of the works belonging to a given sub-set can be seen as belonging to right-wing Neo-Sarmatism, while some others – to the postcolonial one). It is also worth noting that these groups are motivated by political reasons (that is, they are based on worldviews inscribed into particular texts of Neo-Sarmatian literature). The works I am analyzing in my article all belong to a trend I would call radical right-wing Neo-Sarmatism (which, obviously, is included into a larger set, namely, right-wing Neo-Sarmatism). It would be closely connected with the political formation of the radical right. In its description I will draw on the conclusions made by Leszek Szczegółła (2020: 73–86), Dominika Kasprówicz (2017: 17–67) and Tomasz Bojarowicz (2013: 53). These scholars note that the set of ideas propagated by groups of the radical right may appear – when one looks from the outside of this worldview – inconsistent, which results from them drawing on the achievements of other political trends. These borrowed ideas will be subordinated to achieving a certain political goal<sup>8</sup>. The writers creating within the trend under discussion will borrow certain ideas from libertarian thought (the principle of self-determination, considering individual liberty to be the overriding value), reactionary thought (the need to re-create what had already stopped functioning but used to be of value – in the case

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7 There is a debate in Poland concerning whether one can talk about post-dependency, that is, legacy from the period of dependency from partitioning countries or the USSR (Gosk 2014), or about post-colonialism. Ewa Thompson (2011) favors the latter term, arguing that although the situation of Poland was different than in the case of African or Asian countries (e.g. there was no sea barrier separating the colonized from the colonizer; the national language was retained; the leaders ruling on behalf of foreign empires were of Polish origin, etc.), given the overall mechanisms (loss of prestige in the international arena; decisions concerning the country being made outside its borders and benefiting not the citizens, but foreign empires; cultural and economic collapse), one should consider that we are dealing here with post-colonial relations. In the context of noble culture, Thompson (2011: 301) additionally states that “the originality of Polish culture is based on the fact that over two centuries ago what was called, in brief, ‘Sarmatism’ was ‘raped’ by stronger neighbors and, despite this fact, would constantly be revived in texts literary and non-literary, and in social life. This originality becomes completely blurred if we put it in the shallow waters of ‘dependency’”.

8 As it seems, it would consist in re-creating the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: however, not in reality as such, but, rather, in the minds of people engaged in this trend. They would subsequently be able to create new nobility – elite of Polish society, based on ideas drawn from noble culture. Jacek Komuda mentions the project of creating new nobility in one of his interviews (Księski 2009); I also had an opportunity to talk about this with Michał Mochocki, one of the creators of the *Dzikie Pola* RPG, during our meeting in March 2025.



**Picture 1:** Social groups in the radical right-wing Neo-Sarmatian writing. Source: designed by S.T.

of Neo-Sarmatism, this is nobility culture) or conservative one (attachment to a hierarchical structure of society)<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, as can be noticed, the worldview of radical Neo-Sarmatians will be a conflagration of consciously chosen ideas derived from various political trends, connected by a common denominator: achieving a particular goal.

For the purposes of my article, the last of the aforementioned elements included in the radical right-wing Neo-Sarmatian discourse, that is, attachment to social hierarchy, will be the most significant. An analysis of texts of such authors as Jacek Komuda (2010, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2017), Jacek Pilipiuk (2018a, 2018b, 2018c), Darosław Toruń (1998) and an RPG manual written by Jacek Komuda, Michał Mochocki and Artur Machlowski (2008) yields the conclusion that the radical right-wing Neo-Sarmatians divide society in the constructed presented worlds into three categories, as illustrated by the image above (Picture 1.)<sup>10</sup>:

9 Following Bojarowicz (2013: 53), I divide the Polish right into three main currents: conservative, reactionary and radical. Moreover, as Krystyna Skarżyńska (2011: 86) points out, liberalism can take on both a left-wing and a right-wing shape – the latter can be termed neo-liberalism or right-wing libertarianism – and thus it should also be included as a fourth right-wing current.

10 It is worth noting that social hierarchy of modern-period Poland was different from those found in Western Europe. In Poland, the entire noble state was equal. There were no internal divisions (there were, e.g., no titles), nor a division into nobility and aristocracy.

The topmost layer of the hierarchy consists of Polish noblemen and Cossacks, that is, groups privileged from the point of view of the writers. This is where (almost) all protagonists of Neo-Sarmatian works come from, it is from their perspective that the reader gets to know the Commonwealth, and, as follows, it is on the basis of their experiences, convictions and actions the author and the audience have the possibility to construct their identity – and, as I have already mentioned, Neo-Sarmatism consists precisely in creating one's own and collective identity. The very bottom of this imagined social ladder of the radical right-wing Neo-Sarmatians is occupied by peasants, fully dependent on the higher social strata. Their place in social hierarchy is depicted well in the aforementioned RPG manual (Komuda et al. 2008: 206). The description of a “Polish peasant” contained there was put – after the creators' full consideration, as emphasized in the dehumanizing description – not in the chapter dedicated to the peoples inhabiting the Commonwealth, but in the one describing beasts. In the hierarchy of beings a peasant is, thus, equal to a boar or a wolf. Between these two categories there is, in turn, space for other inhabitants of the Commonwealth (Jews, townsfolk, soldiers, robbers, craftsmen) and, significantly, foreigners, regardless of their social standing – in the eyes of the Neo-Sarmatians people from outside the borders cannot measure up to a Polish nobleman, as expressed by Komuda (2011c: 192–193) in his descriptions of Polish and foreign inns in the short story *Nobile Verbum*<sup>11</sup>, where statements concerning the cowardly and duplicitous nature of foreign nobility are juxtaposed with the image of Polish nobles – open, honest and happy. Therefore, there can be no doubt that they should be placed equally with other inhabitants of the Commonwealth, showcasing the same negative features which differentiate a nobleman from someone unworthy. Both these groups are held in equal contempt by the noble protagonists of Neo-Sarmatian works.

It is worth noting that the social hierarchy described above does not reflect its actual state – for instance, in the actual Commonwealth the Cossacks were not equal to the nobility. One should look for the causes of disorder in reflecting historical reality in the genre of the works by the aforementioned Neo-Sarmatians. Indeed, their works are not historical novels. Rather, they realize a conceit that Teodor Parnicki referred to as historical fantasy literature (Uniłowski 1991) – in contrast to the former, within the latter convention the author does not need to aim for the novel to be subordinate to knowledge derived from historical sources. In a historical novel, history is superior to literature, while in a historical fantasy novel this relation is reversed: literature begins to process history, artistic concerns become the most important (rather than fidelity to sources), which leads to emphasizing the fictional nature of the presented world. Such a device is significant for Neo-Sarmatians, as it makes it possible for them to saturate the novels with their own worldview. To add

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11 The title means literally “a noble's word”, that is, a promise made by a nobleman in which he refers to his social status that obliges him to keep his promise.

meanings that make it possible to introduce the project of forming collective consciousness of the audience on the basis of Sarmatian *universum* that is not supposed to reflect historical truth as much as evoke particular impressions and emotions in the reader. Indeed, as mentioned by Eile (1973: 165–166), creating appropriate emotional reactions in the reader is much more efficient than using intellectual arguments. To put it simply: if the writer wants to influence the reader, showing a simplified social hierarchy<sup>12</sup> that will strongly influence the emotional sphere will be more helpful than depicting a complicated structure that would faithfully render current historical knowledge. The latter could, in fact, only damage the Neo-Sarmatian identity project: it would cause the simple and clear message to be blurred by facts, which are rarely black-and-white. Thus, the novel's message would be weakened.

### **Initial Assessment of the Position of Women in the Writing of Radical Right-Wing Neo-Sarmatians**

When describing the figure of Lisowski, one of the protagonists of Jacek Komuda's *Samozwaniec. Moskiewska ladacznica* [*The Pretender. Moscow Harlot*], Dawid Kopa writes:

As a Polish noble, Lisowski has no respect for women regardless of their social background. This is a broader principle, appearing not only in *Samozwaniec. Moskiewska ladacznica*, but becoming a characteristic feature of the entire presented world of Komuda's body of work based on Old Polish motifs (Kopa 2021a: 116).

He suggests that misogyny is rooted in the Sarmatian formation, while Neo-Sarmatians – trying to re-create it – become, inevitably, spokesmen of the patriarchal order which discriminates women. However, that is not true. Arsenia, the protagonist of the novel on which Kopa bases his reflections, similarly to other women in the novels under discussion: Konstancja Dwernicka, jilted at the altar (Komuda 2007) or the noblewoman Eufrozyna, kidnapped at the order of her own brothers (Komuda 2012) can be placed at the middle rung within the abovementioned social hierarchy, as they are dependent on male noble characters, subordinated to them, they are objects, rather than subjects of the plot. It is similar in the case of other women characters. As pointed out by Katarzyna Mróz (2019: 30), in Komuda's prose it is also possible to find women characters who appear liberated – mainly in the sexual sphere – and who, despite enjoying wielding apparent power over other characters are, in fact, puppets of other men. This pertains to the case of Eugenia, depicted in the novel *Bohun*, who, at the order of her principal, controls one of the two protagonists: Dantez. As the scholar points out, this manner of depicting women

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<sup>12</sup> These attempts at causing an emotional reaction in the audience can be seen, for instance, in equating a peasant with a beast.

characters was supposed to differentiate Komuda's body of work from Henryk Sienkiewicz's<sup>13</sup> writing, wherein a considerable majority of women characters is constructed as "passive objects of masculine feelings" (Mróz 2019: 31). In Neo-Sarmatian works, there can also be found women whose position is even lower, equal to a peasant, and thus, to a beast. One of those is Ewa Ligęzianka, sold into Tatar slavery by a nobleman (Komuda 2011c: 314–315). Circassian and Tatar women can also be counted in this category: they are described as game, and thus, similarly to a peasant, put into the same order as fauna (Toruń 1998: 79). It seems that Kopa also wrote about women at this rung of hierarchy when he described women characters as completely dependent on men. This dependence would be expressed mainly through reducing women only to their bodily sphere, while subordination to men is mainly expressed in bed. At this level of social structure, even such an action as raping a woman results not from lust as much as from wanting to influence her male guardian<sup>14</sup>. It could thus seem that the Sarmatian world created by Neo-Sarmatians is a strictly masculine space in which there is no space for women, or that the place of women therein is entirely dependent on a man's will. However, this is not true, as evidenced by the figures of Borderland she-wolves.

### **Borderland She-Wolves in the Writing of Radical Right-Wing Neo-Sarmatians**

The fact that Neo-Sarmatian world is not purely masculine was pointed out by women scholars. One of them is Aldona Kobus (2015: 287):

Unfortunately, all women characters also display the tendency to dying, being used instrumentally as motivation for the protagonist's further activities, so although Komuda considerably broadens the framework of Sarmatism by departing from the model of homosocial formation (mas-

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13 He was a 19th century writer of historical literature who put the action of some of his most important works: a *Trilogy* of the novels *Ogniem i mieczem*, *Potop* and *Pan Wołodyjowski* [*With Fire and Sword*, *The Deluge*, and *Sir Michael*] in the 17th century. To this day *Potop* remains on the list of required school reading, while the film adaptations of these books are regularly shown on Polish TV. Therefore, Sienkiewicz is the best known Polish writer who set his works at the time of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. However, the relationship between him and Komuda is complicated. On the one hand (as has been mentioned), the contemporary writer wants to differentiate himself from the author of *The Trilogy*, but, on the other, his writing evidences clear inspiration with Sienkiewicz's body of work, such as the repeatability of certain plot schemes, interest in similar themes – e.g. the Cossack wars – or even the manner of constructing the characters' utterances. The reasons for these similarities can be seen in the fact that when building his novels, Komuda extremely frequently reaches for borrowings and references to works important for Polish culture (Szagun 2019). Thus, Komuda remains under Sienkiewicz's strong influence; even in the situations where he seems to argue with his predecessor, he is unable to liberate himself from the baggage of associations, motifs and expressions connected with writing about the 17th century left by the author of *The Trilogy* (Bujnicki 2017: 321).

14 And thus downgrading a woman to the level of an object is complete – as she is not even the person whom rape as such is supposed to hurt – this action is aimed against another man.

culine ties of brotherhood) and presenting models of female Sarmatism, this cannot be treated as emancipating – suffice it to mention that aforementioned noble women carry out a typically masculine model of behaviors, sometimes even to a better effect than men (Konstancja’s brothers), while not losing their femininity and sexual attractiveness.

She notices what I have written about in the earlier part of this text, namely, objective treatment of some women characters. She aptly points out that by allowing women to enter masculine roles, Komuda opens the Neo-Sarmatian vision of the world towards women characters. Matylda Zatorska (2016: 81) goes a step further: noting the hierarchy of characters in Neo-Sarmatian writing, she states that there is no one way of presenting women and distinguishes between two different types of women characters:

women characters in Komuda’s historical prose are not literary creations that can be found in historical novels that are herstories, focusing on the stories of women and their participation in history. In a way, the dark, adventurous vision of 17th century Commonwealth forces one to present women only in two roles – perpetrators or victims of violence. The former group is made of battleaxes, steppe she-wolves and avengers. The latter consists of young women who are “objects” of matrimonial trade, oppressed widows, mistreated wives and women dying as a result of quarrels and wars started by men [...] Moreover, [Komuda] presents figures of women absent from common consciousness, strong and independent in difficult social and political circumstances. This is why the Commonwealth described by Komuda cannot be called exclusively “masculine”.

However, it seems that the criterion of violence is not the best possible choice. Indeed, its use flattens the Neo-Sarmatian project to a simple, one could say: primal structure, in which social relations are determined by the characters’ capability to enforce their will on the others: the rule of the stronger over the weaker. Despite all that, the radical right-wing Neo-Sarmatism is more complex and cannot be reduced to one principle.

It is worth going back to what I have written in the introduction about the political borrowings of the radical right. As I have mentioned, the representatives of this trend draw on liberalism. One of the main pillars of this thought is the principle of self-ownership. Liberals are convinced that every person is the owner of themselves, as well as of what they have been able to obtain by the means of their own work (Hankus 2017: 12). This works well with the Neo-Sarmatian conviction regarding the superiority of liberty as the most important value, as discussed by Paweł Bohuszewicz (2023: 107). He points out that for the Neo-Sarmatians, liberty is not a simple reconstruction of the 17th

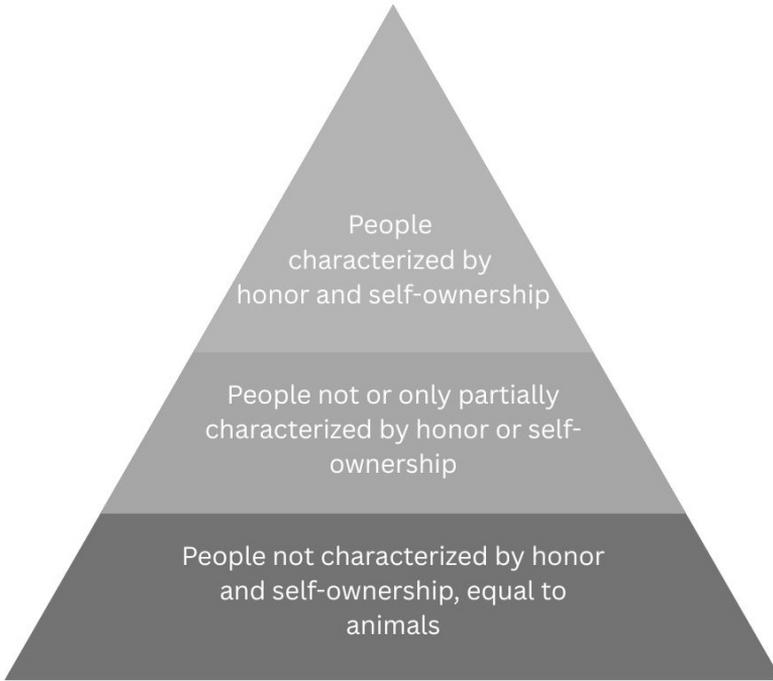
century noble idea of “golden liberty”<sup>15</sup>. In the Old Polish period, this value was connected with another one: concord, which was supposed to prevent negative effects of excessive individualism. In Neo-Sarmatism there is no latter virtue, and, as a result, fetishization of liberty manifests itself in the possibility of self-determination regardless the well-being of not only the remaining society, but also state, church or social institutions. This part of radical right-wing Neo-Sarmatian worldview is borrowed from libertarianism, does not result from a reactionary idea, which is why it takes on such a shape. Indeed, reactionism assumes restoration of old values in their original form (Skarżyński 1998: 33). Some features of reactionary restoration of old values can be noticed in the Neo-Sarmatian belief concerning, among other, non-honorable nature of solving conflicts in an insidious way. Intriguing against one’s enemy, using poison, attacking a foe from behind or refusing a one-on-one duel are behaviors unworthy of a nobleman, behaviors utilized by people from the lower rungs of social hierarchy. Killing an opponent not in an honest duel but, for example, through assassination is a “disgraceful and unworthy” way, and if a nobleman does so, it makes him into an “ordinary bandit” (Toruń 1998: 128). It seems that the two aforementioned features: self-ownership and the ability to solve conflicts in an honorable way – that is, open, non-insidious – will differentiate a noble from someone of an inferior condition in the eyes of Neo-Sarmatians, and thus, will constitute a differentiation between the first rung of the social ladder and the lower ones. Therefore, these relations would appear the following way (Picture 2).

It is also worth noting that, as has been mentioned, in Krzysztof Obremski’s approach, Sarmatism as a worldview was supposed to be characterized by, among others, connecting the attitude of a knight and of a landowner. Based on the picture above it is easy to notice that the division of society conducted by right-wing Neo-Sarmatians is based only on knightly attitude. The lack of appreciation for the landowner attitude in texts is a good showcase of the selective nature of Neo-Sarmatian identity project and of the tendency of the radical right to draw inspiration from history in a fragmentary way. Thus, it will not be a faithful recreation of 17th century social hierarchy, but, rather, an attempt at creating it anew, in a way adjusted to current social and political aspirations of the radical right.

Which category holds a spot for Borderland she-wolves? Were we to follow Paweł Bohuszewicz’s (2023: 108) reflection, it should be said that all women will be subordinated to noblemen, as Bohuszewicz notes that between the two aforementioned groups there occurs a relation of lordliness (a term Bohuszewicz derives from Poblócki’s *Chamstwo* [*The Rabble*]) – and thus, subordination of the former to the latter. However, as has been mentioned, Matylda Zatorska

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15 Thus, an attempt at re-introducing freedoms and privileges enjoyed by the Polish and Lithuanian nobility, e.g. inviolability as pertains to person and property, religious freedom, the ability of a single parliament member to veto decisions made during a *Sejm*’s sitting, etc.



**Picture 2:** Features of particular human categories according to radical right-wing Neo-Sarmatians. Source: designed by S.T.

(2016: 81) notices that women in Neo-Sarmatism cannot be treated as a homogeneous group. According to the scholar, the fair sex can be divided into sub-groups, and Neo-Sarmatians approach each of those in a different manner. It seems that an appropriate criterion for differentiating between particular women’s sub-groups would be the one that divides the entire society and which was presented above. Therefore, there are women in Neo-Sarmatian writing to whom the relation of lordliness applies: they are subordinated to noblemen simply due to the fact that they are at a lower rung of social ladder. There are, however, also such women who do not concede to men and do not enter subordinate relationships with them (or even, it is men who become subordinated to those women). These are the women who are their own mistresses (and thus, the principle of self-ownership pertains to them) and who can face their enemies in an open conflict in a worthy way.

It seems that this is what the Borderland she-wolves are. There is one more feature that sets them apart from other women characters. As Dawid Kopa (2021b: 208) puts it, “in the basket of similarities between Sienkiewicz and Komuda there is also their reserved attitude towards women portrayed in their narratives”. However, this attitude changes when it comes to the she-wolves, as they are either presented in a neutral manner (as Anna Łahodowska, an episodic character in *Diabeł łańcucki* [*The Łańcut Devil*]) or even portrayed

in a way that inclines the reader to identify with their fate, as is the case of Eufrozyna, the protagonist of *Wilczyca* [*She-Wolf*]. Her actions, such as facing overwhelming enemy forces and overcoming adversities are supposed to awe the reader, resulting in an appropriate emotional reaction – which, as Eile had it, is key to influencing the reader and to the author's presenting the worldview contained in the novel. The narrative of *Wilczyca* is conducted in such a way that a reader would first try to understand Eufrozyna's motivation, then "root" for her when she overcomes subsequent obstacles appearing in her way as the plot unravels. Indeed, in this short story the aforementioned distance of the author towards the characters can be felt not towards the eponymous heroine, but towards male characters who attempt to take away an escorted prisoner in infamy from her or avenge themselves on her for (real and imagined) harm.

A closer look ought to be taken at those women placed at the top of social hierarchy. Five examples can be listed (four from literature and one from an RPG), some of those have already been mentioned:

1. Konstancja Dwernicka (*Diabeł łańcucki*): this character is actually half a Borderland she-wolf, and half – a typical noblewoman, and depending on the needs of the plot at the given moment she can display features of the highest societal category: fight with sabers, reject a candidate for her husband, decide the fate of the protagonist, Jacek Dydyński – as it is for her sake that he changes sides in the conflict between the Dwernicki family and the eponymous devil; or features of the medium stratum, becoming, in the end, entirely subordinated to Jacek, who finally leaves her at the altar (Komuda 2007).
2. Anna Łahodowska (*Diabeł łańcucki*): she leads during a foray into church property, trying to force friars to pay baksheesh, and during this event, fights with one of the novel's protagonists, Gedeon. Simultaneously, she does not allow for the law to limit her personal liberty, as the narrator mentions – she has already received several sentences (Komuda 2007: 3–6).
3. Eufrozyna Gintowt (*Wilczyca*): a noblewoman who swore revenge on the nobleman Białoskórski. The man must bow to her will, as he becomes her prisoner. What is more, even when Białoskórski saves Eufrozyna's life, she does not give up on her revenge. She participates in fights three times, succumbing only to Jacek Dydyński, who is also the protagonist of several of Komuda's novels and short stories. However, it should be noted that he does not take the prisoner from her only by means of physical violence. Instead, he makes different attempts, including via blackmail, at convincing Gintowt to agree to cede Białoskórski to him – in this way, the author emphasizes how important the will of Eufrozyna herself is (Komuda 2011d: 7–90).
4. Stanisława Kruszewska (*Kuzynki*): a Polish noblewoman born in the 17th century who, due to being initiated into alchemical arts is able to live until the 21st century. As has been mentioned in the introduction, unwilling to subordinate to the will of her husband who sold her to a slave trader, she killed him in a fight; she was also able to cut out her way to freedom

through a crowd of peasants (Pilipiuk 2018a: 17–18, 30–31). As Aleksandra Kacianowska (2017: 429) notes, although Stanisława cares for people who work for her in order to rebuild her family fortune, she does so only due to her desire for profit, taking into account mainly her own comfort. This demonstrates her status in the imaginary Neo-Sarmatian social hierarchy as high enough for her to be able to direct the actions of other people (including men).

5. Borderland She-Wolf: is one of the classes of characters available to players in the *Dzikie Pola* [*Wild Fields*] RPG. In the description of this class, the authors highlight the independence of she-wolves, referring, among others, to historical Anna Łahodowska, who was the model of the character described above, and to their military abilities and courage: taking part in battles and forays (Komuda 2008: 24).

The features presented above: bravery, causing the she-wolves to solve conflicts in an open way, and the ability to self-determine, which realizes the principle of self-ownership, are, on the one hand, in accordance with the myth of a Borderland woman, present in literature since the 19th century (Korybut-Marciniak 2023: 179), while, on the other, they make it possible to put the she-wolves at the top of the Neo-Sarmatian social ladder. They will find themselves there between the Cossacks and the noblemen of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, as a third category of characters who can “look at people of baser condition from above” (Komuda 2008: 165).

## Conclusion

In radical right-wing Neo-Sarmatian writing the Borderland she-wolves are these characters who are put in the highest position in the social hierarchy among women – equal to noblemen. These women are characterized by the same two features as noblemen or Cossacks. They are, thus, capable of self-determination and of solving conflicts in an open, and, therefore, honorable way.

In the context of the idea of liberty it is worth noting that their presence in this kind of literature can be interpreted as a manifestation of Neo-Sarmatian individualism, as mentioned by Bohuszewicz. In the eyes of radical right-wing Neo-Sarmatians, these women, capable of fighting for and defending their self-ownership in a way worthy of a nobleman, become equal to men. Simultaneously, in this way, the creators emphasize the role of social hierarchy – indeed, the aim of she-wolves is to find their place at its highest rung.

To conclude, Borderland she-wolves in Neo-Sarmatian literature are complex characters; although based in noble tradition, they stand out due to their strong, independent character and the ability for self-determination. They constitute a kind of a liberated archetype of female power which, while still fitting within Neo-Sarmatian social hierarchy, offers a new, more dynamic and complex vision of women than peasant, townswomen, or ordinary noblewomen within the Neo-Sarmatian image of the world.

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## On the Margins of Category. Liberty as Cooperation in a Non-Prototypical Neo-Sarmatian Novel\*

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**ABSTRACT:** The article contains an analysis of the book series *Diabtu ogarek* [*Candle-End for the Devil*] by Konrad T. Lewandowski. Its main goal is to show that the basic variety of Neo-Sarmatism, that is, right-wing Neo-Sarmatism, is not the only one, as there is a certain hidden potentiality in Sarmatism, realized by the novels under discussion. Against right-wing Neo-Sarmatism – resentimental (towards the broadly understood modernity), exclusive (towards subordinated groups, not included in Neo-Sarmatism) and patriarchal (“lordly”) – Lewandowski situates a world that can be termed as democratic in the broadest sense of the notion of democracy as extended to earthly and non-earthly beings, human and non-human ones, as well as regulating relations within the human world.

**KEYWORDS:** Neo-Sarmatism, Konrad T. Lewandowski, resentment, lordliness, democracy

The latest history of Polish culture begins after 1989. That year saw the transformation which made it possible for Poland to transition from a communist system to a liberal capitalist democracy. The entrance of Polish culture into the orbit of influence of values produced by said democracy (universalism, individualism, secularism, consumerism...) met with resistance on the part of conservative communities, experiencing strong nostalgia for Polishness “in its traditional version, unmodified by the years of Communism” (Matyja 2009: 77).

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The interest of the present text consists in those conservatives for whom the basic reference point consists in political and cultural traditions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (the so-called First Polish Republic). It existed from 1569 (the Union of Lublin) until 1795, when the Third Partition of Poland took place, resulting in the disappearance of the Polish state from European maps. For the contemporary conservatives, the initial period of the First Polish Republic is the time of the greatest splendor of their country: one of enormous territory (of almost 1 million square kilometers), almost devoid of cities, for most of its existence (especially in the 16th and the first half of 17th century) economically powerful and politically well functioning. In 1795, as a result of a change in political situation, as well as an internal crisis, this powerful organism ceases to exist, becoming a natural fodder for cultural nostalgia, which, in fact, continues throughout the entire existence of modern Polish culture<sup>1</sup>.

While positive references to noble culture (as constitutive for the First Polish Republic) were possible in the communist era (cf. Czaplinski 2011), they were definitely made difficult due to being contradictory to the official state ideology, which appreciated economically and culturally subordinate classes. Communist officials inscribed the culture of the First Polish Republic into the framework of Marxist theory, according to which past society could be divided into two classes: on the one hand, the nobility and the clergy, that is, the holders of the means of production and capital, and, on the other, peasantry and the townsfolk, or the exploited state (Walas 2003: 34). According to this social ontology and the valuation inscribed within it, when researching the underprivileged strata, one needed to do them justice, hence the strong presence of the plebeian strata in the literary and cultural studies of the Communist era<sup>2</sup>.

The breakthrough came in 1989: due to the agreement between representatives of the opposition and the Communist government, the “round table” talks took place, followed by partly free elections to the Sejm and the Senate, in which the Solidarity opposition achieved a vast victory. The cultural reaction to these political changes was the beginning of the process of re-gaining heritage, as Teresa Walas (2003) referred to it. One of the elements of the past that the phenomenon called Neo-Sarmatism attempts to reconstitute in these new circumstances is the cultural heritage of Polish nobility. This restitution takes place in the circumstances of the new economic reality, leading to complications described by the notion of “external asynchrony”, used by Teresa Walas. It consists in “a discord between the general wish to recover the values sup-

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1 The latest text to activate this nostalgia is Jacek Komuda’s book *Upadek. Jak straciliśmy pierwszą Rzeczpospolitą* [*The Downfall. How We Lost the First Polish Republic*] (2025). On society, culture and politics of the Commonwealth since the emergence of the Polish-Lithuanian Union until its downfall, see Augustyniak 2015. On the downfall of the Commonwealth, see Topolski 2015.

2 An example can be found in the career of the so-called “Sowizdrzał literature”, which included texts written by plebeian underprivileged strata supposedly in an act of rebellion against the values preferred by the nobility. Cf. Grzeszczuk 1970, 1985; Ziomek 1954. For critical reflection regarding studies on Old Polish literature as inspired by Marxism, see Wojtowicz 2010.

posedly taken away by the Communism, and the opportunities provided by the free world, containing proposals sometimes considerably distant from those expectations” (Walas 2003: 147). This leads to the emergence of resentment, particularly visible in the brand of Neo-Sarmatism particular to the intelligentsia, that is, the 1990s publications in such journals as “Frona”, “Arcana”, “Debata”, among which the first place needs to be given to Krzysztof Koehler’s texts (e.g. Koehler 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1996), but also in subsequent essayist books from the turn of the 20th and the 21st century, or from the 21st century, for example, those by Jacek Kowalski (2000, 2006, 2008, 2016) or Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, the author of *Samuel Zborowski* (2010) and *Reytan* (2013). Pop cultural in their essence, Neo-Sarmatian novels are also marked by particular anti-modern and anti-liberal resentment. In an earlier article on this subject I wrote:

Neo-Sarmatian novel is a form of fictional narrative prose whose presented world is an artistic representation of the 17th century Polish Commonwealth. This representation is modeled according to the basic assumption that the reality it refers to was structured according to [social – P. B.] states, out of which the most important and the only one worth of depicting was the noble state, which had created its own culture, contemporarily referred to as “Sarmatian” culture. Hence the decision to discuss Neo-Sarmatism, despite the awareness of all issues connected both to the factual nature of Sarmatism as such, and to the meanings inscribed into the “neo-” prefix (Bohuszewicz 2023: 104).

Among its representatives there are Jacek Komuda, Rafał Dębski, Maciej Liziniewicz, Konrad T. Lewandowski, Jacek Piekara – writers whose novels and short stories are published by the company Fabryka Słów. The previous statements require some follow-ups. To begin with, not all novels concerning 17th century nobility and referring to a Sarmatian worldview can be termed Neo-Sarmatian. For instance, we would not refer this way to Tomasz Jurasz’s novel *Karoca* [*The Carriage*] (2001) (its protagonists is a 17th century noblewoman, Anna Alojza, widow of the *hetman* Jan Karol Chodkiewicz, who escapes from endangered Ostróg with the court) or the novel cycle about Kacper Ryx by Mariusz Wollny (2007, 2012), in which, despite the clear presence of the nobility, the protagonist is a student of town origin (although, significantly, Kacper becomes ennobled in the fourth volume, which formally makes him a nobleman). Last but not least, the novel cycle *Silva Rerum* by Lithuanian writer Kristina Sabaliauskaitė (2020–2022) would not be termed Neo-Sarmatian, either. Although the story takes place in the 17th century and concerns a noble family, the novel puts in motion codes particular to high culture: it is a multi-faceted family saga, focused on detailed analyses of “internal” adventures of its characters, among which women dominate, and men do not act in a prototypically Sarmatian way. Juxtaposing novels by the authors published

by Fabryka Słów with the aforementioned texts makes it possible to clarify the definition of a prototypical Neo-Sarmatian novel. Thus, it would be a longer narrative / fictional form, belonging to pop culture, most frequently focused on one storyline and most frequently, a part of a longer cycle, so far only written by men and read, above all, also by men<sup>3</sup>. These novels belong to “predicate” rather than “subject” literature (Todorov 1973). In predicate literature, a two-fold reduction occurs: “firstly, the reduction of the subjectivity of the subject, making it a simple pretext for performing an activity. X kidnaps Y because he is violent, but his violence as a feature of ‘personality’ has only functional character – it facilitates the kidnapping” (Bohuszewicz 2009: 82); secondly, the reduction of the events presented to those which are unusual, adventurous, which tear apart the threads of the everyday, usual existence by the violence of the Happening (Bohuszewicz 2009: 83)<sup>4</sup>. The protagonists of these novels are always men, usually belonging to moderately wealthy nobility, or outlaws, still of noble origin. However, it seems that what is the most specific for this group of texts concerns the ideological plane.

For the purposes of the present text, it suffices to define ideology in a standard manner, that is, as the worldview expressed in the novel which is presented as “natural” and “right” also for the extra-literary world. As Louis Althusser put it in a much quoted fragment of *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*:

For it is characteristic of ideology to impose self-evident facts as self-evident facts (without in the least seeming to, since they are “self-evident”) which we cannot not recognize and before which we have the inevitable and eminently natural reaction of exclaiming (aloud or in “the silence of consciousness”): “That’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true!” (Althusser 2014: 189).

In my opinion, a distinctive feature of Neo-Sarmatian novel consists in ideological naturalization of three values: liberty, masculinity and lordliness (Bo-

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3 In reference to Stanisław Krawczyk’s research (see Krawczyk 2022), Agnieszka Urbańczyk shows that Polish fantasy has created a fairly particular subculture, whose symbol is a “kuc” (pony) – a young man with a libertine worldview (Urbańczyk 2021: 268–269) (the metaphor derives from long hair bound in a tail). The validity of this stereotype is confirmed by Tomasz Kołodziejczak, who characterizes a typical representative of this subculture in the following way: “Age: 12–22 years. Gender: man, youth, page (depending on age and experience). Place of residence: city or Warsaw. Music: heavy, uneasy and unpleasant. Reading: speculative fiction, fantasy rather than sf. Favorite beverage: beer. Worldview: liberal (leave me the heck alone). Attitude to religion: indifferent (leave me the heck alone). Attitude to politics: not interested (you also leave me the heck alone). Dressed: carelessly, sometimes with military elements or accessories out of natural materials. Attitude to hygiene: see previous brackets. Additional hobbies: history and/or computers and/or paranormal phenomena. Women: OK, as long as they do not disturb him” (cyt. za: Urbańczyk 2021: 269).

4 The most concise definition of the Happening is provided by Michał Paweł Markowski: “When what happens happens, nothing is as it was and nothing will be the way we thought it would be” (Markowski 2001: 23).

huszewicz 2023: 107–109). The liberty is conceived of here in a particular “libertarian” manner: as entirely uninhibited potential to realize one’s urges and desires, giving in to one’s emotions and the easiness of expressing violent affects. Hence the considerable presence of scenes depicting the characters raging, becoming drunk and overeating, raping and fighting<sup>5</sup>. Although liberty was also the foundation of the Sarmatian (noble) worldview, it is not difficult to notice that Neo-Sarmatians have a particular conception thereof. For a 16th or 17th century nobleman liberty should not be a self-standing value, as texts articulating noble ideology drew a close connection between liberty and other values, such as harmony (*concordia*) (cf. Grzeškowiak-Krwawicz 2021), or it was subordinated to the law, treated as a guarantee of liberty. Neo-Sarmatians refer to Sarmatian liberty, while cutting it off from other values that functioned in Poland of yesteryear as “valves” of a kind, providing safeguard against liberty transforming into wantonness or anarchy (in its popular meaning). They create a construct which is the result of rejecting modernity or even the early modern era due to resentment, given that it is the early modern era that makes an individual curtail their affects and urges (see Elias 2011: 350–371), and then “subjugates” the individual by inscribing them into a range of limitations of legal, bureaucratic, civilizational nature<sup>6</sup>. The protagonist of a prototypical Neo-Sarmatian novel rejects thus understood anthropology, choosing freedom in realizing his emotions, affects and urges.

Neo-Sarmatian fetishization of liberty is connected with another value: masculinity. I use this word, and not its cognate manliness. In male-centric discourse (especially in Poland, marked by the names of such influential writers as Adam Mickiewicz and Henryk Sienkiewicz), manliness is connected with such values as faith or knightliness. As Tomasz Tomasik wrote, “the dominating manifestation of Sarmatian masculinity is the cult of manliness [...]. The perfect Sarmatian man is a knight, a hero and a defender of Catholic faith, participant of a ‘holy’ war” (Tomasik 2013: 85). Neo-Sarmatian pop culture is the result of influence of models as much conservative as they are right-wing; it forgoes the caution in expressing one’s views characteristic for conservatism as well as the worldview referring to the major role of the motherland and religion, which is why within it, traditionally Polish manliness turns into masculinity. In the present day, the category of masculinity appears in a debate with left-

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5 Putting aside the most obvious exceptions (such as texts written under totalitarian regimes, wherein ideological doctrine must be carried out in a precise way), the ideological nature of literature is not based on creating fictional equivalents of a given doctrine’s handbooks. This is why I write about a libertarianism particular for Neo-Sarmatian novels, while putting quotation marks around “libertarianism” every time. It is libertarian as much as it fetishizes liberty, but it does not agree with the foundations of libertarianism in its approach to violence. What is characteristic for libertarianism is the rule of non-aggression, according to which nobody has the right to initiate violence, threaten violence or deception towards another person or their property (see e.g. Zwolinski 2016). This obviously contradicts the fairly loose approach to violence in the Neo-Sarmatian novel.

6 As discussed by Michel Foucault.

wing liberalism (cf. Nagle 2017: 87) as a violent negation of ideals of equality and restraint, characteristic for it, as well as the image of a man seen in the context of notions such as rape and domestic violence (Nagle 2017: 87). Neo-Sarmatian nobleman frequently carries out fantasies about liberty as freedom from limitations and freedom to perpetrate physical violence as the basic way of dealing with the world's accidental nature. These fantasies can be more individualistic, as in novels by Komuda (the best known representative of Neo-Sarmatian novel, whose protagonists are always solitary, frequently outlaws) (see e.g. Komuda 1999, 2012, 2019); they can also be communal, as in the *Wilkozacy* [*Cossackwolves*] series by Rafał Dębski (2010, 2012, 2015), in which masculine individualism “dissolves” in a community of wolves<sup>7</sup>. Whether individualistic or communal, Neo-Sarmatian liberty is most often intensely violent in nature, hence the third category – category of lordliness – that I propose in order to discuss prototypical Neo-Sarmatian novels. I took the category of lordliness from Kacper Pobłocki's book *Chamstwo* [*Rabble*] (2021), where it was used as a general category describing social relations in historical, feudal Poland. According to Pobłocki, lordliness is a feature characteristic for feudal society ruled by the principle of subordination. It is not limited to the nobleman – peasant relationship, as it also pertains to relations within, for example, a peasant family, in which wife and children are subordinate to their lord – the husband, while farmhands are subordinate to both the lady and the lord of the house. A Neo-Sarmatian nobleman is a lord – both over the peasants, whom he always treats with contempt, and over women, whom he usually respects, as the weaker sex ought to be respected, but he will not stop himself from rape as soon as he feels an overbearing need to realize his sexual urges (as in the novels *Charakternik* [2019] by Piekara or in Komuda's *Banita* [*The Outlaw*, 2012] and *Diabeł łańcucki* [*The Łańcut Devil*, 2019]). Two caveats need to be made here. Firstly, in these narratives, rape is never carried out by the primary, “good” protagonists, and the narrator never considers it a desirable act. In Neo-Sarmatian novels we are usually dealing with a certain phantasm of violence towards women; its narrativization is a fairly complex process, and its description definitely exceeds the framework of the present text. Secondly, such attitude of men towards women was unacceptable in noble world (paradoxically, it seems to have been more present in peasant rather than noble families).

The aforementioned novels published by the Lublin company Fabryka Słów do not create the entirety of Neo-Sarmatian novel, but, rather, its prototype. I use here a notion common for cognitive linguistics, which used it to deal with the existence of the so-called non-classical categories. Classical categories are such which only contain items with common characteristics. As Georges Kleiber had it,

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7 The series protagonists are Cossacks gifted with the supernatural ability to transform into wolves, especially around the full moon, which provides them with wolfish senses and strength even in their human form. Cossackwolves live according to their own code, known as the “Wolf Law”, which puts *sietch* (the community) above the herd, and the herd above the family.

As D. Geeraerts shows it, it is difficult to find conditions necessary and sufficient to contain the totality of possible birds. The features that correspond to the entire extension – “animal”, “has a beak”, “oviparous” – do not make it possible to separate birds from other categories, because other animals also exist, and because other species also lay eggs (e.g. snakes) or have beaks (e.g. platypus). On the other hand, not all elements show features that seem characteristic: ostriches, penguins and chickens cannot fly, kiwi do not have wings, one cannot clearly use the word “feathers” to refer to penguins and kiwi, etc. (Kleiber 2003: 33).

Non-classical categories, that is, such categories where not all items must fulfill conditions necessary and sufficient for being counted among the set, are radial categories: some items will be more typical (we can assume that Polish respondents asked to provide an example of a bird will name the sparrow, as it has wings and flies) – these are the prototypes; other items will be less typical (respondents will be less likely to mention an ostrich or a kakapo, as, despite their having wings, they are flightless birds).

Neo-Sarmatian novel is precisely such a non-classical radial category. The novels published by Fabryka Słów are its prototype, or a “cognitive reference point” (Lakoff 1987: n.p.), the most common item, which is also most frequently identified as an example of the category “Neo-Sarmatian novel”. However, next to the prototype, there also exist secondary poorer examples, and peripheral examples (Stockwell 2005: 29). “Prototypical novels” and “peripheral novels” have many features in common: for example, they all belong to cycles, they all are focused on one storyline, they are usually predicate, rather than subject, novels, their protagonist is a noble man. However, there is one significant difference, which pertains to the ideological layer. An example of such different – peripheral or “secondary poorer” – Neo-Sarmatian novel, whose difference is realized precisely in the layer of worldview and ideology, can be found in Konrad T. Lewandowski’s cycle *Diabłu ogarek* [*Candle-End for the Devil*].

The cycle consists of three novels: *Czarna wierzba* [*The Black Willow*] (2011), *Kolumna Zygmunta* [*Sigismund’s Column*] (2012) and *Ostatni hołd* [*The Last Homage*] (2013). Its difference from Neo-Sarmatian prototype consists in several factors. Firstly, it is actually historical fantasy, in contrast to Komuda’s or Piekara’s novels, which I would situate on the boundary between two sets: historical novel and fantasy novel, with the caveat that they belong more to the first set<sup>8</sup>. In Lewandowski’s prose, fantastic elements are not barely secondary trappings of plot in which events are realistically motivated. On the contrary: the presented world of his novels is a world ruled by principles that cannot be explained either on the basis of rational / empirical worldview or on the basis of attitudes shared by people living in the 17th century Commonwealth

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8 On genre belonging of Komuda’s novels see Krawczyk 2022: 97; Szagun 2015.

(which is when the novels take place). Secondly, although the protagonist, similarly to a prototypical Neo-Sarmatian novel, is a solitary man roaming a world that threatens him, the events he participates in are very different. Komuda's, Piekara's, Dębski's, or Liziniewicz's (as of yet unmentioned here: see the series about Nadolski: 2011, 2012, 2013) protagonists always act "in a manly way": they are always lonely, they only take care of themselves, not minding any totality functioning outside their individual existence. In turn, Lewandowski's protagonist, Stanisław Lawendowski, is a court server: he delivers summons, and thus acts in the name of the country and the law. In the third volume of the series we learn that he plays one other, much more significant role. Namely, he is a Keeper of the Order. This is explained by a hermit who tells a story that weaves together the fate of the Lawendowski family with the history of Poland. As it turns out, the initial moment for this entanglement is the point when Christianity was introduced on Polish territory, which became synonymous with the destruction of the earlier, Slavic identity of Polish people. As Stanisław Lawendowski says, "badly had we been baptized" (Lewandowski 2013: 159), which is a reference to the words of the 19th century most prominent eulogist of Slavic history, Zorian Dołęga Chodakowski (1967: 19)<sup>9</sup>. However, in contrast to the approach of the contemporary followers of *Rodzimowierstwo* (Slavic Native Faith), in the novel the fact of "bad baptism" does not mean the need to reject Christianity, given that due to the principle of cooperation, which governs the series about Lawendowski and which I will discuss in a moment, what is proper is not an annihilation of Christianity, but creating harmonious cooperation between it and the native faith. This occurred under the rule of king Casimir the Great (in the years 1333–1370). Due to its significance for the entire ideological layer of the novel, I will quote a longer fragment of *Ostatni hold*:

Badly had we, Poles, been baptized. Violently and with no respect for our ancestors. Hence the disorder and neverending war in the other world, which still rocked everything that was built in the world under the Sun. Thus the young king Casimir reckoned that every thing and every creature must be put in its place and have its own place. What belonged at the bottom should be put at the bottom, the middle – in the middle, and what was from up high – up high. But also the highest should be propped up by the lowest, and the meanest tolerate that which was more lofty. How, indeed, any wall can stand, if its top bricks are in discord with the downmost stones? When these bricks and stones do not want to know a common mortar? And thus, one just measure in the underworld, earthly, and heavenly sphere needed establishing.

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9 The phrase quoted here appears in Janusz Tazbir's article dedicated to Maria Janion's *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna* (Tazbir 2007). It is a reference, rather than an accurate quotation from Chodakowski.

For it is concordance that builds, not anger. And so Casimir forbade for Roman Christianity to be propagated by force, and did not hesitate to drown blinded priests who wrought disorder under the Vistula ice. For those who stand against peace and order are always also against the God Supreme, however they would not justify themselves. They should be known not by their lying words, but by the fruit of their endeavors. And so, since the king's will was made law, in Poland, within the borders of the Crown, space was found not only for various spirits, more or less in conflict with God, but also for Jews, Armenians, Eastern Orthodoxy followers, [people of] all faiths (Lewandowski 2013: 159).

This passage is a perfect summary of the worldview and ideology that can be interpreted out of Lewandowski's series. Similarly to Neo-Sarmatian novels, *Czarna wierzba*, *Kolumna Zygmunta* and *Ostatni hołd* take place in 17th century Poland, but in contrast to the former books, here this land is situated in non-autonomous reality, as it is integrated with two other transcendent dimensions: one Christian and one Native Slavic. However, in reference to the latter dimension, one should talk about, rather, the paradoxical immanent transcendence, in accordance to Lewandowski's own approach; in the essay *Teologia wiary rodzimej* [*Theology of Native Faith*] he wrote about the fact that the pagan worldview does not acknowledge an absolute external to the world, as God does not exist outside the world, being, rather, its essence or the principle of its rationality (Lewandowski 2017: 19), not finding his own existence outside it.

Komuda's, Piekara's, Dębski's, Liziniewicz's worlds are always purely materialistic. And they are so even when they are permeated by an extra-empirical dimension. This paradox will be best explained by a reference to an extreme example, that is, Rafał Dębski's *Wilkozacy* series. As has already been mentioned, the eponymous *Wilkozacy* (Cossackwolves) are Cossacks who turn into wolves during the full moon. However, what is the result of this magical transformation? Does it introduce a new, extra-sensual, extra-empirical, extra-rational element into this world? On the contrary: when turned into wolves, the Cossacks burn villages, kill and rape, they are simply more efficient at it as compared to ordinary humans, and therefore, a Cossack's transformation into a wolf only denotes a certain anthropological degradation, a fall into a purely animalistic order through maximizing the order based on urges and affects. Sarmatian masculinity can be realized in a nobleman's *żupan*, with a sable and a goblet in hand, but also as a wolf on the steppe; in the end, however, the result is the same: subordination of the world until its annihilation, whose tools are, invariably, rape and murder. In Lewandowski's series, the presented world is based on the opposite of this vulgar masculine phantasm, for it is ruled, as I have already stated, by the principle of cooperation. A broader description thereof is significant due both to the series as such, and to the fact that it makes it possible to talk about Neo-Sarmatism different from the right-wing one.

This cooperation is a principle that regulates relations between the following elements of the presented world of the *Diabłu ogarek* series: a) between two extra-empirical orders (Christian and that of Slavic Native Faith); b) between extra-empirical orders on the one hand and the earthly order on the other; c) between a human and the natural order; d) between a nobleman inscribed into his family and country and the law.

Explaining the two first kinds of cooperation stumbles upon a certain issue of biographical nature. As we know from Lewandowski's text *Politeizm vs. monoteizm* [*Polytheism V. Monotheism*], the *Diabłu ogarek* series was written while its author was converting from Christianity (Protestantism) to Slavic Native Faith (see Lewandowski 2015). The novels about Stanisław Lawendowski put a kind of a stop to this motion. On their declarative level, directly verbalized by the narrator and some of the characters, Christianity plays a considerable role in the presented world; however, one can get the impression that this is only tribute paid to the historical reality to which these novels refer (Christianity was an important element of noble culture at every stage of its existence). The impression that Christianity is insignificant is multiplied by anti-Jesuit excursions, frequent in all volumes, based on the conviction that Jesuits are an order that wants to destroy the system of the Commonwealth as based on the mutual cooperation of various beings<sup>10</sup>. Jesuits, as Mr Sobieski says in *Kolumna Zygmunta*, propose a new kind of authority: a kind of *absolutum dominium*, the worst possible thing for a nobleman (as it strikes into noble liberties and centralizes authority). Jesuit authority opposes the noble republican anthropology, according to which the apparatus of power should not have control over the person's insides; it also opposes the principle of cooperation between Christianity and paganism, which is so important in Lewandowski's presented world. Thus, in the end, in Lewandowski's novels there is ambivalence as to the status of Christianity: although it is talked about as an important and positive sphere, it is almost always harmful for social order when it is represented in action (there is nothing strange about this ambivalence, as it is impossible to reconcile a monotheist order, with its belief in "extra-world" God, with polytheism and its belief in God that does not exist outside the world). This remains consistent with what Lewandowski wrote about Christianity in his theological treatise concerning Slavic Native Faith:

The fall of the First Republic of Poland was the result of a fundamental inability to reconcile polytheistic republican tradition with Catholic monotheism, which supported absolutism. The Polish state fell because a republican Pole could not be, simultaneously, a Catholic Pole. The

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<sup>10</sup> The anti-Jesuit character of Lewandowski's series remains consistent with the general antipathy of some noblemen towards this order. Sarmatian anti-Jesuit texts are collected in Janusz Tazbir's anthology (Tazbir 1963).

multi-national and multi-religious Commonwealth became politically unsteerable when it came under the domination of intolerant, ultra-Catholic counter-reformation. The Polish national sense and the Polish reason of state cannot be realized by religious fanatics convinced that there is one God, one religious doctrine and one political reason. Thus, the domination of Catholicism in politics results in ceaseless exclusion of subsequent social groups, in the state being torn apart and weakened, as happened in the 18th century and as we can see it now. Only, the Jesuits of old were supplanted by the Redemptorists<sup>11</sup> (Lewandowski 2017: 74).

When it comes to the order within Slavic Native Faith, the matters are very different: it does not only belong to the declarative order, but, rather, it truly works, playing the role of one of the principles that provide structure to the presented world of *Diabłu ogarek*. As has already been mentioned, according to the Slavic Native Faith, God does not exist outside the world, being, rather, its essence or the principle of its rationality. This does not contradict polytheism (various gods and goddesses are different manifestations of divinity), or animism, that is, belief in the existence of various spiritual beings, or even – to be more precise – belief in the spiritual character of natural order. What we are dealing here is a great chain of being, whose topmost element is God, the lower rungs are deities, and the lowest – minor spiritual beings. Importantly, this entire triad does not exist outside of the natural order, but, rather, acts through it, resulting in magical effects. This is very clearly shown in the novel *Kolumna Zygmunta*, whose first sentence is as follows: “A pine grew on a small sandy dune” (Lewandowski 2012: 7). The pine is an unusual tree, as it does not grow on the dune as much as stands upon in, for:

the foundation of the trunk from which roots protruded was located over two ells above ground. Thus the tree stood on over a dozen spindly legs, akin to an ocean-dwelling kraken or another cephalopod taken out of drawings illustrating the adventures of Spanish and English sailors. The only difference was that here a familiar forest under Węgrowo hummed around (Lewandowski 2012: 7).

This tree – of unknown age: some say it is 80 years old, some, that it has always existed – is approached by our protagonist. He comes to it unarmed, as he knows that the tree “did not like when people approached it with any blades” (Lewandowski 2012: 7). Some daredevils once tried to do so – they were Calvinists who considered the pine cursed: they decided to cut it down and make a cross out of it. “These were new settlers who had not yet under-

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11 When writing about the Redemptorists, Lewandowski means the order to which Father Tadeusz Rydzik, a figure of immense popularity in Polish folk conservatism, belongs. Rydzik founded the Radio Maryja station which, in common opinion, is a speaking-tube for folk Catholicism.

stood the first law of the Masovian land: that here there was place for each godly and ungodly creature, as long as it did not threaten the neighbors and respected others' possessions" (Lewandowski 2012: 7). In the end, "the pine allowed the server to approach it" (Lewandowski 2012: 9), Mr Lawendowski takes water hemlock and, as a result, sees movement in the cage of the pine's roots: these are imps which he puts into the bottle.

Another example of cooperation between the extra-empirical and earthly orders, as well as between human and natural order comes from *Ostatni hołd*, where Lawendowski's helper, Grzesiek, becomes bitten by an elemental and, as a result, starts turning into a tree. Aid comes in the shape of Maciej, a constantly drunk, ordinary, not very learned monk of St. Bernard's order. Maciej suggests that Grzesiek be saved by being put into a willow's hollow: as a result, instead of drying out, Grzesiek lives, as his body fills with juices of the tree with which he is growing together. Afterwards, Stanisław Lawendowski wonders if they should carve a cross into the tree, but Maciej responds that Grzesiek is not in a grave and that the Christian order should not be mixed with the pagan one. Enchanted into a willow, Grzesiek is now in the power of the "pre-Christian" order, the monk says, and this should be respected (Lewandowski 2013: 47–50).

There are many such examples in all three novels. They all confirm the existence of the principle of cooperation between various dimensions of being as fundamental for the presented word of Lewandowski's novels. Both Lewandowski the court server and Maciej the monk act according to a Sarmatian principle, borrowed from the antiquity and well-woven into this world, namely, that of golden mediocrity (Lat. *aurea mediocritas*), which is realized in many ways in the novels – in this case, as the level and kind of knowledge available to both characters. They are neither fools (devoid of any knowledge) nor wise men (who have impractical, theoretical knowledge): they are situated somewhere in between. Their knowledge is practical, that is, it is a result of submission to the "subject of cognition", which – due to the world being animated through inscription into the animistic dimension – is not a subject, after all. The pine is alive, it sends signals that have to be read in the right way, and this will only happen when Mr Stanisław becomes appropriately attuned to its "speech". A similar situation occurs with Maciej and his knowledge about the willow: it was not read in learned books, but, rather, practiced in living contact with reality that changes every time. We are dealing here with a reversal of phantasmically "masculine" prototypical Neo-Sarmatism, as the knowledge at Stanisław's and Maciej's (and other characters', whom I cannot name due to compositional limitations of my text) disposal is the kind of knowledge whose patron in new humanities is considered a woman – Mêtis. Mêtis is an underappreciated goddess of the Greek pantheon, the one to have given Cronos an emetic, making it possible for the future Olympian gods to leave their father's body. As Ewa Klekot notes, the goddess symbolizes practical knowledge:

Mêtis is the kind of knowledge that is difficult to obtain other than through participation and which is difficult to generalize. To a large degree, it is extra-linguistic in nature, based on experience and practice which forces one to confront subsequent similar, but never identical situations demanding quick adjustment. [...] Above all, Mêtis is situated knowledge – situated not in a body as such but in the relationship between this body with the world here and now (Klekot 2018: 85).

This situated knowledge – always “weaker”, submissive, feminine more than masculine (Klekot 2018: 87) – is, simultaneously, indigenous knowledge, that is, “local” or “native”: looking at the world “‘from the inside’, that is, from the point of view of local and indigenous knowledges and ways of cognition” (Domańska 2024: 12; cf. Hart 2010: 3–4). The culture from which this knowledge draws is Slavic culture, as it is Slavic (imagined) religious practices that Slavic Native Faith reconstructs<sup>12</sup>.

Referring to Slavic tradition, Lewandowski derives another level of cooperation: between an individual and a family, and between an individual and country and the law. As he writes in *Teologia wiary rodzimej*:

we should be aware that ancient Slavs were not individualistic in the way we are. At that time, a person was a part of the family and self-identified with the family to such a degree that being excluded from this community was equal to death, definitely civil death, and frequently [led] to suicide (Lewandowski 2017: 90–91).

The final meaning of all Lawendowski’s actions is revealed in the last volume of the series, when it turns out that the Lawendowski family members are Keepers of the Order once established by King Casimir the Great. “This whole time I was convinced that I serve bigger matters than the order of the tribunal” (Lewandowski 2013: 158), Mr Stanisław says when he finds out that he acts on behalf of a totality larger than he is, the family totality, which, in turn, is subordinated to the metaphysical totality. In the quoted fragment one can also detect an interesting convergence between the metaphysical order and the existential/political order, which I would like to mention now.

In direct contrast to the protagonists of prototypical Neo-Sarmatian novels, Mr Lawendowski does not take up private actions; neither is he presented, as it happens in all novels and short stories by the most famous Neo-Sarmatian, Komuda, according to the “libertarian” fantasy of a “nobleman” – a figure whose identity is realized in actions connected with fighting for private prop-

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12 In contrast to the cases of Nordic, Germanic or Celtic culture, Christianity was introduced in Slavic territories by the means of “fire and sword”, annihilating the remainders of pagan culture. Therefore, in today’s attempts at reconstructing Slavic beliefs there appears a “constructivist” element: in the situation of absence of sources showcasing Native Slavic deities, one has to “guess” at them, adding one’s own invention to the reconstructive element.

erty. Above all, Mr Lawendowski is a court server, and thus “a public person”<sup>13</sup>. What does a court server do? He acts on behalf of the court, and the court, in turn, carries out the law. In the first volume of the series we encounter Mr Lawendowski when he delivers a summons to Mr Bartnicki. In the second volume, as we already know, Mr Stanisław tricks imps into entering a bottle of aquavit – they will later aid him in a task he is supposed to carry out for the king. In turn, in *Ostatni Hold*, we find Lawendowski in the chambers of the assessor Wygonowski (in the First Polish Republic, an assessor rounded up the composition of the court and advised the judge), accompanied by other representatives of the court: the *subiudex*, writer and the applicant. They all discuss two lawsuits concerning propination laws<sup>14</sup>: one on behalf of Jesuit priests, the other on behalf of the *starosta*. The Jesuits accuse *starosta* Myszowicki of inducing peasants to drink his beer, while Myszowicki accuses the Jesuits of inducing peasant to “have the landowner’s beer in contempt and frequent the priestly inn” (Lewandowski 2013: 9). As we can see, the connection between the protagonist, the law and the state in Lewandowski’s novels is a necessary one, that is to say, one that produces the character and the plot in which the character realizes his identity. This connection is of the same kind that the one described above: the protagonist acts in the name of a higher order. Paradoxically, however, this subordination does not mean the disappearance of individuality and liberty: to the contrary, it is their condition.

In order to describe this paradoxical relationship, I will refer to Hegelian philosophy, in which the law establishes “commonly recognized and also formally (‘externally’) guaranteed principles of societal co-existence” (Siemek 1988: 91). These principles are abstracted from the particularity/subjectivity of specific person, guaranteeing that in their place, there will appear “a rationalizing rule of principles”:

In Hegelian social theory “abstract law” is, therefore, not only a stair preceding “morality”. To the contrary, it constitutes another dimension – or, to be more precise and follow the letter of the *Element of the Philosophy of Right*, even the primary one, meaning also, the more important one – of liberty as a principle of the modern world in its inter-subjective universalization (Siemek 1988: 105)<sup>15</sup>.

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13 I use the differentiation between a private and a public person, as well as their images in novels and epic poetry after Mikhail Bakhtin (1982: 307–308).

14 “Propination is the right of the landowner to produce and sell beverages on the territory of his own land making up the so-called propination area. The right was used both due to one owning land, and due to privilege enabling one to produce alcohol, as obtained from the landowner” (Michalewicz 1992: 104).

15 I wrote more broadly about Hegelian philosophy of right in a context fairly close to the issues discussed in the present text in Bohuszewicz 2024.

When mentioning Hegel, we only seemingly leave the world of nobility. Indeed, this connection between the law and liberty, at first glance paradoxical, is close to the Old Polish conception of liberty, which was, after all, fairly distant from contemporary Neo-Sarmatian fantasies on the subject. Cicero, one of the founding fathers of discourse on state, as well as one of the writers most important for the Old Polish nobility, drew attention to the fact that the three most popular systems – monarchy, aristocracy and the rule of the people – are prone to degeneration, because the rulers are people, who yield to their own subjectivity. This is why the best political system is the fourth one, in which law was supposed to rule. It is, as Jakub Witczak wrote, a republican system:

The law is characterized by its constancy – in contrast to the king, the elite or the people, in whose nature lies letting go of reason for the sake of feelings. Thus, the rule of the law introduced stability into the country. In order to keep it up, it was also necessary to retain balance between the three elements of classic systems: the king, the representatives of aristocracy and representatives of the people. Their privileges and duties were described by the law that everyone was subject to. In this way, society in a state with a mixed system appears as a community living under stable laws, acting for the general good, where nobody has advantage over another, so everyone is free and independent from others, and everybody is equal to everybody else (Witczak 2015: 23).

These may be the most important words of this fragment: given that nobody has advantage over another, everyone is free. This is what the principle of cooperation I wrote about at the beginning consists in. The novelty introduced into the Neo-Sarmatian symbolic universe by Lewandowski's novels is showing that this principle of cooperation, realized in its most perfect manner in the Polish state, is older than Cicero's ideas, as it can be derived from the more primordial order of the Slavic tradition. Indeed, the Slavic tradition is built upon an assembly system, where the ruler is chosen by the community and described as the first among equals (see Lewandowski 2017: 72), in opposition to monarchies, where the ruler is anointed by God, which means that he is due unconditional obedience.

The example of Lewandowski's novels makes it possible for us to see that there is a certain uncarried out potentiality in Sarmatism. This heretofore lack of actualization results from the fact that Sarmatism has been almost entirely appropriated by its right-wing formulations – resentimental in this way or another (towards the broadly understood modernity), exclusive (towards subordinated groups, not included in Neo-Sarmatism) and patriarchal ("lordly") (see Czapliński 2011). Against anti-modern resentment, exclusivity and patriarchy, Lewandowski situates a world that I would gladly refer to as democratic: moreover, I would use democratic in the broadest sense of the notion of democracy as democratization of different forms of existence, namely,

one including earthly and non-earthly beings, human and non-human ones, as well as regulating relations within the human world (see Bryant 2011). It is a democratic order, because each of the elements of these relations has its own subjectivity, it works and remains free due to being obedient to the law (both earthly and non-earthly law). At the same time, it is incredibly interesting that the democratic nature of Lewandowski's series is prone neither to resentment nor to imitation, for it is not created in opposition to Western democracy, or as its imitation, but, rather, as reference to Slavic tradition. Obviously, the latter is also contextualized, or imagined, in a particular way; however, this way differs from the prototypical libertarian Neo-Sarmatism, as liberty – the very essence of both projects – is not conceived as freedom devoid of safeguards, but as cooperation between various elements that are parts of larger totalities: metaphysical (Christian and polytheistic/animistic otherworld) and social (family, country, the law). In the end, the example of Lewandowski's series of novels demonstrates that it is possible for Neo-Sarmatism different from the right-wing one to exist, even if as a margin of the category.

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## The 1670 TV Show as Seen by a Historian of Old Polish Literature\*

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**ABSTRACT:** The subject of reflection and analysis in the present sketch will consist in the 1670 TV show, and my aim will be to attempt to interpret selected plot points that are connected with the critical approach of the show's creators towards Sarmatian culture. The show 1670 should be interpreted as a pop cultural voice in discussion on noble Poland, and the ways it is presented from the perspective of contemporary disputes and discourses. The show's creators, by performing a kind of a deconstruction of national myths, use its most well-known elements (also stereotypically identified with the culture of the second half of the 17th century) such as antemurale, aversion to strangers, honor, economic backwardness, inscribing them into the tradition – modernity opposition.

**KEYWORDS:** 1670 (TV show), anti-Sarmatism, history of Poland, national myths

In his article on the subject of “Sarmatian hermeneutics”, Paweł Bohuszewicz demonstrated interpretative strategies dominating and governing thinking about the past. By referring to texts by the likes of Krzysztof Koehler and Jacek Kowalski, or citing, based on the principle of anti-thesis, Jan Sowa's *Fantomowe Ciało Króla* [*The King's Phantom Body*], he demonstrated how (to simplify it to the max) the subject of research, historical narration, is dependent on the hermeneutic interpreter, whose

goal is not [...] to “establish facts” which, as historical facts are wont to, would be situated outside the interpreter and the present in which he is

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located. The facts established by a Neo- or anti-Sarmatian hermeneutic reader are never treated as simply things of the past. To the contrary: hermeneutic readers of Sarmatia agree on the existence of a certain continuum between the present and the past, which makes it possible for them to treat the past as a part of individual identity (Bohuszewicz 2014: 106).

The scholar's remarks can be used in order to consider various representations of the past, which is increasingly the subject of interest not only for ranks of professional historians or literature studies scholars, but also for creators of audio-visual culture. The subject of reflection and analysis in the present sketch will consist in the *1670* TV show, produced in 2023 by Netflix, directed by Maciej Buchwald and Kordian Kądziela and based on the script by Jakub Rużyłło, and my aim will be to attempt to interpret selected plot points that not only seem important for the series' depiction of the Commonwealth of the second half of the 17th century, but are also connected with the critical approach of the show's creators towards Sarmatian culture.

It is worth stating here that *1670* is a Polish satirical comedy whose action takes place in the fictional village of Adamczycha. It tells the story of the nobleman Jan Paweł, who wants to become the most famous Pole, while dealing both with various family issues and with numerous conflicts with his neighbor or the peasantry. It is also worth adding that *1670* became a phenomenon in Poland, which led the producers to decide to continue the production (the second season is expected to be released in 2025, and the production of the third one has already been announced). This phenomenon results from the presentation of the Sarmatian world and its interpretation in the context of contemporary problems and discussions.

I will attempt to look at *1670* through the lens of a historian of Old Polish literature, while simultaneously being aware of the particular poetics of the TV production, its satirical and comical dimension, which resulted in numerous journalistic reviews and overviews, including left-wing (cautious) praise and right-wing, though not always, reproof. The reception of this series among a broader audience could constitute an interesting subject for analyses in con-

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1 See e.g. „Zbiór memów i mało śmiesznych żartów opakowany w przyjemny dla oka krajobraz Polski szlacheckiej końca XVII wieku. Serial Netflixa *1670* okazał się do bólu zenujący, choć lewa strona internetu jest nim zachwycona. Dlaczego?” (Szczepańska 2023) [“A Collection of Memes and Unfunny Jokes Packaged into Eye-Pleasing Landscape of Noble Poland of the End of 17th century. The Netflix Series *1670* Turned Out to Be Painfully Embarrassing, but the Left Side of the Internet Is Delighted. Why?”]. For comparison, a definitely more reliable review: “In a wonderfully unpretentious way, looking at eras in the mirror fulfills historians' thesis on how Sarmatism shapes Polish modernity. The demons of right-wing historical politics, idealization of the past or increasing mechanization of work connect us, after all, with our on-screen ancestors. However, the Netflix crew has self-control: clever analogies are accompanied by humor that is stale in consciously overdone way, played with a wink, and, as a result – hilarious” (Krawczyk 2023).

nection with its functioning in social and cultural circulation: it may be interesting to show what levels of meaning are perceived by a Netflix user in 1670, what the reception of the creators' playing with historical events is – such issues could be a convenient starting point for questions concerning the reception and comprehension of the TV production under discussion, also in the sphere of social media as a basic territory for exchange of opinions and discussion today.

Before I proceed to interpret selected plot points, it is worth giving the floor to the show's creators as they explain their goals connected with the making of 1670. In one of the interviews with Maciej Buchwald and Kordian Kądziała we read that:

A huge advantage of the script lay in the fact that it is, above all, a story about people, about characters, based in a certain historical reality, although not entirely rooted within it. It is something akin to a fantasy. [...] Above all, it is a comedy. An imaginary version of these times, rather than strict one to one model of them (Duch 2023).

This statement, which does not call for a comment (although for a competent interpreter the utilized categories of fantasy and imaginarium may refer to a broad spectrum of meanings connected, most generally, with psychoanalysis) points to the very manner the TV narration is constructed. The world presented in 1670 should be understood as an imaginary version of the past, dependent on the very convention or perspective in/from which the story is told.

Buchwald's and Kądziała's statement was expanded upon in an interview given by the screenwriter – Jakub Rużyłło. He admits that due to reading Jan Sowa's *Fantomowe ciało króla* and books connected with the so-called folk turn, he started consciously thinking about the past:

We have definitely benefited from the folk turn in literature. *Fantomowe ciało króla* was [published] in advance of interest in peasant history, and I wrote the script to 1670 concurrently to the publication of subsequent books on this subject. These were very helpful sources. We all have noble myths and stories in our cultural code, but due to the folk turn the way this social stratum is perceived has changed, we left behind the 1990s paradigm. On this ground was born the need to laugh at our noble past. And this is when we appeared with our TV show (Marzec 2024).

Thus, Rużyłło reveals to the reader his own perspective of viewing the past as filtrated by Sowa's narration, which had overthrown common opinions on the noble Commonwealth and, let us add, encouraged many to further explorations, both based on interdisciplinary approach of studies into the past and making use of various theoretical languages: e.g. Lacanian psychoanalysis, Gramsci's and Laclau's concept of hegemony, or the postcolonial discourse (Sowa 2011).

The screenwriter also mentions the need to distance oneself from the noble tradition; the convention of satire and comedy is supposed to serve this goal. Disarming the past with the use of a frequently coarse or blunt joke becomes the driving force of the TV series, which reveals noble and national myths we know from our school education.

While taking a look at the visual representations of the noble world in the TV show's sequences from the perspective of a literature studies scholar, it is impossible not to succumb to the temptation of interpretation, based on perhaps far-fetched associations, resulting from many years of working with old texts and overviews concerning Old Polish literature. Thus, having confessed my never-weakening wish for interpretation, maybe too far-fetched, I would like to begin my argument with mentioning the scene appearing in the first episode of the series, when the camera registers mud. Indeed, mud seems to fill the world of Adamczycha. For a historian of literature, it evokes associations with a swamp, quagmire, which Krzysztof Koehler wrote about in the first fragments of his *Paulus sarmatica*. Let us remind here that Koehler encouraged one to enter the Sarmatian swampy world, in the "living substance of existence", the space of dialogue between the past and the present:

Because we had, in our rich history, such an era, in which it was possible for us... – and here we already have a problem, am I allowed to use the "us" pronoun, or should I, rather, say "them", as "us" assumes a community, and "them" seems more adequate, as it points out there used to be "them" and there are "us", and between us, there is a considerable chasm, illuminated (or blinded) by the strong light of the Enlightenment's little lamp [...] so it was possible [...] to create a very interesting culture, an intriguing political system, and civilization aware of its goals (Koehler 2016: 6–7).

If the scholar performs an apology or apotheosis of the Sarmatian world (based on the principle of longevity, as an inalienable element of modern identity)<sup>2</sup>, then the 1670 creators perform – against the author of *Paulus sarmatica* – its radical re-evaluation. Indeed, they are accompanied by, to put in Koehler's terms, "the Enlightenment's little lamp" (in the shape of both Sowa's *Fantomowe ciato króla* and prominent scholars of the folk turn in studies on historiography). Mud will no longer constitute "the living substance of existence", but a remainder of the past world, plunged into symbolic deep, removed from the rational order or rational acting, as well as marked by ugliness and inhuman or anti-human treatment of one's subjects. It should be added that the "intriguing political system" which Koehler wrote about so emphatically is represented in the series by the image of Jan Paweł, transported by peasants on

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2 For more on this subject, see Bohuszewicz's interesting text revealing Krzysztof Koehler's interpretative strategies (Bohuszewicz 2011: 99–117).

a cart that resembles a litter. He says, significantly: “I’m lucky to have been born into nobility here in Poland, which is the most powerful country in the world” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023c). These words open sequences of meanings connected with phrases that make light of familiar myths: “We, Sarmatians, are the chosen people. Thanks to the Almighty’s indisputable will, we were bestowed with the greatest minds, hearts... and phalluses” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023c). The use of the word phallus is, on the one hand, seemingly out of place and results in laughter, or maybe guffaws (perhaps even unconsciously Sarmatian on the part of the audience), while, on the other, it can denote symbolic authority, vitality and power that Polish nobility has at their disposal. Let us add here that the sexual organ raised to the rank of a mythical phallus may also point towards fear of castration, ceaseless sense of danger and reversal of the slogans one propagates (it should be added here that a dispute about the *kutas* (tassel) and honor, oscillating between literality and unsophisticated metonymy appears in the sixth episode). It is worth emphasizing that perhaps we are dealing here with a distant echo of Sowa’s analyses, based on Lacanian and Freudian concepts, among which reflection about the significance of the phallus plays a considerable role.

The 1670 protagonist has the sense of phantasmic power: he wants to become the most famous Jan Paweł, his Adamczycha appears as the center of the world, and it is from its perspective – the perspective of his own manor farm, family nest – that he watches and experiences the world, according to certain mental patterns that make it impossible to discover the world’s complexity and difference from the assumed preconceptions<sup>3</sup>. According to Jan Paweł, life follows an order established by nature, it is organized based on the changing seasons, the sense of the natural domination of nobility over the peasants (“I didn’t get a free ride, you know. I inherited all this myself” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023c), projected and assumed superiority over women, and eternally established social roles, and, finally, antipathy towards the other – in the show it is, for instance, a neighbor, the owner of half of Adamczycha. These initial sequences present in the first episode of the series show a phantasmic order based on familial unity. It is referenced as a bookend closing the first season. While Jan Paweł’s family has their portrait taken – bringing to mind Dutch paintings of the 17th century – the protagonist says the following while talking to his wife: “That’s why we need a strong foundation that we can lean on, so we don’t go mad. And that foundation can only be nation, community, and family. Am I right, Zofia? What? I was asking if I was right. I wasn’t really listening, my lord, but I’m sure you are” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023d). It could be said that Jan Paweł succumbed to fantasy liberated from the demands of reality. He appears to be an exemplification of the Sarmatian myth, as if taken straight out of Sowa’s *Fantomowe ciało króla* (Sowa 2011: 259–273). The protagonist

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3 See e.g. an interesting analysis of the noble world from an anthropological and cultural perspective (Kowalski 2000). See also Świdarska-Włodarczyk 2017.

lives according to phantasmagories and imaginings. He perceives reality in an illusory order, imbuing it with certain meaning.

As has already been mentioned, the struggle for symbolic power takes place in episode six, where the nobility argues about who has the longest tassel<sup>4</sup> (*kutas*)<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, as it is known – “being well-hung is a direct extension of a Sarmatian’s honor” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023b). From the perspective of a historian of literature, the on-screen joke (which is not terribly lofty) evokes associations with analyses concerning the meaning of honor in noble society. It is worth quoting here a longer fragment by Pierre Bourdieu, providing a considerably more developed and theoretical outlook on the phenomenon of honor than works by professional historians:

the point of honour, that particular form of the sense of the game that is acquired through prolonged submission to the regularities and rules of the economy of symbolic goods, is the principle of the system of reproduction strategies [available to men]. [...] Women are excluded from all the public spaces, such as the assembly or the market, where the games ordinarily considered the most serious ones of human existence, such as the games of honour, are played out. [...] Being a man, in the sense of *vir*, implies an ought-to-be, a *virtus*, which imposes itself in the mode of self-evidence, the taken-for-granted. Like nobility, honour – which is inscribed in the body in the form of a set of seemingly natural dispositions, often visible in a particular way of sitting and standing, a tilt of the head, a bearing, a gait, bound up with a way of thinking and acting, an ethos, a belief, etc. – [...] directs (in both senses) his thoughts and practices like a force [...], but without constraining him mechanically [...]; it guides his action like a logical necessity. [...] Nobility, or the point of honour [...] is the product of a social labour of nomination and inculcation at the end of which [there emerges] a social identity instituted by one of the “invisible demarcation lines” laid down by the social world and known and recognized by all (Bourdieu 2001: 48–50).

Therefore, the category of honor is not something neutral; rather, it is inscribed into particular relations of domination, authority, lifestyles manifesting through one’s behavior and body. Let us remind the reader that since his youth, a nobleman was obliged to protect the coat of arms from offense, to take care of the family, to defend the Commonwealth and the Catholic faith, as well to defend himself from infamy. Thus, in the world of the TV show, Jan Paweł wants to erase slander, fulfill the established order. In the scenario he imagines, in which he is, obviously, victorious, he also wants to prepare a short speech or a poem

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4 To remind the reader: a tassel is an adornment, a brush made out of threads or strings at the end of a rope pinned to the belt, decorative in character.

5 In contemporary Polish, the word *kutas* is commonly used as slang for “penis” (translator’s note).

that would confirm his status as a perfect knight and competent speaker<sup>6</sup>. To the surprise of the all-male group that participates in the duel, in the final scene the protagonist's daughter Aniela shows up; thanks to her, or, actually, thanks to his own deceitful arguments, Jan Paweł cleverly avoids the confrontation. He gives the axe to a peasant who unapologetically and violently, in a way that has nothing to do with the logic of the duel, simply kills Jeremi. In accordance with the rule stated by the person in charge of the duel, "God – honor – homeland: the three most common causes of death", Jan Paweł's opponent dies, and the nobility pays him posthumous respects.

The killing of Jeremi can also be treated as a temporary fulfillment of the wish for revenge on the oppressive social system as carried out by the representative of the oppressed peasants. The risen organ of the peasant (who dreams about rebellion against the oppressors – [Buchwald, Kądziela 2023a]), quickly hidden behind the axe, points towards a temporary gaining of power, which, however, soon succumbs to the sense of shame.

Due to the comical situations that show the discordance between the propagated slogans and the lived practice of the show's characters, the cult of honor, connected with the cult of valor, patriotism and manliness are made fun of in various ways on the show. To put it in the most general terms, military manliness does not find approval on the part of the show's creators. Let us remind the reader that, according to Tomasz Tomasiak,

a Sarmatian man experienced liberty not in claustrophobic space of a library or lecture hall, but in the open territory of a battlefield. He did not self-identify with intellectual values, but, rather, with land-owning and military ones. Moreover, the idea of wartime manliness was inscribed into the sacralizing context of Christian ethics and historiosophy, especially given the influence of post-Trident Jesuit ideology (Tomasik 2016: 11).

Thus, this model becomes undermined, for example in the image of Bogdan, whose shoulders are adorned not by Hussar wings as much as their remainders. Fighting is Bogdan's natural element: he says that he took part in all battles that Poles lost. He is the one to spew anti-Jewish, anti-German, anti-Swedish, and anti-peasant (among others) slogans, but in the end, under the influence of narcotic drugs, sees himself in the role of the leader of the Sultan empire (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023a), as if he subconsciously wished to be the one situated on the opposite side of *antemurale christianitas*.

Grotesque and exaggerated images of Sarmatian world are connected with never ending manifestations of superiority not only over the peasants, which is obvious, but also over the townsfolk class. In the third episode, there appears a town man – a merchant, Ciesław Ryczyński, with his wife from Wilanów,

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6 Allusions to Cicero and oratory art appear in the first episode of the series under discussion. On the importance of speeches in the Old Polish era, see e.g. Ciszewska 2016.

whose daughter Jan Paweł's son Stanisław wants to marry. This plot becomes a pretext for showing the antipathy of representatives of nobility towards townfolk. A cultural and mental glance towards the town situated it in opposition to the gentry's way of life, the virtues and traditions practiced by nobility. This is why the nobility "was increasingly convinced that every town person was an enemy and a mountebank, practicing speculation, a parasite out to destroy the country" (Bogucka 2009: 11). The show's creators make Jan Paweł's wife utter a phrase known from works of literature or sermons, presenting the town as a place of debauchery and disgrace. Ciesław does not gain Jan Paweł's approval, for he comes from "another" world, based on different cultural models; what is more, he carries a saber, which he treats as something "in vogue", "a fashion accessory". Jan Paweł states emphatically that "a saber is the accessory of a nobleman, of a warrior. We use it to defend the Commonwealth", "a saber isn't 'in vogue', it's practically an extension of my [Sarmatian] arm" (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023e).

In the episode under analysis one can notice an easily grasped archetypal opposition between that which is familiar and known, and that which is other. A merchant is a sign of otherness, a carrier of culture alien to Poles. He is the one who comes from the outside, undermines native habits and traditions. He comes into conflict with the encountered rules of life and perception of the world. Let us remind the reader that a merchant was an ambiguous figure back in the Middle Ages: a merchant's existence escaped the sacred time, and the course of his life was inseparable from increasing his wealth, it was based on the profitability of economic calculation (Le Goff 1988: 331–355). Finally, merchants played a significant role in the dissemination of ideas of the reformation, and their religiosity was more open and critical than in the case of inhabitants of closed communities, existing in a uniform symbolic and cultural territory (Tenenti 2001: 224). A merchant is an other, belonging to a world based on movement and change, while the political system of nobility is a sign of immutability, stability and hierarchy<sup>7</sup>.

The lack of understanding for the complexity of the world pertains also to the bodily sphere, which appears as repressed and stifled, and which recurs in the least expected moments. Zofia, dressed in black, prone to lying prostrate on the floor, characterized by emotional frigidity, begins a passionate affair with Ciesław's wife. The men, including the merchant, remain entirely in the dark, do not know about the relationship between their wives, nor even entertain such a possibility; they also know little about female anatomy. The case is similar when it comes to basic hygiene. Episode five introduces the motif of *vanitas*, characteristic for Baroque. A conversation with the theater troupe actors concerning the Black Death epidemic causes Jan Paweł to consider mournfully his own children's mortality. Finally, he wants to check if he

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7 Jan Paweł and his son reminisce that they have left the family's estate to watch serfs being hanged. The plot of hanging a serf appears in one of W. Potocki's texts. See Śnieżko 2019: 265–276.

does not carry the mortal illness. During an examination, the doctor says that Jan Paweł “is becoming obese”, to which he replies “thank you” (Buchwald, Kądziała 2023a). The scene resembles remarks on the Sarmatian body made by e.g. Tadeusz Chrzanowski, who notes:

The representatives of other nations had, above all, chests, arms, broad shoulders, muscular calves and thighs. They also had genitals, and their abdomens played an indirect, subordinate role. Among the Sarmatians, there happened something akin to autonomization of the abdomen, it took on an important function, becoming a carrier of dignity in a metaphorical sense, due to its majestic appearance, and in literal sense, as the place where the belt was tied and the saber – the nobility’s attribute – was hanged (Chrzanowski 1977: 63)<sup>8</sup>.

A saber, garments such as a *żupan* and a *kontusz*, finally, an abdomen are visible attributes of a nobleman, strongly emphasized in the show. They point towards what is a direct association with the Sarmatian culture.

The world created in the show brings to mind threads undertaken in works by scholars of literary studies, historians, or found in Sowa’s book. They are adjusted to jokes within the series: we see the embodiment of the phantasm of a Sarmatian and a nobleman in the figure of Jan Paweł, there are also references to the myth of Poland – a granary of the nations, aversion to modernizing the countryside or modern technologies, which Jan Paweł mentions directly in the second episode of the Netflix production under discussion.

The show *1670* should be interpreted as a pop cultural voice in discussion on noble Poland, and the ways it is presented from the perspective of contemporary disputes and discourses. The show’s creators, by performing a kind of a deconstruction of national myths, use its most well-known elements (also stereotypically identified with the culture of the second half of the 17th century) such as *antemurale*, aversion to strangers, honor, economic backwardness, inscribing them into the tradition – modernity opposition. Comedy and humor, and, above all, a satirical outlook on the past situate the show under discussion on the opposite side of Neo-Sarmatian identifications, for which noble past would be living tradition conditioning contemporary identity.

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8 See also Obremski 2015: 140–160.

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## Demolishing “the Dream of Might” of the Nobility of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, or on the Discussion Concerning the *1670* TV Show\*

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**ABSTRACT:** As the screenwriter of *1670*, Jakub Rużyłło, admitted, nobody expected such an enormous popularity of this Netflix show. In Poland, it gave rise to intense emotions, both negative and positive, and, as follows, discussions, also among history lovers and professional historians. In their Internet statements (both in the form of articles and comments on social media), some unhappy audience members point to factual errors in the show, others claim that this text slanders the history of the Commonwealth, while others still (who usually do not wonder about the reality of the 17th century society) are amused by *1670*. *1670* does contain historical truth, but we are frequently unable to find it, as school education, including Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *The Trilogy*, shaped an image of the Commonwealth in our minds that is focused on history of events, rather than everyday history; history pertaining to kings, military leaders, and not an average nobleman. And the latter – as the show’s creators depicted in a satirical, sometimes even grotesque manner – was not always a spotless knight, such as Jan Skrzetuski or Michał Wołodyjowski. However, the show’s critics view it through the lens of their own political views, which frequently involve perception of the past, for instance, idealizing the nobility (especially the Hussars) and the Catholic Church.

**KEYWORDS:** historical education, history in the media, popular culture, *1670* TV series, nobility, Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

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Emerging over the course of years, new media products not only encourage scholars to perceive their own study field in a different manner, but also increasingly force those academics to use audio-visual media as new opportunities to interpret and present the already conducted analyses (Hendrykowski 2000). Visual history points, on the one hand, “to the role that (audio)visual representations play in creating historical representations (imaginary visions of the past), becoming a kind of an alternative to academic historiography”, while, on the other, “to research methods useful in analyzing audio-visual representations of the past as relatively new – but equally important to written history – forms of reflection on the past and historical sources that demand new abilities concerning criticism and hermeneutics of media messages” (Skotarczak 2012: 188–189). Cinema is a particular kind of a case, as in the changing reality, film images have accompanied us for over 100 years. However, it ought to be kept in mind that not every visual representation of the past is a historical film<sup>1</sup>. Currently, enormous popularity is being enjoyed by shorter visual forms – TV shows. Contemporary societies shape their communal, social, cultural memory mainly due to media, including television, and thus also TV shows (Connerton 1989; Hoskins 2001: 333–334). Today, they are the forms that repeatedly shape the contemporary visions of the present, future and the past.

This is the foundation of the basic problem with the *1670* TV show. In order to attempt to analyze the discussion started by this production, I will begin with a fragment of one of many Internet statements on the subject:

What is the reason for making a film about “noble Poland” if it is not a film about the 17th century Poland, but, rather, about big city phobias of contemporary educated youth? The Baroque entourage is just a pretext. Just as well the action could be taking place among the 19th century Polish emigration or in a 1990s city block neighborhood inhabited by a typical “janusz” crowd from memes [“janusz” is a pejorative term describing a person displaying stereotypically negative features of Poles and their primitive behavior – J. O.]. One can say that this is supposed to be a universal story, a story about Poland, Poles and national defects. However, I have a strong impression that this isn’t supposed to be a reflection on our national vices, but a ridicule of everything that the right wing (or at least a part thereof) has been talking about with pride in the recent years. [...] The embarrassing level of *1670* is a result of a deep lack of understanding of Polishness which is only seen through a collection of memes, TikTok virals, mustached Hussars, cavalry marching on tanks and Papal cream-cakes, although in the case of the latter two elements I can’t even be sure if the creators behind the Netflix show know what I mean (Szczepańska 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> “A historical film [...] is a collective name, including various genealogical structures whose subject refers to the past, is supported by historical knowledge which, in connection with fiction results in a generalized image of the past, remaining within perceptive capabilities of a viewer equipped with particular historical awareness” (Machwitz 1983: 125).

This is what Anna Szczepańska wrote about the Netflix produced show in her article entitled, significantly, *Wielka i Śmieszna Polska Katolicka. Niepoprawne politycznie spojrzenie na „1670”* [*The Great and Ridiculous Catholic Poland. A Politically Incorrect Look at “1670”*]. Simultaneously, the article author decided that leftist audience members are in awe of the show. I will return to the political perspective on the reception of this hit show later in the article.

This statement confirms that the 1670 TV show gave rise to considerable emotions, upending the common outlook at the nobility of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, including one of its major and most recognizable symbols – the Hussars – as preserved in education starting with primary school, contaminated especially with Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *Trylogia* [*The Trilogy*], and subsequently, with its adaptations by Jerzy Hoffman. This was, above all, due to the fact that we had become used to presenting the history of early modern Poland as the history of the 17th century wars: with the Cossacks (in *Ogniem i mieczem* [*With Fire and Sword*]), with Swedes (in *Potop* [*The Deluge*]), with Turks (in *Pan Wołodyjowski* [*Sir Wołodyjowski*]). Grounded in the reality of grand history – history of events, kings, great leaders – it presented knights with flawless character who are able to put their lives at risk, or even sacrifice them, for the Homeland, honor and God. This idealized image of unconquerable Hussars, together with the idyll of a noble manor straight out of another great writer’s work – Adam Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz* – constitutes the symbol of Polishness for a part of our society.

Not all nobles were such perfect knights: they were reluctant to take part in mass levy (as king Jan Kazimierz himself complains in the movie/TV series version of *Ogniem i mieczem*). Landed nobility preferred to look after their larger or smaller wealth, take care of the crops that ensured their living, protect their estates from being destroyed. Indeed, it is difficult to define who an average noble was given the varied noble stratum. If we use data, the largest group was the *szlachta zagrodowa/zaściankowa* (petty nobility: croft/village owners) and the so-called *cząstkowa szlachta* (partial nobility) who, in addition to their own land, owned other small pieces of a village, usually one or two peasant households (Markiewicz 2004: 141). This is the standardized and, obviously, very simplified image of an average noble that was presented in 1670. The daily life of a noble and his problems are shown in this production in opposition to grand history – in the village of Adamczycha, history happens slowly and it is of a different caliber than great events recorded in the pages of school and academic books.

And here appears the first problem with how professional historians – especially those concerned with political and military history (that is, history taught in Polish schools) view the show. This is evidenced by both shorter and longer statements regarding the show. For instance, one of articles in “*Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*” was entitled „1670”. *Jaki naprawdę to był rok? [1670. What Year Was That Really?]* (Krajewski 2024). Similarly, a scholar of 17th century military history, Zbigniew Hundert talked about the historical reality of the era in the pop-

ular podcast *Sigillum Authenticum* (*Sigillum Authenticum* 2024). There is a reason why I refer to the historical reality with the word “era” and not “the year 1670”. Indeed, this year has not been chosen accidentally by the creators: we will learn nothing about it from the pages of history books. Meanwhile, historians and journalists, talking about the show reality, discuss the consequences of long years of war (especially the just ended war with Turkey), the 1669 election of Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki to the throne, the breaking of his Coronation Sejm, etc. Thus, they focus on the grand history, while the creators had a different idea for the series. This needs to be stated openly (and repeated every time we talk with someone not well familiar with the era’s reality): this is not a document, it is not even a historical TV series, so one should not look for historical truth here. However, this is not to say there is no historical truth in 1670, which I will return to in a minute. Firstly, however, let us reflect on why this series divided society, especially historians and/or lovers of our history, so much?

Obviously, not everyone will enjoy satire, grotesque, sense of humor resembling that of Monty Python productions; these have a particular group of fans in the land by the Vistula river as a majority of the Catholic – at least nominally – Polish society still does not accept film classics such as *The Life of Brian*. And to a large degree, this form has overshadowed for some audience members, including historians, the most important – in my opinion – positive result of this show: the early modern era has become talked about, in a dimension that had previously been lacking. Popular, or even mass culture, is aimed at a much wider audience than high culture, and as a result, some viewers started seeking information on the history of early modern Poland, but it was a different kind of information than that obtained during school education. Historians (or history lovers) – experts on the era – criticize the show, looking for historical errors. At the same time, they forget that there are no films, TV shows or books devoid of errors, what is more: there are people who specialize in finding such mistakes. A more serious complaint of the lovers of the modern Commonwealth history is the claim that 1670 is an anti-Polish show, which slanders national history and our ancestors – the nobility (sidestepping the issue that the majority of Poles have peasant roots, as nobility constituted about 8% of the Polish-Lithuanian state; Zajączkowski 1993: 10). Such opinions regarding the Netflix production, one of which was quoted in the beginning of the article, appear frequently – especially on social media. This is, however, only one side of the coin. The other consists in articles entitled, for instance, *Szlachcicem być – i basta! Dlaczego nie mamy problemu z tym, że serial „1670” śmieje się z Polski i Polaków [To Be Noble – and That’s It! Why It Isn’t a Problem that 1670 Makes Fun of Poland and Poles]* (Barańska 2023), which is not true, because there are some for whom it is a problem, as confirmed by the earlier quote from Anna Szczepańska.

As Robert A. Rosenstone wrote about the attitude of historians towards cinema – especially films depicting the historical period that the given scholar of the past is an expert in:

For an academic historian to become involved in the world of motion pictures is at once an exhilarating and disturbing experience. Exhilarating for all the obvious reason: the power of the visual media; the opportunity to emerge from the lonely depths of the library to join with other beings in a common enterprise; the delicious thought of a potentially large audience for the fruits of one’s research, analysis, and writing. Disturbing for equally obvious reason: no matter how serious or honest the filmmakers, and no matter how deeply committed they are rendering the subjects faithfully, the history that finally appears on the screen can never fully satisfy the historian as historian (although it may satisfy the historian as filmgoer) (Rosenstone 1988: 1173).

As I have mentioned, some historians complain about the unsuccessful – in their opinion – representation of the history of the era (Adamkiewicz 2023). Conversely, the show’s producer, Jan Kwieciński, stated that

We wanted to create a fairly symbolic world, based in facts, but not stuck to these facts. The world presented on the show is supposed to reflect the historical knowledge of an average citizen [...] We weren’t very interested in details of the voting process during a noblemen’s assembly. There was an assembly, there was *liberum veto* and this was enough for us to make an episode. We take those facts that fit our convention (Anagnostopulu 2024).

And in my opinion, they do so magnificently – both in terms of situations and main characters. I will focus on the nobility. Despite it being depicted in an exaggerated, satiric, grotesque manner, it is still a depiction of modern noble brothers – or, rather: models that should be legible for most contemporary audience members – that follows historical truth. Would it be then possible to find (or even popularize) historical knowledge in this show, which presents, as it has been aptly termed, “historical contemporaneity” (Horbacz 2024)? Especially given the fact that heretofore film and TV productions on the subject of noble culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth may turn out to be inaccessible, or even – let us not shy away from this word – boring for the contemporary youth (Orzeł 2013). The key issue is, obviously, the assumption that films are not “a pure reconstruction of historical facts, but their visual interpretation within the script, utilizing various tools, that is, music, light, acting – always set in a certain genre” (Techmańska 2016: 22). Finally, they are a director’s and/or the producers’ own particular vision of the past. Over 40 years ago, Marc Ferro, a representative of another generation of the “Annales” school, researcher of connections between history and cinematography, claimed that

After all, a film [or a TV show] is nothing more than an event, an anecdote, fiction, information subject to censorship or a chronicle, which

puts winter fashion and death in the summer at the same level. What would new history do with that. On the one hand, a film [or a TV show], on the level of an image, seems to capture events, on the other – [it] gives the impression of manipulation in all meanings of this word (Ferro 1974: 239–240).

What historical reality has been depicted in the right, if anecdotal manner, in 1670? It is impossible not to begin with the figure of Jan Paweł Adamczewski, who will not become the most famous Jan Paweł in Polish history. But why should he not dream about it? The political system of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth allowed for a nobleman to become the king of Poland, as proven in 1669 by Michał Wiśniowiecki, and, after all, it is during his rule that 1670 takes place. If Wiśniowiecki could have been elected the monarch, why should Jan Paweł Adamczewski not be? Admittedly, Korybut became king in particular circumstances: due to the fame of his father Jeremi's military achievements, due to commendable (if made up) genealogy, referring to the Jagiellons themselves, as well as due to the noble society being somewhat tired with foreign rulers. This enormous role played by genealogy in noble society is also wonderfully articulated by Jan Paweł Adamczewski. It is thanks to an ancestor – as the show's protagonist claims – he was “lucky to have been born into nobility here in Poland” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023a). Similarly, the following statement sounds mocking, and yet how genuine, when Adamczewski mentions that “I didn't get a free ride, you know. I inherited all this myself” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023a). Especially the noble title. Indeed, the 17th and 18th century saw lively debates concerning nobility inherited due to one's blood instead of due to achievements or virtues, and not only in the area of the Commonwealth (Donati 1995). Sometimes nobility was the only wealth (even if immaterial) that one could boast. And, in fact, one was lucky to be a member of nobility at the time of the Commonwealth, even if a poor one: other social strata could not even dream about the nobility's rights.

To a large degree, the Adamczewski family carries out an Old Polish model. The eldest son (Stanisław) is the heir, while the second (Jakub) is destined for priesthood. The show presents this as a reason for pride, but in reality, church career was dictated by the small acreage of land to be divided between sons. Nonetheless, sons were the pride of noble family, as only they could ensure the continuity of the family. This will be Stanisław's responsibility. His parents are thus terrified when he chases after a town woman, as for the Adamczewski family (and in the Old Polish society a family was more important than an individual) such a relationship would mean downgrading in social hierarchy. Jan Paweł Adamczewski's less likely – if not naive – dream than becoming a king is marrying his daughter Aniela to a magnate's daughter. Starting with the second half of the 17th century magnates increased the pace of consolidating their wealth and positions, gradually limiting access, in order to become practically unavailable to the rest of nobility in the following century. One cannot forget

Zofia – Jan Paweł’s wife (although he almost forgets her while introducing his family in the first episode of the show). She fulfills roles typical for a 17th century noblewoman: she is a wife and a mother, but, above all, a God-fearing (if not to say, devote) Catholic, who could make *memento mori* into her life motto. This kind of exalted but superficial piousness, since the second half of the 17th century closely connected with the triumph of Catholicism after the Counter-Reformation, was frequently the object of puzzlement for foreigners visiting the Commonwealth. As the Frenchman Gaspard de Tende, having arrived in the early 1660s in the land at the Vistula shore, wrote about this phenomenon: “Le Polonois patoissent fort dévots. Ils donnent beaucoup aux Églises. Mais ils ne donnent pas asses aux pauvres, & n’ont pas asses de soin de leurs valets quand ils sont malades. Ils prient Dieu presque tout haut à l’Église” (Tende 1697: 306) (“The Polish people seem strongly pietist. They donate a lot to the Church. But they do not donate enough to the poor and do not take enough care of their servants when they are ill. They pray to God almost out loud at Church”). And if we talk about Zofia, we also need to mention her brother, the participant “of some of the most notorious defeats in the history of our army, in the past decade”, that is, Bogdan, “a sixth-generation pure-blooded nobleman, with no land, temporarily” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023a). Additionally, this grotesquely portrayed Hussar, representative of *gołota* (barefoot, or landless, nobility) represents an approach to the Polish-Lithuanian union, as well as to other nations in general, that was accurate for a large part of the Old Polish society. On the one hand, we can treat it as xenophobia increasing in Commonwealth society, as admitted by Bogdan himself, although in a very particular manner: “I’m not a racist [...] but Poles are just such superior beings”, after which he adds, “And Lithuanians. They’re pretty good too” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023b). Here, we touch upon another issue, because this does not pertain to xenophobia towards the Lithuanians as such. The problem is much more serious: despite the unions – first the personal one in Krewo in 1385, then the real union in Lublin in 1569, despite the increasing Polonization of the Lithuanian nobility manifested in assuming the Polish language or the political culture of the Crown nobility, the Lithuanians were not always treated in the same manner as the Crown Poles (sometimes the former even consciously separated themselves from the latter). After all: even today, do Poles not frequently simplify the period of the Commonwealth, talking about Polish history, and, in a way, forgetting about Lithuania as the second part of our common state?

Since we mention the characters on the show, one of the Internet articles contained the thought that the most important character are Polish vices, that the show is a mirror in which we can look to see the truth about ourselves (Barańska 2023). Obviously, not everyone will want to see it. It is worth quoting Joanna Barańska’s reflections here:

I wonder how 1670 will influence the belief, fairly common in our country, that the majority of us are descendants of nobility described by

Sienkiewicz in *Trylogia* – as evidenced by the numerous houses with columns, imitating a manor and found all over Poland. What is the source of this pride? What is so elevated about Jan Paweł and other litigants and spongers of his ilk? Let's go further. What will those who tattoo Hussar wings [on their bodies] think about Jan Paweł's brother-in-law, Bogdan, who is brave but not particularly thoughtful? Will they laugh or will they be angry, because Bogdan and his wings ridicule the figure of a Polish warrior? And finally – what about the fact that the smartest person in the farm is a peasant, and a Lithuanian at that (perhaps that is why Maciej rarely expresses his criticism towards nobility openly – after all, only a Pole can criticize a Pole out loud, right?) (Barańska 2023).

Jan Kwiecieński, a *1670* producer, confirmed in an interview that the goal of the series was to start a discussion “about Poland and about how we perceive ourselves” (Anagnostopulu 2024), although he admitted that the show created a sensation mainly due to the political climate in the country at the time. Similar statements were made by the screenwriter, Jakub Rużyłło:

We undoubtedly found a right moment and some kind of a lively need in the nation. It is easy to speculate as to the reason after the fact, but the truth is that we completely didn't expect our show to be so successful. For some time we bounced around various decision-makers with the text of *1670*. While they usually highly assessed its literary value, they claimed that a costume film about nobility will not interest the audience, especially its young members. Then a complete reverse happened. We have definitely benefited from the folk turn in literature. *Fantomowe ciało króla* [by Jakub Sowa] was [published] in advance of interest in peasant history, and I wrote the script to *1670* concurrently to the publication of subsequent books on this subject. These were very helpful sources. We all have noble myths and stories in our cultural code, but due to the folk turn the way this social stratum is perceived has changed, we left behind the 1990s paradigm. On this ground was born the need to laugh at our noble past. And this is when we appeared with our TV show (Marzec 2024).

Above all, historians talking about the show were connected with the recently popular subject of folk history, as, for instance, Kacper Pobłocki (Marzec 2024). While they did not officially comment often on the series, they were divided in their opinions in private conversations. Some complained of the not very intelligent, or even “painfully embarrassing” sense of humor (Szczepańska 2023). And here I will go back to the beginning of the article. It seems that the way the show is received – also on the part of scholars professionally concerned with modern history – is, for the most part, a result of our political views. Indeed, none of us is objective in assessing or describing the issues we have

been studying for so many years. Meanwhile, the “historical contemporaneity” of the show conducts a revolution, although one can also encounter positive opinions of people of more conservative worldviews:

this production takes shots at everyone, in the form of gentle grotesque, rather than sophisticated pastiche. It laughs at the expense of the fundamentalist national-conservative side and its accretions and vices, but also at Aniela’s naive belief in change of habits and her pro-ecological activities. We can also find criticism of a neo-liberal system in which peasants are similar to employees of a great corporation, and what is important is the result at all costs. However, going back to the Sarmatian imaginary world of 1670: one can laugh, but keeping it at arm’s length. It is not necessary to see danger and attack on traditional values in every production of this kind. And yet, when I see the malicious remarks of some people who want to see elements ridiculing and criticizing a more traditional Poland in this show, I have the sense of unfairness and of instrumental use of a work of culture. Additionally, it is worth reflecting whether this spirit of reception does not enforce, by the means of 1670, a culture of humiliation and boosting one’s self esteem because there is “backwater” and I am the enlightened city person who knows French. Without adding ideology, one can smile at this show, even if their sensitivity is conservative (Horbacz 2024).

Once again, 1670 proves that a considerable part of contemporary society, including historians, cannot maintain detachment towards the history of our homeland, especially since historical politics has been instrumentally used by the most important people in the country for many years. One should agree with Piotr Zaremba’s opinion that 1670 is the essence of Polishness, not due to what it presents, though, but, rather, because to a large degree it divided Poles into two fighting camps (Zaremba 2024). Indeed, as Jacek Szymala aptly noted, “every film tells us more about the times it was created in than about those it depicts” (Szymala 2016: 9). Therefore, a comedy show should not be treated as historical one, but as a product of contemporary times – a visual text that talks about attitude towards history, one that co-creates this history. 1670 says a lot about contemporary Poles, including the fact that as people, we differ little from modern nobles, or that some of us do not agree for the romantic vision of a mighty Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to be destroyed. Historians must face new visions of the past that dominate in visual media narrations (Hoskins 2001), take up reasonable discussion with those, and, preferably, make use of their popularity to educate society: both about the past that is gone and the past that we still carry within us.

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## “True Is the Pole when He Gets Drunk”. On the Persistence of Romantic Sarmatism in a Contemporary Liquor Store\*

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**ABSTRACT:** Drawing upon inspirations from anthropology of everyday, visual studies and analyses of Neo-Sarmatian issues, the article is devoted to the subject of vodka (and, in its broader context, also the motif of consuming strong alcohol) in Polish literature of the first half of the 19th century, especially in reference to works by Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki. The impulse for analysis was the appearance of vodkas whose names are connected with the figures and the oeuvre of both Romantic poets in the Polish alcohol market. Tracing their oeuvres with regard to the motif of vodka, the attitudes of the writers to alcohol, reconstructed on the basis of (auto)biographical documents, as well as analyzing visual and textual elements of the vodkas made it possible to pose a thesis concerning the durability of social influence of Romantic Sarmatism in commercial space.

**KEYWORDS:** Romanticism, Neo-Sarmatism, alcohol, vodka, Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki

This sketch will ask more question than it will bring answers. There is more being surprised in it than certainties. The object of the description presents itself only visually as crystal clear. In cultural perspective, however, it is far from unambiguous.

I am interested in vodka as an object culturally and socially significant, surrounded by various discourses. It is simultaneously funny, it evokes smiles and facetious associations – and very serious, taking into account the social

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effects of abusing alcohol. On the one hand, it is perceived as banal, inscribed into our everyday life (one would like to say that to a too large degree), on the other – associated with the unusual nature of festivities or holiday ritual. When abused, it isolates, while in small dosages it stimulates social life and frequently becomes an element of culinary culture. It happens to be affirmed and happens to be an object of shame. Generally, writing a historical literary critical text about vodka is entering slightly muddy water. I am aware of that.

### Methodological Inspirations

The present reflections have stemmed from being inspired by writings of Roch Sulima (2000, 2022) and Wojciech J. Burszta (1996). In the book *Czytanie kultury. Pięć szkiców* [*Reading culture. Five sketches*] the latter writes about the specificity of the approach of an anthropologist of culture to contemporary times. Among those, he lists the following features and perspectives:

however, the particular nature of anthropological approach to culture is not determined by any officially designated subject scope of this discipline, but, rather, it is defined by a way of seeing the world and being sensitive to these aspects thereof that seem either trivial or peculiar but in which certain basic subjects, obsessions and motifs accompanying humanity can be noticed (Burszta 1996: 158).

For this theoretician, a consequence lay in the methodological indefiniteness of thus understood practice: “anthropology is not academic craft as much as a difficult, and sometimes treacherous art of interpretation” (Burszta 1996: 158). This might lead both to the aforementioned interdisciplinarity, and to differentiating discourse within a single text. However, the final element of the description was the most important: “anthropologists of contemporary times make into a privileged territory of their interest that which is at hand’s reach, and what we usually pass by and never notice” (Burszta 1996: 159).

In Poland, vodka is located literally “at hand’s reach”. For years now this unproblematic, brazen availability in almost every shop, at petrol stations and 24/7 liquor stores has been the subject of discourse in the field of public policies. It has intrigued me how the visual phenomenon of presence of high-proof

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1 It is worth to specify terminological issues pertaining to the strength of alcoholic beverages. What I will follow here is the Act of 26th October 1982 concerning upbringing in sobriety and counter-acting alcoholism (in its 2023 version, updated with novelizations), whose Article 9, concerning permits (concessions) for sale of alcohol, contains the following division of beverages: “1) containing up to 4.5% of alcohol and [...] beer  
2) containing over 4.5% to 18% alcohol, excluding beer  
3) containing over 18% alcohol”.

For the purposes of this article, according to the linguistic usus, I will describe the first as low-proof beverages (alcohols), the second – as medium-proof, and the third – high-proof. Synonymously, I will use the division into weak alcohol (the first group) and strong alcohol (the second and third group).

alcohol in our daily lives is shaped and revealed, and this is where anthropological inspiration met with that resulting from a visual turn in cultural studies. In the introduction to the monograph *Badania wizualne w działaniu* [*Visual Studies in Action*] we read:

The shift [in social visual studies – J. W.] under discussion has its sources in becoming aware [...] that our lives are immersed in what is visual and are realized by images and practices that accompany them. Not only are studies in visuality indispensable in order to understand contemporary world, but they also bring the kind of information that cannot be gained in another way, focusing only on linguistic representations of social life (Frąckowiak, Krajewski, Olechnicki 2011: 13).

What knowledge is brought by taking a look at a shelf in a Polish liquor store? The ways vodka is presented in the store create a cohesive message of masculine adventure; some of them are subtle in their creativity, which is, undoubtedly, a derivative of the fact that advertising alcohol in Poland is forbidden (but the ban is efficiently bypassed in social media).

What has drawn my attention is the segment of vodkas whose names are indebted to the history of Polish culture. I leave aside dominating adjective names (e.g. Żytnia [Rye], Luksusowa [Luxurious], Wyborowa [Choice], Żołądkowa [Abdominal], Lubelska [From Lublin], Saska, Barmańska [Bartender's], Absolut [Absolute]), proper names (e.g. Amundsen, Finlandia, Belvedere, Björn), names of animals and derived (e.g. Żubr [European Bison], Żubrówka [European Bison's], Bocian [Stork], Wataha [Wolf Herd], Grey Goose, Dzika Kaczka [Wild Duck] – referring not to Ibsen's play, but to a bird), names of food ingredients and dishes (e.g. Orkisz [Spelt – a crop], Krupnik [Barley – grain], Żurek [sour cereal soup]), words referring to values and phenomena (e.g. Stumbras [Lithuanian for tradition], Gool [Goal], Bohema [Bohemia]). This is not an onomastic treatise, and thus the list of names is not finite, and the way they are categorized – is open to being expanded upon and discussed. Having excluded the abovementioned names, there is still enough beverages for the thirsty on Polish liquor shelves.

This remaining space will be filled by – appearing in the role of patron saints of the products – significant works and figures significant for Polish literature and music. It is worth noting that thus far, I have not come across a vodka named after a creator or an artifact in the fields of painting, film or theater.

Therefore, we have the following vodkas: Soplca, Adam Mickiewicz, Chopin, Pan Tadeusz, Juliusz Słowacki, Ogiński, Wokulski (announced as a craft vodka – moonshine of Polish production), plum vodka Witkacy. The order in which I have listed them is not accidental – the first three have the most developed lines (clear vodka, flavored vodka, liqueur), Pan Tadeusz is limited to the clear form, while the Juliusz Słowacki vodka appears on the shelves with decreasing frequency, similarly to Ogiński. Wokulski and Witkacy, the only

post-Romantic namesakes, are not easily available and take up a marginal position on the shelves.

No great insight is necessary to ascertain a strong position of Polish Romanticism in this segment of the high-proof alcohol market. Where is the source of the marketing productivity of this era when it comes to selling vodka? This was the first question – followed by subsequent ones.

### Questions about Vodka and Romanticism

I will list the most important of these:

1. How is vodka present, what is the function of meaning of its consumption in Romantic literature?
2. How do contemporary Polish vodkas, with their namesakes of the era, tell the story of Polish Romanticism?
3. Is there a connection between Polish Romanticism and drinking vodka? What is the influence of literature, and what – the biographies of the creators?
4. What does a strong presence of Romantic creators (Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Chopin, partly Ogiński as a creator of the turn of the 18th and 19th century) on vodka labels result from? In addition to popularity resulting from constant presence in the canon of national culture (including school lists of required reading and figures presented in the course of musical education), is there any role played by other cultural aspects of Polish Romanticism, including Romantic Sarmatism?

An attempt to answer the two latter questions yields two theses of the present text. Firstly, given the nuanced, and to a large degree – critical attitude towards vodka and drunkenness in Słowacki's and Mickiewicz's body of work, it is impossible to talk about a positive relationship between the content or meaning of literary texts and the choice of the vodka names. There exists a similar lack of close dependence in the case of biographies – according to historical testimonies, neither of the great Romantic poets showed himself to his contemporaries as a vodka lover or connoisseur.

Secondly, in addition to popularity resulting from the canonical character of *Pan Tadeusz*, Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, a significant role in constructing the message of alcohol industry products under analysis is played by the Romantic interpretation of Polish landowning traditions, which, to a large degree, contribute to the notion of Romantic Sarmatism. In this manifestation of everyday life – “Romantic” vodkas in a contemporary liquor store – Romanticism is reduced to idyllic Romantic Sarmatism<sup>2</sup>.

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2 What I follow here is a division of Romantic Sarmatism proposed by Piotr Żbikowski. He ascribes an idyllic vision of Sarmatism to Mickiewicz in *Pan Tadeusz*, while in Słowacki's texts, Sarmatian characters are defined, above all, by “internal dilemmas and anxiety, a nervous anticipation of failure and catastrophe, dramatic collision of good and evil, tragism and triviality, greatness and human poverty”. Their world “is marked by fear and increasing awareness of threat, suffering, the bitterness of disappointment and lack of fulfillment” (Żbikowski 1999: 261–262). Vodka producers (regardless of the presence of Słowacki as their namesake) opt for the first option of Romantic Sarmatism.

At this point, it is worth to define some concepts. According to the dictionary definition and the bibliography behind it, I take Sarmatism to mean “a cultural formation” which appeared in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the end of the 16th century to the middle of the 18th century” (Maciejewski 2006: 548), created among Polish (or Polonized, or in the process of being Polonized) nobility, connected with the so-called Sarmatic myth. It was characterized by the following dominating attitudes and values:

traditionalism, conservatism – stemming from the cult of the old, lack of criticism – a result of trusting faith, xenophobia – a result of the cult of the familiar, democratism (within the noble state) – stemming from the sense of equality, individualism (aversion to subordination, inclination to anarchy and *warcholstwo* [trouble-making] – derived from a particular love for liberty (Maciejewski 2006: 550).

This is supplemented by the lifestyle: lavish, focused on entertainment, connected with contempt for work. A perfect Sarmatian was strong in fight, in a hunt, but also in eating and drinking.

Sarmatism was not a uniform social phenomenon; it also underwent discursive transformations, revealing a more or less changed face with every iteration. For Polish Romanticism, it constituted one of the elements of “discovered tradition”. The romantic interpretation of Sarmatism, although expressed in genealogically and meaningfully diverse texts (it is enough to juxtapose H. Rzewuski’s *Pamiętki Soplicy* [*Soplica’s Souvenirs*], A. Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz* [*Sir Thaddeus*], and J. Słowacki’s *Samuel Zborowski*), contributed to the phenomenon of “Romantic Sarmatism”, described by Andrzej Waśko in a book of this very title. He pointed out that “for the first time in the history of modern Polish culture Romantics started to treat Sarmatism as a custom and style *sui generis*, comprehensible and consistent against the backdrop of their own values”. Indeed, Romanticism is “the only longer period of a cease-fire in the fight against Sarmatism” (Waśko 1995: 14). Incidentally, the question arises if another such period of “cease-fire against Sarmatism” can be seen in the contemporary Neo-Sarmatian turn.

In Sarmatism, Polish Romantics found familial and neighborly rituals of everyday life, ones that served to confirm and cherish the Polish cultural separateness. Intimate geography – interior design of the house, one’s close surroundings – gained meaning. A connection was made between the cult of Sarmatian liberty, distrust to strangers, conservatism and the much desired resistance to external (including Western) influences. The Bar Confederacy was inscribed into the list of national insurrections – in a position giving raise to repeated armed insurrections.

It is worth noting that in the context of Romantic Sarmatism, the notion of “Neo-Sarmatism” (in quotation marks) is used by Aleksander Nawarecki in his dictionary definition (Nawarecki 2009: 861), in reference to national literature

created in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s. The contemporary researched “Neo-Sarmatian” turn in Polish literature, essay writing or narrative creativity would not be the first such actualization of Sarmatism in Polish culture. According to Paweł Bohuszewicz, a scholar studying these tendencies, contemporary Neo-Sarmatism “is a conscious choice of inscribing actions one undertakes into a system of signs referring to the noble cultural heritage” (Bohuszewicz 2021: 77). The object referred to in the title is not Sarmatism as such, but, as suggested by Tomasz Plata (2017: 128), its Romantic (to a large degree, Mickiewicz-based) simulation (interpretation, creation). I believe that selective references to the 19th century vision of Sarmatism, transforming it for contemporary needs, constitutes one of significant elements of the Neo-Sarmatian turn. It is my claim that vodka producers work with an efficient marketing juxtaposition in their message: of the greatness of Polish Romanticism with the familiarity of Sarmatian code, actualized and positively re-valued in Mickiewicz’s and Słowacki’s bodies of work.

I focused on four vodkas and two poetry authors connected with them, excluding 19th century Polish composers from my analysis and assuming analogous motivations of their producers. Słowacki is represented by a single product under his own name, while three of the alcohols offered in the market create a Mickiewicz universe: these are the vodka under the writer’s first and last name, Pan Tadeusz and Soplica. There is a certain interpretative issue with the last one. As we know, in Polish Romantic literature the Judge Soplica from *Pan Tadeusz* is not the only significant literary character bearing this name. It was also put by Henryk Rzewuski in the title of his *Pamiętki*. However, this work, although popular in Mickiewicz’s times, now functions at the margins of literary awareness; it is almost absent in school, or even university education. For that reason, it is difficult to see *Pamiętki Sopolicy* as the direct source of the name and popularity of contemporary alcohol named Soplica.

### **Vodkas in the Discourse of Literary Studies**

There is one more doubt. Is vodka, or, more broadly, alcohol, a subject for analysis on the grounds of humanities, cultural studies, literary studies and literature in Poland? A positive response can find support in Czesław Miłosz’s *Traktat moralny* [*Moral Treatise*] (Miłosz 1981: 199): “The vodka phenomenon is of interest / it is worth analysing”.

Polish writing on alcohol situated outside literary studies is dominated by self-help books: guides (how to make it, how to taste it, how to choose alcohol) or didactic, moralizing, alarmist, popularizing abstinence, bringing awareness of the harmfulness and the scale of influence of alcohol and alcoholism. In the last segment, a significant place is taken by works of sociology and reports of PARPA or public opinion research centers.

It is not possible to claim that intoxicating beverages are absent from Polish academic works in the field of history of literature, but, on the other hand, the

scarcity of their presence does not leave one with the sense that the motif is significant in this area of research.

Explorations confined strictly to literature and literary studies can take place under the patronage of Julian Tuwim, with his *Polski słownik pijacki i antologia bachiczna* [*Polish Drinking Dictionary and a Bacchic Anthology*] (Tuwim 1959), a book initially published in 1935. The latter part of the work is especially engaging. As it turns out, for reasons unexplained in the author’s introduction, the poet-compiler stops in his anthology in the era of Alexander Enlightenment (or Post-Stanisław Classicism), finishing with Michał Brodowicz’s rhymed dialogue *Rozmowy z gorzałką* [*Conversations with Booze*] from 1810. We will not find any Romantic-period pieces in the collection.

In academic discourse, reflections connecting alcohol and Polish Romanticism appear incidentally and have not yet resulted in a monograph “vodka and Romanticism”, not even a collective work of this kind<sup>3</sup>. However, one cannot not mention Grzegorz Godlewski’s, Alina Witkowska’s and Leszek Libera’s works in this context. In her text *Cześć i skandale. O emigracyjnym doświadczeniu Polaków* [*Glory and Scandals. On the Poles’ Emigration Experience*] Witkowska, an excellent scholar of 19th century literature and culture, wrote about alcoholism as a symptom of material poverty of Polish refugees, clearly differentiating between the culture of consuming wine at meals and the increasing drinking of vodka.

[...] the poverty of lonely [men] had its separate features. They used their modest budget in a different way, in the structure of spending a significant place was taken by, for example, alcohol. When Seweryn Goszczyński’s *Dziennik Sprawy Bożej* [*Journal of God’s Cause*] was published, and he carefully registered his expenses, it turned out that alcohol had a fairly significant position, and that it was vodka, not wine. In one of the letters of the so-called ordinary emigre there was a report of

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3 In the pioneering collective publication in the field of cultural and literary studies, entitled, promisingly, *Sztuczne raje... Użytki w literaturze* [*Artificial Paradises. Stimulants in Literature*], edited by Michał Kuziak (2002), out of the 15 texts only Maciej Szargot’s article (*Wódka i fajka w opowiadaniach Józefa Bogdana Dziekońskiego* [*Vodka and Pipe in Józef Bogdan Dziekoński’s Short Stories*]) pertains to high-proof alcohol and Romanticism. In the context of current reflections, it is worth noting a sketch by Jacek Leszczyna, discussing the specificity of Maurycy Gosławski’s poem *Banko*. However, it concerns becoming drunk on wine in an uprising camp.

Another collective publication with a title promising for my reflections is the volume *Oblicza alkoholu w kulturze elit od średniowiecza do współczesności* [*Images of Alcohol in the Culture of the Elites from the Middle Ages to Contemporary Times*], published in Lublin (Bubczyk, Hołub, Sołtys 2015). None of the papers collected pertains to the first half of the 19th century, and the notion of modernity stops at the era of Enlightenment.

The motif of “Romanticism and vodka” is treated with similar lack of grace in the book *Użytki w literaturze i sztuce* [*Stimulants in Literature and the Arts*], published in 2016 (Żychlińska, Głowacka-Penczyńska 2016). The sketches printed therein and concerning alcohol do not refer to Romanticism, and the ones that touch upon this era focus on narcotic experiences (Anna Kowszewicz’s texts following earlier conclusions by Anna Kubale, Jan Tomkowski and Jan Zieliński).

expenses, where 42 francs were spent on bread and 38 on vodka. The time over which this money was spent and the number of people spending it is not important, what is significant is the proportion. Vodka and bread remain in close proximity (Witkowska 1997: 48).

However, this is emigrant, post-November experience that was an inseparable element of Polish fate in the 19th century; how characteristic was it for Romanticism, though, and how much did it fit into a paradigm of social phenomena ascribed to forced emigration? In later written records, there is no shortage of examples of repeated practice of one dampening hard, humiliating and frustrating condition of an emigre by the means of alcohol.

In addition to Witkowska, two aforementioned scholars took up exploration of the meaning of alcohol, including medium and high-proof alcohol, in Polish Romanticism. Leszek Libera assumes an analytical perspective, studying Mickiewicz's alcohol practices on the basis of contemporary reports and mentions in the poetry of the national bard. The result of his studies were collected in two sketches: *Wszyscy byli jak najzupełniej trzeźwi... (O improwizacjach Mickiewicza)* [*Everyone Was Completely Sober... (On Mickiewicz's Improvisations)*] and *Chyba się nauczę pić... [I Should Learn to Drink]* (Libera 2015). The first concerns the role of alcohol in Mickiewicz's delivering improvised poetical texts. During the meetings of the Philomath Society wine was drunk, and intensely so, given that, as Libera quotes, Czeczot complained about "throwing up" and "headaches" in his letters. Among the Filarets, led by Tomasz Zan, things were different. Mindful of the experiences of the preceding society, Zan "introduced a ban on alcohol drinking, recommending fresh milk instead" (Libera 2015: 112). In the conclusion the scholar states that Mickiewicz was strongly influenced by ancient tradition connecting the impact of alcohol with the poetic sense and inspiration; this is visible not only in the early Philomath works, but also in his Lausanne lectures (Libera 2015: 118–119).

The second sketch is an analysis of Mickiewicz's alcohol-related practices over the course of his entire life. We learn, for example, that porter was a strong competition for wine. For the present reflections, the final statement is the most significant:

Alcohol played a considerable role in Mickiewicz's private and daily life since his youth. We can only guess as to how addicted he was. [...] Nevertheless, it would be an overstatement to call Mickiewicz an alcoholic in the medical sense. The poet drank a lot and on a regular basis, especially at later age, but he managed to avoid alcohol disease leading to personality disintegration. [...] In any case, the poet never hid his inclination to the bottle and glass (Libera 2015: 144).

One has to admit that "alcohol-minded" Mickiewicz, thus described by Libera, may be, to a degree, a fitting personal choice as a namesake for vodka.

In 1989 Grzegorz Godlewski's book *Bachus w kontuszu. Z dziejów motywu alkoholu w literaturze polskiej* [*Bacchus in a Kontusz. From the History of the Motif of Alcohol in Polish Literature*] (Godlewski 1989) is published. His synthetic overview of the history of beer, wine, mead and vodka in the mirror of literature (the author references Stendhal's sentence in the introduction) is conducted chronologically. The era of Polish Romanticism is covered by the chapter *Pijani geniuszem* [*Drunk on Genius*]. Godlewski's analysis concerning the presence of the motif of alcohol includes the following texts: Adam Mickiewicz's *Pieśń filaretów* [*The Filaret Song*], *Dziady cz. III* [*Forefathers' Eve, part III*], *Pan Tadeusz* [*Sir Thaddeus*], Konrad Wallenrod, Antoni E. Odyniec's *Wiwaty* [*Cheers*], Juliusz Słowacki's *Beniowski*, *Lilla Weneda*, *Poema Piasta Dantyszka o piekle* [*Piast Dantyszek's Poems on Hell*], *Zawisza Czarny* [*Zawisza the Black*], Józef Dunina-Borkowski's *Zeznanie* [*Confession*] and Kazimierz Brodziński's *Do gospodarza* [*To the Host*].

I will return to ideas found in Godlewski's text later, at this point, however, it is worth noting that out of the great figures of Polish Romantic poetry there are two creators included: Mickiewicz and Słowacki. According to the author of this synthesis of literature distinguished by the motif of alcohol, such material could not be provided by the oeuvres of Zygmunt Krasiński and Cyprian Kamil Norwid.

### Towards Mickiewicz's Poetry

Based on the research and literature review conducted thus far by Libera and Godlewski, one can distinguish between three approaches to alcohol and its abuse in Mickiewicz's literary work. The first can be termed as anacreontic: it appears in the early stage of Mickiewicz's writing, at the time of building friendships in the Philomath Society. Describing this perspective as “anacreontic” is justified not only by positive approach to alcohol consumption as a glue for good company, but also by rhetorical kinship between Romantic texts with the ancient Anacreontics. The appearance of this approach begins with the *Pieśni filaretów*, ending – symbolically – with the prison scenes in *Dziady* part III.

The second group of texts is characterized by depiction of abusing strong alcohol (wine, vodka) in an illustrative, historical perspective. Here, *Pan Tadeusz* comes to the fore, but drinking in this function appears also in *Pani Twardowska* [*Twardowski's wife*], with its initial stanza:

Eating, drinking, smoking, laughter,  
Reverly and wild to-do –  
They shake the inn from floor to rafter  
With huzzahing and halloo  
(Mickiewicz 1993: 93; trans. Mickiewicz 2025: n.p.).

It is easy to notice that the historical reference point consists in noble past. In *Pan Tadeusz*, this Sarmatian drinking, successfully reaching for the strongest

beverage, as if it were a communal magical drink, is focused on the character of Konewka (Bucket), a *zaścianek* nobleman.

At first, Bucket had shown few signs of courage,  
though he was first to be freed from the stocks,  
...But he wasn't anxious  
to fight, not trusting his aim when sober;  
so he took a mug full of spirits,  
and drank to nourish his upcoming labor.  
He adjusted his hat, picked up his gun,  
ramrod, cartridges, and primed the forelock,  
surveying the grounds and the damage done  
(Mickiewicz 1995: 263; trans. Mickiewicz 2017: n.p.).

In this character Mickiewicz presented a kind of a Sarmatian ideal of an intensely drinking Pole: a nobleman by origin, not by wealth, likes medium and high-proof alcohol; has a strong head, can drink others under the table, which translates to his knightly features and is a sign of vitality. In an earlier book of the poem, in which the foray intrigue is only just being put in motion, Konewka issues threats towards Soplica, revealing, simultaneously, a class difference regarding alcohol (the intensity of its consumption):

“Nothing!” the Bucket yelled, “because he comes  
from petty landowners; he’s too puffed up, I think,  
he holds his nose up high when he is in our homes.  
my daughter’s wedding, I offered him a drink  
that he refused. “I don’t imbibe as much  
as you lesser nobles who drink like gadflies”,  
He’s just a fox inside a rabbit’s hutch,  
a magnate who prefers delicacies.  
A milksop! He did not drink, so we poured  
it down his throat. “This act I won’ forget”,  
he protested, though I clearly assured  
him, next time I’d pour it from my bucket”  
(Mickiewicz 1995: 206–207; trans. Mickiewicz 2017: n.p.).

The internal differentiation of the noble social stratum in regard to the kind of alcohol they consume and the intensity of said consumption, found in *Pan Tadeusz*, is also present in Rzewuski’s *Pamiętki Soplicy*. In the tale Pan Borowski, a dialogue between the *krajczy* Płaskowicki and the impoverished Leon Borowski reveals an alcohol-related distinction in its initial phase (Rzewuski 2009: 184–185). Mr Borowski, experiencing poverty, drinks to his guest with vodka, while Mr Płaskowicki, enjoying a position with the magnate, asks for wine in return. Drinking this more noble beverage together foretells the return of lost Borowski

to the graces of Duke Karol Radziwiłł. Zygmunt Szweykowski mentions that *Pan Tadeusz* owes “some custom-related details” to Rzewuski’s work (Rzewuski 2009: XXXIV); this thesis could be confirmed by the analogy noted herein.

If we were to define the emotional mode of the cited scenes of Mickiewicz’s poem, we would say it is neutral-favorable. Stupefying oneself with alcohol is an element of the flavor of the (disappearing) world of the Polish nobility; a world presented with a warm, sympathetic sentiment, slightly seasoned with a small dosage of slightly biting humor. Non-elitist Polishness, but, rather, the most popular and essential Polishness of gray nobility is national identity distant from abstinence. In *Pan Tadeusz*, there is no *expressis verbis* criticism of getting drunk, but it can be found both in Jacek Soplica’s biography and confession (“from such sins, new sins will surely grow / I drank too much” – „z grzechów w grzechy / Zacząłem pić”; Mickiewicz 2017: n.p.), and in the paradoxical fate of the foray<sup>4</sup> as such. It is worth noting that efficient weapon of a consistently sober Jacek Soplica against the Muscovites lies precisely in strong drink.

In the third group of texts, attitude towards alcohol becomes unequivocally negatively valorized. This is what happens in *Konrad Wallenrod*, although one should not forget that alcoholism in an element of the portrayal of a protagonist tragically entangled, touched by depression:

Konrad loved not the riots of the world,  
Nor mingled Konrad in the drunken feast.  
Though truly, in his secret chamber locked,  
When weariness or sorrow tortured him,  
He sought for solace in a burning draught;  
And then he seemed a new form to indue,  
And then his visage pallid and severe  
A sickly red adorned, and his large eyes,  
Erst heavenly blue, but somewhat now by time  
Dulled and extinguished, shot the lightnings forth  
Of ancient fires  
(Mickiewicz 1994: 75; trans. Mickiewicz 2017: n.p.).

The poem does not contain an *expressis verbis* condemnation of alcohol abuse, but it is difficult to put the scenes of drunk Teutonic Knights and Konrad’s

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4 Grzegorz Godlewski interprets the subject of the nobility’s drinking in *Pan Tadeusz* from the perspective of political and military efficiency: “The scenes of the foray and the battle that lie at the climax of the story [...] depict the destructive role played by alcohol in the nobility’s collective pursuits. The early celebration of victory with general drinking ends with the foray participants becoming imprisoned by the Muscovites; luckily, the latter die by the same weapon. Despite the heroicomic, to a degree, tenor of the story it hides a bitter reflection on the results of the nobility’s mixing alcohol into public pursuits” (Godlewski 1989: 72–73). This is not balanced by Gerwazy’s reminiscences wherein he identifies the good old times with the era of famous drinking. Gerwazy remains a controversial figure of ambiguous morality.

lonely drinking in the same line as idyllic meetings at the Soplica table. Drinking without measure is a sign of decadence regardless the patriotic significance of the text.

Mickiewicz conducts a direct judgment on drinking in *Księgi Pielgrzymstwa Polskiego* [*The Books of the Polish Pilgrimage*]. The sentence is crushing and made from the perspective of patriotic obligations.

The issue of drunkenness appears in Chapter V of *Księgi*, devoted to defining what real civilization is. The historiosophic reflections are supported by a parable of older and younger siblings sent to “high-school”. The older go down the wrong path and leave the “Father”:

And they soon felt dissatisfied and grew mournful: they resolved upon seeking solace in drunkenness and dissipation, saying to themselves: “Our father hath often warned us against the injurious effects of drunkenness and dissipation; but we are now come to the age of our own reason; let us try if we cannot be consoled by indulging in wine and the other joys of life, in the measure becoming reasonable men”.

But they soon lost moderation, and turned out to be drunkards, and complete rakes, and swindlers, alive to commit any iniquity for the sake of money. And the usurer having brought a law-suit against them, and, by a decree of the tribunal, having established his claims to their inheritance, ceased to give them any supplies at all (Mickiewicz 1833: 35–36).

Drunkenness becomes a figure whereby the nations of France, England and Germany (the older siblings in faith) deviate from Christian truth; in this parable, Poland, together with Ireland and Hungary, belongs to the “younger brothers”, virtuous and respected, as they do not sink into drunkenness, usury and perdition.

Indeed, *Księgi Pielgrzymstwa Polskiego* reveal a (postulated) image of strong, alcohol-free Poland. In the beginning of Chapter XII we find the following advice:

In your councils and in your speech, never imitate idolators.

For some amongst you used to begin their councils and their schemes, and their conspiracies, which require wisdom and concord, at dinners and suppers – at eating and drinking.

For who has ever seen that the stomach gave wisdom, and that a giddy head gave concord, or that a country was resuscitated by meat and wine?

And therefore, all such conferences and schemes must end in nothing, for as the beginning so is the end.

Physicians know that a child sprung from a father, full of meat, and full of wine, must be stupid, and does not live long

(Mickiewicz 1996: 36; trans. Mickiewicz 1833: 49–50).

A drunk head offers no national concord. Alina Witkowska wrote about the “honorable” hypersensitivity of “lonely men”, resulting in a plague of devastating duels among Polish emigration. Many a conflict was stimulated and accelerated by the consumed alcohol. However, this fragment of *The Books* may be interpreted also outside of this historical context.

What happens here is a fundamental disagreement between communal alcohol sampling in Soplicowo<sup>5</sup> and intense Sarmatian and national drinking in the *zaścianek* in Dobrzyń, and the abstinence that *The Books* understand as patriotic obligation<sup>6</sup>. It is worth noting that Mickiewicz’s emigration catechism, taking the side of abstinence, is inscribed into the context of the customs of the era. As Iain Gately writes in *Drink. A Cultural History of Alcohol*, despite the existence of Christian ascetics, the conviction about alcohol belonging to “indispensable life needs” lasted for hundreds of years prior to the 19th century. The revolution begins at the time of Romanticism:

The age of steam, however, seemed receptive to abstinence, and the act of renouncing alcohol absolutely and forever acquired a name – teetotalism. The neologism was coined by Richard Turner [...] at a meeting of the Preston Temperance Society in 1833 (Gately 2009: 273).

*Księgi* and *Pan Tadeusz* are separated by two years, and, as is worth noting, the poem about the last foray in Lithuania is the one published later. What is Mickiewicz’s final message regarding the role of alcohol in the Polish case? Would drinking vodka as inseparable element of Polish tradition and identity already belong to history and the future prosperity of the nation lie in abstinence or greatly limited consumption?

### Towards Słowacki’s Writing

As a youth, Słowacki is not anacreontically delighted with high-proof beverages. If the subject appears, it is a purely literary conceit, far from a candid tone. In fairly loose translations of two poems by an Irish poet, Thomas Moore (Bąk 2010), there appears the motif of a goblet full of wine “humming in hearts”, but

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5 This ritual meaning of collective consumption of alcohol is referenced by the Warden Gervazy in his reproaches:

“Oh Count”, cried the Warden, “What do you think?  
It’s not enough that your honor is stained —  
must you with these Soplicas eat and drink?  
Must I, Gervazy Rembajło, named  
Warden of the Horeszko castle estate,  
endure insults in the house of my Lord?”  
(Mickiewicz 1995: 160; trans. Mickiewicz 2017: n.p.).

6 These moralizing pieces of advice were not devoid of social context. In Jadwiga of Działyński Zamoyska’s recollections of the 1830s, the post-uprising time led one to daily societal renunciations: “My Mother, if asked why she does not throw dancing evenings, despite having an appropriate apartment and growing daughters, would say: *When Poland is free, we shall dance and have balls, not before*” (Jarosińska 1994: 96).

it is far from ecstatic intoxication. In poems written by the author of *Godzina myśli* [*The Hour of Thought*] himself, the subject of alcohol is absent.

His later work, mature and late, mystical, references alcohol either as a neutral element of the presented world (not infrequently depicted ironically, when it comes to Sarmatian drunkenness), or in an unequivocally negative manner. This differentiation is overlaid with another division. Słowacki consistently ascribes getting drunk on vodka to lower strata: peasants, soldiers (whom he contemptuously refers to as *żoldactwo* [soldiery]) and Muscovites. Polish nobility and townspeople prefer wine (French or Tokay). In Słowacki's view, consuming high-proof alcohol generally puts one at lower position when it comes to class and nation.

While wine appears in early dramas, the protagonists do not drink vodka. Generally, wine remains a prop devoid of a significant role, it is not, for instance, an important element of the portrayal of characters. In *Mindowe* wine appears as an element of the Mass, Rogneda adds poison to wine, there is talk about French gifts in the shape of this noble drink. Maria Stuart, the drama's eponymous heroine, wants to revive a dying Page with a drop of wine. The Page responds, ambiguously, that he drank wine in the morning, which can refer to the moments of happiness at the side of the beloved queen. In *Beatryks Cenci* drunkenness characterizes the worst character of the entire drama – a father who, while blacked out on alcohol, wants to rape his daughter. A sentence spoken by the mother defending Beatryks shows the entire atrocity of alcohol: “Idź spać, jesteś pjany!... / Gadając toczysz pianę z ust...” [“Go to sleep, you're drunk!... / You're foaming at the mouth...” – trans. E.B.] (Słowacki 1959b: 18). There is no possibility of happy drinking. A call to drink, if it appears, is purely conventional, like Kirkor's and Balladina's invitations to feasting, or ironic, like *Śpiew nieznajomego* [*The Stranger's Song*] in *Kordian*:

Drink wine! Drink wine!  
 You don't believe it's a miracle  
 When wine flows in streams  
 Though the folk don't plant vines  
 [...] Drink wine! Go dream!  
 But the dawn will glimmer  
 Wine needs be made into blood  
 Remade wine drunk!  
 (Słowacki 2025: 281; trans. E.B.)

Słowacki put an unambiguously negative assessment of drunkenness as a Polish vice (regardless the social class) into the depiction of the traitor Dziędużycki, who courts Aniela, Beniowski's beloved:

His choice thus made, he came without a matchmaker,  
 And made his intent plain towards the girl;  
 His tree contained nor crook nor father-faker –

He never boasted how the blood would swirl,  
 When he sent those Confederates to the undertaker –  
 But said the King would make him soon an Earl;  
 He smoothed his moustache, and the lease postponed –  
 He loved his drink and loathed all cats, he owned  
 [...]

Grasped Grandad with his greedy right hand tight,  
 Then stretched his left towards the cheering can,  
 And chirped in terms of cheer, “My good old man!”

“As I’m a righteous man and honest Pole!  
 I’ll make your daughter love my lover’s craft,  
 Believe you me, my steady Starost whole!”  
 Here, death-like vocals rattling as he laughed,  
 He sipped some wine; he drank without control,  
 And grimaced after each deep, gurgling draught;  
 So, having drunk a quarter of the jug,  
 His fulsome, furrowed brow clung o’er his mug  
 (Słowacki 2014: 46, 47; trans. Słowacki 2009c: 212–213).

In a dialogue with the Major in *Fantazy*, Jan speaks in a similar tone:

Had you seen this mother  
 Screaming at me in the most funny, most angry way  
 “You killed my child – go away, don’t stand close  
 You vile!... You smell of a simple soldier  
 You smell, smell like a butler does  
 I can smell simple vodka and rotten  
 Tobacco from you – Away from my sight!”  
 (Słowacki 1959a: 289; trans. E.B.).

What draws one’s attention is Jan’s bitterness, as he is reduced to a butler and a soldier by the smell of “vile” stimulants, which, after all, are a necessary and culturally grounded anesthetizing (for his own suffering and the surrounding nightmare of exile), escapist, mollifying hunger and socializing (“mother booze”, “sister booze” appears in his emigrant song [Słowacki 1959b: 229]) remedy. When one is enslaved, a comfortable situation of choosing one’s lifestyle is distant, which the Countess Respektowa, as sharing this common fate for some time, should be aware of.

A statement made by Ślaz in *Lilla Weneda*, who distances himself from the Lechites, a tribe that gave origin to the Polish nobility (according to the so-called conquest theory<sup>7</sup>, as extolled in the drama), straddles the boundary between negative assessment and irony:

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7 On the conquest theory – Wierzbicki 2019: 26–120.

I would spit in the eye of who asked  
 If I am a Lechite. – What? Do my eyes show  
 boorishness, drunkenness, gluttony  
 Seven deadly sins, a taste for screams  
 For pickled cucumbers, for coats of arms  
 (Słowacki 1959a: 384, trans. E.B.).

However, Słowacki reaches the highest moral tone in *Ksiądz Marek* [*Father Marek*]. The eponymous hero does not waver in his assessment in a sermon:

FATHER MAREK, *pointing to Kosakowski*  
 Here is the Satan's servant  
 A man of murder and robbery  
 A violent drunkard  
 Empty as the devil's chapel  
 Screamer as a chicken war  
 (Słowacki 1959c: 60; trans. E.B.).

Vodka, which is the subject of interest in the present sketch, appears in the context of peasants in many texts by Słowacki. In *Beniowski*, the servant Grześ „took great care / Of vodka in Gdansk flask, with leathern cover, / Which gurgled like a drunken witch's prayer” (Słowacki 2014: 18, trans. Słowacki 2009c: 185). Unable to resist, he finally becomes drunk, falls off his horse, and gets lost on the way. In *Balladina*, intoxication with vodka is the attribute and genealogy of Grabiec [Hornbeam]. He reminisces about his father in the following way:

My Father plied the pipes year after year.  
 He played like no one else when he was drunk;  
 When he was sober, though, he really stunk  
 (Słowacki 1959a: 29; trans. Słowacki 2009b: 48).

and it is the only such clear trace in Słowacki's texts that connected drinking with increased artistic abilities. However, given the nature of Grabiec as a character, as well as the drama as such, it is difficult to treat this peasant memory in a non-ironic manner.

Already at the beginning of *Sen srebrny Salomei*, in the letter by the nobleman Gruszczyński, we find the following passage:

The peasants are black  
 Bloody, furious and disobedient  
 Drowning in vodka and mead  
 Lied to by the priests  
 (Słowacki 1959c: 115; trans. E.B.).

While in the statement by the Regimentarz, initializing Act IV, there are the following words:

How is it, Sawa? Did you well  
 Deceive the drunken peasants?  
 (Słowacki 1959c: 208, trans. E.B.)

The motif of inhuman, cruel and primitive collective behavior after drinking alcohol pertains to the soldiers as much as it does to the peasants. In *Ksiądz Marek*, the adjutant reports to Casimir Pułaski:

There one of your sergeants, Tytow  
 Wanted to teach the sick  
 But the drunk soldiery  
 Tore him to bits  
 And so the ruddy body  
 (Horrid work of the sutlers!)  
 Suddenly vanished in my eyes  
 Almost like a miracle  
 (Słowacki 1959c: 101; trans. E.B.).

Against the backdrop of these examples, a fragment of an arch-ironic, grotesque text, a quotation out of which is included in the title of the present article, gains on ambiguity. This is what Słowacki has to say about Polishness and drunkenness in *Poema Piasta Dantyszka herbu Leliwa o piekle*:

True is the Pole when he gets drunk  
 Thinks of the homeland and starts to cry  
 Then, as senseless people  
 Laughs aloud upon forgetting  
 [...]  
 And so! When the lovely homeland is dead  
 Who can blame an elder for getting drunk?  
 Hey, bring in jugs! And put around,  
 Let them help us die happy.  
 [...]  
 Nothing – Poverty, sadness, worry everywhere  
 The homeland – a parcel of bloodied mud  
 A Pole – an exile, a martyr, an orphan  
 Drink and find forgetting in a jug  
 And wake your heart when country comes back to life  
 (Słowacki 2009a: 547; trans. E.B.).

This reflection precedes the appearance of a phantom of Catherine II, depicted as the worst of all rulers of the Partitioning countries. What is Polish drunkenness here? It is not quite a continuation, affirmative in its tone, of the Sarmatian tradition of communal, vital drinking that we can find in *Pan Tadeusz* (if seasoned with the author's distance, filled with warm humor). If it is not entirely ironic towards the figure of a Pole-drunkard, it is an agreement, full of resignation, that alcoholism is a result of the fall and, simultaneously, the only possible reaction of the Poles to a hopeless situation. It is understandable, but is it good and acceptable? Drunkenness becomes a metaphor of reaching the rock bottom of individual and social debasement; it will end, or at least – it should end with the homeland being reborn as a sovereign state, which unexpectedly meets the message of *Księgi Pielgrzymstwa Polskiego* on the subject.

In Słowacki's literary pieces there does not appear an unambiguous praise of alcohol as Polish tradition; there is also no justification for its abuse as something necessary for artists, leading towards "artificial paradises". What did it look like in Słowacki's lived experience? Jan Zieliński wrote about "narcotic-minded Słowacki", referencing both "the poppy drink" from *Lamber* and hashish in *Beniowski* (Zieliński 1999: 237–250). The author connects these motifs with Słowacki's personal experiences, as the poet had brought a glass hookah from an Eastern journey, to be used later. The subject of alcohol did not receive such an overview, for Słowacki, it seems, reduced alcohol in his life to drinking wine at meals – above all. He reveals distance towards excessive amounts of alcohol, although the below quotation from his letter to his mother should be read with certain suspicion – it should be kept in mind that Słowacki mitigated his experiences in front of his mother.

To prove how I gained the friendship of the priests I will just describe my departure to you. The good fathers, sad to see me leave, gave me all provisions for the road and wine. But when it came to load the donkey that was to carry the things, it turned out that he couldn't bear the enormous wine bottle. I was happy to see that, as I thought I would be able to excuse myself from accepting the gift, but alas! The priests send a man to follow me, and on his wiry arms, he brought the bottle, going foot by foot, to Beirut itself. If I had any house of my own in Europe, I would hide this excellent drink away until we met; but since it is impossible to wander with it around the world, I drink it, or, rather, every Sunday I offer it to six Capuchin Friars, who are returning on the same ship from the Holy Land, and thus I gain their great respect and (as they are Spaniards) the title of don to my name (Słowacki 1959d: 305).

Although it is consumed in a pleasant company, the bottle is presented as a nuisance more than a joy-giving gift.

In the light of the present overview, one can ask: how could creators so distant, sometimes: hostile to drunkenness, reluctant towards high-proof bev-

erages, if drinking at all, then wine or beer (Mickiewicz) become convincing namesakes for vodkas? How do the vodkas seen on store shelves portray Mickiewicz and Słowacki?

### **What Do Vodkas Say About Mickiewicz and Słowacki?**

This is impossible to establish by other means than treating bottles as artifacts that can be subjected to reading, semiotic analysis, regardless the content. The latter lies beyond my area of interest and research abilities. It is worth noting that there exist guide books for the connoisseurs of vodka which document taste variations of this beverage (Baron, Klesyk 2017).

Before the purchase and tasting, a client must be tempted by the message of the packaging. What can we find there? Let us begin with Adam Mickiewicz.

### **The Adam Mickiewicz Vodka**

At its front, the slender bottle informs that it belongs to the premium class; under the name consisting of the bard's first and last names we can see his portrait known from the 10 zloty coin produced in the years 1975–1977, at the time of the Polish People's Republic, according to Anna Jarnuszkiewicz's design. Around Mickiewicz's profile there is the inscription: \* distilled 7 times \* filtered. The neck showcases the bard's date of birth, however, it is not stated that it is a reference to the author's birthday. The text placed above the date informs us about the advantages of the beverage, creating a false impression that the poet's birthday begins the tradition of the vodka's production.

The bottle's back carries information about its namesake. The text is as follows<sup>8</sup>:

Adam Mickiewicz (24.12.1798–26.11.1855)  
 – an outstanding Polish poet of the Romantic era  
 counted among the so-called Three Bards.  
 He was a great man and artist, whose oeuvre  
 gained admiration both among his compatriots and abroad.  
 As homage to this Great Pole we dedicate  
 an exceptional product – the Adam Mickiewicz vodka.  
 The quality of the brand is overseen by the best specialists.  
 They carefully select ingredients and match  
 them to the process of production and recipes inspired  
 by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and thus times contemporary  
 to our hero.

I will not analyze the above text, its debatable style and rhetoric acrobatics in detail. Similarly to the case of the date, we are dealing here with a manipulation aiming to “age” the vodka and make it worthy. However, what is worth noting is the lack of direct reference to the namesake's consumption experi-

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8 All citations of the label texts approximate the text design.

ences or to the subject of alcohol in his oeuvre. Mickiewicz has his vodka because he simply deserves it as “a Great Pole”; by producing and – consequently – consuming it, we pay him deserved homage. One can have the impression that we are supposed to drink instead of re-reading the works by the author of *Grażyna*, that – in the dimension of social psychology – drinking Adam Mickiewicz is partly going to fulfill the cultural norm of new readings of his oeuvre. Mickiewicz’s biography is valuable and productive in another area. The pure Adam Mickiewicz vodka has its taste variants. In the *Wspomnienia z podróży* [*Memories from travelling*] series we will find the Cranberry variant. This is its description:

Inspired by Adam Mickiewicz’s journeys  
we created an exceptional taste of alcohol.  
Slightly tangy Cranberry has been long present  
in the Vilnius Region, inscribing itself into its culinary  
traditions. Our beverage connects high  
quality alcohol with the refreshing fruit  
with unusual properties

“The Vilnius Region”.

Another version of Adam Mickiewicz is Bitter Orange:

Following Adam Mickiewicz’s footsteps, we went  
to France. It is famous for original  
taste combinations. Our Bitter Orange  
is a meeting of the unmet. High quality  
alcohol put together with crystal clear  
water and gently tangy fruit  
guarantees a successful journey.

“France”.

The descriptions are supposed to influence our sense of taste. It is, however, easy to note that this happens entirely outside the biography of Mickiewicz, whose experience of leaving the Vilnius Region was painful, and whose stay in France can hardly be described as “a successful journey” with “gently tangy” aftertaste. This would be a euphemism. For the purposes of marketing, Mickiewicz, deeply suffering due to his tragic fate of a pilgrim, was made into a contemporary tourist, excited in his desire to permanently meet and consume that which is (presented as) exotic. The Romantic martyrology of political exile, which is unattractive to the market if significant to the poet’s identity, was translated into the hedonism of contemporary travelers, seeking entertainment and deceptively authentic.

### **The Pan Tadeusz Vodka**

The vodka is contained in a bottle similarly slender to Adam Mickiewicz, but it comes from a different producer. The front label contains a name written in a modern font in the color of deep noble blue, but alluding to a title put in the cover or title page of a book. Underneath the name of the beverage, there is a golden signature imitating handwriting: “Symbol of Hospitality”. On the neck, there is a sticker depicting a young lord (or a townsman) in a 19th century clothing, probably intending to be the protagonist of the eponymous poem by Mickiewicz. In the background of the silhouette, there is barely legible text (another imitation of handwriting), which goes as follows:

In the name of Polish hospitality, the Pan Tadeusz vodka fills (complements?) the meetings of those close to each other. Let it be drunk by all for whom time and distance are no barrier to visits, especially when an opportunity to celebrate occurs.

In the back label, before the information on how the vodka is produced, we can see a sentence in bold: “An ideal vodka for moments of communal celebration”. The textual layer of this artifact is complemented by the bottle itself, and an interesting concept. Above the labels there are embossed names of the characters from the literary text. There are, thus, Tadeusz, Zosia, Telimena, the Judge, Wojski, Jacek, Protazy, Gerwazy, and below the labels – popular Polish names: Krzysztof, Oliwia, Anna, Zuzanna, Czesław, Karina, Grzegorz, Marta etc.

### **The Juliusz Słowacki Vodka**

An alcohol from the same producer as the Adam Mickiewicz vodka. A slender bottle playing with the black and white aesthetic (the box adds a golden tone). There is no textual information other than the level of distillation and the quality of the beverage. The only significant accent, next to the vodka name, is Słowacki’s portrait, which is probably a rendition of Władysław Barwicki’s lithograph (or a compilation of several portraits of the poet). At the bottom of the image, in the ring going around it, there are dates of birth and death, as well as a repetition of the first and last names.

### **The Soplica Vodka**

This fairly popular beverage is produced by a still different distillery than the abovementioned drinks. Soplica is one of popular vodkas – this is shown by the multiplication of “tastes” and “forms” in the form of the so-called *małpki* (literally: monkeys, small bottles of alcohol), stimulating the state of pathological alcoholism in Poland. Going back to the artifact – it does not refer to Mickiewicz’s work by any signature; however, the image of a noble manor, placed in the top of the label, clearly refers to the poem. The gentry code is complemented by the image at the bottom – these are arable fields behind a bundle of hay, a pitchfork and a rake.

The year 1891 was when the first pure Soplica vodka was produced. It was made in Gniezno by Bolesław Kasprowicz, a person engaged into struggle for independence, for a moment after regaining independence, a president of Gniezno. As one can surmise, the name was, above all, a reference to Mickiewicz's text, guaranteeing the drink recognition and common association with Polishness. The inscription on the label: [vodka] "Inspired by years of tradition" refers both to the date when the alcohol was made and to Mickiewicz's poem. As we know from the earlier analysis of the works and biographies of the two bards, they cannot be the foundation for developing a seductive tale about the advantages of vodka. For Mickiewicz, heavy drinking is characteristic for the *declassé* nobility, whose troublemaking is softened by the warm, reminiscent tone of *Pan Tadeusz*, but it is still a song of the past. In Soplicowo as such, drinking is civilized, moderate, courteous, and still more attention and affect is given to coffee. In *The Books*, abusing alcohol meets with condemnation. In Słowacki's writing – vodka is the drink of primitive peasants and soldiery. However, the producers reach for the Romantics, either ignoring the messages found in their work, or manipulating their biographies. Why?

### **Vodka and Romantic Sarmatism. In Summation**

The vodkas that have become the impulse for reflection and the subject of the present description can be divided into those that refer directly to historical authors and into beverages referring to literary texts. As the analysis has shown, the former refer to the "greatness" and popularity of Romantic poets (the *Adam Mickiewicz* vodka is an homage), while ignoring both bards' actual attitude towards alcohol, whether manifested in life or revealed in their writing. In the case of Mickiewicz, what occurs is also a rather free and symptomatic manipulation of his biography. The martyrology of a pilgrim or an exile disappears to be supplanted by the exoticity of distant lands, consumed peacefully and joyfully in the native land. Cosmopolitanism meets with Sarmatism<sup>9</sup>.

A similar reduction of Romantic context takes place in the case of purely "literary" vodkas. The producers of high-proof alcohol bet on one text, *Pan Tadeusz*, as a symbol of Romantic Sarmatism<sup>10</sup>. The tradition of heroism, self-sacrifice in the nation liberating struggle of Polish Romanticism was omitted, similarly to purely artistic practices of stimulating Romantic imagination with alcohol or the reality of salon parties (described in the 19th century epistolography or memoirs). What the *Pan Tadeusz* vodka and the *Soplica* vodka draw

9 An obvious allusion to the title of the volume *Kosmopolityzm i sarmatyzm. Antologia powojenego eseju polskiego* [*Cosmopolitanism and Sarmatism. An Anthology of Post-War Polish Essay*] (Heck 2003), setting these two notions as the poles of Polish thinking.

10 "*Pan Tadeusz* does not re-create Sarmatism as much as it creates it, makes it up. [...] The image of noble Poland is a pure myth. Additionally, an exceptionally efficient myth, with such a strong presence in collective consciousness that it makes impossible any contact with any preceding reality. [...] [one could] state, Baudrillard-like, that Sarmatism does not exist, as there is only its simulation, indistinguishable from reality, in Mickiewicz's text" (Plata 2017: 128).

from the poem are three values: hospitality, community (mostly neighborly) and lordliness (or lordly aspirations), expressed by the ideal of the old noble manor.

This selective and banalizing version of Polish Romanticism, which reduces it to idyllically seen Sarmatism (in Romantic spirit) needs not be conscious of the notions used herein (Sarmatism, Romanticism, Romantic Sarmatism, Neo-Sarmatism). We do not have to expect the vodka producers or consumers to be familiar with these issues (although research in the form of interviews and surveys could be a valuable extension of these analyses, exceeding the scope of the present text). In Poland, experiencing and renewing Romanticism is intuitive in nature. In the context of more serious issues (that is, the contemporary political discourse), this was proven by Tomasz Plata in a book published in 2017:

the return to Romanticism in the last three decades was rarely intentional or conscious. It was also rarely connected with authentic knowledge of the Romantic tradition. [...] What was taken out of Romanticism were selected notions as justification for present choices. In each of the languages we describe Romanticism functioned in a vestigial manner: some remembered Tyrtaeon Romanticism, some – Romantic idylls. Nobody connected it into a whole (Plata 2017: 136).

What can be the function of Romanticism thus reduced to *Pan Tadeusz*, and the poem as such – to idealized Sarmatism (regardless the work's rich subject matter)? It can be said that Mickiewicz's arch-poem shows Sarmatism in its gentry and idyllic guise (Żbikowski 1999: 253). The *Pan Tadeusz* vodka refers to gentry hospitality, every version of Soplica's label woos with a noble manor with columns and trees. It is a perfect "little world", "closed organism", filled with the atmosphere of "patriarchal life" (Cynarski 1969: 235). In the noble Commonwealth, these micro-worlds created an "actual federation of neighborhoods" (Zajączkowski 1993: 36), wherein hosting and being hosted in a noble manor or a magnate's court, with inseparable alcohol (as we have shown, differentiating classes) was one of the basic communal rituals. This "being hosted" is to re-create the old lordly gesture, connect itself with contemporary elegance and sociability.

Romanticism, as updated in the vodka labels, makes it possible to connect conservative, patriotic and Romantic Sarmatian idea with contemporary ambitions of a middle class in Polish capitalism (be it modern, post-modern, or late capitalism is not to be solved here). These aspirations, next to purely economic ones, are of a dual cultural nature. Firstly, consuming "Romantic" vodkas is a twisted way of fulfilling social norm of readership; a surface, or perhaps even grotesque proof of being familiar with the classics of literature. However, the second aspect seems more important to me.

As I have proven, in literature and lived experience of Mickiewicz and Słowacki as such, vodka is not an alcohol perceived to be of first rank. In the ritual of noble hosting, even strongly exaggerated (in the spirit of Jędrzej Ki-

towicz's *Opis obyczajów i zwyczajów za panowania Augusta III* [A Description of Customs and Habits during the August III Rule] or Henryk Rzewuski's *Pamiętki Soplisy*), wine dominates, while strong alcohol plays the role of an addition, an aperitif. It is a peasant, a soldier or a stranger – Muscovite – who abuse vodka. What is contemporarily projected over this old image of vodka is the legacy of the Polish People's Republic. In Poland of the second half of the 20th century, vodka was a common anesthetic, remedying the equally common declassification in the reality of "real socialism" (the fact how inefficiently its "popularity" was dealt with is showcased in a collection of statements corralled in 1969–1970 by the Social Anti-Alcohol Committee, entitled *Alkohol w kulturze i obyczaju* [Alcohol in Culture and Custom]; Górski, Moczarski 1972). Polish vodka enters the decades of post-1989 free market with an image baggage that distances it from the elites. When it comes to high-proof beverages, the latter turn in their choices towards the tradition of Anglo-Saxon whisky, associated with the higher spheres.

The use of "great Poles", creators and representatives of the intellectual elite of the nation would be a way to counteract the turning away from vodka by the means of a reference inscribed into the process of the Polish intelligentsia identifying themselves with noble tradition. The aim would be for vodka to regain the lost (or, in fact, never ascribed thereto) elite position. Andrzej Zajęczkowski wrote about the transformation of Polish elites: "Genetically and culturally, intelligentsia is rooted in the noble stratum, and as the latter, so the former wants to remain a born elite. It remains an elite while retaining its leading function in every field of social life [...]" (Zajęczkowski 1993: 66–67). These theses are confirmed by contemporary, in-depth sociological studies. In the book *Totem inteligencji. Arystokracja, szlachta i ziemiaństwo w polskiej przestrzeni społecznej* [The Totem of Intelligentsia. Aristocracy, Nobility and the Gentry in Polish Social Space] by Rafał Smoczyński and Tomasz Zarycki, we can find a detailed analysis of the mechanism of the constant influence of nobility on the attitude and mentality of the Poles. In Chapter 6, entitled *Rewolucja inteligentka i narodziny polskiego modelu obywatelskiego* [The Intelligentsia Revolution and the Birth of the Polish Citizenship Model] there is posed a thesis concerning "the programming of the Polish citizenship model by the means of numerous elements of the noble ethos" (Smoczyński, Zarycki 2017: 199).

In the light of these diagnoses, the Adam Mickiewicz, Pan Tadeusz, Sopliska and Juliusz Słowacki vodkas (three of which, let us not forget, are of premium rank), drawing upon Romantic Sarmaticism, would situate themselves as beverages characteristic for contemporary professional middle class, which supplants erstwhile intelligentsia and still more removed nobility in the function of the national elite that leads society. By touching upon a note of Polish identity, affirming private ownership and nurturing the subjectivity of hospitality, in a deeper layer, they would actualize the longing for genealogy drawn from nobility (in contrast to the plebeians abusing alcohol), making expensive vodka accepted by elites as a beverage consumed in moderation and with elegance.

Is that really so? This may be the subject for further sociological research. We do not know what social strata the consumers of “Romantic” vodkas derive from and to what degree consuming these beverages is identifying or: aspirational in nature. This, however, is of lower importance for the main conclusion. Indeed, what is significant is that in the perspective of literary and culture studies these beverages are a contemporary evidence of unchanging societal vitality of ideological and aesthetic categories of Romantic Sarmatism in our country, vitality exceeding the walls of schools, universities and libraries.

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

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**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's<sup>1</sup> book *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach* [*Peasant Women: A Story About Our Grandmothers*],

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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 turn<sup>2</sup>, 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

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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.*<sup>3</sup> (2011), the album *Gore* by the band R.U.T.A. (2012), containing musical performances of anti-feudal peasant songs, or the film *Niepamięć*<sup>4</sup> (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 yet<sup>5</sup>. 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 countryside<sup>6</sup>. 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).

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- 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 subjects<sup>7</sup>. This was the moment of a rapid development of folk political movements<sup>8</sup>, 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 Bereza<sup>9</sup>

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 writer<sup>10</sup> 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 culture<sup>11</sup>. 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 Smaciarz (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 playwright<sup>12</sup> (Pigoń 1958: 95), he directed his attention to-

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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 peasants<sup>13</sup> (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-

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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 villages<sup>14</sup>. 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 violence<sup>15</sup>.

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).

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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 year<sup>16</sup>, Orkan shows the moment in which the countryside enters

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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 time<sup>17</sup>, 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 countryside<sup>18</sup> 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

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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 peasants<sup>19</sup>. 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

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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*<sup>20</sup>. 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)<sup>21</sup>, 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.

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

<sup>21</sup> 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"<sup>22</sup> (Pigoń 1958: 5). Moreover, Orkan's oeuvre becomes Pigoń's inspiration when creating the project of "the folk national culture" (Wołowicz 2017).

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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).

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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<sup>1</sup>, the rule of Mieszko I and his descendants to the rule of Bolesław III the Wrymouth in the 12th century. As noted by Monika Brzósztowicz-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

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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<sup>2</sup> (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<sup>3</sup>, 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, Mieczęw. In the end, the woman escapes with her son, takes on the name Żywia to honor the Goddess Żywia

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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 cup-bearer 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<sup>4</sup> (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<sup>5</sup>, 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,

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4 For instance, Gerard Labuda (1989: 77) cites mentions in *Powieść minionych lat* (*Powieść do-roczna*) [*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 Anonymus 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 preminences 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 *Szaławita* (which has received the prestigious Janusz A. Zajdel's Award) and the 2019

novel *Oczy uroczone* 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 śwatami* (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 refers 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*<sup>6</sup>. 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-

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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<sup>7</sup>. No direct sources concerning Slavic faith and religion were

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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<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>, 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 rendering 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<sup>10</sup> 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 Weneda, 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 Weneda 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<sup>11</sup> 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 Romanticism.

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, clichéd 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<sup>12</sup>.

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 pre-figurations: 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<sup>13</sup>; Slavic

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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 *wąpierz* 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*<sup>14</sup> also points towards the main subject of the cycle: depicting the fall of the pagan world of the Slavs (the novel’s “People

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<sup>14</sup> 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<sup>15</sup>. 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).

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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<sup>16</sup> 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-

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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<sup>17</sup>. 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, Kądziała 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,

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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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# Between a Phantasm and the Daily Life. Herstoric In(ter)ventions in Latest Polish Women’s Literature\*

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**ABSTRACT:** The article explores herstoric in(ter)ventions in Polish women’s literature of the last decades. The author analyzes selected texts by Izabela Filipiak, Joanna Bator, Anna Dziewit-Meller, Martyna Bunda, Liliana Hermetz and Inga Iwasiów, drawing particular attention to the strategies of revisionist re-writing women’s phantasms and their influence on the identity of the protagonists and family stories. The author points out that after 1989, there emerges a need to reconsider women’s phantasms present in Polish national imaginari-um and the inspiring influence of precursory works by Maria Janion, who was one of the first in Polish literary studies to reflect upon women’s experience of history in gender perspective. The article also refers to influential philosophical concepts by Jolanta Brach-Czaina, seeking in daily, repetitive activities transgressive potential and gestures of resistance against the excluding mechanisms of History, as well as strategies of resilience against trauma.

**KEYWORDS:** phantasm, daily life, herstory, woman, Polish Mother, revolution

## Herstory and Literature

Women are more likely to be “represented” than to be described or to have their stories told – much less be allowed to tell their own stories. It may be that the more women are absent from the public arena, the

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more abundant the representations. Olympus is filled with goddesses, but Greek city-states had no female citizens. The Virgin reigns above altars at which (male) priests officiate. Marianne is the incarnation of the French Republic, that most virile of regimes. Woman – imagined, imaginary, even fantasized – epitomizes everything else (Duby, Perrot 1992: X).

The quoted conclusion of French historians, Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot points towards a tension between a phantasmic imaginary version of a woman and her actual experience, between the need for an allegoric woman, referring to something different than her own self, and erasing women from public space and historical discourse and expropriating them from their own bodies. These issues became some of research problems for women's history and gender history (Canning 2010). The creation and development of women's history as an independent research discipline took place in the 1960s in the United Kingdom and the United States, and the 1970s in France. Crystallization of this research practice was connected with such factors as anthropologization of contemporary historiography and broadening heretofore research perspective with issues connected with women's experience, feminization of academic structures, and, finally, the necessity of reclaiming one's own past and memory as constitutive factors of emancipatory project (Nora 1989; Perrot 2006). The American feminists of the second wave created the "herstory" neologism, which was, in principle, an element of criticizing traditional historic writing, dominated by an androcentric perspective: "the wordplay of her-story (her story) became a counterbalance for his-tory (his story)" (Kuźma-Markowska 2014: 179). The initial goal, which was to return women to history, soon turned out to be insufficient – scholars such as Natalie Zemon Davies, Gerda Lerner or Joan Wallach Scott undertook reflection on the reasons behind systemic exclusion of women from official historiography (Davies 1976; Lerner 1979; Scott 1986), using post-structuralist thought or Michel Foucault's concept of power-knowledge as inspiration.

A breakthrough moment for the history of women turned out to be the publication of Scott's article *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis* (Scott 1986: 1053–1075), in which the scholar pointed out that in traditional historiography, marginalization of research into women's past is connected with not noticing the research potential of the category of gender. Acknowledging the usefulness of this notion in relation to not just the issues traditionally associated with womanhood, but also a broad spectrum of historical issues made it possible to undertake critical reflection on patriarchal mechanisms of power and the institutions stabilizing those, as well as current models of femininity and masculinity. This necessarily simplified delineation of changes happening in the field of women's history serves me to emphasize that in Poland, the development of this historical practice took place in a different manner than in the West. In Poland, history of women as a research field constituted after

1989, in the post-transformation period (after the fall of the Communist rule), and, thus, at a time when its Western equivalent was in the process of transforming itself into gender history. The relationship between Polish historical and gender studies was also shaped in a different way. According to Dobrochna Kałwa, a women's history scholar and theoretician:

In Poland, as elsewhere in the world, women's past is the subject of interest both to historians and to gender studies scholars. However, if in Western (Anglo-Saxon or German) historiography we can notice an approach and interaction between various communities of broadly understood humanities, in Polish circumstances, instead of interdisciplinary dialogue and cooperation, we are dealing with a situation where two research trends, historical and "gender", remain in opposition toward one another, offering different and separate conceptions and interpretations of women's past (Kałwa 2014a: 118).

Kałwa repeatedly emphasized the local specificity of historical research in Central and Eastern Europe as characterized by considerable distrust towards gender theories; she sought the reasons behind this state of affairs, among others, in the fear of being accused of ideologization and instrumentalization (Kałwa 2014b: 17; Szewczyk 2023: 99)<sup>1</sup>. Despite the reluctance of professional historians, the aforementioned neologism "herstory" found its place in contemporary Polish humanities where – among other reasons, due to popular historiography – there functions a notion of a herstoric turn, clearly emerging in the last years (Grzebalska 2015: 147–148; Szewczyk 2023: 94–114), and connected with the increased interest in women's past in the publishing field, popular historiography and literary studies. Due to the growing interest in women's history within literary studies, the subject of my sketch consists in narratives that I describe as herstoric. I take this concept to denote literary texts that problematize women's experience of history and that create a field of in(ter)ventive negotiations of meanings of female phantasms and allegories rooted in national memory. Herstoric narratives establish a relationship between literature and history that does not only play a background role, but becomes subjected to critical reflection, considerably influencing the identity of women protagonists. Such an understanding of herstoric narratives makes it possible to avoid the danger of abusing the widespread notion of herstory, frequently used in reference to all stories about women (Nowacki 2019: 149). For the purposes of my reflections I have selected texts created over the course of the last few decades, not infrequently inspired by autobiographic experience, inscribed into the genres of a *Bildungsroman*, a neo-post-settler novel (see Siewior 2013), or

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<sup>1</sup> However, it needs to be emphasized that in recent years, monographs concerning the history of women in the period of Communism wherein the category of gender becomes a key research tool were published in Poland (Fidelis 2010; Stańczak-Wiślicz, Perkowski, Fidelis, Klich-Kluczevska 2020; Artwińska, Mrozik, Jarska et al. 2021).

family novel, but ones that always pertain to its women protagonists negotiating their own identities. These are stories that formulate sharp questions concerning the participation of women in the Solidarity revolution, that attempt to deal with growing up at the time of Polish People's Republic (1945–1989), that touch upon the issue of inheriting war trauma, or finding one's place in a new reality of the post-war or transformation period.

I would like to locate my remarks on herstoric narratives in the context of two research proposals seemingly connected only by being created at a similar time. I am referring here to the concepts by the prominent Polish literary studies scholar and historian of ideas, Maria Janion, contained in her book *Kobiety i duch inności* [*Women and the Spirit of Otherness*] and to the reflection by the philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czaina, found in the essay collections *Szczeliny istnienia* [*Fissures of Being*] (1992) and *Błony umysłu* [*Membranes of the Mind*] (2003). It should be emphasized that despite the passage of time, both publications continue to resonate in Polish humanities, inspiring reflections concerning women's experiences and identities. Maria Janion's *Kobiety i duch inności* is one of the first Polish publications in which the scholar drew a framework for revisionist thinking about the presence of women in history. The author made both historic and fictional figures into protagonists of her book: ones that performed gender and cultural transgressions, were gifted with a distinguishing trait of otherness, difference and madness, which defined their presence in public spaces as well as in literature (Mroziak 2012: 44–45). There is no doubt as to the foundational nature of Janion's work, but it needs to be stated that her conclusions also met with some doubts on the part of scholars interested in women's history. As Aleksandra Ubertowska remarked:

Janion's study is, therefore, a "foundational", basic work – but it does not mean that it is free from methodological limitations. It seems that the book's weakness lies in the fact that cases of anonymous women thrown into history that challenges their heretofore stabilized gender roles do not fit the horizon of Janion's feminist writing. And it appears that it is precisely a confrontation – struggling with "surcharge of history" that comes suddenly and irreversibly changes the life of common women – that seems to be the essence of Polish fate in a feminist perspective (Ubertowska 2015: 19).

In her works Maria Janion repeatedly undertook the subject of female political figures, following the transformations of the French Marianne – the allegory of the Revolution into an image of strict and dignified Republic, or studying the history of the personification of Polonia as a symbolic embodiment of the body of the nation<sup>2</sup> (Janion 2006, 2007). The scholar drew attention to how

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2 Janion's analyses, located in the framework of studies into women's experience of history, saw their continuation by inspiring – both conceptually and methodologically – the monographic

the 19th century saw a growing need within political imagination for women's figures, gradually undergoing allegorization that resulted in them being made melodramatic and kitschy. Janion's analyses of the "long endurance" of women – phantasmic images showed their influence over collective imagination and the national identity discourse, which is particularly significant in the perspective of research into women's history and showcasing the contrast between phantasmic femininity and actual women's experience. For this reason, the quotation cited at the beginning of my sketch could be a motto to Maria Janion's reflections; in her research, she used the notion of a phantasm, understood as "various kinds of imaginings, images, emotional subjects, delusions, mirages, mystifications, hallucinations, dreams and illusions" (Janion 2006: 6), which, however, result in enduring consequences within consciousness, and thus, can also have impact on women's biographies and histories.

If the subject of interest of the author of the project of phantasmic criticism was what is subversive and focused around otherness, then Jolanta Brach-Czaina's reflection in *Szczeliny istnienia*, one of the most important Polish philosophical books of the 1990s, concentrated on the experience of what is corporeal and sensual, connected with private space and repetitive household chores. Brach-Czaina's project was based on the philosophy of existential concrete, and one of its foundations consists in daily, invisible household work (*krzątactwo* – busyness), traditionally taken to be women's domain. In this perspective, busyness, inseparable from human existence, allows for a particular access to reality. At the same time, the pages of *Szczeliny istnienia* revealed a concept of embodied subject, rooted in being due to the repetitive actions and physiological processes omitted in philosophical reflection. As Tomasz Stawiszyński wrote in his introduction to a subsequent edition of Brach-Czaina's essays,

In the pages of this book there is revealed a fundamental ecstasy of the most banal daily practices and props. [...] And above all – as is, after all, an essential condition of the possibility of any kind of existence – the fact of having a body. With all of its usually undescribed, shamefully hidden "meaty" physiology. With excreting, body fluids, being born and dying, eating other bodies [...] (Stawiszyński 2018: 7).

I treat Janion's and Brach-Czaina's projects, briefly summarized above, in the perspective of women's history not as opposing, but, rather, complementing

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volume *...czterdzieści i cztery. Figury literackie. Nowy kanon [...Forty and Four. Literary Figures. A New Canon]*, which is a project of gender-based re-reading of Polish literary and cultural canon, as well as its interpretation through the lens of women figures gifted with subversive potential (Mrozik i in. 2016). As the authors of the introduction to this extensive monograph remarked: "a central figure for our thinking of new canon was Polonia reconstructed by Maria Janion in, among others, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna [The Uncanny Slavic Tradition]* (2006). The interpretative fields she delineated showed the directions for exploration, intellectual investigation and were clues in analyzing the figures that create our historical and literary memory" (Rudaś-Grodzka, Smoleń 2016: 12).

one another. Taking into account their ceaseless influence within Polish gender studies, in the present sketch I focus on reading selected herstoric narratives created after 1989 through the lens of both concepts. My aim here is not to create a total synthesis of the issue I am interested in, but to show the way in which women's literature, as emerging over the last decades, captures women's phantasms, revising women's allegories and identity figures rooted in national imagination. I also aim to show how herstoric narratives undertake reflection over History through the lens of daily life, repetitive activities that turn out to be practices of resilience against the experienced trauma and, at the same time, gestures of resistance against discriminating historical mechanisms.

### Women Rebels and Polish Mothers

A reconstruction of herstoric in(ter)ventions in Polish literature of the last decades is not possible without taking into account Izabela Filipiak's (born in 1961) short stories published in the 1990s, namely, *SKA* (from the volume *Śmierć i spirala* [*Death and the Spiral*], 1992) and *Weronika, portret z kotem* [*Weronika, a Portrait with a Cat*], from the volume *Niebieska menażeria* [*Blue Menagerie*], 1997), as well as her novel *Absolutna amnezja* [*Absolute Amnesia*] (1995), one of the most important texts of the period after the system transformation. The lively discussion she instigated became – as Przemysław Czapliński noted – the first debate concerning gender in Polish literary criticism, while its participants saw the category of gender as useful for analyzing literary texts (Czapliński 2024: 213).

From the perspective of my reflections, what is significant is the autobiographical signature of Filipiak's oeuvre: the author had participated in Maria Janion's seminar at the University of Gdańsk. The scholar herself dedicated an affirmative essay published in the collection *Kobiety i duch inności* to *Absolutna amnezja*, and recognized herself in the figure of the Teacher-Mistress presented in the novel. While analyzing the transgressive potential of Filipiak's teenage heroine in Polish literary canon, Monika Świerkosz drew attention to the fact that it is not a coincidence that her name is Marianna, which refers to the imaginary representations of the French Republic and one of the most recognizable feminine political figures, whose transformations were analyzed by Maria Janion (Świerkosz 2016: 405). According to the scholar, the transformation of the Goddess of Liberty – Revolution into the stately personification of the Republic associated with motherhood and strict morality denoted the end of the anti-structural phase of the revolutionary impulse and sending women to traditional social roles and private spaces. Filipiak made the protagonist of her novel into a girl gifted with sensitivity and a keen sense of observation, whose adolescence happens at the time of the violent strikes at the Polish Coast in the 1970s. Torn between her father – a secretary of the local party cell – and her mother, engaged into opposition activities, Marianna discovers that both at school and at home she is being socialized to take a subordinate place in social

hierarchy and fulfill a reproductive role. In this literary way, Filipiak processed the mechanism of the need for a feminine allegory with the simultaneous marginalization of women's experiences, as diagnosed by Janion.

Izabela Filipiak was one of the first to diagnose the male-centric nature of the heroic foundational myth of Solidarity and the traditional gender contract reproduced by the Solidarity opposition, which Maria Janion (2003: 7) also wrote about in the introduction to the Polish edition of Shana Penns's *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland*. The short stories *Weronika, portret z kotem* and *SKA* are connected by a similar narrative perspective, established by the protagonists' emigration; years later, they reminisce about their engagement into opposition activities, an experience that is deeply hurting, unprocessed for both. In both short stories there also recurs the particularly significant moment of young women being excluded from the space of the student strike – a space where History is symbolically taking place. It turns out that the source of this exclusion lies in their sexuality: by not having an exclusive disposer, it is perceived as a threat to the seriousness of the “masculine matter” which consists in participation in Solidarity structures (see Mrozik 2012: 163)<sup>3</sup>.

Reminiscing about her youth spent in Gdańsk at the time of the late People's Polish Republic, the narrator of *Weronika...* wants to reconstruct the story of the eponymous character, realizing, years later, how the latter influenced her own identity, artistic and life choices<sup>4</sup>. Regaining the story of *Weronika* – an emancipated painter with an open house – full of “areas of silence” has its meaning not just for the narrator's individual biography; it also serves to capture mechanisms whereby women's oppositional activities are erased. At the time, the relationship between the two women is mediated and conditioned by Seweryn, *Weronika*'s son and the narrator's fiancé, who is the leader of an informal student group. Filipiak recounts its microstructure, dominated by young active men focused around their leader, and, simultaneously, unmasks the relations within, which save a narrow strip of approved roles for women: those of muses, wives, or fiancées ready for sacrifice. As Agnieszka Mrozik

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3 A similar motif appears in Agnieszka Graff's essay *Patriarchat po Seksmisji (Patriarchy after Sex Mission)*, in which the author analyzes the Polish political discourse and the Solidarity gender contract by referring to her own experiences: “In 1987, as a 17-year-old ‘oppositionist's girlfriend’ I was carried out, against my will, from a demonstration when it seemed batoning was imminent. On the one hand I was livid, on the other, I knew that the bruises the boys will leave the battle with will be worth more in their own and in my eyes if I allow myself to be first carried out of the battlefield. [...] Today I am convinced that clashes with the police and the later stories about them were in the NSZ community a rite whereby masculine identity was created” (Graff 2021: 37–38).

4 The narrator emphasizes the radical difference between *Weronika* and other women, manifested in her appearance, behavior, and undertaken activities: “she was completely different from those I knew in passing, herded into work, tired of getting up too early, exhausted in buses, teetering at the edge of irritation, beyond which dementia begins, while in queues – mothers of my young friends” (Filipiak 2006: 428). Thus, women's experiences of the Polish People's Republic construct a generation gap.

aply notes, “In Filipiak’s texts there is an essential difference between women and men engaged in oppositional activities: men function as individuals who have their personalities, ambitions, passions, while women appear as a not very interesting, gray mass, a set that only gains meaning when it is located in the orbit of masculine interest” (Mrozik 2012: 162).

A group uniting young people, seeking an escape from the dreariness and hopelessness of late Polish People’s Republic, becomes similar to Romantic conspiracy and independence-minded associations from the post-Partition period<sup>5</sup>, that valued, above all, brotherly relations and had – in addition to the patriotic dimension – also a clear compensatory function with regard to patriarchal structures shaken due to the loss of independence. As aptly noted by Elżbieta Ostrowska, “manhood, strained due to the circumstances of external political oppression, could become reborn and strengthened via the force of masculine relations uniting secret associations of conspirators, for whom the feminine element, if appearing in a formula different from safe motherhood, could only be a threat” (Ostrowska 2004: 220)<sup>6</sup>. The scholar points to the homosocial nature of Polish culture, referring to the notion of homosocial relationships, as proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), and secured by the figure of a mother (see Janion 2007: 272). Indeed, as Ostrowska aptly noted:

Despite it usually taking the shape of national myth and stereotype, the phantasm of the Polish Mother reveals in its deep structure, above all, how rooted the ideal of womanhood realizing itself through motherhood is in collective imagination. [...] In Polish culture, where [...] one can notice a domination of masculine relationships based on the principles of idealized brotherhood, femininity takes on the shape of the phantasm of a mother, who not only does not threaten brotherly relations, but, in a sense, even legitimizes them – after all, brothers must have a mother. That mother is a phantasmic Polish Mother – an ideal moth-

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5 The Partitions of Poland took place between 1772 and 1795. As a result, the then Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth lost its territories for the sake of the neighboring countries: Russia, Prussia and Austria.

6 In the short story *Weronika, portret z kotem* Filipiak demonstrates the “long endurance” of this mechanism. The narrator recalls the justification behind the refusal to let her into the university during student strikes: “Eventually they would have let me in had I been married. In these important times, my friends, like Renaissance scholars, discovered that the unpredictable feminine element could only disturb the gravity of their focus” (Filipiak 2006: 448). In the novel *Absolutna Amnezja*, Marianna becomes a member of a school band led by a teenage boy that meets in post-German bunkers. The school rebellion organized by the band happens at the same time at the Coast strikes of the 1970s. When the girl sees the leader of the student group sitting in the headmaster’s armchair, she begins to understand that “revolutionaries” take over the attributes of the overthrown authorities, and she becomes excluded from their community and deprived of any alternative, as both in the current system and in the structures of opposition she will always be located in a subordinate position as a representative of the “worse” sex. Therefore, her place in the rebel group can only be secured by taking on the role of “the leader’s girlfriend” (see Świerkosz 2016: 407).

er who, in the phantasmic imagination, also becomes the motherland (Ostrowska 2004: 223).

In her short stories, Filipiak attempts to perform a revisionist re-writing of the phantasm of the Polish Mother, depicting an ideal relationship between a woman and her homeland, and, at the same time, delineating the framework of women's activities (Dąbrowska 2012: 162). Indeed, the figure of the Polish Mother remains inextricably connected with two kinds of reproduction – biological and cultural. By giving birth to sons, the Polish Mother serves to strengthen the national community, and by raising them in a patriotic spirit, she becomes a guardian of the national cause. Although the figure of the Polish Mother evolved over centuries (see Titkow 2012), her influence would increase during key historical moments. The eponymous character in the short story *Weronika, portret z kotem*, seeking the possibility of self-expression and confirmation of her uniqueness outside the realm of the art and making her surroundings aesthetic, in the conspiratorial activities, succumbs to the seductive power of the phantasm. The figure of the Polish Mother, initially tempting Weronika with the promise of recognition and broadening her area of activity, turns out to be a trap of contradictory demands, deprives her of autonomy and leads to the disintegration of the “self”:

She did what she could to reconcile the demands of history, family, art, and her own. [...] She outgrew that mother who, with unsurpassed coquettishness, wanted to be worshiped, and revealed herself to us as the Polish Mother. Earlier, she wanted to be everything for her son, now she became for him the law, the guardian of national values, family laws and those holy, inalienable mother rights (Filipiak 2006: 445–446).

The phantasm of the Polish Mother remains inextricably connected with the institutionalization of motherhood (Rich 2001), with its subordination to the interest of national collective. Kaśka, the protagonist of the short story *SKA*, is removed from student strike when she becomes pregnant with one of the oppositionists. It seems that entering the role of a mother is the only solution for the protagonist, as it will allow her to avoid being accused of sexual promiscuity. Kaśka's body becomes politicized, located between the figure of a public woman, an allegory of the “shameless” Revolution and the figure of a majestic Polish Mother, disembodied and asexual. However, Kaśka does not agree to be subordinated to the mechanisms of biological and cultural reproduction, and decides to perform a double transgression: abortion and emigration. During one of the meetings of American Polonia, the drunk protagonist undermines and bursts open Romantic mythology, describing Poland as “the Frankenstein of the nations” (Filipiak 2006: 149). Not only is this concept a subversive reference to the Romantic messianic idea, assuming that Poland sacrifice itself in the name of returning liberty to other nations (Poland as the Christ of na-

tions), but it also refers to the figure from Mary Shelley's novel, grown over with various interpretations. In reference to the Latin etymology of the word monster (*monstrare* – to show), one can thus ask, what does the monstrous figure in Filipiak's text point to? Frankenstein's monster – a construct made out of dead bodies, brought to life without a woman's participation, read in gender perspective reveals a conglomerate of Thanatic and motherly imaginings, which includes fantasies about sacrificing a woman and depriving her of creative abilities (see Szczuka 2001: 160–175). In Filipiak's short story, motherhood subordinated to the interests of the nation becomes a variant of a story about reproduction taking place with the exclusion of female body.

In *Absolutna amnezja*, the institutionalization of motherhood becomes integrated with the phantasm of menstruation. The growing Marianna dreams about being surveilled by the Menstrual Police, a panoptical institution that gathers information about girls menstruating for the first time so as to “seal” their destiny as representatives of the “worse” sex and include them into reproductive mechanisms. The protagonist unsuccessfully tries to get her mother, engaged in aiding persecuted oppositionists, interested in the form of violence she experiences; however, her “first blood” is seen as a private issue, devoid of meaning in the hierarchy of experiences as compared with the blood shed by men in the battlefield<sup>7</sup>. As Agnieszka Mrozik aptly noted:

Filipiak unmasks the process whereby female body is controlled, disciplined by state, national, social institutions: in patriarchy, female body only has a utilitarian, ancillary role, while its suffering and pain become unimportant, pushed to the margin of History. Women's menstrual blood is worth less than the blood of men shed in the fight for the Homeland [...] (Mrozik 2012: 166–167)<sup>8</sup>.

7 It is worth reminding the reader that undertaking the topic of menstruation in *Absolutna Amnezja* met with unfavorable reactions of some male critics, who accused the novel of ideologization. The term “menstrual literature”, used with regard to the novel, began to function as a sort of stigma in literary criticism, ascribed to women's literature that would take up the topics of corporeality, physiology or sexuality.

8 I believe that the influence of “masculine” phantasm of menstruation can also be seen in the story described by Marta Dzido in the reportage *Kobiety Solidarności (Women of Solidarity)*, first published at the 35th anniversary of the August Agreements. The author references an article concerning one of the male oppositionists, a legend of underground Solidarity, published in press. After its publication, the editorial board received a letter in which the author pointed out the omission of her sister, Krystyna – the oppositionist's partner of many years, bringing up their daughter on her own, who paid for her engagement and work in the structures of the opposition by miscarrying twice. However, a suggestion of publishing the story from the woman's point of view met with a firm refusal: “Zuzanna A. called the editor's office and asked the editor whether her text would be published. ‘Never ever will I forget these words’, Zuzanna A. recalls today. ‘They were like a slap in the face. Brutal, very impolite, and, of course, arrogant also in the symbolic, cultural sphere. He said: We will not publish something like that in the context of Teoś Klincewicz, just look what you wrote – it's something about miscarriages... This isn't about Solidarity's struggle, about Solidarity's ethos, this is about some menstrual blood’...” (Dzido 2016: 91).

Filipiak made female phantasms the subject of her stories and the novel *Absolutna amnezja*, referring to visions of womanhood rooted in imagination. Her protagonists are gifted with transgressive potential, unmasking patriarchal mechanisms of power and History, which nullify women's experiences. However, open endings of the texts under analysis lead one to questioning the efficiency of women's gestures of resistance – the narrator of the short story *Weronika, portret z kotem* and the protagonist of *SKA* choose emigration, but they cannot liberate themselves from their own and national past, while for Weronika herself, the only form of rebellion against being reduced to the role of national monument turns out to lie in madness, manifested in fear of men. Confronted with the Menstrual Police, Marianna decides to run away, although, at the same time, she gains knowledge about menstruation as feminine initiation – the source of power and creative energy – drawn from folk beliefs. This leads to an association with Brach-Czaina's micro essay devoted to menstruating, in which the philosopher proposes the idea of shedding membranes of the mind as a difficult, but renewing practice leading to the sharpening of critical sense, noticing and transgressing imposed limitations: "By rejecting old membranes, we reach the living force of the mind, which consists in the power of disbelief, the ability to be wonder, the critical sense. The freed ability to doubt makes it possible to question oneself curiously and to reject the uncritically assumed notions, traditions, customs, values" (Brach-Czaina 2022: 173). Therefore, perhaps, revisionist and critical herstorical narratives, rooted in women's experiences, are a form of shedding membranes of the spirit, whose source lies in the physiological act of menstruating?

### **Peasant Women and Heroines of Socialist Labor**

Years later, the narrator of *Weronika...* admits: "We stood at opposite sides of closed doors. Unfortunately, there was no one to open them for us" (Filipiak 2006: 446). In this way, she points out the impossibility of establishing an authentic relationship with the eponymous heroine, a relationship free of social demands and cultural mediation. In herstorical narrations created in the first decades of the 21st century relationships between women gain particular meaning. What becomes particularly significant are women's genealogies, marked with absence, rupture or trans-generational trauma, whose reconstruction within the novels' narratives is undertaken by representatives of the youngest generation, seeking sources of their own identity and otherness (see Szewczyk 2022: 33). These narratives frequently take on the form of family sagas that question linearity, are written out for women's voices and perspectives, in which official history is marked with clear gender edits, while, simultaneously, entering into relationships with family history, as well as the local, grass-roots history of daily life (see Zatora 2022). Their heroines are frequently women marked with war trauma, repatriates or newcomers seeking a possibility of social advancement and their places in post-war reality (see Szewczyk 2022: 35). Reflection over women's historical experiences, inscribed into these stories, is connected with a clear emphasis on the heroines' origins and so-

cial belonging. Reconstructing matrilineal heritage draws with it transgressing forms of noble culture, which traditionally shaped Polish national identity.

This is showcased wonderfully in Joanna Bator's (born in 1968) *Piaskowa Góra* [*Sand Mountain*] (2009), inscribed into the trend of novels about the shaping of locality in the so-called Recovered Territories<sup>9</sup> and about growing up at the time of the Polish People's Republic (see Mroziak 2021). Its characters are repatriates and newcomers brought to the eponymous neighborhood in Wałbrzych by wartime turmoil and the promise of social advancement. Building a community and, at the same time, seeking one's own place in the world requires creating consolidating, new foundational myths and referring to well-known identity figures – however, neither the former nor the latter survive confrontation with reality and undergo ironic inversion in Bator's novel. A kind of a founding myth for the emerging community of newcomers consists, first, in searching for German gold, and, in later years, searching for “a good German from the FRG” as a perfect candidate for a husband for the inhabitants of Wałbrzych. In this way, Bator deconstructs the legend about the Polish princess Wanda, who refused to marry a German prince and chose to die in Vistula waters, preventing the outbreak of war by the means of willing self-sacrifice. In *Piaskowa Góra*, Bator re-writes the phantasm of a woman sacrifice, and thus, two symbolic sacrificial stakes burn in the novel. Zofia, a representative of the oldest generation of heroines, dies in a fire, thus becoming punished by a once-rejected suitor for her wartime affair with a Jew, Ignacy Goldbaum; her granddaughter Dominika is also supposed to die in a burning car, stigmatized for her multi-faceted otherness and breaking the rules of her own community by the forbidden affair with a priest. Therefore, Bator unambiguously indicates the endurance of the mechanism of punishing a woman as the one who, by opening her body to the Other, infringes upon the boundaries of her own national community and the one who becomes a carrier of otherness.

In *Piaskowa Góra*, the motif of inherited, trans-generational traumas and complicated, damaged family relationships between women recurs multiple times. Zofia and Ignacy's daughter, Jadzia, unloved by her mother, who sees in her the result of a rape – punishment for the wartime affair with the hidden Jew – subsequently creates and hands down to her daughter a phantasmic, romantic and heroic scenario built around the figure of her supposed father, a Polish soldier, who dies a tragic and noble death: “They found him at the bank of Pełcznica, in military uniform, he looked beautiful, as if he slept, covered with apple blossoms, star-like snowflakes, autumn leaves in all shades of gold” (Bator 2009: 342). The imagined figure of the absent father – a war hero – is indispensable for Jadzia to confirm her own uncertain and blurry identity through self-identification with the Polish Mother. This has destructive influence on her relationship with her daughter, Dominika. Indeed, the phantasm

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9 The Regained Territories was a propaganda term for the territories that became part of Poland after World War Two following the decisions of the Potsdam Conference.

that protects brotherly relationships does not leave space for relations other than those between mothers and sons – the daughter only gains meaning when she becomes a mother herself and reproduces maternal scenario. Dominika, radically different from other inhabitants of Piaskowa Góra, does not fulfill the expectations set before her, and Jadzia, deprived of motherly love, cannot accept her daughter's otherness and is only able to sacrifice herself for her. At the same time, Dominika's mother appears in her own identity project as "her father's daughter", thus avenging herself on Zofia for the latter's emotional frigidity: "When she told her daughter about her childhood, Zofia was almost absent there, as this was the only way she could have her revenge. Jadzia never admitted, not even to herself, that she was jealous of the belated love that Zofia preserved far from her and that she gave wholly to her granddaughter" (Bator 2009: 343).

Drawing upon voraciously read romance books, Jadzia imagines for herself a Romantic and noble genealogy, according to which, "the grandmother whose namesake she was was a beautiful noblewoman married to an ordinary Strąk from Brzezina as a result of unspecified, but tragic circumstances of romance nature" (Bator 2009: 343). By the means of this strategy, the heroine attempts to recompense herself for the lack of motherly love and unsatisfactory marriage, but one can also see an attempt to negate shameful peasant heritage in this strategy. Dominika's persistent efforts to seek truth about family past, leading to the discovery of a Jewish ancestor, result in Jadzia's reluctance and fear of the need to confront herself with otherness suddenly discovered within herself, and the loss of a point of reference in the shape of imagined genealogy, built against the backdrop of national and Romantic phantasms.

The passion of uncovering family histories is instilled in Dominika by the falsified stories of her paternal grandmother, Halina, whose basis is an album found during repatriation: it becomes a kind of a "memory prosthetic" and a source of fantasies about the noble manor in the Borderlands<sup>10</sup> as a place of rootedness. However, this imagined genealogy is not compensatory in nature, as in Jadzia's case, but is a particular form of grass-roots emancipation. Halina uses resettlement to Wałbrzych in order to erase the stigma of her son Stefan's illegitimate origin; she also deconstructs the idyllic imaginary version of a small Borderland homeland that she had never had, as she had been oppressed and subjected to patriarchal violence as a mother of an illegitimate child (see Zatora 2022: 228). In turn, someone else's photographs, found in the gained album, awake in Halina the force of storytelling, which makes it possible to establish a relationship with her granddaughter that is filled with tenderness. Similarly, Zofia, who discovers the similarity to her beloved Ignacy only in Dominika, loves her unconditionally, in a way she has never done for her daughter. Thus, Bator shows the impact of

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10 Eastern Borderlands is an old term for the borderland Polish territories that became part of the USSR after World War Two and that currently belong to Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine. At the time of the Polish People's Republic, Communist authorities strove to eliminate this term.

History and national myths on the life of women through the lens of mother-daughter relationships, always marked with a lacuna, painful rupture and hurt.

For Katarzyna, the protagonist of Anna Dziewit-Meller's (born 1981) *Od jednego Lucypera* [From One Luciper] (2020), discovering empty spaces in family history has – as for Dominika in *Piaskowa Góra* – emancipating and, at the same time, therapeutic dimension. Here the family structure is also built only of women, burdened with the phantom of Marijka Solik, who had been accused of industrial espionage and sentenced to death in the Stalinist period. The heroine, robust and muscular, different from her mother, sister and other women, becomes a kind of an embodiment of the Socialist caryatid – a heroine of Socialist labor, feminine icon of social realism. As such, she is the victim of twofold violence – actual and symbolic. Indeed, as Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz aptly concludes: “In the museum of curiosities of the People's Polish Republic imaginary versions of women take up a prominent position. The so-called Socialist woman, a heroine of labor, a woman-brick layer, woman-tractor driver tends to be referenced as an oddity, a symbol of reversed reality” (Stańczak-Wiślicz 2013: 152; see Mrozik 2016). In the narrative of *Od jednego Lucypera*, there strongly resonates the conviction – firmly grounded after 1989 – concerning the illusory nature of the emancipating project decreed from the top up by the Polish People's Republic authorities and disastrous for women deceived by the promise of equal rights and possibility of working in masculine professions; in this perspective, the social realist heroine of labor functions as a sign of disturbance of the traditional gender order, a caricature of “normative femininity”. Polish feminist communities referred to the tradition of pre-war women's movement, as well as to the Solidarity protest, seeking their genesis in these events (Mrozik 2011: 155–156). According to Stańczak-Wiślicz: “Women's active participation in the underground, their role in creating association structures were eagerly equated with partnership, with ‘noticing’ women, with permitting them to exit the home sphere” (Stańczak-Wiślicz 2013: 154). In this discourse, labor heroines became a symbol of oppression and entering “unnatural” roles (Stańczak-Wiślicz 2013: 154). The studies concerning the Communist period in Poland, developing dynamically over the last years and drawing on the gender studies toolkit, aim to return the period of the Polish People's Republic to the history of feminism, recognize the activity of Polish women of the time (not limited to participation in the Solidarity opposition), finally, draw attention to the place of Communist women in family archives (see Mrozik 2022). These studies also lead to providing visibility to grassroots emancipating projects of women at the period of Social Realism, when the participation in vocational courses and working in “masculine” professions was a way of liberating oneself from the patriarchal structures present at the family home and achieving financial independence (Fidelis 2010).

In the novel *Od jednego Lucypera* Marijka, a socialist labor heroine and victim of Communist terror buried in an unmarked grave, becomes erased from family history and symbolically excused from the history of Polish emancipa-

tion movement, wherein the Polish People's Republic period functioned for a long time as "the lost chain link" (Iwasiów, Galant 2011: 5). It could seem that Dziewit-Meller's Silesian saga copies the discourse that unambiguously criticizes the Social Realist project of women's equal rights. Experiencing deep trauma after her sister's death, Halina negates the point of Marijka's grass-roots emancipation, as the latter "had once given in to the temptation of the devil of modernity, had believed in all that Communist propaganda" (Dziewit-Meller 2020: 255). Halina chooses a survival strategy consisting in "being dissolved" in family space and in traditional mothering role: "Eight years after her death, when she stood in front of the altar to marry grandpa, she almost dreamed about getting pregnant soon, many times, and give herself over to the one task that God designed for women: raising a family" (Dziewit-Meller 2020: 255). However, reproducing a traditional mothering role does not turn out to be a positive alternative to the Social Realist emancipating project undertaken by Marijka and ending in her failure. The family structure in Anna Dziewit-Meller's Silesian saga is burdened by historical, multiplied trans-generational trauma and silence regarding Marijka's tragic fate, which mark the fates of representatives of several generations of women.

Conducting the narrative through a woman's body is one of the distinguishing features of the herstoric narratives within my field of interest; here, it should be noted that the gender experience of History leaves its marks precisely on the body. When she is being arrested and brutally interrogated by the Security Bureau's functionary, Marijka experiences a particularly painful and violent menstruation, humiliated not only with being accused of sabotage, but also with her own physiology, manifested by the bloodied work uniform. Analyzing iconography and novels of the Social Realist period, Ewa Toniak draws attention to the fact that "a woman's body and woman's physiology [...] are located in this system of representation that represses corporeality as such at the side of the abject" (Toniak 2008: 88). This is why the contempt-inducing body is ascribed to negative characters, feminine equivalent of "enemies of the people". Once Marijka is pushed off her Socialist labor heroine pedestal, it is the actual, rather than the phantasmic, feminine body that is humiliated, beaten, tormented and embarrassed: this is how Dziewit-Meller intervenes within the Social Realist imaginarium, locating stifled corporeality and sexuality of the "monumental" Marijka. A deconstruction of "Socialist caryatid" is performed here through referencing the experience of menstruation, which multiplies violence against the woman's body.

Reading Joanna Bator's and Anna Dziewit-Meller's novels leads to a conclusion that a chance for breaking through a cursed circle of historical traumas handed down from generation to generation may lie in a difficult reconstruction of women's histories: silenced and invalidated, confronted with national myths and phantasms of womanhood. This task is undertaken by the representatives of the youngest generation of the novels' protagonists, who reclaim invalidated relationships between women. Polish literature after 2010 puts clear

emphasis on marginalized matrilineal relations, as advocated by Brach-Czaina, who signed her book *Błony umysłu* as “Jolanta, daughter of Irena, granddaughter of Bronisława, great-granddaughter of Ludwika”. Here, reclaiming women’s genealogy gains a liberating dimension while, simultaneously, being connected with the women protagonists abandoning the limiting home space. In the continuation of *Piaskowa Góra*, the book *Chmurdaia* published in 2010, a relationship between Jadzia and Dominika becomes renewal in the space of the Greek island of Karpathos, ruled by matriarchy and matrilineal principles of inheritance. Therefore, the myth of a Polish Mother, as subordinated to masculine community, comes to be supplanted by an affirmative myth of feminine community.

### Herstories of the Everyday

Reading last decades’ narratives that problematize women’s experiencing of history leads to a conclusion that within them there can be distinguished (frequently interpenetrating) strategies of unmasking and critical re-writing women’s allegories grounded in Polish national imagination, or demonstrating their destructive influence on matrilineal, cross-generational family relationships. However, it is impossible not to notice that a significant medium of herstoric narratives consists in the experience of the everyday, inextricably connected with the category of “busyness” as proposed by Brach-Czaina (2018: 67–96), referring to repetitive, apparently meaningless actions that make it possible for one to become rooted in being:

Busyness calls out of nothingness a delicate, tiring issue of daily existence, out of necessity with a frail basis, sentenced to temporary being. Stubbornly maintained, it is the driving force of everyday life. [...] The aim of efforts of busyness is precisely struggle for daily existence created and renewed with every small action. [...] Busyness maintains everyday life in an uncertain point of tension between being and the void. Although we do not hear the sounds of struggle going back and forth, we take part in it (Brach-Czaina 2018: 88–89).

I am not going to reconstruct extensive reception of Jolanta Brach-Czaina’s philosophy here; despite the passage of time, it continues to inspire scholarly reflection (see Przymuszała 2021: 45–56; Marzec 2022: 34–47). My goal, in turn, is indicating that busyness referring, above all, to women’s activities, traditionally set in opposition to men’s actions undertaken in the public space (Latos 2014: 253), aids in constructing women’s counter-history and makes it possible to undertake critical reflection over official History. In this context, it is worth referencing the novels *Nieczułość* [*Lack of Tenderness*] (2017) by Martyna Bunda (born in 1975) and *Rozrzucone* [*The Scattered*] (2021) by Liliana Hermetz (born in 1964), wherein the protagonists’ daily life plays a very significant role. One of the protagonists of Bunda’s Kashubian saga, Rozela, a victim of wartime rape by the Red Army soldiers, represses the trauma that burdens her rela-

tionships with her daughters. Simultaneously, her actions are directed towards preserving and maintaining the house she had built even before the war in Dziewcza Góra, a kind of a matriarchal seat, which – similarly to Rozela's body – becomes marked with signs of wartime trauma.

After five years of war, time came to return life to its proper place. To apply lime to the apple tree so the worms would come out, to repair the fence, to order and cut down the currants, to clean up the well – these were the most important. [...]

Still there was not enough time to take care of everything. The floor, for example. The war did strange things to it. Oh, here they went and scraped it with black soles. They brought in soil, slime, which dried on the soles and then, mixed with God knows what, ate into the wood. Those that burned the trace of clothes iron on her stomach had metal-shod boots. On the wooden planks, polished for years with a rice brush, seventeen scratches remained, deep and wide. It all made up a map.

And there was blood left on the floor. Her blood. It is the most difficult to wash off. Oh, here, next to the stove, it poured when the Russkis were gone. Rozela was cutting carrots with her small knife, worn out with the years of faithful service, when all that dirt, helplessness, all that corruption – poured into the floor and it was not possible to wash it out (Bunda 2021: 37–40).

When writing about struggles with the matter of the everyday, Brach-Czaina repeatedly reaches for the metaphor of a fight, which, while referring to the external chaos, makes it possible to forget about internal chaos for a moment (Brach-Czaina 2018: 86). The protagonist of *Nieczułość* seeks shelter from the experienced trauma in repetitive activities, although it is impossible to remove traces of the experienced violence both from her own body and from her surroundings. The trace burnt with the clothes iron on Rozela's stomach is mirrored by the patch burnt at the very center of the yard, where the rapists started a fire. In Bunda's novel, it is that being rooted in daily life that makes it possible for Rozela to survive; although – similarly to Jolanta Brach-Czaina's philosophical reflection – busyness is not affirmed, from beneath it there peeks out the body's memory, and the drama of dealing with the matter of the everyday is a sign of the "hidden presence of the forces of chaos" (Brach-Czaina 2018: 86). This is why the unprocessed and unspoken about wartime trauma, whose visible sign is Rozela's wound, manifests itself in the form of mental disturbance that the family matriarch suffers with time (see Ładoń 2020: 210–212). Thus, feminine madness is here not an attribute of heroines gifted with revolutionary potential, but, rather, becomes woven between daily, repetitive activities, from under which dealing with History peeks out.

When, prior to leaving for school, one of Rozela's daughters decides to use the forbidden clothes iron, her mother uses the iron's slug to hit her in the face.

The sign of the trauma being transferred to the daughter is that “on the first day in new school Truda showed up in an un-ironed dress, with hair she had no strength to style for the first time in her life [...]” (Bunda 2017: 78). However, despite her declarations, Truda cannot tear herself away either from Rozela or from the family home in Dziewcza Góra. The new iron she brings from Gdynia after electrification becomes a sign of quiet understanding, of difficult relationship between the women – marked with lack of tenderness, yet still maintained; it also makes it possible to take up anew busyness, which is a form of resistance and survival:

She put this new trinket on the table with a gesture so fierce as if she plunged a sword into the battlefield. And she kept looking into her mother’s eyes, haughtily. The new iron was put on the wardrobe, the old one disappeared for good [...] When the electricity finally flowed, Truda spread open the table, covered it with a blanket and one of the sheets, and put around things to be ironed: more sheets, both dresses, the green and the blue one, Gerta’s dresses, and the man’s waisted shirt she’d gotten somewhere for Ilda. And then, with a gesture so wide and pious, as if she was sitting to the piano, she grabbed the plug and put it in the socket. Electricity flowed. The iron became hot (Bunda 2017: 84–85).

Daily life can also be seen to generate narrative in Hermetz’s *Rozrzucone*, wherein 20th century history is told through the lens of daily busyness of several generations of women. The novel’s protagonist, Marysia-Irène, realizes the figure of a woman stranger, alienated on every level of her existence – national, familial and linguistic (see Nadana-Sokołowska 2016: 121–133). Exiled to do forced labor in Germany, as a result of her illegitimate origin, settled in Alsace after the war, for decades the protagonist maintains an uneasy, full of hidden animosities and dependencies relation with her mother’s sisters and with her Polish-Ukrainian cousins. Family relations between the women, presented against the background of the post-war period and the system transformation, in Hermetz’s novel become a lens that makes it possible to grasp long-lasting tensions connected with the sense of alienation and rejection, as well as inferiority complex with regard to the phantasmic West (see Zdanowska 2021).

What connects the scattered protagonists in a particular way is the routine of daily activities, gluing together the representatives of three generations. In her novel, Hermetz depicts one day in the life of each of the women, reflecting its particular pace by the means of linguistic and narrative devices. One day in Ksenia’s life is written out as almost a single, unbroken sentence, imitating daily, mechanical busywork, rhythm of working in the field and tending animals, while a day in Eulalia’s life, represented by the means of short, rhythmic sentences, portrays how this representative of the youngest generation – a business translator of French – feels at home in post-transformation reality.

In turn, Marysia-Irène's daily life is stretched between household busyness and long hours of working at her husband's French restaurant. However, from beneath the daily work of protagonists peeks out their traumatic experience: Ksenia was the victim of paramedical experiments in the Nazi Reich, while Marysia was taken to do forced labor due to her aunt's decision – by sacrificing her sister's illegitimate daughter, she saved her husband from a similar fate. In the eyes of Polish relatives, Marysia-Irène's post-war marriage with a foreigner seems to be a model realization of a perfect life scenario, but it is actually connected with alienation, lack of financial independence and growing antipathy for the husband, which the protagonist hides under the mask of an elegant, respected "Madame".

The representative of the youngest generation, Lala, a beneficiary of the Polish system transformation, also hides the stigma of a "poor relation from the East", once humiliated by her aunt's French family. The restaurant incident, during which her provincial peasant background is scorned, sets into motion a tangle of affects of embarrassment and humiliation, while, at the same time, referring back to national and ethnic stereotypes and complexes which the protagonist tries to mask with a total commitment to her work, legitimizing her belonging to the Western cultural circle, pride in the success achieved and capitalist changes taking place in Poland. As Ewa Zdanowska aptly notes, the author of *Rozzrucione*, "aware of Polish myth-making, ironically drags out into daylight the entire repository of Romanticism – from Mickiewicz to Maria Janion" (Zdanowska 2021). Here, the masculine, Romantic myth of an emigre – an exile experiencing ceaseless symbiosis with his place of origin – becomes demythologized. It is confronted with the emigrant experience of several generations of women and, as connected with it, hard work to earn a living, sense of alienation and not belonging.

Thus, literary adaptation of daily life may become a tool for herstoric in(ter)vention. An incredibly interesting example of this literary strategy lies in Inga Iwasiów's (born in 1963) short story *Kobieta z kotлетem. Brednia paraakademicka* [*A Woman with the Meat Patty: A Para-Academic Drivel*] (2014), which brings together two fields of the author's activities as a writer and as a literary studies scholar. The protagonist of the micro-narrative based in memories and set in the reality of the Polish People's Republic is Anna, who:

kind of prettily and romantically bought minced meat on the first day of the strike. The composition of this meat, other than beef-pork, was a state secret. Anna made it into meat patties. To put a secret note in? No, of course not, this was just about meat patties. High protein food for men. And Anna, in a flowing dress, took the patties to the gate (Iwasiów 2014: 251–252).

Anna's "feminine" gesture becomes a pretext for a reflection on herstory and its research limitations. At the same time, however, the narrative, permeated with distance towards fashionable subjects of contemporary humanities and un-

doubted liking for the protagonist, is a literary extension of Iwasiów's considerations contained in the auto-ethnographic sketch *Przed sklepem rzeźnika* [*In Front of the Butcher's*], whose ironic title is a reference to Karol Wojtyła's text *Przed sklepem jubilera* [*In Front of the Jeweler's*] (1960). In analyzing the political nature of women's prose and discourse after 1989, the scholar focuses on the notion of the gender politics of meat (see Adams 2015), taking up, among others, the issue of the construction of the gendered subject of narratives concerning meat in the literature of personal document and memoirs about Polish People's Republic. At the same time, Iwasiów reaches for Brach-Czaina's essay *Metafizyka mięsa* [*Metaphysics of Meat*] – the philosopher's reflections about “meatiness”, referring to what is material and metaphysical, and, simultaneously, communal, lead her to consider the degree to which this category can be useful for grasping the generational and daily experience of the time of Polish People's Republic, woven around illegal distribution of meat and its processing, around which there was created a particular “meaty” ritual and folklore, preserved in various texts of culture. Here, Iwasiów emphasizes the community-creating role of meat, which “could be a gift of love – housewives made rump steaks for their husbands. Women wielded the cleaver and the knife excellently. Men would drive cut meat around in suitcases, preferring this dangerous mission from the monotony of obligatory queuing” (Iwasiów 2013: 195). In this way, she showcases the particular politics of meat and the gender contract connected with it.

In the short story *Kobieta z kotлетem...* Anna's gesture, rooted in the daily life of Polish People's Republic, becomes a pretext to consider excluding mechanisms of memory and history, and an opportunity to reflect over herstory, frequently treated as a supplement of the official, male-centric History. “Non-heroic input in the shape of a meat patty” belongs to the order of busyness and may reveal the subversive nature of daily activities, establish the subjective presence of anonymous women in literature and culture, but also become one of constitutive elements of a positive myth of transformation, a need for which was indicated by the creators of the famous musical *1989*, which premiered at the Juliusz Słowacki Theater in Krakow in 2022<sup>11</sup>:

This myth is built not only on reclaiming memory about women revolutionaries, but also on drawing attention to daily women's busyness: “Next to ‘revolutionaries’ the fate of Solidarity was also decided by another group of women – ‘housewives’. [...] They were the ones to ensure that children would eat daily breakfast and start for school, they kept the house and clothes in order, and kept a pot of hot soup always ready on the stove” (Napiórkowski, Szyngiera, Wleklej 2024: 30–31).

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11 As the musical creators wrote: “While Solidarity was being canonized or demonized, we tore out its teeth. We deprived it of the internal fissures, which actually denoted its strength. This is why today we need a new, positive myth of Solidarity, which will allow us to meet the challenges that future brings” (Napiórkowski, Szyngiera, Wleklej 2024: 130).

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Over three decades ago, in *Projekt krytyki fantazmatycznej* [*The Project of Phantasm Criticism*] Maria Janion made a call to take up the challenge consisting in reconsidering national myths and phantasms and developing a new language that would make it possible to articulate reality – also that of women’s experiences. A reply to that call may consist in seeking a positive myth of 1989, rooted in official history and history of the everyday both, but also in a gesture by Karolina Micuła – an artist, performer and activist of the National Strike of Women, which took place on the General Charles de Gaulle’s Roundabout in Warsaw on 26th October 2020, during a protest against exacerbation of abortion law in Poland. Standing on a car’s roof with her breasts bared, a flare in her hand and a mask on her face, Micuła reclaimed the feminine allegory of revolution familiar from Eugène Delacroix’s painting *Liberty Leading People*. It is appropriate to once again refer to Janion’s conclusion, according to which, although “the basic phantasm of a revolution-liberty is an imaginary version of a woman” (Janion 2006: 6), it leads to women being deprived of political rights. Micuła’s gesture can be an evidence of long endurance of women’s phantasms, but it can also prove that the statement formulated by women literary critics back in the 1990s remains current: that revolution is not a woman as much as it starts with women (see Mroziak 2012: 57) – in public and private space, in literature producing a field for herstorical in(ter)ventions.

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# How Does Contemporary Polish Literature Tell Minority Stories of Women? On the Example of the Novels *Sońka* by Ignacy Karpowicz and *Krótką wymiana ognia* by Zyta Rudzka\*

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**ABSTRACT:** The article analyzes the way histories of rural working class women belonging to ethnic minorities are used in two contemporary Polish novels: Ignacy Karpowicz's *Sońka* and Zyta Rudzka's *Krótką wymiana ognia* [A Short Exchange of Fire]. The women characters are created in a similar way – they talk about their lives right before they die, showcasing a minority perspective on the 20th century history of Poland. Through analyzing literary and linguistic strategies utilized by the novels' authors, the article shows how contemporary Polish literature creates minority histories, and, by their means, builds discourse concerning the sources of identity for the middle class.

**KEYWORDS:** contemporary Polish literature, ethnic minorities, rural working class, middle class

The interest in women's minority stories in Polish literature did not begin with the publication of Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak's historical reportage *Chłopki: opowieść o naszych babkach* [Peasant Women: A Story of Our Grandmothers] (2023). In fiction, women's perspective on life in the countryside had already appeared in novels inspired by the folk trend created prior to

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1989<sup>1</sup>. In them, there are also present subjects undertaken by Kuciel-Frydryszak – patriarchal power and violence inextricably connected with life in the countryside in the first half of the 20th century.

My interest lies in women's minority histories that I find in novels of the second decade of the 21st century. Their focus on minority does not concern only the protagonists' gender identities and rural background, as it is in the case of *Chłopki*<sup>2</sup>. The protagonists of Ignacy Karpowicz's and Zyta Rudzka's novels are also persons whose ethnic identity exceeds Polishness. Significantly, they do not fully recognize their belonging to minorities themselves: it is visible from the reader's perspective. An important factor behind such classification consists in that the stories told by the protagonists are an attempt at retelling war and post-war history with the use of perspectives heretofore underappreciated in Polish historiography and literature. The protagonists themselves do not seem to realize that.

Although even a few years ago re-writing the history of the first half of the 20th century (focusing, above all, on the stories of excluded groups) could have seemed an attractive task due to its novelty, today it is a fairly obvious concept. This is evidenced by the multiplicity of publications in the recent years that present latest history through the lens of groups heretofore excluded. Among these, there are, for instance: Silesians (Zbigniew Rokita's *Kajś*), homosexual people (Joanna Ostrowska's *Oni. Homoseksualiści w czasie drugiej wojny światowej*) or people with mental illnesses (Kalina Błażejowska *Bezdušní. Zapomniana zagłada chorych*).

When observing the popularity of the phenomenon of re-writing history, which is also the essence of the folk turn, it is worth taking a closer look at how it has functioned in the 21st century fiction. It would be difficult to prove in a convincing manner that literature is faster than the changes taking place in the discourses of humanities and social studies. However, it is worth taking a look at novels, at the subjects they touch upon and how they do so, in relation to the issues appearing in non-fiction texts. Even if fiction does not directly inspire research, reportages or essays, it certainly expresses social moods, and in many cases, it can be a detector of emerging processes, changes and turns.

In this way, I will analyze two novels in the present text: Ignacy Karpowicz's *Sońka* (2014) and Zyta Rudzka's *Krótką wymiana ognia* [*A Short Exchange of Fire*] (2018). They were both published prior to the boom for folk stories, best illustrated by the popularity of *Chłopki* – a book that was the only non-fiction publication to have made it to the list of top ten most read books in Poland in 2024 (Chymkowski, Zasacka 2024: 6). In Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels my area of interest will be the way minority stories of women are cre-

1 One example of such novel can be found in *Najada* by Zyta Orszyn, first published in 1970.

2 In the introduction to a new edition of Orszyn's novels there appears the statement that this novel "can be read [...] as a separate voice with regard to the canon [of peasant novel – A. B.] created by men" (Chmielecka, Fierek 2021: 5).

ated, what their narrative meaning is, and, as a result, what their discursive function consists in. Juxtaposing these two texts makes it possible to demonstrate a certain universality in the way minority histories of women are used. Some of the similarities I showcase can definitely also be found in non-fiction literature undertaking the subjects of history of excluded groups.

It is worth starting this analysis with the beginnings of the novels. This would be a paraphrase of the narrative starting point of *Sońka*:

The car belonging to Igor, a theater director, breaks down somewhere in the middle of Podlasie. This happens at a key moment of his professional life – the way his directorial body of work is assessed is about to be decided. His routine, so far connected with Warsaw, is temporarily disturbed in a village nearby a place where his grandparents used to live and he used to spend his holidays. Igor comes across Sońka, an elderly woman who looks after cattle grazing in the meadow (Karpowicz 2014: 7–11).

In turn, *Krótką wymiana ognia* begins the following way:

Roma, an aging poet, arrives at her family house in Silesia. Some time ago her teenage daughter left her, having written a letter in which she said she did not want to have any contact with her parents. Later, Roma discovers her husband's cheating. She comes to visit her elderly mother as the awareness of inevitable passage of time forces her to recapitulate her last years, especially the relationships she had created (Rudzka 2018).

These two narrative beginnings already have much in common. Middle-aged protagonists, at their lives' turning point, meet elderly women for whom they become the audience of the last telling of their life stories. Seemingly independent histories of characters from different generations influence each other, but mostly one-sidedly – it is the stories of the elderly women that have impact on the life of younger characters.

The way Igor and Roma are created as characters is also similar. They are both people who have experienced social advancement and moved from a small town to Warsaw. Although they are both artists seeking inspiration for their creative work in daily life, they have not seen the potential of stories to be told in the roads they have traveled so far. Their big city identity is built in separation from their place of origin or family identity. In the case of Igor, the narrator states outright that the protagonist “carefully hid his childhood, painted it over, was consistently ashamed of it, diligently forgot it, repressed and buried. The childhood he spent with grandparents in the nearby countryside” (Karpowicz 2014: 24).

This detachment from the past on Igor's past is also bluntly emphasized by his changing his name from the one given to him by parents – Ignacy, to the one he chose on his own – Igor. The symbolic meaning of changing one's

first or last name in the case of people advancing in society is discussed by Morgane Cadieu in her *On the both sides of the track*, mentioning the examples of French writers: Eduard Louis and Annie Ernaux, who function as creators under new names and not their family ones (Cadieu 2024: 31).

Therefore, although the protagonists' advancement is clearly visible for us-readers, due to the fact that it remains unnamed and not fully recognized by the characters as such, it resembles the way Andrzej Leder termed post-war social changes – a dreamed-through revolution (Leder 2014). Karpowicz's and Rudzka's protagonists do not belong to the generation that survived the war and built their life on the debris of the Holocaust. They were born in the Polish People's Republic and started their careers in 1980s and 1990s. However, similarly to the people advancing, unnoticed, in the post-war years due to the changes introduced by the new authorities and the wealth left by Jews, they have not in any way named the change that took place over the course of their lives. They are representatives of a new middle class, which, following Marx, could be termed as a class-in-itself – having common interests – but which is not yet a class for itself, that is, one that is aware of its own identity<sup>3</sup>. Przemysław Czapliński, in turn, defines it as a class devoid of a background it could use.

The fact that the middle class is born through negating their own origins should be seen as a clue that at the beginning of the 1990s there was no class legacy (family wealth, experience, network of connections) that could serve as background for mass middle class. This why it found its beginning in despair (caused by poverty), in dreams (of a better life), in determination (not to repeat the parents' biographies), as well as in the tradition of cunning and illegality of Polish People's Republic (Czapliński 2024: 190).

Sources indicated by Czapliński can be found in both Igor's and Roma's lives. Both have achieved a kind of artistic success in the capital, thanks to their dreams and determination, while simultaneously experiencing failure in their private lives, turning them back towards despair.

Although central places in both novels are taken up by the histories of *ma-mulka* (mommy) and *Sońka*, we become familiar with them in an indirect way – they are located within narration initially focused around Igor and Roma. The way in which both texts are constructed as stories-within-stories becomes significant in the context of analyzing class discourses. After all, in literary texts,

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3 In *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx writes: "Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests" (Marx 1955: 79).

the plot is not the sole carrier of meaning. The genre of a given piece may turn out to be equally important<sup>4</sup>. Should the story-within-a-story composition of Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels be treated as a feature of a genre, what would it say about the image of the presented world in these texts?

Firstly, Igor's and Roma's meetings with women living in the countryside and listening to their stories become pretexts within the narrative to confront two generations and two different class identities while, at the same time, showcasing how much they are interconnected. The result of this confrontation can be foreseen from the very start, and it is foreshadowed by Roma's mother's words:

Daughter's come. Learned daughter.

*Mamulka* responds, laughing: Well, what can you do, learned, but a fail. She planted herself in the capital. Fail (Rudzka 2018: 16).

Igor's and Roma's folk origins and their social advancement remove the protagonists from the people that stayed in their places of origin. As Czaplinski notes, the totality of differences between the middle and the rural working class weakened the chances for a set of commonalities being born: culture, value system, space for communication (Czaplinski 2024: 194). Having the women's minority stories nested within the narrative concerning advancing protagonists reveals the scope of differences between characters from various generations. Secondly, the mediation we are dealing with in the case of Sońka's and *mamulka's* stories results in them not functioning as independent histories. They can only be accessed through the city-based protagonists. Not only does this lack of directness construct distance, but it also strengthens doubts regarding the authenticity of the older women's stories<sup>5</sup>. The first-person narration in Rudzka's novel, the literary features of the older protagonist's language and elements indicating a script-like essence of the text in Karpowicz's novel suggests that women's stories could have been processed by younger protagonists, or even used instrumentally, as suggested by the fragment from *Sońka*:

Igor Grycowski, his lips shaping an "o", turned to stone, and, like a fairytale prince, realized at once that in front of him is a creature he had waited for all his life, and this does not pertain the cow, handsome and quite tempting as she batted her long eyelashes, this does not even fully pertain to Sonia, or, at least, not the Sonia that Sońka was on a daily basis. This pertains to a new Sonia, undiscovered and forgotten. An exciting Sonia, whose presence Igor Grycowski sensed and noticed, when

4 This is shown by, among others, by Witold Sadowski by formulating the concept of a Genre Image of the World, see Sadowski 2021: 181–193.

5 This pertains to authenticity within the presented world. Much indicates that in both novels, the stories of older characters are modified (linguistically or narratively) by the younger protagonists.

the old woman's blue eye rested on him, although throughout Igor: first, with a slight apprehension and then – it cleared like the sky, faded, brightened up and glimmered (Karpowicz 2014: 17).

Even if we reject the interpretation, according to which the old women's stories would be a kind of projection or the result of the younger protagonists' creation, there is no doubt, as the fragment above shows, that the stories of *mamulka* and Sonia are, above all, the context for Roma's and Ignacy's histories. Thirdly, finally, the aforementioned mediation and doubtful authenticity of histories of old women inscribe themselves into diagnoses regarding the decline of peasant culture. Back in 2003 Wiesław Myśliwski, a writer creating literature inspired by the peasant trend, described the process that he defined as the end of peasant culture (Myśliwski 2003). He defined peasant culture through its metaphysical nature, attachment to a place, being based in word, imagination, but also silence and isolation. Due to the civilizational progress and lack of interest in peasant culture, it came to be supplanted by folk culture, a reduced vision of the countryside created by the intelligentsia. This is perfectly evidenced by the story-within-a-story composition of both novels – the image of the countryside is constructed from shreds of heard stories of the passing generation. The decline of peasant culture that Myśliwski writes about is manifested in the impossibility of writing peasant novels, which are supplanted with a relativizing narration – the image of the countryside is created there by people who no longer belong.

### **The Image of the Countryside and Its Women Inhabitants**

In both novels, the decline of peasant culture also has a very literal dimension. The end of the countryside life is, above all, its depopulation. Sońka lives in a village described as:

here, at the end of nothing, in Królowe Stojło near the metropolitan Służanka, there were only four huts. Sonia lived in the smallest, mice played in two others, as the owners lay down in coffins, and town heirs sometimes came for a weekend, although not often and definitely not every weekend, pity it was not often, it's always some kind of a change, some noise in the silence, some life in the wilderness (Karpowicz 2014: 14).

As inhabitants of villages migrate to cities, the countryside loses its meaning. Roma says about her place of origin that “this used to be Czarnolas, then Schwarzwald, and now – a black hole” (Rudzka 2018: 14). The tempestuous history of the countryside in the area of the so-called Recovered Territories, where Rudzka's novel takes place, ends with the lives of the last local inhabitants.

Old age and approaching deaths of women coming from the countryside are a synecdoche of the countryside's decline. The stories told by women

characters are the last testimony of collective history. As a result, they gain a supra-individual dimension, are supposed to represent the history of groups heretofore unspoken about: in Karpowicz's novel, the *tutejsi* (locals) Podlasie inhabitants<sup>6</sup>, in Rudzka's book – Silesians.

Czapliński notes that in Polish novels of the second decade of the 21st century the countryside is frequently depicted as a deserted place, one abandoned by the young. The texts are dominated by a melancholy mood. According to Czapliński, the cultural reason for the countryside dying out can be sought in the conventional way it had heretofore been described (Czapliński 2024: 346). “Literature – in this, the formula of active melancholy expresses itself – killed the past so that the future would be possible” (Czapliński 2024: 346). Therefore, the death of heretofore known forms of life in the countryside is the condition for the birth of new ones.

What are, thus, these passing life forms connecting the stories of Sońka and Roma's mother? Or, actually: how are the women inhabitants of countryside seen by the characters who had moved to the city? And finally, what do both novels say about the way literature of the second decade of the 21st century characterizes the rural working class? These three questions are asked from three levels of reading register<sup>7</sup>: the level of plot, the level of narration and the level of discourse within which the novel is ascribed or which it creates. Through characterizing the protagonists, taking a look at how Igor and Roma see them, I will move on to reply to the eponymous question: How do minority stories of women build the identity of the middle class?

### The Folk Elements

Characterizing Sońka and *mamulka* begins with descriptions of both women's houses. These are places they seem inextricably connected with – on the one hand, it would be unthinkable if they lived anywhere else, on the other, their presence seems to shakily hold up the construction of the houses.

When Igor approaches Sońka's croft, he sees that “the small gate barely held on the rusted hinges, lopsided and moss-covered; as if in the farmyard of a Baba Yaga's sister, a turpist sister who removed all that is pretty and new out of her sight” (Karpowicz 2014: 18). In a similar way, nature enters the house of Roma's mother. The protagonist feels the presence of the dried-out river in “the damp house, in walls covered with slime like *suillus* mushrooms, in fairy ring mushrooms growing out of old pots behind the poker in the corner of winter kitchen” (Rudzka 2018: 14).

Women's houses are farmsteads-ethnographic museums, cluttered with old brooms, pots with burned bottoms, holy pictures put behind a glass pane. Traces of old work connected with keeping animals (Sońka's last cow, Roma's

6 The Podlasie inhabitants sometimes use this term to describe their borderland identity.

7 I distinguish various levels of reading register, modeling them slightly on the scheme of set of roles in literary communication as suggested by Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska (1998).

mother's stool for milking cows) are still visible in these households. It seems that both houses escaped the processes of modernization – in Sońka's house, there is no plumbing, next to *mamulka's* house there is still a well.

These details referenced in the narration are supposed to be signposts of the characters' personalities. Both women are characterized by simplicity, directness, pragmatism. They have a skeptical attitude to changes offered by modernity – be it traveling by car or the possibility of gaining education. The archaic nature of their home spaces harmonizes with the main matter of both Sońka's and *mamulka's* lives – the past.

Both in *Sońka* and in *Krótką wymianą ognia* it is clear, from the very outset, that we are dealing with poor, uneducated characters, strongly connected with their place of birth, which they barely left over their lifetimes. On this basis, we can discuss their belonging to rural working class<sup>8</sup>. In a way similar to sociological studies, in Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels, the social and economic status of the rural working class representatives is also showcased through the description of the characters' taste and aspiration. When looking at her mother, Roma registers details of her appearance: "and she laughs with her only tooth. She is wearing a child's tracksuit with a Mickey Mouse applique. The American rodent is shredding at the ears, but still it applauds, and its sleeves release embroidered wishes for a Happy New Year!" (Rudzka 2018: 16). Juxtaposing the absurdity and shoddiness of her mother's clothes with her age and condition awakens tenderness in Roma; similar emotions are probably supposed to arise in us, the readers. Interestingly, in Karpowicz's novel a very similar way of portraying the character and creating emotions around her appears. In *Sońka*, tenderness is caused by the character's aspirations connected with realizing moderate consumption needs:

She bought the chocolate box three years ago, shaped like a red heart, with a beautiful, red inscription: E. Wedel. Earlier, she had looked at that box for about half a year, it was so wonderful, so expensive and unobtainable. She had looked at it and imagined that one day, the red heart will find its place in her cupboard, on a crocheted doily, next to the teeth. She had dreamed about it in daytime, it had appeared in her dreams at night, she had drooled over her pillow – until, one day, she asked for the chocolates (Karpowicz 2014: 23).

These descriptions, through a vivid depiction of the lifestyle of the older characters, so different from the city one, demonstrate the distance between the countryside and city characters. Above all, the Mickey Mouse tracksuit or dreams

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8 I use the notion of "rural working class" in the sense given to it by, among others, the authors of the report *Praktyki kulturowe klasy ludowej* [Cultural Practices of the Rural Working Class], who, in turn, are inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's theory regarding class. In this perspective, class division is based not only in the differences of economic capital, but also social and cultural one. See: Gdula, Lewicki, Sadura 2014: 35.

about a chocolate box evoke associations with children, draw to mind infantile people. In both fragments, what comes to the foreground in childlike straightforwardness of the characters which, although it is not provided with valuation by either Igor or Roma, becomes a lens through which we see both women.

Both Sońka and *mamulka* are open and direct when talking about their needs (“You will go get the beer from the shop”; Rudzka 2018: 19). They are not ashamed of their looks, habits, conditions they live in. However, they seem uneasy in situations in which they should express positive emotions. When Roma approaches her mother and leans to embrace her, “she escapes me like a feral cat. No kisses. No such thing, she repeats” (Rudzka 2018: 42). In turn, Sońka’s most frequent reaction is silence – “If one were to count minutes of her life, it would turn out she was quiet throughout her own life” (Karpowicz 2014: 138).

This distance, or, sometimes, emotional frigidity of the characters can be explained by their slowly revealed past. In the monologue Roma’s mother addresses to the well, it is suggested that she had had an affair with her sister’s husband. Sońka tells Igor the story of her relationship with a Wehrmacht soldier. The price of these forbidden loves lied in the subsequent emotional crises of the characters. The reminiscences of both women continue to oscillate around wartime events connected with the experienced raptures of love. And the result of experienced tragedies is that the only lasting state for them in their old age is frigid distance.

A similar lack of tenderness and difficulty in expressing emotions that characterize Sońka and *mamulka* are ascribed to the rural working class women in reports cited by Kuciel-Frydryszak in her book *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach*. One of her heroines says the following about her mother: “Mom was unable to teach me how to build relations with people, I had a hole here which I had to fill myself, because my mom did not experience the treasure of relationships and was not aware that they are what provides safety and support” (Kuciel-Frydryszak 2023: 586).

It seems significant that in Kuciel-Frydryszak’s reportage we also have to do with the perspective of the generation of the heroines’ children. The daughters, seeing their own difficulties in building relationships, start to notice lack of tenderness in how they were treated by their mothers. The plot of Rudzka’s novel is constructed in a similar way – Roma’s problems connected with romantic and erotic relationships with men, as well as the family ones focused on the daughter lead to an apparent source, namely, Roma’s relation with her mother.

### Women’s History

The women characters’ personal life tragedies take place during World War Two. The so-called great history, focused around political, military or economic matters only appears in the background of both texts. In its stead, the foreground consists of family histories and details connected with countryside life. *Mamulka*’s and Sońka’s histories are of entirely local dimension, and within them, animals, the river or the well become actors of equal importance to

people. Obviously, this introduction of women's histories connected with the everyday life into both novels has a similar dimension to the aforementioned writing histories from the perspective of heretofore overlooked groups – it is a gesture of resistance towards traditional history writing.

Both characters are completely aware of the insignificance of their life stories in the face of the 20th century history, although both were its victims. Roma's mother says the following about surviving the war: "I am just a *perfekte Hausfrau* with a fiery bungle on my head. *Jo?* I crawled out of the shooting, lightly shot. To comfort and propagate wounds. These years stretch like a black veil" (Rudzka 2018: 155).

The paradoxical importance of women's histories does not consist solely in the weight they carry throughout their lives, but also in the simple fact that they survived. For Sońska, this miracle comes down to the continuously experienced absence she talks about when she describes herself:

I am Sonia the White, I am Sonia the Lame, I am the last as my dog Borbus the Twelfth, as my cat Jozik the Mouse Shepard, the last of the family, my blood was erased from the world during the war and then it was just drying up. I am from Królówce Stojło, where proud kings stopped for pasture, I am born Trochimczyk, I am a mother whose child was killed, I am a sister whose brothers were killed, I am a wife whose husband was killed, I am a lover whose lover was killed, a neighbor without neighbors, despair without vocal cords, complaint without a confessor, confession without absolution (Karpowicz 2014: 128).

This statement points to the specificity of women's histories during the war – not taking direct part in the fighting, they are more likely to survive, but, at the same time, it is more likely their close ones will die, an absence they will later have to live with. Obviously, this is not the only price for being a woman during the war.

In Sońska's and Roma's mother's stories there recur memories concerning violence, especially sexual violence they experienced not only from the soldiers, both also their own families. The characters describe this violence in a brutal, direct way, almost in passing, which reflects the currently growing awareness of the commonality of violence against women, especially during wartime.

Indeed, women's histories are, to a large degree, histories connected with corporeality. In both texts, the body is a carrier of experiences, not only those in which women were victims of violence. Key events in their stories have corporeal dimension. For instance, when talking about the loss of her sister Ingeborga, Rudzka's protagonist describes her cut braids. This perspective follows how Hélène Cixous defines women's literature in her classic work *The Laugh of the Medusa*, calling for women's bodies to become audible (Cixous 1993: 152). Although Sońska and *mamulka* do not write their stories directly, their narratives are clearly inscribed into the postulate of what women's perspective, ac-

according to Cixous, should introduce into literature. The act of writing “will not only “realize” the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal” (Cixous 1976: 880) – the French philosopher continues.

This call is also realized in both women’s histories. Both Sońka and Roma’s mother reminisce their relationships, seen as wrong by local communities, without shame and sense of guilt. They describe sexual sphere in similar way, despite the common imagined conservatism concerning social mores of people from the rural working class<sup>9</sup>. They dedicate considerable space to discussing sexual experiences, marginalizing motherhood. It seems, thus, that in talking about themselves, the characters succeed in “tear[ing] themselves” away from the superegoized structure in which [they have] always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being ‘too hot’; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing...) – tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvelous text of her self” (Cixous 1976: 880). Living and telling their stories gives them power over those who wanted to see them as guilty ones and whose voices are no longer audible.

### Non-Polishness

Just as sexual relations of the characters are not inscribed into the stereotype of a woman living in the countryside<sup>10</sup>, so their identity exceeds alleged identification with Polishness. Interestingly, in neither novel do the women directly define their national or ethnic belonging. About herself and her family Sońka says: “we are not theirs, we are nobody’s, we are our own”, emphasizing that her locality is not connected with Polish, Belarusian or Russian nationality. In turn, Roma’s mother mentions the time right after the war, when the goal of the people’s authorities was to achieve national homogeneity of the country. This process was connected with resettlements, as well as with Polonization of members of ethnic and national minorities. The protagonist of Rudzka’s novel admits: “I started a new life with a new name, but I didn’t have the inclination to live in a new way” (Rudzka 2018: 71).

The way Rudzka’s protagonist experiences her own identity does not require a direct indication of being Silesian. In both histories, national or ethnic

9 The imagined conservatism of the rural working class is shown well by such monikers as: *ciemnogród* (place of ignorance), *zaścianek* (backwater), Poland B. They refer, on the one hand, to provinciality and small cultural capital of the people they describe, while on the other, to their apparent reluctance towards changes and progress.

10 A character following such a stereotype would be Handzia from Edward Redliński’s *Konopielka*. Her attachment to traditionally perceived social norms is seen, for instance, in the scene in which she refuses Kaziuk to have intercourse in other positions than the traditional one.

labels seem to come from the dominating group that uses them. For the characters, local belonging, understood as neighborly community and connection with particular land and village, is more important. This approach is in accordance with the opinion concerning the fact that in the 20th century the concept of the nation was still produced by intellectual elites<sup>11</sup>.

The protagonists' non-Polishness is also the reason why the war, despite its effects being keenly felt, in a sense does not concern them – they do not belong to any side of the raging conflict. Therefore, although they describe events so deeply rooted in Polish historiography, their perspective is far from the one seen by the Polish nation as a subject of historical events. A good example can be seen in Sońka's statement regarding living conditions after the Third Reich army entered Podlasie in 1941: "It had never been that easy to live: neither in Prussia, nor in Czar or Soviet Russia, or in the noble Poland, the *staryki* [old people] would say. We knew that we were Adolf Hitler's subjects now" (Karpowicz 2014: 28). The words of Karpowicz's protagonist are clearly marked by class context – the Nazi occupation for the inhabitants of the novel's village in Podlasie was simply another form of servitude, not much worse than the previous ones. Thus, the folk memory of this period differs from the memory of intelligentsia, which had come to dominate historical discourse.

In an obvious way, the strategies of building identities of the women protagonists are supposed to provide nuance to the binary division of us – Poles and others – Germans, Russians, Belarusians. Thus, experiences resulting from women's ethnic belonging are supposed to break the omnipresent Polish-centric narration, especially that around World War Two and post-war years. They show a minority look at history and in this way, precede the aforementioned non-fiction books based on a similar idea.

In both novels, this minority approach is connected with the protagonists' statements. Historical background is present in the texts due to the stories of Sońka and Roma's mother. Therefore, they treat history as a sphere that is subjective, narrative and affective. In turn, the construction of plot in the novels draws to mind the concept of oral history, in which the research subject is not written sources, but rather, statement by the events' participants and witnesses. This results in appreciation of a perspective wherein World War Two or the beginning of Polish People's Republic are discussed not through the lens of political or military history. Their place is taken up by a relation regarding the daily life of people who had to live in those times.

### Language

The orality of the protagonists' histories is also connected with the tradition of orality, which, according to Myśliwski, is passing away, similarly to the toll of

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11 As Michał Rauszer notes, this opinion is a certain simplification, although the sense of Polish national identity did actually spread on such a wide scale among rural working classes in Polish People's Republic with the growth of the literacy within society (Witkowski 2025).

working in the field (Myśliwski 2003). According to the writer, these two losses contribute to the aforementioned decline of peasant culture. It thus seems significant in this context that in Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels younger protagonists are writers by profession, while the older characters provide them with matter in the shape of spoken word. This conclusion leads us to the issue of the language – exceptionally important in creating older women in both novels.

Czapliński notes the importance of this issue with regard to peasant novels created in the 20th century. In the classification of ways of using language, he emphasizes Edward Redliński's strategy consisting in juxtaposing dialect with literary language (Czapliński 2024: 83). A similar device is used by both Karpowicz and Rudzka, the difference being that in their texts, dialect is contrasted with literary language. In Sońka's speech there appear many phrases drawn directly from Belarusian. In turn, Roma's mother intersperses her speech with phrases resembling German ones (*fotografujemy*) or dialect ones ([*córucha*] *barbelucha* – *berbeluch* in many dialects refers to cheap alcohol), simplifying words phonetically, as present in many kinds of dialect (*chlyw* instead of *chlew*; *chopy* instead of *chłopy*), adding the dialect interjection *jo* at the end of sentences or, finally, using idioms or syntax that is supposed to bring associations with the language of rural working class (idiom: *ciemno tu jak u Murzynów*, [dark here as if at the Negroes'], inversion: *ja mojej szpuntce nieba przychylałam* [for my szpuntka I would bend the sky]).

In turn, in fragments pertaining to the younger characters, the language becomes metaphoric, uses plays on words and changes register between regular and literary language (“As if metaphysics was a word that sometimes met the world” – „Jak gdyby metafizyka była słowem, które niekiedy spotykało się ze światem” [Karpowicz 2014: 53]), “One more hour and he will dissolve, and the dirty stain of his ego will wash under my boots” – „Jeszcze godzina i rozpuści się, a brudna plama z jego ego podmyje mi botki” (Rudzka 2018: 47).

Although Igor and Roma grew up surrounded by dialect and they understand it, they only use it when quoting or imitate countryside inhabitants. Czapliński notes that in Redliński's prose, this linguistic “conflict confirmed the insurmountability of class difference as showcased in the plot and the impossibility of developing a common language” (Czapliński 2024: 83). In Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels this conflict has a similar function – it shows the irreversibility of the advancement of the protagonists who construct their city identities in separation from their places of origin.

In both novels, the linguistic image of the countryside is built, above all, from the fragments of statements of the inhabitants who are passing away forever and descriptions of decline of countryside spaces conducted from the perspective of the arriving city dwellers. Czapliński describes this strategy as ghost stories (Czapliński 2017: 27), and the stories using this device, among which he lists *Sońka*, according to him, reach directly to the war, and indirectly, into deep past, showing Polish culture as the producer of the countryside's

phantom existence. It took on the shape of a dependent, servile countryside, discursively contingent. The paradox revealed by the writers manifested itself in the fact that the most effective defense against cultural domination turned out to be transforming the countryside into a phantom. Thus, if the literature of the turn of the 20th and 21st century sought chances to renew energy of country life, the writers of the next decade, with grotesque interest, discovered, above all, energy of death (Czapliński 2017: 30).

The energy of death mentioned by the scholar also touches the language. After all, the protagonists' idiolects (rooted in dialects), similarly to their places of residence, are marked by the women's inevitable deaths.

### **The Rural Working Class and the Middle Class**

In *Sońka* and *Krótką wymianą ognia*, the dependence of countryside existence that Czapliński writes about is visible in the very structure of a story-within-a-story, the mediation with which we are dealing in case of stories of women from the rural working class. We learn about the lives of both women characters *post factum*, it functions as a story about a past that contextualizes the life stories of socially advancing protagonists. Igor's and Roma's arrival at their places of origin becomes for them a pretext to discover the sources of their own conditions, not autonomous stories of the women. When Sońka's or Roma's mother's stories are discussed in the novels, what is really discussed are their descendants. "Sońka busies herself in the barn, plays white fugues of milk on the walls of the bucket, grunts and curses the animal in a friendly way, and then Igor focuses on himself, or more precisely, on his emptiness [...]" (Karpowicz 2014: 19). In Karpowicz's novel the suggestion concerning instrumental usage of Sońka's history by Igor appears repeatedly from the very start – for the protagonist, a director, meeting the woman is, after all, inspiration for another play.

The audience's interest in the subject of the play, as mentioned in the novel, can be treated as foretelling what will actually soon happen in the real, not just literary world – in the publishing market, folk histories will start appearing one after another, in the cinemas, these will be films portraying peasant life, and in television studies, the issue of the so-called folk turn will be discussed. The reasons behind this popularity of folk subjects are bluntly indicated by Antonina Tosiek:

Were we to look for the actual reason why publications connected with the "folk turn" gained such popularity, we should probably indicate the communal need for intervention in fake collective genealogies and simplified identifications. The impulse appeared out of the wish to deconstruct history, recover memory of camouflaged dimensions of violence and systemic strategies that aimed at its collective repressing. It was accelerated by resistance to hegemony of a single narrative of the nation's self-determination and creation; subsequent paragraphs and plays were supposed to facilitate finding its fissures, inconsistencies (Tosiek 2024).

All functions of describing folk histories indicated by the author appear in both novels in fragments pertaining to women's minority histories. Similarly to many Polish novels concerning social and political subjects published after 1989, they aim to revise historical narrative, mainly through talking about what has been overlooked so far. However, their meaning does not end there – using women's minority stories in the novels says a lot about how the middle class perceives itself.

The histories of rural working class women make it possible for the protagonists, and, as follows, also the readers, to look at themselves in them as if in a mirror and see something that will supplement their own story or identity gaps. In this reflection, one can see what had admittedly not been unavailable before, but what remained outside the sphere of interest of the middle class. The cited women's stories are created as sources – the violence experienced by the previous generations explains the issues faced by the younger protagonists. A similar parallel, albeit in a social dimension, is drawn by Czapliński. In his approach, people of the middle class “recognize their place in the social structure in the same way as peasants do – through the *worseness* in which they are stuck” (Czapliński 2024: 341). This worseness does not need to have only the economic dimension that Czapliński writes about. These are also difficulties with relationships, underappreciation, issues in dealing with problematic situation. Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels indicate the “therapeutic” potential that in the situation of such a sense of worseness can be found in women's minority histories. They demonstrate that the current condition is not one's blame, but, rather, a result of what ancestresses faced.

In (re/de)constructing history selection is an important aspect. Academic and popular science publications of the folk turn frequently focus on peasant rebellions and acts of resistance (Czapliński 2024: 359). In the case of women's histories in Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels what is significant is a certain kind of agency, independence or non-conformism that make it possible for the characters to survive and tell their life stories, and for the women readers to find a model of discreet women's emancipation in times and places in which feminism was not discussed.

Igor and Roma, thanks to *Sońka* and *mamulka*, respectively, and their stories woven for the last time, gain a certain kind of self-awareness that has both an individual and a social dimension. These histories fill a gap in the identity of middle class, wherein many people have experienced advancement, heretofore insufficiently discoursivized. They constitute a kind of genealogy, whose essence is not their truth or falseness. After all, women's minority histories in *Sońka* and *Krótką wymianą ognia* are narratives within narratives, stories conducted in processed minority language, a literary warning that in the case of folk histories we usually deal with a certain fleeting narration.

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## Maritime Turn and the Sinking of Heweliusz\*

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**ABSTRACT:** The article formulates a postulate of a maritime turn in research and public debate in Poland, grounding it in the context of the ongoing folk turn. The text argues for the need to increase maritime awareness and moving some of national interest from traditional land subjects to issues connected with the Baltic Sea. In the first part, the author defines maritime awareness, references concepts from the field of maritime sociology, history of culture and economy so as to show the historical conditions behind land-based foundations of Polish mentality and Poland turning away from the sea. Simultaneously, changing human aspirations and counting maritime economy among challenges for the near future are taken into account. The second part analyzes the significance of Adam Zadworny's non-fiction book *Heweliusz. Tajemnica katastrofy na Bałtyku* and the announced Netflix series for the popularization of maritime-related subjects within the postulated maritime turn. It shows that disasters, seen as "useful" in the sphere of communication, may play the role of a catalyst for communal forms of life, whereas when described at a temporal distance in texts of culture with broad public audience, they may co-create social climate favorable for the development of maritime economy.

**KEYWORDS:** maritime turn, sinking of Heweliusz, Adam Zadworny, Heweliusz TV series

### The Maritime Awareness of Polish People

The article contains a postulate of a maritime turn. It would consist in forcing through and then consolidating a "new" research focus in our country, in supporting maritime awareness in Polish culture, despite the legacy and *longue durée* of land-locked mentality in Polish social history and, as a result, in inten-

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sifying interest in the sea in Polish public life and economy. It is my claim that the time is right for Polish society to cease to be focused only on land interests. Simultaneously, we encounter valuable academic and published body of work of many fields of study dealing with the sea and the people of the sea, among others, maritime sociology, transport economy and history of culture. This body of work could be publicized and popularized with the goal to increasing the maritime awareness of the Polish people.

I propose the following blueprint definition of maritime awareness. Maritime awareness is an attitude shaped by historical experiences and collective state of mind that sees the sea as the key source of prosperity, strategic space and cultural inspiration. It is expressed through knowledge, responsible management of resources, attention to security, as well as social and cultural activities. It constitutes a foundation of cultural identity and it marks directions for national maritime policies, including ports, navy, shipping, and professions connected with the sea both offshore and onshore. Therefore, an increase in maritime awareness should be seen as a product of the process of civilization. It consists in establishing requirements regarding economic activity connected with the sea, its resources and functions – activity which becomes socially required in the course of this process. These criteria include using the sea both as space for transportation, source of raw materials and energy, and in the function of a space for recreation and cultural activity. Following Norbert Elias, by such a psychocultural process I understand, in fact, constructing what is obvious in the given culture. It concerns building a cultural model in the context of issues of state organization, imposing moral norms, economic standards, etc. In this way, social compulsion changes into internal compulsion of individuals (Elias 2011: 495–517), on the level of culture of existence as well as symbolic culture (Boksański 2006: 193).

The present article has two parts. The second, shorter part, brings about a fundamental change of topic. It pertains to the recent Polish publication of a reportage concerning the reasons, course and consequences of the 1993 sinking of the Polish ferry Jan Heweliusz in the Baltic Sea. I do not interpret Adam Zadworny's publication in terms of a literary event – this I leave to literature scholars and their tools; rather, I note a public event of a game changer type. I realize that the *iunctim* between the two parts of my article may appear entirely impossible to grasp at first glance. However, I would like to show that given the faint maritime awareness of Poles, any starting point, any pretext becomes exceptionally valuable and can be fruitful. As the adage has it, beggars can't be choosers. Moreover, disasters, following a suggestive, paradoxical concept of a performative scholar, can be counted among culturally productive phenomena (Wojnowski 2016: 411–432). While they are rightfully seen as tragedies or destruction scenes, simultaneously, having broken the continuity of some structures or longer event chains, disasters open space for new forms of life, new ideas, languages, practices, etc. In this sense, among others, this popular reportage narration concerning the sinking of the Polish ferry may

pave the way for a maritime turn. Adam Zadworny's reportage has social resonance not only due to its pioneering nature and culturally productive disaster content. In the footsteps of Zadworny's book – admittedly, this is a pure coincidence, and not a business collusion or adaptation of some kind – there follows a notorious TV show. At the point when the present text is handed over to the editors, *Heweliusz* has not premiered yet, but it has already been emphatically announced in other media by its creators and producers from the Netflix streaming platform, and advertised according to PR techniques. It could be said that the *Heweliusz* TV show has become known before it was even shown on the screen.

The book's author, Adam Zadworny, is a Szczecin-based journalist, anchored, above all, in regional community. Nevertheless, the book *Heweliusz. Tajemnica katastrofy na Bałtyku* [*Heweliusz. The Mystery of a Baltic Disaster*] had a strong national resonance. In addition to reconstructing the course of the disaster, describing the attitude of the shipowner, the institution of maritime administration in Poland, the surviving crew members and the experiences of the victim's families, the reportage provides a rare insight into the reality of Polish shipping and maritime transportation in the first phase of economic and system transformation. Zadworny succeeded in reflecting a certain *Stimmung*, a broad political, cultural, emotional, economic and infrastructural context of the 1990s, when shipping in the version brought over from the last years of Poland under a Communist rule was giving its last breath, while phenomena of the democratized Poland removing itself from the sea were accelerating. These include: lack of investment into state-of-the-art shipping vessels, departing from national fleet (Polish ensign), allowing for the fall of the shipyard industry and reduction of Polish technical support, the disappearance of deep-sea fishing.

The maritime turn will not be possible or efficient without an increase in maritime awareness. Maritime awareness will serve as cultural and mentality-related support for the process of increasing the role of the Baltic Sea, shipping and port economy in the social and economic development of Poland.

### **Maritime Turn**

I postulate a maritime turn. I use the notion of a "turn" while being aware of all its burdens and wear in social sciences and humanities. There is no doubt that the multitude of novelties in theory and research announced one after another at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries (interpretive turn, performative turn, postcolonial turn, spatial turn, etc.) resulted in all these turns ceasing to appear as serious, great caesuras in the second quarter of the 21st century; the most they seem are amendments or supplements of the research state (Bohuszewicz 2012: 23–24). Similarly, the maritime turn, although it may sound novel, will in no way take place in an empty space. However, the logic of intellectual provocation that I consciously want to employ has its rights. In order to be heard and to give dynamics to a certain process initiated in the academia, but aiming to exceed it into public influence, it is the most efficient to announce yet an-

other turn. Here, this word is supposed to be received in the mind of academic audience as an unambiguous, understandable signal that another momentous and current topic – or, rather, a set of topics, together with a certain research focus dedicated to it – enters the agenda.

In cultural studies, metaphors are a normal tool of cognition and description. The maritime turn belongs to this order. Furthermore, as Doris Bachmann-Medick has shown, the strength and attractiveness of turns is determined by the fact that they perform a movement from research subjects to categories of analysis, while the categories of analysis as such undergo metaphorization. This means that a new “cultural turn”, instead of referring to cognitive objects, “becomes a *tool* and *medium* of knowledge itself” (Bachmann-Medick 2012: 31). As a result, the given subject area can be delineated right across a division into research fields. In the case of a performative turn, these will be ritual, translation or space, while in the case of a maritime turn – the navy, ports or maritime texts of culture. Turns do not impose a specific method; rather, they bring about a re-organization of imagination. A very broad range of interests, just as metaphors, are not an impediment in cultural studies, as they suit its holistic nature. Culture remains the final and target subject of study of all sciences, be they natural or political (Szahaj 2023: 160).

Currently, Poland is ruled by a folk turn. It will not be overly publicistic to state that there has been an outcrop of intellectuals who want to have something to say about the countryside, the past history of Polish peasants, or about other forms of life of the lower class. Whether they are able to hear, simultaneously, what the sources want to tell them, should be verified by professional historians. The fashion for the so-called folk histories made repressed excesses of noble culture and reckoning of bills of wrongs between peasants, lords and hegemony, or servants, the proletariat and townspeople into main subjects for debate. It is worth redirecting this attention to the “excess” of Poland turning her back to the Baltic Sea, and, starting today, balancing the folk turn with a maritime turn. Not just out of contrariness, as a gesture of discursive foolery – extending the postulate of a maritime turn has material justification that I present later. I assume that the folk turn is now reaching its culmination. When the given intellectual fashion reaches its peak, it must soon fade out or give way to another powerful trend. Although Georg Simmel referred mainly to aesthetic fashions, his observations can be extrapolated to ideas. Just calling something a fashion assumes that it will disappear as soon as it appeared. And, at the same time, fashion cannot be universal, for after a quantitative multiplication it becomes homogenized, becomes, “as pertains to its quality, a common good of the masses” (Simmel 2006: 25).

What I am aiming at is that space is being made for maritime interests and issues. Once there occurs an oversaturation with peasants and the land, navigating might become tempting for a change. *Navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse*. In fact, the low maritime awareness and the scope of the folk turn are like the obverse and reverse of one and the same cultural formation. The fashion

for folk histories of Poland and its scope find their justification in the specificity of native cultural formation, shaped at the junction of folk and gentry tradition.

The Poles' turning their back at the sea is an inveterate issue, long-standing mental structure, the legacy of the noble Commonwealth – Poland before the Partitions, which took place at the end of the 18th century. The excellent twentieth-century historian, Władysław Konopczyński, put this particularity succinctly: “The pre-Partitions Poland had agrarian economic structure, and the population of the Commonwealth displayed characteristics of typical agricultural society. The nobility’s interests and perceptions focused, above all, on land-related issues” (Konopczyński 2014: 226). A contemporary historian, Jan M. Piskorski, writes in identical spirit:

Poles were not drawn towards the sea. While in the times close to ours, especially in the euphoria after regaining independence in 1918, we were wont to boast about the homeland “from a sea to a sea”, we were actually drawn by that which was between those – “the Intermarium”: the rich soil of Ukraine and cheap, sometimes all but enslaved, labor force (Piskorski 2020: 11).

The nobility considered Ukrainian arable fields to be much more important than the sea. The First Polish Republic never had a big navy fleet, and its maritime significance was slight in comparison with maritime empires of the modern era. As follows, work on the sea, maritime professions were not held in high esteem by society. A certain exception lay in recruiting to foreign ships. It was not an accident that the maritime writer Józef Conrad Korzeniowski wrote in English. He might have been born in Berdyczów in the present-day Ukraine, but he swam on French and British ships. The English language provided him with rich technical vocabulary which, should he be writing in Polish, he would have needed to omit or make up himself first (Piskorski 2020: 12).

The measure of individual and collective success among Polish land owners was marked by the territory owned, family wealth and not the status of a ship-owner. Unless these were truly long-distance expeditions of explorers into foreign seas. Zygmunt Sójka, one of the seniors of Polish maritime economy, stated that it was this particular social, cultural and developmental grounding that “shaped a particular type of a Pole – a knight and a farmer – for centuries” (Sójka, Kasprzyk 1986: 17). In his historical and social exegesis of Polish modernity, Tomasz Kizwalter adds to this image of being immersed in agrarian peripherality the low level of urbanization, weakness of towns, complete elimination of “burgher components” (Kizwalter 2000: 33–37). In foreign trade, this meant stopping at exporting crops, agricultural products and “forest gifts” by cosmopolitan ports in such towns as Gdansk or Elbląg, which would at one point have better, and at another – more complicated relations with the Commonwealth.

Therefore, the issue of territory as such, Poland’s limited access to the Baltic Sea does not entirely explain the propensity for Poland’s weak utilization of

its seaside location and possession of an extensive shoreline in its own borders. However, it is a significant historical and political factor (cf. Znaniński 1935: 33). Limiting the reflection to the past century, initially, during the inter-war period Poland only reached the Baltic Sea via a narrow corridor. General Józef Haller performed the lofty gesture of marrying Poland to the sea by throwing a ring into the sea in Puck in February 1920. In the interwar period, the capital of the Pomerania voivodeship was located in Toruń (which is admittedly situated at the Vistula shore, but at about 180 km from the Baltic Sea). After the end of World War Two and the fall of the iron curtain “from Szczecin to Trieste”, as Winston Churchill put it, the revived Poland took over a shoreline of about 770 kilometers. Took it over in the administrative sense, but managed it clumsily and ineffectively. This was supposed to be hidden by a surplus of patriotic pathos. In a poem unambiguously entitled *Powrót* [*The Return*], a poet familiar to many generations of children praised this return the following way: “Wróciła Polska na swój brzeg, / ku wiecznie swemu morzu” [Poland returned to its shore, to the sea that is forever hers] (Szelburg-Zarembina 1970: 3). The country’s return to the sea was also celebrated symbolically, by repeating the gesture of the pre-war general by the Polish People’s Republic’s authorities. In Kolberg-Kołobrzeg, liberated from German rule, corporal Franciszek Niewidziajło threw a ring into the sea on 18th March 1945.

Two literary fragments showcasing the shallowness of the Poles’ attitude towards the sea are familiar from ceaseless circulation. Both derive from the troves of literary history. It seems that a quote from a 1595 Baroque poem *Flis* [*Rafting*] by Sebastian Klonowic is the one more popular: “Może nie wiedzieć Polak co to morze, gdy pilnie orze” (What the sea is a Pole may not know as he is busy with the plow) (original quote following Rancew-Sikora 2010: 11). Rafters, people of the river finished their work where the world of the great water and foreign trade exchange by the means of deep-sea routes only began (Chwalba 2023: 154–171). This is why in the sphere of Polish cultural heritage people of the sea do not appear, while rafting was appropriately honored. Poland introduced timber rafting to the UNESCO “Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity”. Until 2022, this was the fifth Polish entry on this list. The previous ones concerned nativity scene tradition in Krakow, tree beekeeping, falconry and flower carpets arranged for Corpus Christi in the village of Spycimierz in the Sieradz Land<sup>1</sup>. Thus, these entries contribute to a constellation of an expressly landlocked nature.

Many years ago, Franciszek Bujak, a social and economic historian and, coincidentally, an inhabitant of the Lesser Poland region, noted that people of the land, including those from riverine cultures, even with rafters as central social figures, create cultures with a limited exchange of information and

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1 See the official information from the Ministry for Culture and National Heritage: <https://www.gov.pl/web/kultura/flisactwo-piata-polska-tradycja-wpisana-na-liste-unesco> (retrieved April 27, 2025).

with narrowed circulation (Bujak 1934: 7–8). Meanwhile, the force of maritime cultures resembles *avant la lettre* globalized network form in Manuel Castells's understanding (Castells 2008: 405–452). People of the sea function in hubs belonging to extensive networks of transport nodes. Seaside cultures exist due to transfers both in the economic and political, and cultural and civilizational dimension. “Maritime culture – is a culture of exchange and circulation. Sailing – is above all trade”, Bujak (1934: 9) wrote. Tellingly, Bujak somewhat affirmed the dichotomy of land and maritime culture with his own biography and scholarly career. He wanted to do his habilitation on sailor's maps, but the Krakow Academy of Learning took that to be something exotic, an eccentric idea. Thus, having been quickly taught conformism, Bujak “abandoned endless seas and focused on the oldest villages in Lesser Poland, various Łęki, Zabłocia and Zakamycza” (Piskorski 2020: 12–13).

In turn, the other circulating literary fragment, containing a more developed thought, comes from *Rozmowy kruszwickie* [*Kruszwica Conversations*] by Jan Dymitr Solikowski from 1573. The archbishop admonished: “Whosoever has a maritime country and does not use it or allows [others] to tear it away, removes all benefits from oneself and brings all harm upon oneself, becoming a slave instead of a free man, a poor instead of a rich man, a stranger instead of familiar” (Solikowski 1906: 479). This quotation was used, among others, as a motto on the website of the Polish Navy in its previous version, or in the title of selection of source texts with historical-literary commentary (Kotarski 1970). It is difficult to imagine a more fitting comment to the desertion from intense development of navy, going on for a long time now, and a well-considered, perspective-oriented policy in maritime economy. Indeed, it is also a comment to the contemporary repeat of moving away from the sea by the Third Polish Republic.

A country's moving away from the sea has various determinants, such as a lack of strong commercial fleet under the Polish flag, actions leading to the fall of the shipyard industry, or the ongoing decrease in the mass of fishing nationally and deep-sea. Today, the historic BHP Room in the old Gdańsk Shipyard almost disappears among the intense building of developer estates, while shipowners make standard use of the so-called flags of convenience; according to the generally available data of GUS [Statistics Poland] for 31st December 2023, there were altogether 88 ships in Polish maritime transport fleet belonging to Polish shipowners and operators, out of which only 14 units, or 15%, displayed the white-and-red Polish flag. Moreover, according to official data, the number of coastal cutters declined between 2003 and 2022 from 991 to 697, representing a one-third loss without replacement by new vessels; this translates into a decline in fish caught in Polish fisheries from nearly 200,000 tons in 2016 to nearly 76,000 tons in 2024. This is compounded by the scale of neglect of smaller ports. Poland has four thriving ports of fundamental importance to the economy – this being a statutory designation for the ports in Gdańsk, Gdynia, Szczecin, and Świnoujście. Furthermore, there are several

dozen (approximately 30) ports considered medium-sized and small. An audit conducted by NIK [the Supreme Audit Office], covering most of Poland's smaller-scale seaports (27–29), revealed long-standing neglect, a deplorable state of their infrastructure, and their marginal role in domestic transshipment. The report, published in 2023, blamed the blocked development of these ports on overly fragmented ownership and lack of stable financing<sup>2</sup>.

According to my research at this point, what the relationship between Poland and the Baltic Sea represents has been diagnosed most aptly by the Gdańsk polyhistor: a geographer, economist, nautologist, historian of civilization and geopolitics specialist in one. Andrzej Piskozub indicated three key features: “mystical attitude to the sea, mythical to maritime traditions, and volunteer in approach to maritime economy” (Piskozub 2004: 7). In other words, Piskozub expressed the opinion that the inscription of the Baltic Sea into patriotic feeling did not decide about the emergence of any kind of mature maritime culture in Poland, if it is to be seen in the categories of symbolic and material products of national community, resulting from economic and social activity.

Another person who thought it important to pragmatically include Poland into maritime civilization through developing contacts with the sea on all planes – economic, social, cultural, scientific and strategic – was the founder of the Szczecin school of maritime sociology (Janiszewski 1989: 281–283). Ludwik Janiszewski is known, above all, from his authorial concept of marinization. The processes of marinization consist of two free factors: the influence of forms of human activity connected with the sea as well as the influence of the sea as such on the structure and culture of coastal societies as a particular type of a community (Janiszewski 1984). In Janiszewski's research, a prominent place was taken up by maritime professions and sailors' families, especially how the specificity of offshore work transformed family relationships. At the same time, Janiszewski (1989: 267) perceived the Polish Coast in its entirety: from Świnoujście to Elbląg and ports at the Vistula Lagoon, without favoring the two major port centers: in Trójmiasto (Gdańsk–Gdynia) and in Western Pomerania (Szczecin–Świnoujście). Thus, he maintained a pragmatic, constructive way of thinking about Poland's location at the Baltic shore, one that Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski had tried to strengthen right after the war, when for a short time he was the government's proxy for reconstruction of the Coast (Kwiatkowski 1945: 57).

Janiszewski and Piskozub appear here in a *pars pro toto* mode, that is, a synecdoche of the general state of maritime writing in Polish. The issues of Poland's relationship with the Baltic Sea and the Poles' cultural attitude towards sailing have already been fairly richly described. It is even less possible to say that the industry literature connected with various scientific fields and discussing equally diversified maritime issues is lacking. Additionally, for instance, the

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2 See The NIK Report *Małe porty morskie i ich duże problemy wraz z wystąpieniami pokontrolnymi* [Small seaports and their large problems with post-audit statements]: <https://www.nik.gov.pl/najnowsze-informacje-o-wynikach-kontroli/male-porty-morskie.html> (retrieved April 27, 2025).

achievements of Polish maritime sociology (see Kołodziej, Kołodziej-Durnaś, Królikowska 2024) are present and noted in international circulation. It is worth referring here to the publishing series “International Studies in Maritime Sociology” of the Brill publishing company or the directing functions of professor Maciej Kowalewski from the Szczecin University in the networking COST grant. The aforementioned repertoire of scientific publications is supplemented by industry and popular journals available in the regular offer of press stores („Morze” [The Sea], „Polska na Morzu” [Poland in the Sea], „Morze, Statki i Okręty” [The Sea, Boats and Ships], etc). There is also a constant niche for maritime literary fiction. As one can read in one of the monographs, this kind of prose by nature continually struggles for a higher rank in culture and tries to push away the opinion that it requires both special creators and refined audience (Karwacki 1975: 14), in brief, people fascinated with sailing and with the sea. Finally, the sea in Poland can crop up as both the pretext and the subject of “easy summertime reading”, that is, books purposely published at the very beginning of summer (e.g. Czechowska 2024; Øverås 2025).

Therefore, formulating the postulate of a maritime turn needs not lead to an appeal for a significant increase of subject literature. Still, a maritime turn should lead to a situation whereby broadly understood maritime research will go out to a larger audience and will, thus, serve to an increase in maritime awareness. “What we say and how we say it is really important, as, even if we are not always aware of it, it is always a part of a dialogue”, writes Monika Kostera (2019), inspired by the works of the Danish economic geographer, Bent Flyvbjerg. In humanities and social sciences we always refer not to laws of science, objective such as law of gravitation, but to problems, which are “someone’s”, situated in historical and social contexts. In order for these problems to be solved, theoretical knowledge has to be transformed into practical wisdom (Flyvbjerg 2001). The first step towards that, as clearly articulated by Kostera, is made when we have something meaningful to tell people. I see the maritime turn as a tool for making such considered stories heard. After all, they are no less meaningful than folk histories of Poland.

Moreover, within the maritime turn I would envision establishing an Institute for Maritime Affairs (Instytut Spraw Morskich) – named thus, as the shorter option, “Instytut Morski” (Maritime Institute) has already been taken. It is a name of the research-and-implementation institute that undertakes studies in the field of maritime law, water and port engineering and hydrology, existing in Gdańsk since 1950, in 2019, incorporated by the Minister for Science, Jarosław Gowin, into the Gdynia Maritime University. The new institutions – the Institute for Maritime Affairs – with aims in popularization and public diplomacy, would take care of what was called maritime upbringing in interwar Poland. It was supposed to be comprehensive, yet it started with a primer of “what every Pole should know about their sea” (Rylke 1926). This kind of maritime upbringing meant, in fact, shaping of what I call maritime awareness. To refer to the previously quoted diagnosis by Piskozub, it should fulfill three

criteria: of realistic approach to the sea, critical outlook at the history of Polish sailing and maritime tradition, and pragmatic attitude towards maritime economy and ports in “arranging” the future. Only in these circumstances would it be obtainable to identify Polish society with the sea in a measure equal to heretofore identification with the land through “being economical”. Only in these circumstances can the “cultivation of the sea” develop, as it would have been put by Franciszek Gronowski (Waldziński 2017: 33), in the post-war Polish academia a prominent expert with regard to economics of maritime transportation and port infrastructure.

Simultaneously, such a formulation of the tasks of the Institute for Maritime Affairs should safeguard from this enterprise sliding into propaganda, pathos or kitsch, and thus, from repeating past mistakes. A mixture of propaganda and pathos turned out to be a phenomenon characteristic for the moment of maritime agitation in interwar Poland. The Polish cultural identification at the Baltic shore was co-created, to a considerable degree, by Liga Morska i Rzeczna (Maritime and River League), a social organization which, in a phantasmagoric sense of historical mission, changed its name to Maritime and Colonial League in 1930. The League produced and disseminated the phantasm about gaining exotic overseas colonies for Poland, including terrains suited for new settlement. Contemporarily, given the force of postcolonial theory, the program and activities of the League faces directly strict criticism. And unfortunately, such an image of the Maritime and Colonial League does not serve well maritime awareness, as it aids in creating the sense that for Poles, presence in the sea does not work out, or, due to some kind of determinism, must take on distorted forms. Thus, the League’s failed attempt at starting a settlement called Morska Wola [literally: Seaside Will] on land purchased in the Brazilian state of Parana is summarized bluntly by a historian of culture: “Well, seaside will turned out to be sea sickness (it is difficult to escape this inelegant association), but one way or another – the sea remains a very important figure of the colonial dream, wherein the process of regaining and purchasing territory is interwoven with internal symbolic violence [...]” (Litwinowicz-Drożdziel 2022: 21). This is my response to this dictum: the point of maritime turn is to wake up and to do maritime Poland of the 21st century in the waking world.

The newly established Institute for Maritime Affairs should be named after Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski. It is truly puzzling that no political decision-makers to this date came up with referring to this deserving namesake of the development of Poland, as well as its technological infrastructure and ports! In February 1947, and thus still fulfilling the role of a government proxy on the Coast, Kwiatkowski wrote: “the sea has been and continues to be a great power that forms and transforms the nation’s psyche. The sea educates people in issues of large spaces, in international ones, it bends human characters to tenacity, [...] to fierce stubbornness, mounted, however, on the anchor of reason [...]” (Kwiatkowski 2009: 369). Kwiatkowski, who had previously rendered significant services for the creation of the port city of Gdynia, encouraged continuous

and realistic development: “the huge disproportion between political ambition of playing the role of an empire and economic inertia may be currently eliminated. Pointless ambition can be processed into positive and worthy economic facts” (Kwiatkowski 2009: 367).

Given the existence of such formations as the Narutowicz (formerly: Dmowski) Institute or Narodowy Instytut Wolności [the National Institute of Freedom], the accusation of straining public means by the new institute whose goal is to make proper use of the maritime country becomes baseless. Especially taking into account the fact that among pointless public spending, registered by the reports of the independent analytical center, Warsaw Enterprise Institute, there are wasteful curiosities next to which the ideas of the interwar League seem innocent. Let us just consider that the „Pamięć i Tożsamość” Museum in Toruń was gifted a medieval sword purchased in an antique shop by a company of the National Treasury, which medieval scholars suspect of being a forgery (Staciwa 2024: 48). A penny saved is a penny earned for the budget of the Institute for Maritime Affairs.

### **Background of the Maritime Turn**

It is possible to indicate at least four different circumstances in favor of the maritime turn, its background, which appears increasingly better prepared.

Firstly, there is a development of aspiration culture in Polish public space. It involves, as should be immediately emphasized, an increasing group of social actors, connecting them into a power above the basic sociopolitical division in the country (Obacz 2021). This means that above the division line of the currently governing coalition of democratic parties versus the right led by the folk PiS party, we are dealing with a confrontation of a “party” of development with the “font” of investment minimalism. This is why the recent words by Prime Minister Donald Tusk regarding a proposal of hosting the 2040 Olympic Games in Poland are no longer discussed in media or social media, while the government is regularly appraised by society with regard to both continued (Central Port Komunikacyjny – Central Port of Communication) and hotly awaited new investments (nuclear power plants). These are megaprojects on a Polish scale (cf. Flyvbjerg 2017). The Polish government officially added expanding Baltic ports to the priority goals for the “Rok Przełomu 2025” [Year of Change 2025].

Jakub Dymek puts modern port economy and an expanded fleet among “nice things” that Poles need urgently (Dymek 2024). According to the journalist, the maritime issue needs to be put in the center of debate concerning the future, next to CPK or high-speed trains. Maritime concerns must also find their place in the first rank of strategic development thinking. This is a thought expressed in the spirit of professor Marcin Piątkowski. This economist consistently encourages Poles to become aware that they are at the best possible moment in the history of their country. In common terms, it can be described as window of development. According to official prognoses cited by Piątkowski,

Polish GDP is supposed to exceed 1 trillion dollars in 2025. The country currently faces the opportunity of breaking through to an above average status, an opportunity to turn into European leader (Piątkowski 2023: 317–337). Such aspirations are not at all among phantasms, and the window of development constitutes a factual moment. Therefore, it is obvious that a leading country located at the sea shore cannot make limited usage of this access, or not have its own commercial fleet.

Secondly, in worldwide academia, which Polish academia increasingly catches up with, there are developing various trends of reflection in the fields of eco-social sciences and eco-humanities. It suffices to mention here blue economy, ocean studies or reflection on ocean literacy – a sensitivity to maritime ecosystem in the approach of new humanities. An excellent example of a Polish response to international intellectual trends is the publication of “Przegląd Kulturoznawczy” under the moniker of Blue humanities. The aforementioned trends react to crises (climate change, rising sea levels, etc.) simultaneously studied by nature scholars and drawing the current attention of political decision-makers and the media. Today, discussions concerning new infrastructure (including water infrastructure) or sea exploitation actually turn into cultural wars: battles regarding language, cultural imagination, new human practices, as well as technological solutions with regard to green transition (e.g. Owczarska 2021; Henry 2023; Macura-Nnamdi, Sikora 2025).

Thirdly, the year 2026 will bring about a “round” birthday for Gdynia, namely, the 100th anniversary of the old fishing settlement over the Gull of Gdańsk receiving township rights (10th February 1926). In Poland, we often have excessive anniversary celebrations; we also have celebrations that not enough advantage was taken of, or dates strangely overlooked, such as the 1000th anniversary of the coronation of the first Polish King, Bolesław Chrobry. However, it is difficult to imagine the authorities overlooking the celebration of this port town, “the promised Gdynia”, as it was termed in the renowned book by a critic of architecture and the Second Polish Republic (Piątek 2022). Thus, one should expect official celebrations, publications on the occasion, events of ludic nature, even a *Sejm* act. Still, I am referring here to Piątek’s book for another reason: this narrative devoted relatively little space to the port and port activities. Even Grzegorz Piątek, when taking on the “town of the sea”, inscribed himself clearly into land-driven cultural tendencies.

Fourthly, it is necessary to take into account the return of maritime and naval subjects due to and by the means of the latest texts of culture. I treat cultural premieres as social events. In humanist political studies, as advocated by Włodzimierz Anioł, the importance of soft means of influencing public life is emphasized (Anioł 2021: 48). Thus, in addition to systemic factors, public life is also shaped by carriers of humanist interpretation and understanding. This is precisely how things are with regard to the reportage I discuss below. It concerns the biggest maritime catastrophe in the history of Polish commercial navy at the time of peace; 55 people died (10 crew members and 45

passengers), only 9 were saved. Regardless the tragic dimension, catastrophes are good forms of communication (cf. Wojnowski 2016: 429). The author of this book has something significant to say about how, in its beginnings, economic transformation of Poland prolonged the last moments of negative phenomena and practices from the end of Polish People's Republic. The transition from an illusory stage to a realist one in commercial ferrying did not happen until Poland started to turn away from the sea.

### A Useful Disaster

The Czarne publishing company released the non-fiction book entitled *Heweliusz. Tajemnica katastrofy na Bałtyku* [*Heweliusz. The Mystery of a Baltic Disaster*] (Zadworny 2024) in the late autumn 2024. Finally, an important maritime and Baltic subject appears in mainstream! Almost at the thirtieth anniversary of the tragedy, although closer to the thirty-fifth one – the Polish cargo-and-passenger ferry's sinking in the Baltic Sea took place in 1993, in the morning of 14th January. The few survivors belonged to the crew. All passengers were shortly annihilated by the forces of raging sea: these were truck drivers and their companions, including one child. Some, surprised by the monstrous listing during their night sleep in cabins, were unable to get to the deck, as bulkheads suddenly turned into floors and ceilings; the others died in the freezing water during the forced evacuation, the announced alarm to abandon ship. In accordance to the old sailing honorary code, the captain, Andrzej Ułasiewicz, voluntarily went down with the ferry. A few weeks after the disaster, his body was easily found at the bridge by divers and extracted from the wreckage.

At the same time, the TV series directed by Jan Holoubek and scripted by Kasper Bajon was made; it awaits its Netflix premiere in the second half of 2025<sup>3</sup>. The film-makers had the opportunity to film the series on the car-and-train ferry Jan Śniadecki, built almost ten years later (in 1986) than Jan Heweliusz (1977), yet in the same technology: it is also a ROPAX ferry. The film crew took advantage of the time right before Śniadecki was sent to Greece to a new shipowner.

It is worth adding that heretofore, the Heweliusz case had not been described in any monographs, and the title of a publication by Andrzej Soysal, a famous retired captain of deep-sea sailing (*Tajemnica zagłady Heweliusza* [*The Mystery of Heweliusz Sinking*]) is simply misleading, as it does not reflect the contents of the book, which is simply autobiographical storytelling. It only contains one passage concerning Heweliusz, does not reveal any mysteries or solve any crimes (Soysal 2010). Adam Zadworny fills this gap skillfully, as it was earlier done by films and documentary television programs of the “black series” kind: presently, most of them have been made available online. However, their feature is that after seeing a few such productions, one achieves a level of saturation with facts. For obvious reasons, I am not yet familiar with

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3 I have finished writing this article in April 2025.

the Netflix series, and thus I devote some attention to Zadworny's non-fiction work. Not much later, the book *Katastrofa Heweliusza* [*Heweliusz Disaster*] appeared in bookshops, marketed as a fictionalized reportage (Janiszewska 2025). Given the perspective of engendering a maritime turn, such thematic doubling is a good sign.

Among the announcements making it to the public domain and concerning "the most expensive Polish Netflix series", thus, apparently sentenced to success in advance of its release, two may be considered of note. Firstly, the crew made every effort, by, for example, traveling to a set at a special water (and underwater) Belgian film studio, so as the dramatic scenes taking place in the stormy Baltic whirlpool could be presented most faithfully, realistically and with momentum, and, at the same time, with respect towards the victims and the survivors who had to witness other people dying. Nonetheless, Jan Holoubek assures that the disaster is not the dominating mode of the series, which is supposedly much closer to psychological cinema. What is emphasized is what happened after *Heweliusz* sank – establishing the reasons behind the disaster, fates of the families, seeking justice, human attitudes. As follows, the series creators needed to somehow address the tradition, as created and fixed during Polish People's Republic, of the *Izba Morska* [Marine Chamber] to issue sentences favoring shipowners. The character of the captain, played by Borys Szyc, bears the name of the actual leader of the MS *Jan Heweliusz*.

Moreover, the Holoubek-Bajon tandem will face a different situation that in the case of the three-season thriller series *Rojst* [*The Mire*]. There, as befit a crime series, everything needed to be clarified, all jigsaw puzzles of narrative schema had to be finally joined together with craftsman-like precision due to the demands of cultural realism (Czubaj 2010). Here, we are dealing with a pre-defined set of established facts (that is, those known from the testimonies of surviving crew members, rescuers, etc.) and comments to those (analyses of experts in the field of naval ferry construction, reactions of state authorities of the time, etc.), and these facts cannot be exceeded. In that case, one needs to move from the events to a narrative built around those facts; they do not speak for themselves, and thus they need to be presented, culturally played in some way. Therefore, there arises the question as to what narrative Holoubek and Bajon have proposed – and what interpretation of the problems of Polish navy at the end of the 20th century, the state of the country, economy and society in the beginnings of free democratic Poland they will reveal.

Meanwhile, Zadworny remains transparent in his text, especially in its first part, which reconstructs the course of events of the fatal night as well as what preceded them: the history of MS *Jan Heweliusz* as such and its use by shipowners, a series of negligence and twists of fate (Zadworny 2024: 7–99). As a result, the writer reveals something fundamental. Over thirty years ago, an enormous disaster took place in the Baltic sea, the fifth in terms of victims in the 20th century, but it was not simply this kind of a catastrophe! It was also a shock for the Polish navy, a paroxysm for sailing in its Polish People's

Republic guise, transported into the reality of open borders and free market competition. In fact, the Jan *Heweliusz* ferry was all but a relic in 1993. It might have incurred admiration against the background of the gray countries of people's democracy, but after the political and economic turn of 1989 it should have been deemed a sick guest at the Baltic waters. To stick to the metaphor, a fluffed up and glum bird. Especially given that, instead of modern, electronic security supports, it moved around the uneasy Baltic waters with an increasing number of repairs following subsequent accidents and malfunctions (over 30!), including serious listing and a fire. Indeed, Jan *Heweliusz* was an unlucky ferry. Its first serious accident happened just one month after its launch: in August 1977, the new ferry collided with a barge in the Ystad port.

The capsizing of MS Jan *Heweliusz* during a storm of over 12 on Beaufort scale and its sinking revealed systemic deficiencies. The myth of naval greatness and made-up reason for national pride toppled over. The sinking of *Heweliusz* gave the fatal blow to the "colonial" phantasm of Poland as a true maritime country. Although advanced systems of electronic stabilization were available in 1993, the ferry only had at its disposal manual way of balancing lists by the means of a valve at the bottom of the ship, based on pumping water between ballast tanks. The crew used a mechanism dedicated for use during loading/unloading in a port in the deep sea. Makeshift repairs, postponed due to the shipowner's pressure for continuity of journeys (every day that the ferry spent at the shipyard meant financial losses), in connection with semi-legal practices being tolerated aboard (the crew members supplementing their official income by, e.g., trading alcohol or cigarettes, and letting unregistered passengers on board) increased the risk of exceeding a critical point in terms of security. All this seemed to foretell the final tragedy. In January 1993, the ferry set sail after hasty repairs to the stern gate, only welding and sealing. The captain's decision regarding steering with the stern, incorrect assessment of the water level in ballast tanks and extreme weather conditions resulted in a list of 30–40 degrees and made it impossible for the ferry to return to a vertical position. In his convincing narrative, *Zadworny* demonstrates that the disaster was the result of technological, economic and human factors all coming together, and not simply extreme weather or individual negligence.

In the year of the *Heweliusz* disaster, Polish commercial navy had already been suffering tonnage and course regression, and by the end of the 20th century indicators fell to 1/5 of post-war achievements. They peaked at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s as a result of the demand for coal from Upper Silesia. In 1990s, Polish deep-sea fishery was also in its agonal stages. There also occurred the phenomenon of gradual leaving Polish flag, which *Heweliusz* still boasted. "The most lucrative line fleet went completely over to the exotic 'flags of convenience'", as *Piskozub* concludes (*Piskozub* 2004: 250). The passenger ferry *Nieborów*, bought in 1994, was immediately registered under the Bahama Islands flag, meaning that its port of origin was Nassau. This was noted with an appropriate sign on the ship's hull – in the place where *Heweliusz* had the

“Świnoujście” inscription. The MS Rogalin ferry lost Polish flag for Nassau in 1999. Today, Polskie Linie Oceaniczne [Polish Ocean Lines], a company that Euroafrika, a sub-company running Heweliusz on its regular line to Ystad, emerged from at an early phase of Polish transformation, has no ships registered in Poland. In fact, a verification of a long-term prognosis developed in the Gierek era had negative results back in the first half of the 1980s. Neither did Polish ports catch up to Rotterdam, nor did Polish commercial fleet reach the size of Norwegian fleet, as had been promised in the prosperous 1970s (Piskozub 2004: 248).

In conclusion, it is possible to express the belief that although the tragic moment of the Heweliusz sinking with its passengers and transported cargo three decades ago did not become a psychological or practical bridge for a new era of Polish maritime activity, as a subject present due to public events it can become a starting point for re-evaluations and changes of attitudes indispensable for the formation of maritime awareness. The potential of a disaster which, as a form of communication, leads to the end of the “old world”, may offer a favor to the maritime turn. Given the metaphoric nature of all cultural turns, the conclusion should also contain a rhetorical figure: the memory of Heweliusz resembles a lighthouse, as it warns of rocks and shallows of the past, while casting bright light towards the horizon of the future.

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**RECENZJE I OMÓWIENIA**  
**REVIEWS AND DISCUSSIONS**



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## Najmłodsza historia ludowa?

### The Youngest People's History?

**Elżbieta Kaczyńska, *Niechciane, porzucane, naznaczone. Dzieci w modernizującej się Europie (od schyłku XVIII do początków XX wieku)*, Instytut Historii PAN, Warszawa 2024.**

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#### **Punkt wyjścia i okoliczności publikacji**

Książka Elżbiety Kaczyńskiej, powiedzmy to na samym początku, stanowi świadectwo śmiałej próby opracowania historii dzieci w Europie od schyłku XVIII do początków XX w., a wśród polskich publikacji akademickich jest wręcz pionierska. Trzeba też od razu dodać, że rzecz ukazuje się w okolicznościach rosnącej rangi studiów nad dzieciństwem (*childhood studies*) – badań inter- czy wręcz transdyscyplinarnych, biorących sobie za przedmiot kulturowe (w tym literackie) konstrukty dzieciństwa, instytucje poświęcone dzieciom (w szerokim ujęciu – instytucje kulturowe, jak również w węższym – instytucje państwowe), normy i regulacje rządzące rzeczywistością najmłodszych (na poziomie zasad moralnych i przepisów prawnych), programy dydaktyczne i reformy pedagogiczne, wreszcie – praktyki kulturowe dzieci i ich doświadczenia. A to wszystko w odniesieniu do współczesności, a także do zjawisk i procesów historycznych. Socjologia spotyka się w tych badaniach z antropologią, literaturo-

znawstwo z historią, pedagogika z filozofią, zwłaszcza etyką, kulturoznawstwo z psychologią. Rzeczona orientacja badawcza od dawna łączy naukowczynie i akademików z powyższych katedr w zespołach i projektach afiliowanych już nie tylko przy uniwersytetach francuskich (Philippe Ariès i – szerzej – annaliści znad Sekwany są tu poniekąd ojcami założycielami subdyscypliny i stałym punktem odniesienia), lecz także brytyjskich, a od kilku lat również polskich. Interdyscyplinarny Zespół Badań nad Dzieciństwem UW grupuje badaczki z warszawskiej etnologii i kulturoznawstwa oraz z innych krajowych ośrodków. Warto jednak dodać, że – jak zresztą często bywa, gdy piszemy o nowych kierunkach badawczych – zanim powstały nowe prężne zespoły o zapożyczonych z angielska etykietach, istniała już w Polsce dłuższa tradycja badań i publikacji poświęconych temu problemowi: temat podejmowany był regularnie w licznych tomach z serii „Kobieta i...” pod redakcją Anny Żarnowskiej i Andrzeja Szwarca, znalazła próbę szerszego opracowania w pokonferencyjnych tomach *Od narodzin do wieku dojrzałego. Dzieci i młodzież w Polsce* (Dąbrowska, Klonder 2002; Mazur 2003), trzeba też przywołać prace Doroty Żołądz-Strzelczyk, np. *Dziecko w dawnej Polsce* (Żołądz-Strzelczyk 2002), nie wspominając już o wężiej zakrojonych czasowo lub problemowo książkach lub artykułach monograficznych, których nie sposób tu wymienić.

Nieprzypadkowo w omówieniu książki Kaczyńskiej – a zatem publikacji historycznej – wymieniłem nauki o kulturze i społeczeństwie. Autorka to znana badaczka historii społecznej – od dekad chętnie czytana i cytowana właśnie na wydziałach socjologicznych, kulturoznawczych czy etnologicznych, jako historyczka mająca dar obudowywania przedmiotu swoich badań szerokimi cywilizacyjnymi kontekstami. Fragmenty jej *Pejzażu miejskiego z zaściankiem w tle* (Kaczyńska 1989) stanowią poręczne narzędzie dydaktyczne, którego na zajęciach historycznych dla studentów kulturoznawstwa używa się obok książek Jerzego Jedlickiego (co poświadczam jako dydaktyk prowadzący takie właśnie przedmioty).

Kaczyńska podejmuje temat nieczęsto analizowany w polskiej historiografii – losu dzieci niechcianych, porzucanych i naznaczonych społecznie. Praca ta wpisuje się we wspomniany szerszy nurt badań historycznych nad dziejami dzieciństwa, życia rodzinnego, antykoncepcji itd., zapoczątkowany przez Philippe’a Ariès’a w klasycznej już koncepcji „odkrycia dzieciństwa” (Ariès 1960). Kaczyńska, świadoma ograniczeń i kontrowersji wokół tez Ariès’a, proponuje ujęcie z perspektywy porównawczej i interdyscyplinarnej. Łączy historię społeczną, badania demografii, prawa, dzieje medycyny oraz historię kulturową, ukazując dziecko jako kategorię społeczną i polityczną, za którą dopiero kryły się (co już musimy sobie dopowiedzieć) realne podmioty historii. Interesuje więc Kaczyńską przede wszystkim proces instytucjonalnej modernizacji, który zmieniał status dziecka w społeczeństwie i położył fundamenty pod jego transformację – od istoty zależnej i podrzędnej do podmiotu dyskursu prawnego i etycznego. Jak podkreśla autorka, jej celem nie jest opis konkretnych losów dzieci, lecz raczej analiza mechanizmów i struktur społecznych decydujących

o ich pozycji, przetrwaniu i stygmatyzacji. Kaczyńska traktuje nieletnich jako „probiez cywilizacyjny” społeczeństw nowoczesnej Europy – wskaźnik poziomu moralności, rozwoju i stosunku do jednostki.

*Niechciane, porzucane, naznaczone* należy umieścić w jeszcze jednym kontekście, który zostanie tu jedynie zamarkowany: w sytuacji dynamicznie przyrastającej liczby publikacji z zakresu historii ludowej. Autorka nie zaznaczyła tego w tytule publikacji, nie przywołuje też tych okoliczności we wprowadzeniu, niemniej publikacja poświęcona właśnie dzieciom nieuprzywilejowanym wpisuje się w serię wydarzeń naukowych dotyczących historii chłopskiej, a po części też robotniczej (m.in. Leszczyński 2020; Rauszer 2020; Pobłocki 2021). Warto od razu zaznaczyć, że tematu nie wybrała Kaczyńska koniunkturalnie – już od przeszło dwóch dekad znajdował się w spektrum jej zainteresowań, zarówno jeśli chodzi o dzieciństwo (np. Kaczyńska 2003), jak i historię osób zepchniętych na margines (liczne publikacje poświęcone przestępcom, penitencjariuszom, katorżnikom, np. Kaczyńska 1982, 1989; Brus, Kaczyńska, Śliwowska 1992).

Doświadczona uczona opiera swoje badania na szerokiej bazie źródłowej, obejmującej archiwa polskie, rosyjskie, niemieckie, francuskie i irlandzkie. Wykorzystuje raporty policji, akta sądowe, materiały statystyczne, pamiętniki, publicystykę i literaturę piękną (m.in. Charlesa Dickensa, Émile’a Zolę, Adolfa Dygasińskiego). Jej podejście punktowo łączy analizy przypadków z analizą struktur makrosocjalnych – książka przypomina pod tym względem napisane z rozmachem wielotomowe publikacje francuskich annalistów: *Historię ciała*, *Historię męskości*, *Historię życia codziennego*.

Ramy chronologiczne – które z premedytacją nie zostały zakreślone w sposób precyzyjny – obejmują okres od oświecenia do I wojny światowej, z nawiązaniami do wcześniejszych epok w przypadku zjawisk długiego trwania (np. dzieciobójstwa, tzw. kołowrotów, tradycji religijnych). Zakres terytorialny ma charakter paneuropejski, przy czym autorka próbuje odnieść specyfikę zjawisk środkowoeuropejskich do doświadczeń Francji, Anglii, Rosji czy Irlandii – krajów o różnych systemach religijnych i politycznych, spośród których zwłaszcza ta ostatnia wydaje się dla polskiego czytelnika istotna, w omawianym okresie sytuacja w tym państwie przypomina bowiem tę na ziemiach polskich (osobność kulturowa, katolicyzm, zależność polityczna). Kaczyńska analizuje dziecko jako kategorię historyczną – produkt określonego dyskursu społecznego i ideologicznego. W jej ujęciu kluczowe jest zrozumienie, jak zmieniało się samo pojęcie dziecka i jego granice wiekowe, moralne oraz prawne. Sięgając nieraz do biblijnych lub średniowiecznych koncepcji władzy ojca i docierając do epoki narodzin idei praw dziecka w XX w., autorka śledzi ewolucję stosunku społeczeństwa do najmłodszych (s. 13–15) w okresie modernizacji.

### **Jak żyć (będąc dzieckiem w okresie modernizacji)?**

Pierwszy rozdział książki stanowi rewizję tezy Arièsa o „odkryciu dzieciństwa” u progu nowoczesności. Francuski badacz dowodził, że w średniowieczu dzieciństwo jako kategoria społeczna nie istniało, a nieletni byli postrzegani

jako „miniaturowi dorośli”. Kaczyńska zgadza się, że zmiana nastąpiła w epoce oświecenia, lecz podkreśla, że była to ewolucja, a nie rewolucja. W wielu środowiskach – zwłaszcza uboższych – dziecko nadal traktowano przede wszystkim jako siłę roboczą lub obciążenie ekonomiczne (s. 29–43; Ariès 1960: 45) – historyczka zwraca tu uwagę na ograniczenia wywodów ojca studiów nad dzieciństwem i realizuje tym samym, jak zaznaczyłem, strategię rewizjonistyczną, bliską historii ludowej. Autorka pokazuje, że w XIX w. dzieci zaczęły funkcjonować jako istotny element dyskursu moralnego, medycznego i narodowego. Wraz z rozwojem szkolnictwa, higieny i opieki społecznej dziecko stawało się nie tylko obiektem troski, lecz również kontroli. Państwo i Kościół rywalizowały o „dusze” dzieci, co Kaczyńska określa jako walkę o przyszłego obywatela (czy byłby to skrypt nowoczesności aktualny w Polsce do dziś?).

W kolejnych częściach autorka analizuje tradycję prokreacyjną i moralne uwarunkowania rodzicielstwa. Zawołanie „idźcie i rozmnażajcie się” (rozdział drugi) staje się punktem wyjścia do ukazania złożonych relacji między religią a praktyką społeczną. Kaczyńska przypomina, że przez wieki prokreacja była obowiązkiem religijnym i ekonomicznym (tak kobiety, jak i mężczyźni – przy wszystkich różnicach w realizacji tych zobowiązań...), a dziecko – błogosławieństwem oraz, *last but not least*, narzędziem zbawienia. Jednocześnie normy te często kolidowały z realiami życia, zwłaszcza w środowiskach, które stanowią główne pole badawcze autorki: biedą, nieślubnymi związkami, prostytutką czy brakiem opieki medycznej (s. 61–74). Autorka analizuje również dawne metody antykoncepcji i postawy wobec niej, wskazując, że mimo zakazów religijnych stosowano je w sposób powszechny, zwłaszcza w miastach i wśród klas wyższych. Zmieniające się podejście do seksualności stanowiło preludium do sporów o „rewolucję seksualną”, omawianych w końcowych partiach książki.

### **Jak żyć (będąc matką w okresie modernizacji)?**

Szczególnie ważnym wątkiem jest rozdział o dzieciach pozamałżeńskich (rozdział czwarty). Kaczyńska zaznacza, że w XIX w. urodzenie dziecka poza małżeństwem oznaczało społeczną degradację zarówno matki, jak i jej potomka. W wielu krajach europejskich dzieci te nie miały praw dziedziczenia, a w rejestrach parafialnych oznaczano je literami „NN” (nieznani rodzice). Autorka analizuje różnicowanie wyznaniowe i geograficzne – w krajach protestanckich proces destygmatyzacji następował szybciej niż w katolickich. W Polsce, Irlandii czy Austrii jeszcze na przełomie XIX i XX w. nieślubne dzieci stanowiły „klasę podejrzaną”, co miało konsekwencje w życiu zawodowym i społecznym (s. 118–143). Jeśli zestawimy to zjawisko ze społecznym pochodzeniem matek pozamałżeńskich dzieci, zaczynamy dostrzegać, że czynniki dyskryminacji i marginalizacji nie tyle się do siebie dodają, ile raczej – jeden przez drugi mnożą, już od początku czyniąc życie takiego dziecka wielokrotnie trudniejszym niż w „normalnych”, „pożądanych” warunkach.

W ogóle cała druga część monografii stanowi tyleż opracowanie kategorii dzieciństwa, co różnych strategii (czy raczej, mówiąc językiem Michela de

Certeau, taktyk) macierzyństwa. Rozdziały piąty i szósty należą do najbardziej wstrząsających fragmentów publikacji – to zresztą dobre miejsce w tym omówieniu, żeby podkreślić, że książka jest materiałem nie tylko pouczającym, ale też głęboko poruszającym. Kaczyńska rekonstruuje dzieje dzieciobójstwa i aborcji, analizując zarówno ich skalę, jak i kontekst kulturowy. Pokazuje, że praktyki te nie były wyłącznie efektem „patologii”, cokolwiek mogłoby to znaczyć, lecz wynikały z ubóstwa, wstydu i braku wsparcia instytucjonalnego. Dzieciobójstwo – choć formalnie karane – często bywało społecznie tolerowane, zwłaszcza gdy dotyczyło niezamężnych kobiet. Autorka wskazuje na transformację norm prawnych i moralnych – od drakońskich wyroków po liberalizację w XIX w. Z kolei aborcję traktuje jako zjawisko z pogranicza medycyny i moralności: z jednej strony potępiana przez Kościół, z drugiej – popularyzująca się w kontekście urbanizacji, medykalizacji i emancypacji kobiet (s. 225–272). Badaczka zestawia stanowiska lekarzy, prawników i duchownych, wykazując, jak spór o życie płodu stawał się areną ideologiczną. Już w XIX w. pojawiły się argumenty o „prawie kobiety do decyzji”, które powrócą w debatach XX, a nawet i XXI w., zwłaszcza dla polskich czytelniczek i czytelników rozdział ten nasuwa miejscami skojarzenia bardzo bliskie współczesnym dyskusjom.

Rozdział siódmy omawia zjawisko podrzucania dzieci oraz placówki takie jak „kołowroty” czy „kantory” (dziś powiedzielibyśmy: okna życia) – instytucje kulturowe umożliwiające anonimowe pozostawienie noworodka. Kaczyńska śledzi ich historię od średniowiecza po XIX w., wskazując na moralne i logistyczne dylematy, jakie wywoływały. Debaty wokół „kołowrotów” ukazują zderzenie miłosierdzia z kontrolą społeczną (s. 287–306). Autorka analizuje też narodziny nowoczesnych instytucji opiekuńczych – domów dla podrzutków, sierocińców, zakładów wychowawczych – oraz ich ideologiczne zaplecze. Pomoc dzieciom niechętnym była nierzadko motywowana interesem państwa lub Kościoła, a nie wyłącznie altruizmem. Jak zauważa badaczka, „troska o dziecko była zarazem troską o towar” – o przyszłego robotnika, podatnika, obywatela (s. 306).

W rozdziale ósmym autorka analizuje zjawisko „hodowli dzieci” i rolę mamek, ukazując je jako element gospodarki opiekuńczej i moralnej hipokryzji XIX w. Wiele dzieci z biednych rodzin oddawano na wychowanie do mamek, co często kończyło się ich śmiercią lub trwałym kalectwem. Zjawisko to Kaczyńska interpretuje jako część „podaży i popytu” w społeczeństwie przemysłowym (s. 324–345).

Ostatni wreszcie rozdział wydaje się nieco osobny względem całej publikacji – poświęcony jest rewolucji seksualnej (a właściwie rewolucjom seksualnym) – sporom o zmieniające się postawy wobec seksu, macierzyństwa i dzieci. Kaczyńska szkicuje krajobraz społeczny, w którym przemiany obyczajowe XIX w. przygotowały grunt pod rewolucję lat 60. kolejnego stulecia. W tej części autorka oddala się od głównego toku wywodu nie tylko chronologicznie, lecz także przedmiotowo – ma to jednak walor otwarcia książki na szersze konteksty i historyczne „dalsze ciągi”.

### **Takie będą Rzeczypospolite...**

W syntezie Kaczyńskiej historia dzieci niezaopiekowanych jawi się jako historia modernizacji społecznej, a zarazem historia wykluczenia – jeszcze jedna historia ludowa. Od oświecenia po XX w. dziecko jest przedmiotem refleksji moralnej, medycznej i prawnej, lecz jego status zależy od struktury władzy, religii i gospodarki. Autorka proponuje interpretację małego człowieka jako „zwierciadła” procesów modernizacyjnych – w nim odbijają się konflikty między tradycją a nowoczesnością, Kościołem a państwem, ciałem a duszą, prywatnością a polityką. Książka Kaczyńskiej jest nie tylko panoramą przemian obyczajowych, lecz także refleksją o naturze ludzkiej empatii i granicach odpowiedzialności społecznej. Wpisując się w tradycję badań nad dziejami ciała i dyscypliny (wymienieni annaliści), praca ta stanowi ważny głos w polskiej historiografii dzieciństwa i historii kobiet. Łączy erudycję z refleksyjnym przesłaniem – każe postawić pytanie, czy sposób, w jaki społeczeństwa traktują swoje dzieci, nie jest miarą ich człowieczeństwa. Znane słowa kanclerza Jana Zamoyskiego – „takie będą Rzeczypospolite, jakie ich młodzieży chowanie” – znajdują tu nieoczekiwaną reinterpretację.

*Niechciane* są książką potrzebną i poznawczo pożyteczną (tym bardziej cieszy jej dostępność w otwartych zasobach internetu!), niemniej jej złożona struktura i rozbicie na aż dziewięć rozdziałów, spośród których większość łączy ujęcie syntetyczne z próbą wchodzenia w szczegóły, wiążą się z pewnymi mankamentami. Autorka przeskakuje między różnymi kontekstami – religijnym, prawnym, demograficznym, medycznym, obyczajowym – nie zawsze jasno ukazując ich wzajemne zależności. W rezultacie niektóre wątki, jak te o dzieciach nieślubnych czy mamkach, są rozwinięte szerzej, podczas gdy inne, dotyczące np. edukacji (tu akurat wielka szkoda!) lub systemów wychowawczych, pozostają jedynie napomknięte. Ze zdziwieniem należy przyjąć nieobecność (stawiam sprawę mocno, choć nazwisko na łamach publikacji kilkakrotnie pada) Janusza Korczaka – rozumiem, że w pracy zjawiska polskie nie miały być eksponowane w sposób szczególny, niemniej postać tak ważna, jako lekarz, wychowawca oraz kronikarz zajmujący się dziećmi niechcianymi (nie tylko we własnych placówkach opiekuńczych!), zasługuje na szersze przywołanie. Nie znajdujemy też poświadczenia innych polskich instytucji, choćby Naszego Domu Marii Falskiej. O ile autorka nie znalazła przestrzeni na omówienie działalności powyższych postaci, o tyle zdarza jej się na kartach książki podzielić swoją prywatną opinią na temat niestandardowych formatów rodzin, samodzielnych matek itd. (np. s. 153); czy jest to w takim syntetycznym opracowaniu niezbędne, oceni już każdy we własnej lekturze.

Choć Kaczyńska korzysta z bogatego materiału archiwalnego i statystycznego, jej analiza ma głównie charakter jakościowy, bez pogłębionej warstwy ilościowej – brakuje porównań, tabel czy map demograficznych – nawet dla humanistycznie zorientowanego czytelnika takie zestawienia mogłyby być przydatne. Niemniej książka pozostaje też w dużej mierze historią opowiedzianą „z góry” – o dzieciach mówią lekarze, urzędnicy, duchowni, a nie one same

czy ich matki. Brakuje więc tak ukierunkowanych studiów przypadków, które mogłyby nadać pracy głębi antropologicznej (a przecież choćby materiały gromadzone przez wspomnianych Korczaka czy Falską dałyby ku temu możliwość, zwłaszcza że były już opracowywane [np. Gołąb, Sękowska 2019]). Wspomnienie tego pierwszego każe też skonstatować, że w ogóle słabiej reprezentowana jest w publikacji perspektywa żydowska, ważna zwłaszcza dla społeczeństw Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Kaczyńska przekonująco to jednak tłumaczy brakiem opracowań i oczywistymi trudnościami w pracy historyka ze źródłami. Nie jest to więc zarzut pod adresem tej konkretnej książki, lecz przygnębiająca konstatacja, że historiografia europejska (syntetycznie lub w swoich narodowych realizacjach) wciąż uprawiana jest osobno względem historii żydowskiej.

Mimo tych ograniczeń *Niechciane, porzucane, naznaczone* to publikacja imponująca pod względem zakresu tematycznego, wnosząca do polskiej historiografii ważną perspektywę porównawczą. Warto więc uznać książkę za dzieło otwarte – na rozwinięcia, uzupełnienia i kontynuacje. Tym lepiej dla studiów nad historią dzieciństwa.

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## „Sarmatyzm” jako pojęcie płynne

### “Sarmatism” as a Fluid Concept

**Maciej Nawrocki, „Sarmatyzm”. Historia pojęcia,  
Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, Toruń 2025.**

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„Sarmatyzm”. *Historia pojęcia* jest monografią naukową w całości poświęconą zagadnieniu ewolucji rozumienia pojęcia sarmatyzmu. Nawrocki nie próbuje rekonstruować tego, czym była (lub czym nie była) kultura szlachecka w Polsce w okresie przedrozbiorowym, określana często tym terminem. Zamiast tego ukazuje czytelnikom, co autorzy (pisarze, badacze, filozofowie) mieli na myśli, gdy mówili o sarmatyzmie. Interpretuje dwa dyskursy – akademicki i publicystyczny, dzięki czemu możliwe staje się ukazanie tego, jak o sarmatyzmie pisano między XVIII a XXI w. Refleksja naukowa przedstawiona w książce opiera się w znacznej mierze na dwóch humanistycznych nurtach badawczych: historii idei (szkoła Cambridge, reprezentowana przez Quentina Skinnera wraz z Johnem Pollockiem, i *Begriffsgeschichte* Reinharta Kosellecka) oraz krytycznej analizie dyskursu (w ramach której Nawrocki korzysta z ustaleń takich badaczy jak Antonio Gramsci i Michel Foucault). Dzięki takiej perspektywie badawczej autor ma możliwość zarysowania historii interesującego go pojęcia z punktu widzenia krótkiego i średniego oraz długiego trwania. Umożliwia to zarówno udzielenie odpowiedzi na pytanie o rolę sarmatyzmu w pojedynczych aktach mowy, jak i pochylenie się nad nim jako nad długotrwałą, ciągłą ideą,

która choć przechodzi przemiany, to jednak pozostaje wciąż aktualna. Ponadto Nawrocki ukazuje wpływ historii politycznej na zmiany znaczeniowe pojęcia i określa, jak ośrodki sprawujące hegemonię kulturową wpływają na mówienie o rzeczywistości grup podporządkowanych (krytyczna analiza dyskursu).

Pierwszy z rozdziałów, zatytułowany *Najbardziej barbarzyński kraj Europy: między dyskursem a rzeczywistością*, jest w zasadzie wstępem do dalszych rozważań. Nawrocki wyjaśnia w nim różnicę między regionami cywilizowanymi a barbarzyńskimi przełożoną na realia nowożytne. Autor zauważa, że w XVIII w. opozycja Północ–Południe zastąpiona została przeciwieństwem Wschód–Zachód. Wskutek tego, w opinii oświeconych uczonych, Rzeczpospolita znalazła się w kręgu państw uznawanych za barbarzyńskie. Nawrocki wyjaśnia przyczyny takiego postrzegania Polski i Litwy na zachodzie Europy, wiążąc je z ucywilizowaniem Rosji przez cara Piotra I. Ta miała przestać być uznawana za najbardziej barbarzyński kraj kontynentu przez zachodnich myślicieli; rola ta przypadła Rzeczypospolitej. Rozważania te służą przybliżeniu czytelnikowi warunków politycznych, w których pojęcie sarmatyzmu zaczęło być stosowane przez frakcję zamierzającą, w swoim mniemaniu, „ucywilizować” kraj poprzez zbliżenie go do standardów zachodnioeuropejskich.

Kolejna część książki – „Sarmatyzm” XVIII wieku – przedstawia początki funkcjonowania interesującego autora terminu, który utożsamia on z okresem panowania Stanisława Augusta Poniatowskiego. Na dworze tego władcy tytułowe pojęcie zaczęło funkcjonować jako pejoratywne określenie pewnej części rzeczywistości polityczno-obyczajowej, na której zmianie zależało królewskiemu stronnictwu. Nawrocki w rozdziale tym analizuje pamiętniki monarchy, artykuły w piśmie „Monitor” i komedie teatralne Franciszka Bohomolca, Franciszka Zabłockiego i Józefa Bielawskiego. Szczególnie dużo miejsca poświęca twórczości tych ostatnich jako powstającej pod monarszymi auspicjami. Badacz zwraca uwagę, że słowo „sarmatyzm” w okresie tym było używane rzadko – nie było stosowane powszechnie przez ludność Rzeczypospolitej – stanowiło raczej pojęcie specjalistyczne, o wyraźnie pejoratywnym zabarwieniu. Jednocześnie zaznacza on, że w publicystyce tego okresu z podobną częstotliwością krytykowano zarówno kurczowe trzymanie się dawnych obyczajów i norm (utożsamiane z sarmatyzmem), jak i bezmyślne podążanie za zachodnimi nowinkami, co wyrażało się w literackim motywie konfliktu fraka (symbolizującego zachodnią postępowość) i kontusza (będącego tradycyjnym elementem mody polskiej).

Trzeci fragment monografii nosi nazwę „Sarmatyzmy” XIX wieku, choć obejmuje też okres do końca I wojny światowej. Autor wskazuje, że pojęcie to (mimo znaczenia, jakie dla np. romantyków miała kultura szlachecka) stosowane było rzadko i nie miało większego wpływu na formowanie się polskiej myśli narodowej. Był to jednak okres, gdy uzyskało ono wiele nowych znaczeń, przenikając powoli z publicystycznego do naukowego słownika. Analizie podlegają tu dzieła literackie Jana Ursyna Niemcewicza, Cypriana Godebskiego, Henryka Rzewuskiego i Józefa Mikołaja Wiślickiego, refleksje naukowe Kazimierza Władysława Wóycickiego, polemiki Hilarego Zaleskiego czy hasła w słownikach:

Samuela Bogumiła Lindego z początku XIX w. i niemal o 100 lat późniejszego Zygmunta Glogera. Pozwala to na ukazanie, jak zmieniła się percepcja sarmatyzmu w czasie zaborów. Stał się on bowiem synonimem całości przedrozbiorowej polskiej kultury, w tym tych elementów, które nie podlegały oświeceniowej krytyce. Dzięki temu pojawiły się pierwsze użycia tytułowego terminu w kontekście pozytywnym, stosowane przez romantyków idealizujących czas istnienia niepodległej Polski i dowartościowujących indywidualizm narodowy.

Kolejny rozdział, „*Sarmatyzmy przedwojenne*”, poświęcony jest przykładom użycia tego terminu w czasie istnienia II Rzeczypospolitej (1918–1939). Nawrocki szczególnie dużo uwagi poświęca trzem osobom stosującym to pojęcie: Aleksandrowi Brücknerowi, Ignacemu Chrzanowskiemu i Tadeuszowi Boyowi-Żeleńskiemu. Można dostrzec w okresie tym już wyraźne i częste pojawianie się sarmatyzmu w obu analizowanych dyskursach: naukowym i publicystycznym. W ramach tego pierwszego pojęcie to nie uzyskało jeszcze jednoznacznej definicji, miało jednak wyraźnie negatywne konotacje. Identyfikowany z zacofaniem sarmatyzm, będący symbolem negatywnych cech związanych z polskością, przeciwstawiano nowoczesności odrodzonej Polski. Można w tym dostrzec wpływ oświeceniowego dyskursu, przejmowanego przez XX-wiecznych publicystów i badaczy. Rzadziej, w radykalnie prawicowym dyskursie publicystycznym, będącym w kontrze względem liberalnych i konserwatywnych wizji przeszłości, sarmatyzm był wiązany z pozytywnie wartościowaną lokalnością, przeciwstawiany takim terminom jak „germańskość” czy „semityzm”.

Ostatni z głównych rozdziałów – „*Sarmatyzm w dwudziestowiecznej nauce*” – koncentruje się na okresie powojennym. Badacz skupia się w nim wyłącznie na jednym z dyskursów, co można zrozumieć, biorąc pod uwagę, jak istotny stał się sarmatyzm w omawianym okresie. Ta część książki poświęcona jest ewolucji definicji pojęcia od czasów tuż po II wojnie, gdy po raz pierwszy w Polsce ludowej starano się je doprecyzować, przez jego wyjaśnienia z końca lat 40. i 50. tworzone w paradygmacie marksistowskim (a więc rzutującą na nie anachronicznie ideę walki klas), oraz z lat 60. i 70., gdy pod wpływem gomułkowskiej polityki unarodowiano historię i gdy naukowcy pisali o sarmatyzmie z perspektywy strukturalistycznej, zauważając wewnętrzne sprzeczności tego zjawiska. Rozdział kończy się omówieniem definicji i innych naukowych użyć terminu „sarmatyzm” pochodzących z czasów po upadku PRL-u. Nawrocki wskazuje na przejście naukowców w ostatnich latach XX w. od politycznie zaangażowanej refleksji w stronę większego obiektywizmu, co spowodowało też odejście od pejoratywnego zabarwienia pojęcia i nadanie mu bardziej neutralnego wydźwięku.

Ostatnią częścią książki jest *Zakończenie – perspektywy*. Jest to w istocie zwięzły skrót najnowszej, XXI-wiecznej refleksji nad sarmatyzmem, w której na pierwszy plan wysuwają się uwagi o neosarmatyzmie (a więc o współczesnych nawiązaniach do sarmatyzmu) czy powiązaniach sarmatyzmu z postkolonializmem. Nawrocki wraca też do dyskursu publicystycznego, prezentując twórczość Jacka Kowalskiego czy Krzysztofa Koehlera. Badacz zwraca tym

samym uwagę, że dyskusja nad sarmatyzmem wciąż nie jest zakończona, samo pojęcie zaś pozostaje jednym z istotnych tematów w polskim polu naukowym.

Bez wątpienia największą zaletą książki jest ukazanie płynności pojęcia sarmatyzmu, zwrócenie uwagi na to, iż – w dużej mierze w zależności od epoki – osoby posługujące się tym terminem odnosiły się do różnych koncepcji sarmatyzmu. Dyskursy mogły portretować go w negatywnym bądź neutralnym świetle, z rzadka zaś zdarzały się takie, w których to, do czego miałby odnosić się wspomniany termin, byłoby waloryzowane pozytywnie. Ewolucja używania pojęcia, polegająca w znacznej mierze na pozbywaniu się pejoratywnych konotacji, jest równocześnie historią przejścia sarmatyzmu z glosariusza publicystycznego do słownika pojęć naukowych. Książka korzysta z imponującej bazy źródłowej; stanowi satysfakcjonujący opis historii tytułowego pojęcia. Jedynym mankamentem jest niedowartościowanie XX-wiecznej refleksji nad tym terminem i związanymi z nim zagadnieniami, na co wskazuje umieszczenie jej nie w osobnym rozdziale, a w zakończeniu. Dużą zaletą książki jest za to przejrzysty i precyzyjny język, dzięki któremu może być ona z łatwością zrozumiana także przez niespecjalistów, co jednak nie niszczy naukowego charakteru publikacji. Przejrzystość wywodu zyskałaby jednak na przetłumaczeniu cytatów z języków obcych na polski.

„Sarmatyzm”. *Historia pojęcia* Macieja Nawrockiego jest niezwykle wartościowym głosem we współczesnej debacie dotyczącej tytułowego tematu. Przedstawiona przez badacza analiza jest przeprowadzona dogłębnie i dokładnie oraz wyłożona w przejrzysty sposób. Uświadamia ona czytelnikowi, że gdy spotyka się ze słowem „sarmatyzm”, może mieć do czynienia z pojęciem odnoszącym się do szerokiego spektrum zjawisk, które można wartościować w rozmaity sposób. Wynikające z lektury uwrażliwienie na mnogość sensów sarmatyzmu i ewolucję znaczeniową tego pojęcia powinno umożliwić precyzyjniejszą refleksję naukową nad tym zjawiskiem.

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## Antropologia potrzebuje pszczół

### Anthropology Needs Bees

**Karolina Echaust, *Ludzie i pszczoły. Antropologia polskiego bartnictwa*,  
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Książka *Ludzie i pszczoły* to praca pionierska, o wybitnych walorach naukowych, wpisująca się w poszukiwania współczesnej humanistyki, która poddaje dziś krytyce dominujące paradygmaty wiedzy o człowieku i jego świecie. Można powiedzieć, że jest swoistym manifestem nowego myślenia o przyrodzie.

Przedmiotem badań jest tu polskie bartnictwo, a bliżej: odtwarzanie bartnictwa na podstawie wiedzy instytucjonalnej oraz lokalnej, którą autorka rekonstruuje ze znanstwem i w sposób klarowny przybliża czytelnikowi. Karolina Echaust zajmuje się więc zjawiskiem określanym przez nią terminem „nowe bartnictwo” i traktuje je jako przejaw dziedzictwa kulturowego widzianego w relacjach międzygatunkowych, a więc powiązania działań aktorów ludzkich z nie-ludzkimi; wśród tych ostatnich jawi się świat pszczół. Badaczka odwołuje się do wpływowej dziś tradycji badań sygnowanych m.in. nazwiskiem Brunona Latoura i jego teorii aktora-sieci. Jeden z jej rozmówców stwierdza: „W bartnictwie trzeba myśleć jak pszczoła” (s. 13); sama zaś konstatuje: „Drzewa, pszczoły miodne i las są symbolami międzygatunkowych spotkań” (s. 40).

W pracy zarysowuje się zasadniczo nowy punkt widzenia w badaniach nad niematerialnym dziedzictwem, które zazwyczaj postrzegane (i praktykowane) było w sferze kultury symbolicznej. Zaproponowane przez Karolinę Echaust wyjście poza „świat ludzki” przekształca kulturowe

ramy dziedzictwa, pozwalając widzieć globalne sieci i dynamikę powiązań świata ludzkiego z „pozaludzkim”. Jest to propozycja „spojrzenia na dziedzictwo przyrodniczo-kulturowe jak na uniwersum zrzeszeń ludzi i nie ludzi” (s. 311), otwierająca nowy horyzont myślenia humanistycznego, a zarazem wprowadzająca nowy język humanistyki. Ujawnia jednocześnie potrzebę nazywania świata na nowo, w momencie gdy zaczyna wzrastać aktywność sfery nie-ludzkiej.

Książka *Ludzie i pszczoły* na swój sposób „odkrywa” bartnictwo, włącza je w dyskursy publiczne, a także w „laboratoryjne” badania terenowe, wnioski płynące z tych badań mogą być zaś odebrane jako krytyka oficjalnej wiedzy instytucjonalnej o bartnictwie (tym historycznym i tym „nowym”), a zarazem stają się mocnym głosem za uznaniem niematerialnego dziedzictwa za jedną z żywotnych dziś ponadnarodowych idei.

Badaczka z jednej strony z naukową precyzją śledzi usytuowanie prawne „nowego” i historycznego bartnictwa, a z drugiej strony prowadzi intensywne badania terenowe w 87 miejscowościach w Polsce. Zyskuje zaufanie bartników, wręcz „wrasta” w ich środowisko, potrafi myśleć i mówić ich głosem, co widać w tak często przytaczanych relacjach jej rozmówców. Głosy z terenu uprawomocniają teoretyczne konceptualizacje, są przesłanką teorii, która przypomina „teorię ugruntowaną”. Autorka zwraca uwagę na problemy etyczne prowadzenia „badań w antropocenie”. Narracja prowadzona jest w ten sposób, że czytelnik jest zaangażowany w proces prowadzenia badań. Rzadko we współczesnej humanistyce spotyka się tak fascynujący samoopis terenowej praktyki badawczej, dla której trafna może być formuła: „Teren to ja”.

Karolina Echaust posługuje się pojęciem aury (można przypomnieć tu Waltera Benjamina), które nadaje „nowemu bartnictwu” wymiar dawności i sprawia, że to, co odtwarzane („wynalezione”), można traktować w kategoriach „ciągłości” (domena pamięci) i „autentyczności” (domena praktyk odtwarzania). W szerszej perspektywie oznacza to, że niematerialne dziedzictwo „wynajduje się” w „lokalnych światach”, w których dokonuje się doświadczane sensualistycznie „splatanie” świata ludzkiego z naturą.

Badaczka stwierdza, że dla uwiarygodnienia praktyk odtwarzania tradycji bartnictwa potrzebne są nie tylko artefakty (np. kłody), ale również lokalne opowieści, kulturowe zaplecze, a to było konieczną przesłanką wpisania nowego bartnictwa na Listę reprezentatywną niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego ludzkości, co nastąpiło 17 grudnia 2020 r.

\* \* \*

Gdy przyjrzymy się kulturowemu wymiarowi „nowego bartnictwa”, to – jak zauważa badaczka – bywa ono praktyką pretekstową, inicjującą nowe aktywności, generującą nowe znaczenia czytelne w sferze kultury społecznej. Często bartnictwo bliskie staje się modnym dziś „rekonstrukcją”, inscenizacją obrazów z przeszłości, jest przejawem pasji, hobby, formą odpoczynku. Autorka rekonstruuje lokalne „obrazy” nowego bartnictwa, włącza je w ponad-

lokalne dyskursy, w obiegi wiedzy społecznie „czynnej”, która z kolei (niejako wtórnie) inspiruje praktykowanie nowego bartnictwa jako cennej kulturowo i gospodarczo aktywności społecznej. Cała ta praca jest w gruncie rzeczy o aktywności w lokalnych społecznościach, o przejawach formach kultury „czynnej”, o ludzkich „pretekstowych” działaniach nierzadko w funkcji autotelicznej.

Etnograficzny opis nowego bartnictwa jest jednym z „wzierników” tej lokalnej formy aktywności, nierutynową metodą jej badania, wyjściem poza akademickie metodyki analiz współczesnego społeczeństwa. Praktykowanie „nowego bartnictwa” można uznać za wartościową strategię uczestnictwa w dzisiejszym „skomercjalizowanym” świecie. W ramach „zwrotu” do tradycji (retrotopia) jedni zajmują się „odtworzeniem” ludowych obrzędów, rekonstrukcją ludowych strojów, potraw, opowieści, a inni dłubaniem i zasiedlaniem barci. Koresponduje to z rozprzestrzeniającym się dziś stylem *hand made*, powrotem do kultu prac ręcznych, do teatralizacji życia codziennego, o czym pisali już u nas m.in. Tomasz Rakowski i Marek Krajewski.

W przypadku „nowego bartnictwa” „teatr społeczny” wkracza do Lasu, pisane wielką literą. W odsłanianiu „nowego” – jak bartnictwo – niematerialnego dziedzictwa potwierdzamy się jako ludzie powiązani ze światem nie-ludzkim. Sens życiu nadaje odkrywanie „całości” powiązań z naturą, i nie jest to akt spekulatywny, a po prostu – czynność dłubania barci czy „rozmowa” z rojem pszczół. Cytuję autorkę: „Współczesne bartnictwo zostało »odtworzone« i »odkryte« przez bartników dla nich samych i dla pszczół” (s. 165).

Ustalenia Karoliny Echaust, szczególnie te ugruntowane w badaniu terenowym, wsparte świetną znajomością światowych teorii, traktowane są tu jako rekomendacje, które „mogą zostać uwzględnione przy wdrażaniu efektywniejszych rozwiązań zarządzania dziedzictwem przyrodniczym i kulturowym w Polsce oraz jego ochrony” (s. 232). Recenzowana praca ma więc także wielki walor praktyczny, przynosząc zarazem ostrzeżenie, że współcześnie możliwy jest proces „zagubienia się w dziedzictwie”, związany z działalnością mediów tworzących „mitologię nowego bartnictwa”. W efekcie rozrasta się symboliczna przestrzeń ochrony niematerialnego dziedzictwa, powstają nowe narracje, które mają nierzadko status „zobowiązujący” lokalne wspólnoty do określonych działań.

*Ludzie i pszczoły* to książka świetnie skonstruowana, zawierająca liczne podsumowania, uogólniające konkluzje oraz cechująca się wysoką kulturą prowadzenia narracji, która nigdzie nie zostawia czytelnika samego. Nie można pominąć tego, że jest wyrazistą propozycją nowej antropologii międzygatunkowej, przedstawioną z dużą wrażliwością metodologiczną. Przesłanie, które osobiście wyczytałem z tej rozprawy, brzmi: „antropologia potrzebuje pszczół”.

Podsumowując, chciałbym wyrazić sąd, że mamy tu do czynienia z pracą wybitną, która zainteresuje szerokie grono odbiorców. Warto też dopowiedzieć, że została już doceniona: przyznano jej I nagrodę w konkursie im. Profesora Jerzego Wilkina „Polska wieś – dziedzictwo i przyszłość”, ogłaszanym każdego roku przez Fundację na rzecz Rozwoju Polskiego Rolnictwa.



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## Totemy czeskich trampów

### Totems of Czech Tramps

**Karel Altman, *Dědictví českého trampingu. Vybrané kapitoly z historie a každodennosti svérázného fenoménu*, Akademia, Praha 2024.**

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Czeski tramping jest zjawiskiem wyjątkowym. Nie zamyka się bowiem ani w formacie globalnego zjawiska kojarzonego z programem Roberta Badena-Powella, ani nie ma odpowiedników w krajach sąsiednich, takich jak Polska. Jest to ruch na wskroś oryginalny, lokalny i wernakularny. Dobrze się zatem stało, że mamy wreszcie obszerne opracowanie jego dziejów, praktyk oraz wartości. W 2024 r. Karel Altman, etnolog i historyk związany z uniwersytetem w Brnie, opublikował pracę *Dědictví českého trampingu. Vybrané kapitoly z historie a každodennosti svérázného fenoménu*. We wstępie zaznaczył, że w centrum jego analizy czeskiej subkultury trampingowej znajduje się codzienność i związane z nią praktyki. Przyjęta perspektywa etnologiczna uprzywilejowała zainteresowanie kulturą specyfiką grupy, znaczącymi dla niej zachowaniami, symbolami czy obiektami. Jako znaczące źródła Altman wskazał kroniki, wspomnienia, afisze, archiwalne fotografie, trampingowe czasopisma i ziny (w tym samizdat), które można potraktować w kategoriach autoetnografii członków tej subkultury. Autor przekonuje, że tramping jest fenomenem czeskim (częściowo także słowackim), od ponad wieku funkcjonującym na granicy legalności (narażonym w związku z tym na restrykcje i przemoc, zwłaszcza władzy socjalistycznej).

Ruch ten narodził się spontanicznie, oddolnie i początkowo określano tego rodzaju praktykę po prostu jako wycieczkę albo wędrówkę. O trampach szerzej zaczęto mówić w latach 20. XX w.

Istotą trampingu zawsze było i jest swobodne wędrowanie po okolicy, biwakowanie i późniejszy rozwój unikalnych form wypoczynku i rozrywki na łonie natury [...]. Wykazuje ponadto szereg specyficznych atrybutów z zakresu kultury materialnej, duchowej i społecznej, które są produktem wyższej jakości, co uprawnia do uznania trampingu za stosunkowo odrębny, charakterystyczny i specyficzny styl życia (s. 60).

Od początku była to też aktywność charakterystyczna dla młodzieży miejskiej<sup>1</sup>, wywodzącej się z różnych klas społecznych. Zdaniem Altmana była to subkultura etnicznie ograniczona do Czechów, nie angażowali się w nią młodzi Niemcy sudeccy; wyjątkiem od reguły była społeczność młodych Greków.

Wśród kluczowych powodów narodzin ruchu Altman wskazuje szeroko rozumiany romantyzm, a także postawę antynowoczesną, poszukiwanie relaksu (silne szczególnie w latach po I wojnie światowej), chęć poznania własnego kraju w bezpośredni sposób, eskapizm od miejskiego stylu życia, fascynację środowiskiem naturalnym. Ważna była również sfikcjonalizowana wizja Dzikiego Zachodu z dwoma typami pozytywnie postrzeganych bohaterów: tubylczą ludnością Ameryki (wodzowie, wojownicy), a także stojącymi po stronie prawa osadnikami (szeryfowie, rewolwerowcy, traperzy). Wzorce te przyjmowano za pośrednictwem popularnych powieści (*mayovki* autorstwa Karola Maya oraz *bufalobilky* opowiadające o przygodach Buffalo Billa), a potem filmów; w konsekwencji trampowie nosili sombrero, „kowbojskie” kapelusze, a nazwy ich osad nawiązywały do mitycznego Dzikiego Zachodu.

Jakkolwiek można udowodnić istnienie etyki i tożsamości tej subkultury, to jednocześnie „tramping nigdy nie był i nadal nie jest zjawiskiem całkowicie jednolitym, jednorodnym, choć z drugiej strony subkultura ta zawsze była wewnętrznie ustrukturyzowana, składając się z kilku stosunkowo odrębnych typów” (s. 104). W jednym z zasadniczych podziałów wyodrębniono trampów „wędrownych” oraz „osiadłych”, inne dotyczyły kwestii związanych z elementami stroju, wyposażenia albo stosunku do konsumpcji alkoholu. Po transformacji 1989 r. subkultura ta znalazła się – trochę mimowolnie – na zderzeniowym kursie z ruchami ekologicznymi, wspartymi przez programy UE.

Rekonstruując *curriculum* trampów, Altman podkreśla wspólny wiek inicjacji do subkultury, zwykle dotyczący młodzieży po ukończeniu szkoły pod-

1 W monumentalnej pracy *Kmeny 90. Městské subkultury a nezávislé společenské proudy w letech 1989–2000*, będącej rodzajem atlasu czeskich subkultur, pomieszczono grupy tak różne, jak rap, metal, reggae, skinheads, skate, punk, hardcore, graffiti, dance, „military” czy „16-bitowcy” (co już samo w sobie mogłoby być przyczynkiem do analiz porównawczych). Nie znajdziemy tam jednak trampów. Prawdopodobnie z tego powodu, że ich osady, wędrówki, spotkania i zabawy odbywają poza środowiskiem miejskim, choć gros z nich to mieszkańcy miast (Vladimír 2016).

stawowej. Znamienne jest i to, że wiele z tych osób praktykowało tramping w zasadzie aż do śmierci. Częste były przypadki małżeństw w tym środowisku, skutkujące adekwatną enkulturacją wspólnych dzieci już od „kołyski”.

Detaliczne opisy Altmana nie pomijają w zasadzie żadnego wymiaru funkcjonowania czeskigo trampingu, łącznie ze sposobami rozpalania ognia, gotowania i obozowania. Autor zajmuje się środkami komunikacji wykorzystywanymi przez trampów, wśród których kluczowe miejsce zajmował pociąg – znany także z obrazów filmowych oraz literackich i w związku z tym czasem określany jako *pacifik* – a poza nim popularne były autostop (kiedyś), motocykle, a także łodzie. W każdej dekadzie niezwykle wysoko ceniono ponadto piesze wędrówki, wpisujące się bezpośrednio w etos bliskości z naturą. Trampingowe formy noclegu obejmują z kolei formacje naturalne (np. jaskinie), przestrzenie pół prywatne, pół publiczne (np. stodoły), a także – co niemal oczywiste – nocowanie pod gołym niebem. Osobny rozdział pracy dotyczy różnorodności obiektów budowanych przez samych trampów (*bouda, srub, drevenica, dača*). Nie zabrakło też opisów wspólnych i identyfikowanych jako własne gestów powitania oraz słownych pozdrowień, zabaw i świąt, zarówno dorocznych, jak i organizowanych *ad hoc*, z okazji pewnych wydarzeń (istotne jest w tym kontekście środowiskowe słowo *potlach*, o niejednoznacznej etymologii, niekoniecznie wywodzącej się z tradycji północnozachodniego wybrzeża USA).

Karel Altman jest wybitnym i wyjątkowym znawcą zaprezentowanej w książce tematyki. Zajmuje się subkulturą trampów od wielu lat, gromadzi źródła archiwalne, prowadzi samodzielne badania (inspiruje także innych do ich realizacji), utrzymuje kontakty z wieloma przedstawicielami tej grupy. Nikt przed nim nie podjął się zadania stworzenia etnograficznej monografii tej subkultury, mającej objąć całą jej dotychczasową historię oraz tak wiele elementów składowych (od materialnych przez ideologiczne po społeczne). W konsekwencji powstała praca niezwykle bogata informacyjnie, prezentująca czeski tramping jako osobną, interesującą i zmienną formację kulturową.

To, co wskazałem jako silne strony recenzowanej pracy, decyduje także – o paradoksie! – o jej słabości. Praca Altmana jest bowiem *stricte* deskryptywna, co przełożyło się bezpośrednio na jej poziom teoretyczny. Nie znajdziemy tam nawiązań do toczącej się od lat międzynarodowej debaty dotyczącej subkultur ani postsubkultur (David Riesman, Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, Sarah Thornton, Mirosław Pęczak). Prawdopodobnie wiele korzyści analitycznych przyniosłoby odwołanie się do koncepcji, takich jak wspólnoty empatyczne (Rifkin 2009), *affectual nebula* (Maffesoli 2008) czy *portable communities* (Gardner 2020), zdają się one wszak wskazywać na konstytutywne cechy subkultury trampingowej. Podobnie negatywnie zaskakuje to, że autor nie podjął krytycznej analizy charakterystycznych dla tego środowiska zapożyczeń kulturowych. Mam tutaj szczególnie na myśli „totemy”, stanowiące element wielu trampingowych osad (zaprezentowane ponadto na ilustrujących książkę fotografiach); apropiacja kulturowa jest dzisiaj problemem na tyle znaczącym, że jego pominięcie uważam za poważny błąd.

Z zakończenia dowiadujemy się, że autorska wersja rękopisu liczyła ponad 1000 stron i uległa znacznemu skróceniu w procesie przygotowywania do druku. Być może dobrym pomysłem byłoby zdecydowanie się na publikację dwóch prac: jednej opisowej i popularnonaukowej, przeznaczonej dla szerokiego kręgu odbiorców, oraz drugiej, krytycznej, wykorzystującej w interpretacjach międzynarodową literaturę antropologiczną. Wybierając rozwiązanie pośrednie, autor nie zrealizował z powodzeniem – jak sądzę – ani jednej, ani drugiej możliwości. Nie oznacza to wszelako, że nie mamy do czynienia z dziełem oryginalnym, wykorzystującym korpus różnorodnych materiałów źródłowych, dzięki którym powstał monumentalny i bardzo szczegółowy opis specyficznej grupy społecznej, ukazanej w perspektywie diachronicznej oraz wielomiejscowej (Marcus 1995). Nie mam wątpliwości, że praca Altmana rychło stanie się kanonicznym źródłem dla wszystkich osób zainteresowanych niezwykłym fenomenem czeskiego trampingu. Na pogłębione, krytyczne ujęcia zjawiska przyjdzie natomiast jeszcze poczekać.

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