

## DOCUMENT

Editors' note: This article is a revised and updated translation of a text originally published in Polish. We are pleased to include it in this issue, as it offers a lucid and compelling perspective on how contemporary Polish literature engages with the nineteenth century. Its insights have been particularly meaningful for shaping the thematic framework of this volume, and many of its questions resonate closely with the contributions gathered here. The English translation allows this important piece to enter a broader international discussion<sup>1</sup>.

EWA PACZOSKA

### THE POLISH NINETEENTH CENTURY IN THE MIRROR OF TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LITERATURE – THE MEANDERS OF NEIGHBOURING

The problems of the Polish nineteenth century as a neighbour of contemporaneity appeared in various Polish intellectual debates throughout virtually the entire twentieth century. As we recall, only a few decades ago that century was solemnly declared closed, marking a new stage in the fate of Poland; yet the recurring question remained whether that century had in fact ended, and whether we could indeed part with it for good<sup>2</sup>. Neighbourhood, which in common parlance signifies cohabitation in a spatial sense, constitutes an important element of symbolic space, composed of what is historical and what is contemporary. This space, of course, is also shaped by official historical policy. In recent years, such policy has repeatedly returned us to the Polish nineteenth century, urging us to seek there models of national heroism, heroic rising from one's knees, traditions of family life, or, finally, "feminine virtues". In this form, the nineteenth century has often proved to be not only a troublesome neighbour, but also a dangerous or toxic one. Neighbourhood, as is well known, is always bound up with questions of community and the delineation of its borders: it "marks [...] the closest public sphere, but also confronts it with the global sphere of influence"<sup>3</sup>. In this article I

---

<sup>1</sup> See Ewa Paczoska, "Polski wiek XIX w lustrze literatury XXI wieku – meandry sąsiedowania", *Tekstualia*, 1, 2024, 78, pp. 85-98.

<sup>2</sup> See Ewa Paczoska, *Prawdziwy koniec XIX wieku. Śladami nowoczesności* [*The True End of the Nineteenth Century: Tracing Modernity*], Warszawa, PIW, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> "Tak sobie mieszkamy, Marcin Żyła rozmawia z Rochem Sulimą" ["*That's How We Live: Marcin Żyła in Conversation with Roch Sulima*"], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 2022, 26, p. 20: "wyznacza [...] najbliższą strefę publiczną, ale też konfrontuje je z globalną sferą oddziaływania".

will not focus on the regressive paths of political strategies, though these undoubtedly require further analysis. The nineteenth century neighbours our present day in diverse ways that elude discourses imbued with longing for the “good old days”. Moreover, it turns out to be an intriguing and inspiring neighbour, one that provokes questions about our own contemporaneity. In addition, the nineteenth-century legacy should be understood here not only in its Romantic guise, but also in its fin-de-siècle and turn-of-the-century configurations.

### *What Devours Us*

The Romantics – the architects of the Polish symbolic imaginary, embodied in stereotypical cultural figures continually mobilised by discourses that model the community – return in contemporary literature in various guises. The plot of *Jul* (2010) by Paweł Goźliński is set in 1845 among the Polish émigré community in Paris. By that point in history the milieu is already a shadow of its former greatness, gathering the frustrated and the deranged, further riven by the messianic movement of Andrzej Towiański, who had just departed the French capital. The leading protagonists do not in fact take the stage – Adam Mickiewicz, for example, is glimpsed from afar, through a windowpane, or filtered through the opinions of others (“Mickiewicz – bah! – born of a foreign mother”<sup>4</sup>). Instead, historical secondary figures appear, yet – like the great men themselves – they are entangled in a web of politics, poetry, and madness. Each of these Romantic “lost causes” (recalling the favoured protagonists of film noir) trails secrets, disappointed political illusions and affections, and the shadow of betrayal.

Although in terms of genre the novel comes closest to retro-crime fiction, with its plot structured around a crime and a dual investigation conducted by Poles and Frenchmen, Goźliński undoubtedly “confronts messianism as a sequence of historiosophical stereotypes, while not forgetting the specificities of Polish émigré culture”<sup>5</sup>. Jakub Rawski is right to stress that the crime-novel form is here nothing more than staffage, a decorative backdrop<sup>6</sup>. Goźliński (himself the author of a doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of Maria Janion, Poland’s foremost scholar of Romanticism) draws extensively on documents of the period, invoking numerous quotations from Romantic literature<sup>7</sup>. The criminal investigation assumes the form of a historical inquiry, posing questions about the

<sup>4</sup> Paweł Goźliński, *Jul*, Wołowiec, Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2010, p. 52: “Mickiewicz, tfu, z matki obcej”.

<sup>5</sup> Jakub Rawski, “Kryminalny rozrachunek z romantycznym mesjanizmem w *Julu* Pawła Goźlińskiego” [“A Crime-Fiction Reckoning with Romantic Messianism in Paweł Goźliński’s *Jul*”], *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego*, 2016, 5, p. 193: “mierzy się z mesjanizmem jako ciągiem stereotypów historiozoficznych, nie zapominając o specyfice polskiej kultury na emigracji”.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 194.

<sup>7</sup> Goźliński also draws on numerous documents and studies, employing the formula “while writing, I was reading”.

condition of the Polish mentality both in the nineteenth century – when messianism still held its appeal – and today. The author depicts Poles as “imprisoned in cramped rooms of obsession, where scraps of yesterday’s newspapers flutter, mingling with the stench of musty ideas and the smoke of expired prophecies”<sup>8</sup>. The Frenchmen who encounter the émigré milieu formulate diagnoses such as those of Commissioner Lang:

Do you really think God has nothing better to do than to carve crosses for you, so that you can die on them for that Poland of yours? You’re in love with martyrdom! And you’d even hang each other with tears of brotherly love in your eyes<sup>9</sup>.

*Jul* can also be read as a political novel, inscribed within the various discourses that reactivated Romantic scenarios during and in connection with the mourning after the 2010 Smolensk air disaster<sup>10</sup>. The author refers to them directly in his subsequent quasi-crime novel, *Dziady* [*Forefathers’ Eve*] (2015). Here, the fantastic and sensational plot rests on a satirical conceit: leading figures of contemporary Polish culture mysteriously perish, and the crimes turn out to enact the scenario from Słowacki’s *Król-Duch* [*King Spirit*]. The poison of Romantic heroism exposed in *Jul* becomes a tangible threat here, though one that often assumes a caricatural form. Yet the novel is concerned not only with caricature and sensationalism; it may also be read as a political work of reckoning. Thus, authentic figures appear – those responsible for activating this poison, which, spreading uncontrollably and avalanching through the Internet, ensures that, as one character puts it, “our life is a conspiracy of all Poles against all Poles”<sup>11</sup>. Among the novel’s *dramatis personae* is Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, a poet and essayist

<sup>8</sup> Goźliński, *Jul*, p. 82: “uwięzionych w ciasnych pokoikach obsesji, w których fruwają skrawki zawsze wczorajszych gazet, zmieszane ze świadem zapyziałych idei, dymem przeterminowanych proroctw”.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 314: “Wy naprawdę myślicie, że Bóg nie ma nic do roboty, tylko strugać dla was krzyże, żebyście mogli na nich zdychać dla tej waszej Polski? Bo wy się kochacie w męczeństwie! I siebie wzajem byście ze łzami braterskiej miłości w oczach powywieszali”.

<sup>10</sup> See Sławomir Sierakowski (ed.), *Żaloba* [*Mourning*], Warszawa, Wydawnictwo “Krytyki Politycznej”, 2010, and Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, *Wiersze polityczne* [*Political Poems*], Warszawa, Wydawnictwo “Sic!”, 2010. The author appended the collection with an afterword entitled “Czego uczy nas Adam Mickiewicz?” [“What Can We Learn from Adam Mickiewicz?”].

<sup>11</sup> Paweł Goźliński, *Dziady*, Wołowiec, Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2015, p. 341: “nasze życie jest spiskiem wszystkich Polaków przeciw wszystkim Polakom”. In April 2010, a Polish government plane crashed near Smolensk in Russia while carrying the presidential couple, members of parliament, and other officials to the commemoration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Katyń Massacre. All 96 people on board died. The interpretation of this event remains the subject of ongoing debate and intense controversy. According to the available evidence and the reports of official investigative commissions, the crash resulted from an unfortunate chain of circumstances of the kind that often lead to aviation accidents. This explanation has not been accepted by part of the Polish public (particularly those affiliated with the political right), who maintain that the crash was an assassination orchestrated by the Russian authorities. This vision of the Smolensk catastrophe resonates strongly with certain nineteenth-century narrative patterns, which were widely invoked in numerous occasional texts written in the immediate aftermath of the event.

who later emerged as a leading voice of the national-conservative discourse in Poland, portrayed by the narrator in the following terms:

The Last Bard. That's what they called him. Probably hooligans – there's no other way to describe that band of ageing fanatics with white-and-red scarves, who came to support him at literary evenings that turned into party congresses, and party congresses that turned back into poetry readings<sup>12</sup>.

Goźliński's protagonist, proclaiming a return to the age of conspiracies, voices opinions that directly echo many of Rymkiewicz's texts (for example, from the collection *Political Poems* [*Wiersze polityczne*]): "Some Poles are no longer worthy of having Poland"<sup>13</sup>. The nineteenth century, invoked as the direct neighbour of the twenty-first, reinforces a peculiar bubble of Polishness, which not only blocks engagement with an ever-changing reality, but also fosters a climate conducive to crime. In the novel, the murders of prominent cultural figures are absurd in character – yet at the same time, behind these caricatural events emerges a thoroughly real image of mounting contemporary tensions, tensions that may be discharged through a return to nineteenth-century spectres, so deeply lodged in the social imagination<sup>14</sup>.

Another kind of literary play, also asking about the place of Romanticism in contemporary Polish life, is the narrative poem *Wypiór* by Grzegorz Uzdąński, a writer of literary pastiches and an accomplished imitator and rhymers (*Nowe wiersze sławnych poetów* [*New Poems by Famous Poets*]). Its metrical form, evoking Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, is used here to tell the story of a couple of thirty-somethings from Warsaw's Plac Zbawiciela (a central square, known both as a hub of hip urban life and as a symbolic site of cultural and political tensions), living in an apartment inherited from an uncle, where the titular *wypiór* (cf. Polish *upiór*) – the spectre of Adam Mickiewicz – has taken up residence. He becomes their flatmate, and thus their closest neighbour. The protagonists, forming a partnership typical of today's social mores – without serious commitments – are people living from day to day, disappointed with their own lives, constantly

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 232-233: "Ostatni wieszcz. Tak go nazywali. Chyba kibole, inaczej nie można nazwać tej grupy przekwitających fanatyków z biało-czerwonymi szalikami, którzy przychodzili wspierać go w czasie wieczorków autorskich zmieniających się w parteitag i parteitagów zmieniających się w wieczory poetyckie".

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 273: "Niektórzy Polacy nie są już warci tego, żeby mieć Polskę".

<sup>14</sup> It is worth recalling, in this context, the scene in which a televised debate between Professor Zbigniew Mikołajko (a Polish historian of religion, often engaged in public debates) and Father Tadeusz Rydzyk (a Catholic priest and founder of Radio Maryja, a key institution of Poland's right-wing Catholic media) is interrupted by women in the audience shouting "Only under the Cross" (*Tylko pod krzyżem* – a slogan from nationalist-religious protests), and the discussion ends with the declaration: "We, true Poles, will not apologise for Jedwabne" (Jedwabne was the site of an anti-Jewish pogrom on 10 July 1941 in which local Polish inhabitants, acting under German supervision, murdered and burned many Jewish residents – an episode whose later exposure [notably in 2000] provoked a major public reckoning in Poland).

weaving rather vague plans of artistic careers that come to little. This generational portrait is rendered realistically, though it is not without satirical accents.

Who is this uncanny and irritating neighbour of the couple? Mickiewicz's spectre (*upiór*) becomes a distinctive point of reference for the banality of Marta and Łukasz's lives. He compels them to probe their own complexes and frustrations, their expectations and dreams. He also makes them ask whether they truly wish to go on living in the same way – addicted to social media, to the opinions of others, to the trivial rituals of everyday life. Can the meaning of life really be found in skimming along the surface of events and emotions? Paradoxically, it is the titular *Wypiór* who proves to be more of a flesh-and-blood character than they are. Recalling his own life, and comparing it with that of Warsaw's inhabitants in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Mickiewicz returns to the knots of his own biography – to love, to his troubled relations with women, to his reactions to his wife's madness, to his sense of guilt towards her. And he may, in reckoning, declare: it was a full, genuine life, so I have nothing to regret, though now, as a spectre, I atone for my sins. Uzdański presents Romanticism as an age of sharp contrasts, powerful emotions, glaring dilemmas – set here against the lukewarm mediocrity of the present. This is not Romanticism cast in the heroic mould of a suffering and martyred nation. It is Romanticism of dreams of freedom, of crossing boundaries, of expressing individual longings and spiritual discoveries. The Romantic idiom, seemingly appropriated irretrievably by politics, is shown here – as Justyna Jaworska aptly writes in her afterword to Uzdański's book<sup>15</sup> – to retain its ever-fascinating dimension.

### *Progenitors out of the Closet*

For today's author and reader, the nineteenth century is of interest above all as a drawer of hitherto undiscovered stories (to which I shall return later), while the biographies of Romantic poets become the subject of interpretations different from earlier ones – sometimes radically so. This was already called for, as we know, by Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński in his *Brązownicy* [*The Bronze Casters*] (a 1930 collection of essays that demythologises Poland's Romantic national poets) and by Jan Lechoń. The "other" Juliusz Słowacki – the European dandy, experimenting with love and narcotics – was of course presented earlier, for instance, by Jan Zieliński in his book with the provocative title *SzatAnioł* [*SatAngel*]<sup>16</sup>. Following similar paths, though directing the reader elsewhere, is Maria Justyna Nowicka, author of *Juliusz Słowacki. Wychodzenie z szafy* [*Juliusz Słowacki. Coming Out of the*

<sup>15</sup> Justyna Jaworska, "Posłowie" ["Afterword"], in Grzegorz Uzdański, *Wypiór*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo "Filtr", 2021, p. 211.

<sup>16</sup> See Jan Zieliński, *Słowacki. SzatAnioł* [*Słowacki. SatAngel*], Warszawa, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2009.

*Closet*]<sup>17</sup>. The main questions of this essentially biographical inquiry concern the secrets of the poet concealed beneath the myth of the Romantic misfit. According to the author's theses, the principal cause of the poet's existential dilemmas – and the artistic strategies integrally bound up with them – was his non-heteronormativity. Donning various masks and playing multiple roles in his relations with women and men, in her reading Słowacki continually positioned himself at the boundary of gender norms. His frequently assumed identity as an outsider and eternal nomad, his fascination with androgyny, his dream of becoming an angel – all, in the monographer's view, signal the poet's struggles with his own gender and sexuality. Nowicka thus discerns in Słowacki a patron of today's identity choices, one close to our contemporaneity through his mode of feeling and his fight for subjectivity. Although not all of her arguments in support of this thesis convince me, what remains important in her book is the proposal of a Romanticism that – with its cult of individualism – encouraged in a particularly forceful way the crossing of social conventions, including those related to gender identity. Here Słowacki also appears, as the author shows, more closely akin to European Romantics such as Byron or Chateaubriand, passionate seekers of freedom who defended the right to their individual choices.

A good context for Nowicka's scholarly book can be found in two recently published novels: *To przez ten wiatr* [*Blame It on the Wind*] by Jakub Nowak<sup>18</sup> and *Odmieniec* [*The Misfit*] by Natalia Fiedorczuk<sup>19</sup>. The author of the former uses as the basis of his plot an intriguing episode from the biography of Henryk Sienkiewicz, one that remains significant and fascinating to both readers and scholars. Nowak depicts Sienkiewicz and his friends in California at the end of the 1870s, attempting to realise their dream of living in a free world. The novel's plot thus draws on well-known historical facts, presenting the circumstances of the departure of this Warsaw group of friends and artists. Its central motif is Sienkiewicz's obsessive love for Helena Modrzejewska (Modjeska), but also, through the eyes of newcomers from nineteenth-century Poland, the image of the American West. It is an image familiar from westerns, for the novel deploys the full repertoire of strategies characteristic of popular literature: Wild West stories, sensational intrigue, romance. The Sienkiewicz portrayed here is a man unhinged, tossed between conflicting emotions and ambitions stoked by his new environment – one rife with violence, crime, and fraught relations, not least those stemming from a multiculturalism unfamiliar to Poles. It is an environment in which the Polish intellectual phalanstery are far from exceptional in the eyes of the locals,

<sup>17</sup> Marta Justyna Nowicka, *Słowacki. Wychodzenie z szafy* [*Juliusz Słowacki. Coming Out of the Closet*], Warszawa, Wydawnictwo "Krytyki Politycznej", 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Jakub Nowak, *To przez ten wiatr* [*Blame It on the Wind*], Warszawa, Powergraph, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Natalia Fiedorczuk, *Odmieniec. Vie romancée* [*The Outsider: A Vie Romancée*], Warszawa, Wielka Litera, 2021.

their eccentricities simply adding to the mosaic of oddities in the wild Californian world.

The Sienkiewicz of this incarnation is a fantasist, a trickster, vainly dreaming of manly strength and a firm masculine identity. Of course, as we know, in 1876–1877, when the novel's plot is set in accordance with historical realities, Sienkiewicz was still a fledgling writer and journalist. In America he experiences the longed-for masculine adventures, yet at the same time his Californian dream – and perhaps his love – begins to unravel. The novelist concludes the chosen episode from Sienkiewicz's biography with the hero's death, thereby inscribing his work within the model of alternative narration. The reader, however, knows that Sienkiewicz returned to his homeland, soon to begin his triumphant march towards becoming the favourite writer of Poles and virtually a national bard. The disappointed and frustrated participant in the Californian utopia was transformed into a successful man who drew on his American experiences in various ways in his own oeuvre – an oeuvre that would bring him renown not only in Poland.

What, then, is the purpose of this strategy of alternative biography? First of all, it prompts us to ask about the unknown Sienkiewicz – unknown because appropriated by those who wished, and still wish, to see in him above all the “father of the nation”. The novelistic image of a fantasist and a mad artist consumed by complexes and ambitions appears to me, as a scholar of nineteenth-century literature, to be accurate. This is, after all, the same Sienkiewicz who, defending himself against the reproaches of critics of his historical novels, wrote: “it is difficult to demand of a self-sown meadow that it should blossom with flowers other than its own”<sup>20</sup>.

A different kind of “misfit” is portrayed by Natalia Fiedorczuk, who turns to the biography of the modernist artist, sculptor and painter Bolesław Biegas. The author here recalls one of the most enigmatic figures of Polish culture at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth. The novel's protagonist is an artist constantly struggling for recognition of his individual path. Particularly compelling are Biegas's struggles with various patrons and “benefactors” who attempt to inscribe him into their own projects – from the priest who takes a talented peasant child under his care, through Aleksander Świętochowski (a leading ideologue of Polish Positivism), who envisions for Biegas a positivist model of biography and career, to the moderators from among the Polish émigré community in Paris. The hero of Fiedorczuk's book is a “total” modernist artist. As the author writes in the afterword, “*Odmieniec [The Misfit]* was born out of a fascination with otherness, out of a captivation with the neo-Romantic myth of the prophetic artist, the mediator between the mystical and the

---

<sup>20</sup> Henryk Sienkiewicz, “O powieści historycznej” [“On the Historical Novel”], in Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Dziela [Works]*. Ed. by Julian Krzyżanowski, vol. 45, Warszawa, Ossolineum, 1951, p. 124: “rudno żądać od samorodnej łąki, by takimi a nie innymi kwiatami zakwitała”.

earthly”<sup>21</sup>. Such a figure stands at the antipodes of today’s artistic strategies, tied to transformations of the art market and to the phenomenon of the celebrity-artist. The modernist “neighbour” of Fiedorczuk’s novel may in this sense be taken as a mirror of our contemporaneity.

*From the Drawer of Forgotten Stories*

Reaching into the nineteenth century as a drawer of forgotten stories, contemporary writers search for those that can reveal overlooked or neglected paths of Polish cultural narratives deriving directly from that century. Among the most fascinating of these is the Romantic-era tale of Mother Makryna, the “holy impostor” of the “Great” Polish political Emigration<sup>22</sup>. Jacek Dehnel returns to this story in his 2014 novel, drawing on numerous documents of the time, including the correspondence of the Resurrectionist Fathers from the 1840s. The story of Makryna Mieczysławska shows, on the one hand, the circumstances of the formation of her legend in the milieu of the Great Emigration. When Makryna arrived in Paris with her account of persecutions heroically endured, this milieu was in urgent need of another identity-forming narrative. Speaking of a homeland the émigrés had not seen for years, the heroic exile provided the moral fuel for a story in which the figures of Nation, Christ, Victim, and “Polish-Mother” (pol. *Matka Polka* – a nineteenth-century symbolic figure of the suffering mother identified with the fate of the nation) coalesced. In the eyes of the émigrés, Makryna, as Dehnel shows, embodied all suffering Poles, and appeared to them as yet another symbolic “voice from Lithuania”. She also became a habituée of Parisian and Roman salons, a celebrity whose tales were avidly recounted by the press. The point of returning to this story is not merely to recall a fraud long since unmasked<sup>23</sup>, but to examine the mechanisms by which identity-creating legends were shaped within a messianic framework.

What interests the author most is the true story – concealed beneath the narrative that so fascinated the Paris émigrés of the 1840s – of Irena Wińcowa, who passed herself off as Mother Makryna. This story also inscribes itself within a tale of rape and female suffering, though from a very different register. It is the narrative of a Jewish woman converted to Catholicism, then widow of a violent Russian officer, a prisoner, an escapee from a convoy – who, finding herself at the

<sup>21</sup> Natalia Fiedorczuk, “Posłowie – o Bolesławie Biegalskim” [“Afterword: On Bolesław Biegalski”], in Fiedorczuk, *Odmieniec*, p. 204: “Odmieniec powstał z fascynacji innością, z zafrapowania neoromantycznym mitem artysty profety, pośrednikiem między sferą mistyczną a ziemską”.

<sup>22</sup> Jacek Dehnel, *Matka Makryna* [*Mother Makryna*], Warszawa, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2014. See also Jacek Dehnel, “Makryna Mieczysławska – oszustka w habicie” [“Makryna Mieczysławska: The Impostor Nun”], *Polityka*, 16 December 2014, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/historia/-1602681,1,makryna-mieczyslawska--oszustka-w-habicie.read>. Accessed October 20, 2025.

<sup>23</sup> It is well known that Makryna was neither a nun, nor a prioress or a noblewoman.



very bottom of the social ladder, survived only thanks to her talent for storytelling. The emancipatory dimension of this story exposes the underside of the Polish heroic myths of Romanticism, myths forged by frustrated men deaf to the transformations of reality. They would never have been interested in the true story of a woman from the social underclass, for – as the beguiling female narrator well knew – they craved a therapeutic legend to sustain their sense of Polish and masculine mission. Dehnel demonstrates how easily such an appetite can be satisfied by means of mystification, through the discourse of catastrophe and martyrdom, with its characteristic motifs of national necrophilia and sacred sadism. In Dehnel's novel, the story of Mother Makryna becomes a lens through which the Polish nineteenth century is revealed both in what is foregrounded in cultural memory, and in what is concealed. What is both important and intriguing here is the use of one of the iconic figures shaping the symbolic imaginary of that time – namely the heroine of Juliusz Słowacki's poem *Rozmowa z Matką Makryną* [*Conversation with Mother Makryna*].

Another well-known figure from this imaginary has been evoked by Radek Rak in his novel *Baśń o węzowym sercu albo Wtóre słowo o Jakóbie Szeli* [*A Fairytale about Snake's Heart, or a Second Word about Jakob Szela*] (2018)<sup>24</sup>. The image, entrenched in nineteenth-century culture, of the leader of the Galician peasant uprising of 1846 as murderer and traitor is here deconstructed and reconstructed anew from sometimes surprising elements. The figure of Szela assumes a protean character, composed of the multiplicity of disguises, masks, energies, and beings deployed by the protagonist – showing, for instance, the absurdity of the traditional division between nobility and peasantry. The story of Szela's fate and that of his noble adversary, Bogusz, unfolds as a dark parable of transformation, and of the role of chaos and chance in the world and in history, a world that does not allow the individual to escape social conditions, yet which, once transcended through the magic of successive metamorphoses, proves to be a space of eternal potentiality.

In Radek Rak's novel, the instruments and props of the fantasy genre are deployed. The story of Jakub Szela, inscribed within the history of social injustice, mechanisms of power and subjugation, the anatomy of fear, and the consuming, destructive drive for revenge – destructive both for social relations and for the individual psyche – acquires a universal dimension here. Interestingly, at the same time, the local character of the tale remains crucial: a locality at once tinged with Mickiewicz and Bolesław Leśmian, and directed towards regional legends and folk rituals from the author's native Beskid region, where, as the novel itself observes, “in these parts it is sometimes hard to tell who is who”<sup>25</sup>. In accordance with the

<sup>24</sup> Radek Rak, *Baśń o węzowym sercu albo Wtóre słowo o Jakóbie Szeli* [*A Fairytale about Snake's Heart, or a Second Word about Jakob Szela*], Warszawa, Powergraph, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88: “w tych stronach trudno niekiedy odróżnić, kto jest kim”.

conventions of the fantasy world, this space becomes the primeval ground of mystery: “They say that the beech forest, which begins in the merry valley of the Wisłoka, stretches across the entire Beskids, and the Beskids reach the very edge of the world, and beyond there is nothing, only the black sea”.<sup>26</sup> It is here that the struggle for the world unfolds – along with Szela’s struggle, and that of his peasant descendants (figured in Polish discourse as the accursed offspring of Ham [pol. *cham*]), to reclaim a history long usurped by the “lordly” version<sup>27</sup>.

Characteristically, the fantastic world created by Radek Rak emerges in contemporary literature almost exactly at the moment when a boom begins around the “people’s history” of Poland. In the same year as the novel, Adam Leszczyński’s widely discussed book *Ludowa historia Polski. Historia wyzysku i oporu. Mitologia panowania* [*The People’s History of Poland: A History of Exploitation and Resistance. The Mythology of Domination*]<sup>28</sup>, as well as Piotr Korczyński’s *Śladami Szeli czyli diabły polskie* [*In Szela’s Footsteps, or Polish Devils*]<sup>29</sup> were also published. This coincidence was noted by critics, although, for instance, Dariusz Nowacki argued<sup>30</sup> that we should see in contemporary writers’ interest in the figure of Jakub Szela nothing more than a pop-cultural game. The matter, however, seems to me more complex. Even if Rak’s novel cannot be inscribed within the “plebeian turn” that initiates a re-reading of Polish history from the perspective of socially weak peasant subjects, it certainly directs the reader towards the forgotten or falsified stories of the Polish nineteenth century. Built upon the prefabricated elements of the fantasy novel’s repertoire, Rak’s work simultaneously draws upon regional fantastic motifs and, as I have said, local tales rooted in a concrete place and tied to a precisely defined time. Here Radek Rak

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 90: “Powiadają, że buczynowy las, który zaczyna się w wesołej dolinie Wisłoki, ciągnie się przez cały Beskid, a Beskid sięga aż po kraniec świata i dalej nie ma już nic, tylko czarne morze”.

<sup>27</sup> See *Ibidem*, p. 78. As the fictional Szela reflects, “memory of one’s ancestors is all very good for the lords, who supposedly can trace their lineage back to Adam himself” (“pamięć o przodkach dobra jest dla panów, którzy podobno potrafią prześledzić swój ród od samego praojca Adama”), whereas “the first *chamy* [peasants] emerged [...] from the soil, from rot and roots” (“pierwsze chamy wyszły [...] z ziemi, próchna i korzeni”).

<sup>28</sup> Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski. Historia wyzysku i oporu. Mitologia panowania* [*The People’s History of Poland: A History of Exploitation and Resistance. The Mythology of Domination*], Warszawa, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Piotr Korczyński, *Śladami Szeli czyli diabły polskie* [*In Szela’s Footsteps, or Polish Devils*], Warszawa, Wydawnictwo RM, 2020. A year earlier saw the publication of Arkadiusz S. Więch’s book, *O galicyjskich krwawych zapustach, czyli chłopskim zrywem Jakuba Szeli* [*On the Galician Bloody Shrovetide, or the Peasant Uprising of Jakub Szela*], Kraków, Powergraph, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> See Dariusz Nowacki, “Obecność Szeli. Trzy przykłady z nowej prozy” [“The Presence of Szela: Three Examples from Recent Fiction”], *Konteksty Kultury*, 17, 2020, 4, pp. 453–469. The article discusses three novels in which the figure of Jakub Szela and the theme of the Galician Peasant Uprising appear: Rak’s *Baśń o węzowym* (2018), Maciej Hen’s *Deutsch dla średnio zaawansowanych* [*Deutsch for Intermediate Learners*] (2019), and Stanisław Aleksander Nowak’s *Galicyanie* [*The Galicians*] (2016).

finds what the master of fantasy, Tolkien, called “the Cauldron of Story”<sup>31</sup>. Like every writer of the genre, he presents the eternal struggle for the world as situated in some “long ago”, but here it is a “pastness” not accidentally marked with the stamp of the nineteenth century. And that stamp still directs us towards dilemmas and quests bound up with questions about the substratum of our culture – about what, in its patterns and narratives, has been overlooked or remains concealed.

*On the Trail of Popular Culture – and Beside It*

Yet this vision of neighbourhood with a distant century differs fundamentally from the trend, fashionable for several decades now, of “recycling” the nineteenth century under the dictates of popular culture<sup>32</sup> – though popular culture is, to be sure, the lifeblood of nearly all the references and returns I have discussed here. This is, of course, a global trend, spanning literature of diverse genres and across the full spectrum of publishing. On the “top shelves” we find today contemporary neo-Victorian novels (such as the works of Michael Faber or Susan Waters), while on the lower ones we encounter various strands of popular genre fiction – from chick lit to crime and horror. The overarching frame for this literary activity is, of course, film, constantly reworking nineteenth-century plots in Netflix series, as well as the world of steampunk comics<sup>33</sup>, computer games, and, finally, fan culture, which runs websites devoted to nineteenth-century literature (above all Jane Austen) or to fashion shows<sup>34</sup>. In Poland, the main example of this cultural vogue is retro crime fiction, which grows each year<sup>35</sup>. Here, too, the nineteenth century thrives: one need only recall such works as Ida Żmiejewska’s three-volume cycle *Warszawianka* [*The Varsovian Woman*], Adam Węglowski’s *Pruski lód* [*Prussian Ice*] (describing a scandal of 1891), Jakub Bielikowski’s *Detektyw warszawski* [*The Warsaw Detective*], or the novels of Katarzyna Kwiatkowska, which set their criminal intrigues amid the nineteenth-century life of the Greater Poland landed gentry.

The poetics of retro-crime are most intriguingly played with by the already mentioned Jacek Dehnel, who for several years now has been publishing, together

<sup>31</sup> John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, in *Tree and Leaf*, London, Unwin Books, 1964, p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> See Ewa Paczoska, Bartłomiej Szleszyński (eds.), *Przerabianie XIX wieku* [*Reworking the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*], Warszawa, PIW, 2011; Anna Dunin-Dudkowska, Dariusz Piechota, Agnieszka Trzeźniewska-Nowak (eds.), *Reaktywacje dziewiętnastowieczności* [*Reviving Nineteenth-Century Culture*], Warszawa, PWN, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> See Bartłomiej Szleszyński, “Komiksowe gry z wiekiem XIX” [“Comic Games with the Nineteenth Century”], in Paczoska, Szleszyński (eds.), *Przerabianie*, pp. 246-270.

<sup>34</sup> See Bartłomiej Szleszyński, *Non omnis moriar? Bolesław Prus, wiek XIX i opowieści współczesne* [*Non omnis moriar? Bolesław Prus, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and Contemporary Tales*], Warszawa, Wydawnictwo IBL, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Małgorzata Kosmala, “Kryminalne retro światy” [“Retro Crime Worlds”], in Paczoska, Szleszyński (eds.), *Przerabianie*, pp. 223-245.

with Piotr Tarczyński and under the pseudonym Maryla Szymiczkowa, a series of novels whose protagonist, Zofia Szczupaczyńska, is conducting her investigations in Kraków at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To date, four novels have appeared in this cycle, in which the authors return not only to the realities of the time but also to its literature, enacting a strategy that might be described as a second-degree retelling<sup>36</sup>. The novels masterfully reconstruct the scenery of the fin de siècle, presenting Kraków on the one hand as a city of modernist artists and eccentrics, and on the other as the domain of respectable bourgeois households in the manner of the Dulskis (the hypocritical middle-class family from Gabriela Zapolska's play *Moralność pani Dulskiej* [*The Morality of Mrs Dulska*]). I have the impression, moreover, that in successive volumes of the cycle the criminal plot matters less and less, while what grows increasingly significant is the tactic of collecting nineteenth-century "curiosities" that even a scholar of that culture must appreciate, and of exploiting the immersive potential hidden among them<sup>37</sup>.

Nor is this the first time in Dehnel's work that we encounter a return to the nineteenth century and a play with the traditions of that era's literature (apart, of course, from the already mentioned *Mother Makryna*, I am thinking here of his micro-novels entitled *Balzakiana*<sup>38</sup>). There he demonstrated that Poland's post-communist transformation could be described in the idiom of the author of *The Human Comedy*, while as co-author of the crime novels he chiefly amuses himself with his unconventional heroine and with a collection of historical curiosities. Yet even here questions arise about the consequences of the close neighbourhood of the nineteenth century.

I have in mind especially the 2020 novel *Złoty róg* [*The Golden Horn*]<sup>39</sup>, whose action unfolds on the night of that wedding in Bronowice well known to us, of course, from Stanisław Wyspiański's canonical 1901 play *Wesele* [*The Wedding*], and in which figures such as Włodzimierz Tetmajer and Stanisław Wyspiański appear on various narrative planes. The latter presented the central scene of these events in *Wesele*; Szymiczkowa, by contrast, peers behind the scenes, into the background, where events unfold that rework those known from the drama (for instance, the meeting of the Host with a mysterious visitor burdened with a secret

<sup>36</sup> Izabela Poniatońska, "'Retelling'. Kilka uwag w kontekście 'opowiadania na nowo' literackiego dziedzictwa dziewiętnastego wieku" ["'Retelling'...."], in Dunin-Dudkowska, Piechota, Trześniewska-Nowak (eds.), *Reaktywacje*, pp. 13-24.

<sup>37</sup> See the final novels in the series: Maryla Szymiczkowa [Jacek Dehnel and Piotr Tarczyński], *Śmierć na Wenecji* [*Death in Venice*], Kraków, Wydawnictwo Znak, Literanova, 2023, and *Szaleństwo i śmierć spłyną z gór* [*Madness and Death Flow Down from the Mountains*], Kraków, Wydawnictwo Znak, Literanova, 2025.

<sup>38</sup> See Ewa Paczoska, "Wiek XIX – reaktywacja" ["The 19<sup>th</sup> Century – Revival"], in Paczoska, *Prawdziwy*, pp. 254-262.

<sup>39</sup> Maryla Szymiczkowa [Jacek Dehnel and Piotr Tarczyński], *Złoty róg* [*The Golden Horn*], Kraków, Znak Literanova, 2020.

mission). Yet at the same time, the axis of the action shifts in quite another direction, for here we do not encounter what “each, or in his dreams, may find” (Act II, Scene 3) but rather the realities of Polish life at the beginning of the twentieth century, and these prove surprisingly close to our own present, bound up with such questions as the relation between patriotic action and everyday life, or between great poetry and national kitsch as the lifeblood of Polish identity choices.

Here the game of imitating Wyspiański or Zapolska leads to serious questions: about the consequences of a domesticated image of Polish life on the threshold of the twentieth century, about the underside of the myth of *Felix Austria*, about the issues arising from the collision of tradition and modernity in our culture. In this circle, Zofia Szczupaczyńska proves to be not only a kindred figure to Radczyni (the widow of a Kraków city councillor from *The Wedding*), but also to Wyspiański himself, whose drama showed, above all, how not to play at Poland any longer. The authors of the novel have emphasised in interviews that this return to the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a time of change also serves to examine the forms of transformation in our own culture.

### *The End of the World of Men*

The character of Zofia Szczupaczyńska, created by Dehnel and Tarczyński, has been endowed with an emancipatory potential that at first glance seems surprising. The meticulous Kraków bourgeois housewife, obsessively devoted to the order of her household and seemingly without any ambition for agency beyond it, turns out to exploit this role in pursuit of her own aims. She is able to manipulate men, to take advantage of their hidden weaknesses, all the while never disturbing their sense of well-being or their impression that they remain in charge. This is an example of a “soft” emancipation and thus an extraordinarily effective one. The crime novels of Szymczkowska provoke readers to ask distinctly contemporary questions about the relations of femininity to masculinity in Polish culture.

It is in a mode no longer buffo but serious that these questions return in the recently published novels of Manuela Gretkowska and Olga Tokarczuk. In *Mistrzyni* [*The Mistress*] (2021), Gretkowska revives the figure of nineteenth-century Poland’s Martha Stewart – Lucyna Ćwierczakiewiczowa. The author of *365 obiadów* [*365 Dinners*] was, in the nineteenth century, as popular as Bolesław Prus, and perhaps even as Mickiewicz<sup>40</sup>, yet in the public consciousness she was later entirely forgotten or marginalised. And still, as the recently published biography *Pani od obiadów* [*The Dinner Lady*] shows, her cookbooks, household calendars, and manuals on domestic management defined, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the practical horizon of everyday emancipation. The

---

<sup>40</sup> See Marta Sztokfisz, *Pani od obiadów. Lucyna Ćwierczakiewiczowa. Historia życia* [*The Dinner Lady: Lucyna Ćwierczakiewiczowa. A Life Story*], Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2018.

Ćwierczakiewiczowa of Gretkowska's novel is an independent and active woman, fully conscious of the transformations taking place in Polish society and determined to make others aware of them:

The days of young ladies of manor houses are over. The manor houses are being requisitioned by the partitioning powers, peasants no longer work for free – you must have a skill to make a living, and not squander money. A clean, orderly home is a necessity. [...] Capital, accumulation, God, if one believes in him. And honesty. Not for the sake of virtue, but for social trust<sup>41</sup>.

She is the heroine of a nineteenth-century narrative long forgotten or dismissed today as dull and barren: the narrative of the “sober enthusiasts” of broadly understood positivism. This positivism, in the women's school of everyday life, also introduces – as the novelist shows – a new formula of patriotism. It is not the patriotism stamped from a heroic mould, nor from the register of masculine phantasms.

These forgotten paths of Polish nineteenth-century history, demanding to be dusted off and brought up to date, interest the author of *Mistrzyni* just as much as the fate of an extraordinary woman whose abilities surpassed her age, whose awareness allowed her to step beyond the intelligentsia or bourgeois “bubble”, and who achieved subjectivity and financial success by breaking through contemporary stereotypes about the aims and behaviours deemed appropriate for her sex. Yet the life of the heroine of Prus's chronicles is, in Gretkowska's novel, marked by a kind of fatalism – for the price of independence proves to be the fate of a woman solitary and unloved, always under the watchful gaze of public opinion, which forgives her no mistake. Especially when the “Dinner Lady” loses her head over a much younger man and seeks to live out a romantic love with him in suitably staged settings.

Here Gretkowska sharpens not only the emotional dilemmas of her heroine but also her feminist appetites and fantasies. Thus the fictional Ćwierczakiewiczowa articulates, for instance, a programme such as this: “Women in Poland will never be an independent force until they put a healthy distance between themselves and Catholicism and their husbands. [...] And so it will go on, breaking human lives and breaking the country, no matter under whose partition”<sup>42</sup>. The author often places in her heroine's mouth opinions lifted straight from contemporary debates

---

<sup>41</sup> Manuela Gretkowska, *Mistrzyni. Powieść inspirowana życiem Lucyny Ćwierczakiewiczowej* [*The Mistress: A Novel Inspired by the Life of Lucyna Ćwierczakiewiczowa*], Kraków, Wydawnictwo Znak Literanova, 2021, p. 33: “Skończyły się czasy panienek z dworów. Dwórki rekrutuje zaborca, chłopci darmo już nie pracują, trzeba coś umieć, żeby się utrzymać, nie szastać pieniędzmi. Czysty, estetyczny dom to konieczność. [...] Kapitał, akumulacja, Bóg, jeśli ktoś w niego wierzy. I uczciwość. Nie dla cnoty, ale dla zaufania społecznego”.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 99: “Nigdy kobiety siłą niezależną w Polsce nie będą, póki od katolicyzmu i mężów na zdrowy dystans nie odejdą. [...] Tak to się będzie toczyć, łamiąc ludzkie życia i kraj, obojętnie pod czyim zaborem”.

and discussions about women's rights and possibilities in today's Poland, especially those connected with the "black umbrellas" movement and the mass demonstrations against abortion restrictions at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century:

Poland is a woman, not a Polonia weeping over corpses [...]. Women are capable of reaching the moon if that's what it takes to feed and educate their children. Enough of patriotic corpses and of men drunk as a corpse. Polish women have their husbands either six feet under or up their ass<sup>43</sup>.

Portrayed as a nineteenth-century "neighbour" of today's Polish women – who can and should still draw on her advice – Cwierzakiewiczowa is, of course, a striking counterpoint to other figures from that century: the *Polish Mother* (*Matka Polka*) or the virgin-heroine, powerful in symbolic force but weak, of course, in subjectivity. In Gretkowska's novel it is, rather, men who struggle with subjectivity, entangled in a web of roles and props wholly inadequate to reality. This is why, in one of the opening scenes of the novel, Cwierzakiewiczowa simply directs one of them to the cemetery rubbish heap: "That's where we sort waste – and men"<sup>44</sup>.

From an entirely different angle, the same collapse of the male world is described by Tokarczuk, who sets the action of her novel just before the First World War, at the close of the long nineteenth century. The male community of spa patients in the mountain sanatorium portrayed in *Empuzjon* [*The Empusium*] is a characteristic collection of individuals who are not only treating various physical ailments but also their masculine impotence. This community realises itself, above all, in speech and in fantasies of agency. These dreams and debates revolve around imaginings of strength, scenarios of violence, ideals of healthy physicality, and rational judgments about the world. The participants in these debates hail from different European nations, yet within the same circle is placed the model of the Polish man, which Mieczysław Wojnicz receives from his father. The protagonists, trapped in this discourse organised around the role of the "real man" – all-knowing and, as Friedrich Nietzsche would put it, "incurably self-certain" – nonetheless feel a mounting unease, for they do not in fact conform to these seemingly obvious models. As one of the characters puts it, it makes them "tremble inside"<sup>45</sup>. Perceiving the coming change, registering its clear signs, they are in no way prepared for it. Standing in the way of reading the signals of reality is still the image of the male hero – the doer of great deeds – who conceals his hunger, emotional needs, fears, and phantasms. In the fantastic scenery drawn from folk

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 183: "Polska jest kobietą, nie Polonią oplakującą trupy [...]. Kobiety są w stanie dostać się na księżyc, żeby dzieci wyżywić, wykształcić. Trupów patriotycznych albo w trupa zalanych dość. Polki mężów mają w grobach albo w dupie".

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15: "Odpady i mężczyzn segregujemy tam".

<sup>45</sup> Olga Tokarczuk, *The Empusium: A Health Resort Horror Story*. Transl. by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2024, p. 229.

legends, this dying world of “real men” is observed simultaneously from the perspective of the “eye of nature”, or rather of a feminine energy hidden within nature and revealed in stories about witches:

Here we are, watching them, as usual from below, we see them like big, strong columns topped by small, chattering projections – their heads. Their feet mechanically crush the forest litter [...]. For a short while after they pass, beneath the forest floor the mushroom spawn quivers, that vast, immense, motherly structure transmits information to itself – where the intruders are, and in which direction they are bending their steps<sup>46</sup>.

The world of men is shattered and defeated here not only locally but also globally. Its true end – and the consummation of the main protagonist’s fate – will come with the Great War, the fruit of male ambitions and violent appetites, as well as the result of disregarding the sphere of feelings that did not fit the rational model, of failing to attend to otherness or to heed the signals of nature.

#### *Old Stories and New Neighbours*

The examples of reviving nineteenth-century neighbourhoods in recent Polish fiction, delivered here “by special dispatch”, clearly call for some kind of conclusion. The meanderings of this neighbourly relation, as shown in the novels discussed, direct us towards a different picture of that century and of its significance for the shaping of our contemporary culture. Stories recovered from beneath the stereotype of “the great century of the Poles” resonate with a circle of entirely modern dilemmas and questions. The nineteenth century thus proves to be an unfamiliar neighbour, one still demanding our attention. Nineteenth-century “tales” – alternative narratives set against the mainstream of national history – expose the origins of cultural stereotypes and collective self-delusions. By loosening the cohesion of the Polish story, they reveal what continues to structure our collective thinking, both in consciousness and in the subconscious.

Of course, all these attempts can be described as instances of appropriating this neighbour, incorporating it into the repertoire of interpretive tools indispensable for understanding the present. They may also be treated as cases of disenchanting what has at times been dangerous or even toxic in Poland’s cultural cohabitation with the nineteenth century. For this neighbour, as it turns out, need not encourage us to lock ourselves into regressive enclosures. Instead, it may teach attentiveness to the meanders of history and the consequences of its various readings. And, true to the custom of neighbourly favours, it may also offer good advice – or comfort us with the thought that we are not alone in having troubles with our own present.

*Translated from Polish by Tomasz Krupa*

---

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 92.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- \*\*\*, "Tak sobie mieszkamy, Marcin Żyła rozmawia z Rochem Sulimą" ["That's How We Live: Marcin Żyła in Conversation with Roch Sulima"], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 2022, 26, p. 20.
- DEHNEL, Jacek, "Makryna Mieczysławska – oszustka w habicie" ["Makryna Mieczysławska: The Impostor Nun"], *Polityka*, 16 December 2014, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/historia/1602681,1,makryna-mieczyslawska--oszustka-w-habicie.read>. Accessed October 20, 2025.
- DEHNEL, Jacek, *Matka Makryna [Mother Makryna]*, Warszawa, W.A.B., 2014.
- DUNIN-DUDKOWSKA, Anna, PIECHOTA, Dariusz, TRZEŚNIEWSKA-NOWAK, Agnieszka (ed.), *Reaktywacje dziewiętnastowieczności [Reviving Nineteenth-Century Culture]*, Lublin, Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2021.
- FIEDORCZUK, Natalia, *Odmieniec. Vie romancée [The Outsider: A Vie Romancée]*, Warszawa, Wielka Litera, 2021.
- GOŹLIŃSKI, Paweł, *Dziady*, Wołowiec, Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2015.
- GOŹLIŃSKI, Paweł, *Jul*, Wołowiec, Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2010.
- GRETKOWSKA, Manuela, *Mistrzyni. Powieść inspirowana życiem Lucyny Ćwierczakiewiczowej [The Mistress: A Novel Inspired by the Life of Lucyna Ćwierczakiewiczowa]*, Kraków, Znak Literanova, 2021.
- KORCZYŃSKI, Piotr, *Śladami Szeli czyli diabły polskie [In Szela's Footsteps, or Polish Devils]*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo RM, 2020.
- KOSMALA, Małgorzata, "Kryminalne retro światy" ["Retro Crime Worlds"], in Ewa Paczoska, Bartłomiej Szleszyński (eds.), *Przerabianie XIX wieku [Revisiting the 19<sup>th</sup> Century]*, Warszawa, PIW, 2011, pp. 223-245.
- LESZCZYŃSKI, Adam, *Ludowa historia Polski. Historia wyzysku i oporu. Mitologia panowania [The People's History of Poland: A History of Exploitation and Resistance. The Mythology of Domination]*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2020.
- NOWACKI, Dariusz, "Obecność Szeli. Trzy przykłady z nowej prozy" ["The Presence of Szela: Three Examples from Recent Fiction"], *Konteksty Kultury*, 17, 2020, 4, pp. 453-469.
- NOWAK, Jakub, *To przez ten wiatr [Blame It on the Wind]*, Warszawa, Powergraph, 2022.
- NOWICKA, Marta Justyna, *Słowacki. Wychodzenie z szafy [Juliusz Słowacki. Coming Out of the Closet]*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo "Krytyki Politycznej", 2021.
- PACZOSKA, Ewa, *Prawdziwy koniec XIX wieku. Śladami nowoczesności [The True End of the Nineteenth Century: Tracing Modernity]*, Warszawa, PIW, 2010.
- PACZOSKA, Ewa, SZLESZYŃSKI, Bartłomiej (eds.), *Przerabianie XIX wieku [Revisiting the 19<sup>th</sup> Century]*, Warszawa, PIW, 2011.
- PONIATOWSKA, Izabela, "Retelling". Kilka uwag w kontekście 'opowiadania na nowo' literackiego dziedzictwa dziewiętnastego wieku ["Retelling'...."], in Anna Dunin-Dudkowska, Dariusz Piechota, Agnieszka Trzeźniewska-Nowak (eds.), *Reaktywacje dziewiętnastowieczności [Reviving Nineteenth-Century Culture]*, Warszawa, PWN, 2021, pp. 13-24.
- RAK, Radek, *Baśń o węzowym sercu albo Wtóre słowo o Jakóbie Szeli [A Fairytale about Snake's Heart, or a Second Word about Jakob Szela]*, Warszawa, Powergraph, 2018.
- RAWSKI, Jakub, "Kryminalny rozrachunek z romantycznym mesjanizmem w *Julu* Pawła Goźlińskiego" ["A Crime-Fiction Reckoning with Romantic Messianism in Paweł Goźliński's *Jul*"], *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego*, 2016, 5, pp. 189-198.
- RYMKIEWICZ, Jarosław Marek, *Wiersze polityczne [Political Poems]*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo "Sic!", 2010.
- SIENKIEWICZ, Henryk, *Dzieła [Works]*. Ed. by Julian Krzyżanowski, vol. 45, Warszawa, Ossolineum, 1951.
- SIERAKOWSKI, Sławomir (ed.), *Żaloba [Mourning]*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo "Krytyki Politycznej", 2010.

- SZLESZYŃSKI, Bartłomiej, “Komiksowe gry z wiekiem XIX” [“Comic Games with the Nineteenth Century”], in Ewa Paczoska, Bartłomiej Szleszyński (eds.), *Przerabianie XIX wieku [Reworking the 19<sup>th</sup> Century]*, Warszawa, PIW, 2011, pp. 246-270.
- SZLESZYŃSKI, Bartłomiej, *Non omnis moriar? Bolesław Prus, wiek XIX i opowieści współczesne [Non omnis moriar? Bolesław Prus, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and Contemporary Tales]*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo IBL, 2019.
- SZTOKFISZ, Marta, *Pani od obiadów. Lucyna Ćwierczakiewiczowa. Historia życia [The Dinner Lady: Lucyna Ćwierczakiewiczowa. A Life Story]*, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2018.
- SZYMICZKOWA, Maryla [Jacek Dehnel and Piotr Tarczyński], *Szaleństwo i śmierć spłyną z gór [Madness and Death Flow Down from the Mountains]*, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Znak, Literanova, 2025.
- SZYMICZKOWA, Maryla [Jacek Dehnel and Piotr Tarczyński], *Śmierć na Wenecji [Death in Venice]*, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Znak, Literanova, 2023.
- SZYMICZKOWA, Maryla [Jacek Dehnel and Piotr Tarczyński], *Złoty róg [The Golden Horn]*, Kraków, Znak Literanova, 2020.
- TOKARCZUK, Olga, *The Empusium: A Health Resort Horror Story*. Transl. by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2024.
- TOLKIEN, John Ronald Reuel, “On Fairy-Stories”, in *Tree and Leaf*, London, Unwin Books, 1964, pp. 11-72.
- UZDAŃSKI, Grzegorz, *Wypiór*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo “Filtry”, 2021.
- WIĘCH, Arkadiusz S., *O galicyjskich krwawych zapustach, czyli chłopskim zrywem Jakuba Szela [On the Galician Bloody Shrovetide, or the Peasant Uprising of Jakub Szela]*, Kraków, Powergraph, 2019.
- ZIELIŃSKI, Jan, *Słowacki. SzatAnioł [Słowacki. SatAngel]*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2009.

### THE POLISH NINETEENTH CENTURY IN THE MIRROR OF TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LITERATURE – THE MEANDERS OF NEIGHBOURING (Abstract)

The article discusses several ways in which the nineteenth century appears in recent Polish literature. It highlights how different elements of that legacy, especially those linked to romanticism and modernism, have been reshaped and reassessed. A century once fundamental to Polish culture during the partitions has, in contemporary times, taken on more problematic – and at moments even toxic – dimensions. Contemporary Polish writers return to that period to uncover stories previously excluded from the mainstream national narrative. The texts analysed here show that the nineteenth century remains a “neighbour” unexpectedly close to our present day.

*Keywords:* Romanticism, Modernism, rereading, national myths, marginalised stories.