

The Romantic Discovery of the Homeland: Polish Context

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Abstract: The era of Romantic literature in Poland brought a revival in the description of the landscape of the homeland. This type of phenomenon has two sources in Polish tradition. The first stems from the philosophical foundations of Romanticism, especially the philosophy of nature developed by early German Romanticism. In literary consequences, what is wild, regional and national in nature has become closer than what is artificial, general and universal. The second source for a new understanding of the native landscape is also important: Polish historical experience. In the 19th century, Polish culture was deprived of its own independent state and lost the ability to maintain its own administration or education. Therefore, belles-lettres have the obligation to show Polishness, which still exists and still has regenerative abilities.

Many elements of the works of Adam Mickiewicz, Seweryn Goszczyński and Wincenty Pol can, therefore, be understood not in the context of showing the geography of the former Polish state but as an expression of longing and dreams for a space in which Poles will become free and happy in a new way.

Keywords: Romanticism, Polish Literature, Homeland-Landscape, Adam Mickiewicz, Seweryn Goszczyński, Wincenty Pol

European Context for Polish Romanticism

The era of Romantic literature in Poland (1822-1864), after the realizations in the Old Polish period (Kalinowski 2019, 41-47), brought a renewal of the ways of describing the landscape of the homeland. This resulted from two sources as well as historical and philosophical tendencies. The first type derives from the philosophical ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) and early German

Romanticism. As for Herder, he wondered about the issues of historical laws that stimulate the development of humanity and put forward the thesis about the existence of various, diverse spirits of nations recognized in Europe (Herder 1989). According to the philosopher, the distinctiveness of the spirits of nations could be described using the terrain or climate features. Europe, described by Herder in this way, became a space of land understood not so much in the dimension of physical geography but of symbolic and imagined geography. In the cultural result of Herder's deliberations, and in the wake of later generations of Romantics European Romantics, savagery was perceived in the East, and civilizational savagery in the West. In the North, the severity and secrecy of the people living there were recognised, while in the South, the gentleness and optimism of the inhabitants. Herder thus combined the features of the spirit of nations with the shape of physical geographical space (Bräuer 1995; Szczodrowski 1997).

For the 19th century discourse on Slavic culture, and therefore Polish culture, Herder was an important thinker by the very fact that he appreciated the presence of this ethnic element in the history of all of Europe. He recognized Slavic cultural, moral and religious differences, which was a bold idea at the time, as well as a very inspiring one. After all, in medieval and later chronicle-historical accounts formulated by Western European authors, the Slavs were regarded as barbarians, culturally retarded people with no sense of identity. Herder, on the other hand, ennobled the Slavs. However, his attitude also had a negative aspect. Herder stigmatized the Slavs, giving them the position of a “young” ethnos that was only entering the arena of great history, imitating, as it were, the achievements of the “old” nations: Franks, Normans or Saxons. The German philosopher thought that the Slavs were people of the land, farmers, and possibly forest and wetland dwellers. He believed that their natural activities were farming and shepherding, while their common traits were hospitality and peaceful conflict resolution. He also saw in them a respect for the divinity of Nature and a strong attachment to the ancestral land. This was a cultural projection, mostly adopted by Slavic intellectuals, present until World War II (Witkowska 1972; Witkowska 1980; Kalinowski 2016, 37-54).

As for the second philosophical factor important for the Polish tradition of describing the homeland, it is worth noting the ideological proposals of early German Romanticism. Particularly interesting in such a context are the descriptions of the relationship between man and the signs of nature by Georg von Hardenberg (aka Novalis, 1772-1801) or the philosophy of nature developed by Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854). As for Novalis, it should be emphasized here that, for example, in his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (Novalis 2015), the understanding of nature as a set of material values (e.g. minerals or the world of flora and fauna) was transformed towards immaterial values of psychological and spiritual significance (the mountain landscape became an image of longing for the sublime and God, images of the interior of the earth were a reflection of the desire for self-analysis). Thus, literary meditations on the landscape experienced by the heroes of Novalis's works led not only to the discovery of the ancient history of a given place but also to an increasingly deeper knowledge of one's own "self" (Molnar 1973: 272-286; Nischik 1984, 159-177; Kalinowski 2008: 157-194).

As for Schelling, it is worth noting that in his considerations contained in the work *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* (1797), he perceived nature as a derivative of ontological existence (Schelling 2017). The study of nature was not only an analysis of its products (pragmatically understood soil, vegetation, water bodies or mountains) but also an investigation of the processes of transformations occurring in it and discovering its "interior." Schelling understood nature as a living and creative force, manifesting itself in oppositions: mountains-valleys, deserts-marshes or forests-meadows. A human being placed in front of nature was not only a user of natural goods and a conqueror of wealth but also a sensitive and wise participant in the world (Esposito 1977; Shaw 2011).

There is no room here for a deep analysis of the relationship between the aforementioned philosophical or literary proposals. The most important thing for the subject matter I am interested in is that thanks to the ideas of German Romanticism, artistic creations of psychologizing, symbolizing, sacralizing and absolutizing the landscape, the homeland, the region, and finally, the homeland could be created in Polish literature of the 19th century.

The Polish Experience of History

In creating an ambiguous image of the native land in Polish literature of the 19th century, the experience of European universal history is very important. It must be remembered here that the Polish state, founded in the 10th century and then existing through the families of Piasts, Jagiellons and elected kings, ceased to function in 1795. This happened as a result of a number of factors, the important of which were both internal (poor and backward society, ineffective royal power, the growth of the rights of the nobility as the most important social stratum) and external factors (the growth of political and military aspirations of Poland's neighbouring states). As a result of the political and administrative partition of Poland (the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), the hitherto dominant lands of native culture and language were seized by three states: Russia, Prussia and Austria. Poles throughout the 19th century were thus deprived of their own independent state and lost the opportunity to practice their own self-consciousness. They tried to change this state of affairs with national uprisings (uprisings in 1834, 1848 or 1864), but each time, they lost to external opponents and their own organizational and social limitations. In turn, the decision-makers of the aggressor states began to apply methodical Germanization or Russification to Polish society in order to erase the national feeling in Poles and impose different and foreign cultural values (Janion, Żmigrodzka 1978; Davies 1981).

One of the strongest forms of defence of Polish culture against oppressive phenomena on the part of Russia, Prussia, and Austria was art and literature. Since there were no strictly Polish educational or cultural institutions in the Romantic period, it was the creators of poetry, prose and drama who took on the responsibility of cultivating Polishness, presenting it in attractive literary forms saturated with historical, cultural and linguistic knowledge. It was to show the constant vitality of Polish culture, its advantages, achievements to date and prospects for the future.

In terms of describing the native land, Polish writers faced a multifaceted task. First, they wanted to show the historical history of the broadly defined Polish culture developing from the banks of the Elbe in the west, to the Dnieper in the east, from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Carpathian

Mountains in the south. Secondly, they wanted to express a range of positive emotions related to their love of their homeland, their native land, the beauty of nature, customs and human relations, thanks to which the literary myth of the Polish lands as a multicultural space and an area of religious tolerance developed. Thirdly, their descriptions of the Polish lands, both as seen in centuries past and as presented from a current perspective, were intended to be a form of specific self-therapy. Artistically, it was intended to bring to users of Polish culture the conviction that despite the absence of an independent state, an army or a government of their own, one can still feel Polish and constantly nurture a sense of ethnic consciousness (Milosz 1983; Nasilowska 2024).

Descriptions of the Homeland

Polish romantic writers, just like romantic historians, wanted to bring their readers closer to their native history, describe the diversity of the regions of the now-defunct state, and characterize the multitude of peoples and customs inhabiting Polish lands. In cases where they did not have access to historical sources or where they had not personally visited, they used poetic imagination. The attention of Polish writers and poets was drawn to the spiritual and material legacy of ancient Poles and Slavs, and as a result, literature began to be permeated with more and more themes commemorating the local, regional, and ethnic world, taking place in the territory of Central Europe, on the Vistula, Warta, Oder, Niemen, and Dnieper rivers, which was a counterweight to the cosmopolitan patterns of Western European culture. Through such a turn towards locality, writers strengthened their own and the national identity of Poles. Polish Romantics positively valued and elevated tradition, the past, and attachment to what was native. Images of the territory of the Slavic world carried the conviction that the lands between the Baltic and the Carpathian Mountains were civilizationally free from the cultural corruption of the West of Paris, London or Vienna. It was a space of domination of nature, primordial social laws, moral health and physical vitality (Janion 2006; Rudaś-Grodzka 2013: 30-56).

One of the most important writers of Polish Romanticism, who consistently created the myth of antiquity and the Polish civilizational enclave, was Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), who gained

the greatest respect not only among Polish readers but also in the pan-European arena (Rymkiewicz, Siwicka, Witkowska, Zielińska 2001; Koropeckyi 2008). It was thanks to his *Ballady i romanse* (1822) that Polish literature was so strongly influenced by the province, folklore and nativeness, which, unlike the earlier Enlightenment era, began to be qualified positively (Mickiewicz 1986). It was here, in the spaces of wild forests and clean lakes, in villages and small communities, that the most important dramas of life took place, and the deepest human wisdom was available. Mickiewicz wanted to show through colourful images of the native land, descriptions of the inhabitants of the Polish-Belarusian-Lithuanian countryside, poetic references to the natural law applied around and mentions of folk religiosity that Polish culture is still not lost. Moreover, the reader receives a strong signal that there are still places in the Polish lands annexed by the Russian partitioners where it is possible to successfully defend oneself both against the educated, intellectual and artificial civilization of Western Europe and against the aggressive, perfidious and absolutist civilization of Eastern Europe (Milosz 1983: 210-211; Cysewski 1987; Piwińska 1995, 6: 32-43).

The second example of Mickiewicz's respect for the past and his native land was the national epic *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), in which a small area of today's Lithuania became the "centre of Polishness" (Mickiewicz 2024). It was here that representatives of all social classes of the time were found (nobility, peasants, clergy, Jews, Russians). Here, Mickiewicz showed the reality of the early 19th century and a small noble settlement where old interpersonal relations, social hierarchy and old cultural customs prevail. The space created by the poet is the eastern part of central Europe, right next to large swaths of forests, among lakes and fields of arable land. Great historical events or intellectual movements of the world of that time reach the place described in *Pan Tadeusz* like a distant echo. More important, however, is life subordinated to the rhythm of nature, where the inhabitants coexist with the forest and humbly submit to the necessity of working on the land. The author of the poem describes many details of everyday life and elements of the natural world, convinced that in this way he leaves a memento of the lost space of his own youth, but also of a place of existence typical of noble culture (Ziejka 1999; Dopart 2006; Hoffmann-Piotrowska 2017).

Another Polish romanticist who saturated his work with images of his native land was Seweryn Goszczyński (1801-1876). His literary activity focused on the poetic characterization of the lands of today's Ukraine, Galicia and the Tatra Mountains, which he treated as a space emotionally very close to him due to his own biographical fate (Sosnowska 2000). For him, those were the lands that he knew from the stories of older people, tales and legends and from his own life experience. Wanting to present them to a wider audience, he evocatively described the lands of the eastern borderlands of former Poland using the poetics of Romanticism, referring to frenzy, Gothicism and historicism. One of his most important works is the poetic novel *Zamek Kaniowski* (Goszczyński 2002), published in 1828, the plot of which concerns the uprising of the Ukrainian people against the Polish nobility in 1768. In this work, Goszczyński used Ukrainian folklore in an innovative way in the creation of the poetic world. The space of Ukraine is presented here from the perspective of a native resident who tells about ancient history and social injustice, raising the problem of treating local peasants like slaves by wealthy and foreign landowners. More important than the economic context in the poem is the metaphysical aura of historical events. The heroes of the work are subjected to the action of cosmic forces of good and evil. In such a perspective, Ukrainian insurgents, Polish nobility, ordinary farmers or educated people become helpless with their free will or character traits in the face of powerful, irrational and superhuman laws. Ukraine and the native land in Goszczyński's literary images become a land of eternal struggles between good and evil. This territory is saturated with blood and violence, where existence is very intense and very short (Kurska 2003: 19-35; Ławski 2015: 455-478).

Goszczyński's Gothic novel *Król zamczyska* (1842) was written in a similar spirit of fascination with Ukrainian lands. The main character is a comprehensively educated and overly sensitive man who has gone mad due to the loss of freedom in his homeland (Goszczyński 1958). His brooding over the past, great love for his native culture and a huge sense of loss causes the man to alienate himself from his social environment, live among the ruins of a former castle and maintain contact only with his imagination. The protagonist of the novel looks out from the remains of a once

impressive building at the surrounding lands and sees no signs of development, life or joy but only signs of destruction, death and despair. Observing the disintegration of mementoes of the homeland leads the protagonist to self-destruction. The subject of the work becomes a personal and spiritual "ruin", which ultimately leads to his death. The king of the castle, in his ideological message, indicates an extreme form of love for the homeland. The novel also contains the conviction that the loss of freedom and living space leads to the destruction of every person.

The third example of a Polish romantic who subordinated his work to the desire to show the cultural richness of the lost homeland is Wincenty Pol (1807-1872) (Janion 1975: 467-518; Bondos 2018, 7: 130-145). He published the multi-part *Piesn o ziemi naszej* (published in its entirety in 1843), which is a poetic description of Polish lands visited during a specific patriotic journey by Pol (Pol 1922). The work brought the author great popularity and respect. In this case, poetry contributed to a significant increase in interest in native nature and culture in Polish society. Pol's decision to describe in a literary way those lands of the former Polish state that were being independently discovered and scientifically researched was important in the creation of the work. Of course, literary descriptions of journeys were also known to other romantics or writers of earlier eras, but in Wincenty Pol's works, the successively characterized Polish lands convinced readers how vast and fascinating these spaces were: from Lithuania and Samogitia in the north of former Poland to the Carpathians in the south, from Ruthenia (today's Ukraine) in the east to Greater Poland in the west. All these lands were presented as spaces of cultural wealth and diversity of natural resources. The same language dominated everywhere, as did a similar ethos of Slavic hospitality, respect for older generations, and even similar architectural solutions in sacral and secular architecture. Pol's vision of old Poland had the features of a cultural myth, but it must be emphasized that in the 19th century, it fulfilled a unifying function and inspired people to continue thinking about the cultural and spiritual existence of Poland despite external political obstacles. In this way, the poet transferred the existence of the homeland from the material dimension to the scope of the mental life of Poles (Kamionka-Straszakowa 1988; Piersiak, Timofiejew 2007).

For a complete picture of the Romantic view of old Poland, one must also add Wincenty Pol's interest in the ancient and 19th-century Slavic northwest. This is because the poet had literary and scientific ambitions not only for the territory of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth but also for the entire Slavic region. His travels contributed to the creation of literary descriptions of the Baltic Sea area and Slavic lands located between the Oder and the Elbe in the 6th and 11th centuries. Pol wrote about the Oder River and the island of Rugia as lands lost to Polish culture and indicated that this loss should be a warning to the generations of Poles who lived there. He believed that the memory of the homeland should concern not only the epochs that were closest in time but also the Middle Ages or even the epochs when Christianity had not yet taken hold in Central Europe. Only such a perspective allows us to understand the history and development of ethnic elements.

Polish Romantics, keenly interested in Slavic culture, folklore and the cult of the past, created literary images of the homeland as distinct identity and national factors (Bobrownicka 1995; Kowalik 2004). They set off on patriotic journeys across the lands of the former state or, based on their own reading, memories and imagination, published works that made people aware of not only the geographical but also the cultural scope of the influence of the native tradition. Their works were intended to maintain Polish national and historical awareness in a situation of cultural threat from Russian or German culture, giving readers symbolic signs of space. Polish writers described Lithuanian-Belarusian forests as a space of *primaeval* and wild nature, Ukrainian steppes as areas of freedom and liberty, Greater Poland villages and towns as places of remembrance of former medieval rulers, and finally, Mazovia as fields full of rich land and happy farmers (Przybylski 1978; Kowalczykova 1982).

The interest of Polish romantics in what was homely was undoubtedly an expression of longing for freedom, for that which was lost. At the same time, however, these were literary and mythological dreams of a space in which Poles would become free and happy in the future. In such a setting, literature became a compensatory and therapeutic act that allowed to survive the situation of

political and cultural enslavement. The images that were created in romanticism proved productive until the end of the 20th century, becoming part of the symbolic imagination of Poles (Rybicka 2014).

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