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Bolesław Leśmian's lost drama *Vasilij Buslaev*: more than just a bibliographical problem

Abstract

The complex and mysterious story of Bolesław Leśmian's drama *Vasilij Buslaev* has led some scholars to doubt the very existence of the piece. The correspondence of Maksim Gor'kij may help to solve the mystery. The authoritative Russian writer acted as a reviewer when the decision to accept or reject this play for print was to be taken. Once Gor'kij had read the manuscript, the piece was returned to the author, who was informed that it would not be published. Unfortunately, its fate thereafter remains unknown.

Keywords

Bolesław Leśmian, drama, bylina, *Vasilij Buslaev*

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Readers of Bolesław Leśmian's works may have reasons to be satisfied: the last volume of the poet's collected works was published recently[1]. The size of this corpus of heterogeneous texts would appear to suggest that we have the author's entire output at our disposal. However, there are grounds for thinking this is not so. The fact that Leśmian's works were written in different countries complicates the fate of his manuscripts. These stories are intricate, but above all extremely interesting. One of the most dramatic began in 1944, when Leśmian's wife and elder daughter managed to escape from burning Warsaw with a package of the poet's unpublished works. They had to leave some priceless archival materials behind. These events were recalled by Leśmian's daughter, Maria Ludwika:

> We did not manage to rescue them all from the burning house. My mother lost her strength due to despair. She was not able to lift a leaf from the ground. Warsaw was burning after all. Nevertheless, I carried a bulging suitcase to Rakowiecka street, to a house as yet untouched by fire. It stood opposite a fortress improvised by the Germans. There, on the ground floor, lived our friend. Her name was Czarnocka. We put the manuscripts in her basement [...]. These were the already published works[2].

They did, however, take an extensive package of unpublished manuscripts with them and looked after them with great devotion. Before they were rounded up and sent to the Mauthausen camp, and later to a thread factory, they deposited the suitcase containing the manuscripts in the house of a German village mayor. Thus secured, these papers survived this traumatic period for Leśmian's family. After the liberation of the camp, the manuscripts returned to their rightful owners. Leśmian's wife and daughter decided not to return to Poland, then occupied by the Soviets. They emigrated to Argentina, where they started looking for an institution willing to buy and properly secure the manuscripts. Unfortunately, the Polish authorities were not interested in purchasing them, so at the end of the 1960s the manuscripts were sold to a Polish antiquarian in New York, Aleksander Janta-Połczyński. It is worth mentioning that when the negotiations began, Leśmian's wife was prepared to sell the only token of remembrance of her husband for $500. Giving up the manuscripts was a dramatic decision prompted by her desperate need not only to improve her economic situation but also to secure the archival materials, which continued to deteriorate due to climatic conditions. Finally, in 1970, the manuscripts ended up in the collections of the Humanities Research Center in Austin, USA (currently: Harry Ransom Center), where they remain to this day. This brief account of how such precious archival materials for Polish culture were saved is significant since the researchers who had previously shown interest in Leśmian's Russian drama *Vasilij Buslaev* looked for it, *inter alia*, among the manuscripts deposited in the Texan archive.

[1] B. Leśmian, *Dzieła wszystkie*, ed. by J. Trznadel, PIW, Warszawa 2010-2012. In fact, the books were available a bit later.

[2] Cf.: M. L. Mazurowa, *Podróże i praca twórcza Bolesława Leśmiana*, in Z. Jastrzębski (ed.), *Wspomnienia o Bolesławie Leśmianie*, Wydawnictwo Lubelskie, Lublin 1966, p. 36. [All the translations in English are mine – D.P.]

1. Known and unknown dramas

Rochelle Stone, who for many years has been the only person authorized by the family to take care of Leśmian's manuscripts preserved in the U.S., wrote:

> It was therefore known that at least six[3] of Leśmian's attempts at drama existed, and the plays were known by their titles: *Pierrot i Kolombina* (Pierrot and Columbine)[4], *Skrzypek opętany* (The Frenzied Fiddler), *Bajka o złotym grzebyku* (A Fable about the Golden Comb), *Dziejba leśna* (Forest Happenings), *Zdziczenie obyczajów pośmiertnych* (Barbarousness of Posthumous Customs) and the Russian *Vasilij Buslaev*. Of course, there is no certainty that there were no more[5].

In 1985, Stone published two works: *Skrzypek Opętany* and *Pierrot i Kolombina*[6]. A decade later, Jacek Trznadel published *Zdziczenie obyczajów pośmiertnych*[7], then in 2011, the farce *Bajka o złotym grzebyku*[8]. Therefore, the only work whose fate remained a mystery was *Vasilij Buslaev*: no trace of it can be found in any of the national archives that hold the poet's manuscripts, or in the collections of the Harry Ransom Center, where the other works are located. In my search for the manuscript, I also turned to the last owner of the archival materials, Walentyna Janta. Unfortunately, the remnants of her husband's archive do not currently contain any of Leśmian's manuscripts. This direction of research was justified by the fact that, in the mid-1980s, Franciszek Palowski[9] had found a few pages of the manuscript of a novel by Leśmian entitled *Kołysanka* (Lullaby). For unknown reasons, this fragment did not make its way to the Harry Ransom

[3] Other researchers also wrote in a similar vein: "Leśmian was the author of six attempts at drama, of which we know only two plays by their titles and from written records. One of them is a dramatic fragment of *Dziejba leśna*, published for the first time in 1938, so already after the writer's death […]. We also know that Leśmian is the author of a lost attempt at fantasy drama titled *Skrzypek opętany*, written in Russian, based on the *bylina* plot of *Vasilij Buslaev*. Other manuscripts are still waiting for their lucky finder". Cf. K. Miklaszewski, *Teoria i praktyka (Wokół Leśmianowskiej wizji teatru)*, in M. Głowiński, J. Sławiński (eds.), *Studia o Leśmianie*, PIW, Warsaw 1971, p. 410.

[4] In my belief, *Pierrot i Kolombina* is the first, abandoned edition of *Skrzypek opętany*. Cf. D. Pachocki, *Jeden dramat Leśmiana w dwu edytorskich przywidzeniach*, in B. Leśmian, *Skrzypek opętany*, ed. and with an afterword by D. Pachocki, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2016.

[5] R. H. Stone, *Introduction*, in B. Leśmian, *Skrzypek opętany*, ed. and introduced by R. H. Stone, PIW, Warszawa 1985, p. 7.

[6] Leśmian, *Skrzypek opętany*, cit. The relation between the texts will be analysed later in the article.

[7] J. Trznadel published again this play in 2012 (B. Leśmian, *Zdziczenie obyczajów pośmiertnych*, in Id., *Dzieła wszystkie*, cit., vol. 4: *Utwory dramatyczne. Listy*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 213-273). A new edition based on the author's manuscript was published in 2014 (cf.: B. Leśmian, *Zdziczenie obyczajów pośmiertnych*, ed. and with an afterword by D. Pachocki, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2014).

[8] B. Leśmian, *Satyr i Nimfa. Bajka o złotym grzebyku*, ed. by D. Pachocki, A. Truszkowski, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2011.

[9] At that time, he was collecting material for a biography of Aleksander Janta-Połczyński. Cf. F. Palowski, *"Kołysanka" Bolesława Leśmiana*, in "Przekrój", n. 2080, 1985, p. 9

Center either, hence its fate too remains a mystery. Given these uncertainties, it would be appropriate to investigate who, if anyone, knows anything about the play *Vasilij Buslaev*, and, above all, whether any such work ever existed.

2. The *Frenzied Fiddler* and *Vasilij Buslaev*: one or two plays?

Rochelle Stone, who was the first to publish some of the manuscripts that had made their way to the USA, wondered if *Skrzypek opętany* and *Vasilij Buslaev*[10] were not one and the same work. Such a hypothesis was not groundless, as only *Vasilij Buslaev* was known to be missing from Leśmian's archival materials. In an attempt to solve this mystery, she turned to Aleksander Janta, who had purchased the manuscripts from Leśmian's family. In a letter written at the end of 1973 she wrote:

> I am writing to you with a request for information about the scenario of Leśmian's *Skrzypek opętany*, purchased from the author's daughter, Mrs. Mazurowa. I am trying to determine the source of this play. Some literary critics claim that it is based on the Russian *bylina Vasilij Buslaev*. Judging by the reports of J. Brzechwa, as well as the correspondence between B. Leśmian and Valerij Brjusov, there was also a Russian drama, *Vasilij Buslaev*, which supposedly got lost. The question here is: is this not one and the same work? Only you are able to explain this situation, if you have this work in your possession. I would be very grateful for a few words on whether you find traces of the plot of the Russian bylina *Vasilij Buslaev* in this work?[11]

Unfortunately, we have no access to the letters from Janta, but even without knowing their contents we can state that Stone did not obtain any valuable new information. Otherwise, it would probably have been noted in one of her publications. Three years after the letter was sent to Janta, Rochelle Stone published a book on Leśmian's poetry[12], in which she wrote:

> He also wrote a drama in Russian. *Skrzypek opętany* (The Frenzied Fiddler) is apparently based on the Russian bylina, *Vasilij Buslaev*.

[10] "Vasilij Buslaev, appearing in the cycle of Novogrod *bylinas* might have been – among the Russian researchers of Old Russian epic songs there is no agreement on this matter – a historical figure. He is mentioned in the 16th century Russian chronicles as a figure from the mid-12th century; however, there were researchers of Russian folklore who claimed that Buslayev made it into the chronicles of Novogrod the Great from the folk tales, so there is no reason to believe in his historical existence, much less his existence in the 12th century". Cf. J. M. Rymkiewicz, *Leśmian. Encyklopedia*, Warsaw 2001, p. 385.

[11] Letter dated 11 October 1973. Document from the collections of the National Library.

[12] R. H. Stone, *Bolesław Leśmian: The Poet and his Poetry*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1976.

> However, there are conflicting accounts of the source of *Skrzypek*. Brzechwa claims to have read a play titled *Vasilij Buslaev*, which seems to have been lost, while the manuscript of *Skrzypek opętany* is a scenario recently acquired by Aleksander Janta from M. Mazurowa[13].

The above quote proves that Stone had no clear idea and was wary of any possible source of information. However, there was a lot to indicate that we should look for not one but two different plays. Many years later Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz addressed the same issue in his encyclopedia, where he wrote:

> It is possible – even highly probable – that it was Bal'mont who persuaded Leśmian to write poems in Russian. [...] As claimed by Maria Ludwika, Bal'mont also contributed to the creation of a Russian play, which Leśmian wrote in Paris. This is probably *Vasilij Buslaev* but it could also be that Leśmian wrote some other play in Russian in Paris[14].

Rymkiewicz drew this information from the recollections of Leśmian's daughter, which read as follows: "He wrote a commissioned Russian drama in Paris. Bal'mont, whom he met by accident at the Small Luxembourg while sitting on a bench, was supposed to publish it in a magazine. At the time, he was in a difficult financial situation. Bal'mont did not manage to publish the drama in the magazine"[15]. Unfortunately, this does not settle anything, but rather obscures matters even further under a veil of speculations that are hard to confirm. The first person to speak about this drama was probably the poet's cousin, Jan Brzechwa. He wrote in his memoirs: "Of the pieces written in Russian I saw the typescript of the play *Vasilij Buslaev*. However, it has never been staged"[16]. In this case we have a specific account of a witness. On the other hand, it is difficult to say what Brzechwa really had in his hands: from a strictly scholarly point of view, this does not constitute proof; it is merely a clue. Therefore, Izabela Migal, writing on the ties between Leśmian and the Russian language, formulated her statements cautiously:

> Taking *Pieśni Bazylianny Mądrej* (The songs of Vasilisa the Wise) into consideration, we should probably conclude that nothing of Leśmian's lost or never written poem *Vasilij Buslaev* survived. The *bylina* that inspired Leśmian was based on the story of a rather cruel daredevil who despised everyone else. He is an extraordinary, wayward strongman, who makes an unpleasant impression. Only his mother can stop him once his supernatural physical strength is unleashed. Perhaps, in Leśmian's version, Buslaev's physical strength would have been transferred into the metaphysical sphere: but we cannot speculate on this. I wonder what captivated Leśmian in this

[13] Cf. Ead., *The Perspective of Time*, in Ead., *Bolesław Leśmian*, cit., p. 9.

[14] Rymkiewicz, op. cit., p. 20.

[15] Cf. J. Trznadel (ed.), *Korespondencja z rodziną Bolesława Leśmiana*, in "Arcana", n. 2, 1998, p. 99.

[16] Cf. J. Brzechwa, *Niebieski wycieruch*, in Jastrzębski, op. cit., p. 85.

> *bylina*. But the poem has never been found. Russian Slavists say that they have found no trace of *Vasilij Buslaev* nor of *Pieśń nad pieśniami* (Song of Songs) in the libraries of Moscow, Leningrad or Lithuania[17].

The fact that the drama is not to be found in any Russian archive does not mean that it never existed. In order to cast some new light on this issue we should take a closer look at relations between Leśmian and Russian writers, especially Valerij Brjusov, who may turn out to be a key figure here.

3. The poet and an idea for a best-seller

Leśmian was probably in touch with Brjusov between 1901 and 1903. A decade later he met him in Warsaw, where he was a war correspondent. And it was to him, the co-publisher of the journal "Vesy", firmly embedded in theatrical circles, that in 1907 Leśmian sent his drama *Vasilij Buslaev*, intending it to be published in the journal "Pereval", also published by Brjusov[18]. Luckily, Leśmian's letters to Brjusov have survived. They were published by Juniewicz who, in the note preceding the letters, wrote the following about the fate of the Russian drama:

> The main issue is probably Leśmian's missing drama. Whether the poet finished it and sent or delivered it to Moscow – as he announces in the letter – we do not know. The search for this drama has not led to any positive result to date. However, we do now know that Leśmian wanted to print this drama in Russia, or even stage it in one of Moscow's theatres[19].

Leśmian contacted Brjusov about printing a cycle of Russian poems. This correspondence contains clues that are significant in the context of these deliberations. In one of the two preserved letters, the poet wrote: "Soon I will leave for Moscow with the manuscript of a drama I am currently working on and, should you allow it, I will ask you personally for advice and also about printing and staging this drama"[20]. The Russian thread in this story is much more extensive than it would seem. In her article on the reception of the poet's Russian writings, Marta Kaźmierczak noted that Leśmian's friendship with Bal'mont began in 1905, when they were both living in Paris. According to her, they shared in a "search for the musical values of poems and the intention to come closer to the sound of the ancient songs"[21]. In all likelihood, it was the "Russian symbolist" who persuaded Leśmian to write "two cycles

[17] I. Migal, *Leśmiana w język rosyjski wyprawa*, in "Teksty Drugie", n. 6, 2010, p. 206.

[18] Stone, *Introduction*, cit., p. 6.

[19] Cf. A. Juniewicz, *Nowe rosyjskie wiersze i listy Leśmiana*, in "Przegląd Humanistyczny", n. 1, 1964, p. 149.

[20] Ibidem, p. 151. Letter dated 7 August 1907.

[21] M. Kaźmierczak, *Leśmian po rosyjsku – zarys recepcji*, in R. Cudak (ed.), *Literatura polska na świecie*, vol. 3, Gnome, Katowice 2010, p. 282.

of Russian poems"[22]. Moreover, Leśmian managed to go deeper into the world of the Russian writers. In 1912 in Paris the poet had the opportunity to meet such people as Dmitrij Merežkovskij, Zinajda Gippius, Andrej Belyj and other Russian symbolists[23]. It is possible that the influence of the Russian literary circles was enough for Leśmian to decide to write a drama in Russian. However, his decision may also have been related to purely practical considerations. Leśmian always had major financial needs, which could not even be met by his decent salary as the owner of a notary's office. So the prospect of another source of income prompted by his encounter with the Russian writers was probably very tempting. We do not, however, have any reliable information on this matter. At this point, the search for the very existence of *Vasilij Buslaev* appeared to be a lost cause and the drama itself a bibliographic mirage. Then, out of the blue, an entirely new trail opened up: Maksim Gor'kij's letters contain a passage that indicate that he was contracted by the publisher to read the Polish poet's work[24]. In one of his letters to Pjatnickij – jointly responsible for managing the publishing house – Gor'kij refers to manuscripts he had received for assessment:

> Dear friend! The following manuscripts are returned: B. Leśmian's, *Vasilij Buslaev*, Savenkov's, *Tam gdzie – to* (There where – this), L. Vasilevskij, Stixi (Poems), Špacek's, *W disciplinarnom bataljonie* (In the Penal Military Unit). By the order of the office return them to the authors with a brief note: manuscripts have not been accepted [...]. Savenkov's place is "Russkoe Bogatstvo"[25], Leśmian's – is the St. Nicholas Hospital, as indicated by the first pages of their works[26].

Exercising restraint, we could say that Maksim Gor'kij did not enjoy Leśmian's drama. He was a highly influential figure at that time and – as documented by the present case – in just a few lines he could raise someone to the literary altar or cast him into the abyss of rejection. Unfortunately, we have no information on whether the publisher sent any official opinion to Leśmian. However, we do know that Leśmian also wrote one more work in Russian, *Pesnja pesnej*, the fate of which is also unknown[27]. There is a lot to indicate that Gor'kij did not receive this play for review without a reason. *Vasilij Buslaev* was his favorite historical figure and he intended to write a play based on the bylina theme of Buslaev himself:

[22] Ibidem.

[23] Ibidem.

[24] Kaźmierczak, op. cit., p. 282.

[25] "Russkoe Bogatstvo" was a monthly magazine founded by Nikolaj Konstantinovič (and V. Korolenko), who was its editor until 1904. Konstantinovič was a sociologist, an influential philosopher and a literary critic, close to the social revolutionary party.

[26] Cf. M. Gor'kij, *Pis'ma k K. Pjatnickomu*, Arxiv A.M. Gor'kogo, vol. 4, GIXL, Moscow 1954, pp. 267-268.

[27] S. Belza, *Brjusow i Pol'ša*, in J. F. Belza, V. D. Koroluk, *Istorija i kul'tura slavianskich narodov*, Akademija nauk ZSRR, Moscow 1966, pp. 202-203. Cf. A. Ostrowska, *Rosyjskie wiersze Bolesława Leśmiana w tłumaczeniach polskich* [Russian Poems by Bolesław Leśmian in Polish Translations] (master's thesis written under the supervision of Professor Edward Balcerzan). I would like to express my sincere thanks to Alina Ostrowska for being so kind as to share the results of her research with me.

> This character personifies the uncontrollable passion of the Russian spirit; he was Gorkij's favorite hero. The writer carefully collected material on his subject and also cultivated the idea of writing about Vasja Buslaev, but when he found out that A. V. Amfiteatrov was already writing a play about this protagonist he gave all the collected material to his friend. This play is considered to be one of A. V. Amfiteatrov's best works[28].

Gor'kij also discussed this drama with Konstantin Fedin:

> Fedin recalled the words Gor'kij supposedly said after the publication of a separate edition of the play: You know, I really believe in this idea of historical images. I was tempted to write something like that myself. The subject was excellent too: Novgorod the Great, *Vasilij Buslaev*. There is no character that is more Russian: the man loved the land, he was always up to some mischief, but also worked very hard.
> — What prevented you from writing then?
> — I wouldn't say what, but rather who. It was Aleksander Amfiteatrov [...] I gave him what I had gathered on Vasilij. And not long ago the play *Vasja Buslaev* appeared. A pretty good piece[29].

Gor'kij surrendered all the material he had gathered for the purpose of writing the work. However, it turns out that it was not his initiative: he did so at the request of Amfiteatrov who discreetly asked for these materials. In his letter dated 27 April 1919 we read as follows: "If you have Šejn's *Velikorossija* or a collection of songs by Sobolev or any collection of lyrical folk songs, please do not deny me them: send them to me [...]. I need them for the third scene in *Vasja*"[30].

However, he regretted not having been the one to have written this work:

> Čukovskij reminisced: "At one of the meetings [...] Aleksander Valentinovič Amfiteatrov read us his talented, yet brutal play *Vasja Buslaev*, written in pseudo-Russian style. When we listened to the play and Amfiteatrov left, Gor'kij said to me: – Well, I regret to admit that this play has already been written! I've been dreaming of writing it for years"[31].

Therefore, it is safe to say that Gor'kij was not inclined to review another play featuring the same Vasilij Buslaev as a protagonist. Yet again the theme he had been dreaming of had been used – and by a totally unknown writer. On the other hand, we know why it was Gor'kij who received the text for review. The writer was invited to work with the publishing house "Znanie" and he soon became one of the two most important people there. Administrative

[28] Cf. http://www.krugosvet.ru/enc/kultura_i_obrazovanie/literatura/BILINA.html?page=0,1 (accessed 05.03.2015).

[29] K. Fedin, *Gor'kij sredi nas. Kartiny literaturnoj žizni*, GIXL, Moscow 1968, p. 34.

[30] Cf. http://gorkiy.lit-info.ru/gorkiy/letters/letter-273.htm (accessed 05.03.2015).

[31] Cf. http://amfiteatrov.decoregift.ru/2/470.php (accessed 20.05.2016).

matters were handled by Pjatnickij, but relations with authors and the reading of manuscripts proposed for printing were handled by Gor'kij. Thanks to his participation in the project, the publishing house became a center uniting a group of eminent writers. Leśmian's proposal cropped up when the publishing house had already changed its profile of interests from popular scientific publications to belles-lettres and art books[32]. Unfortunately, this did not help Leśmian. His decision to write a play recalling one of the best known Russian heroes is fairly comprehensible. He probably thought that this topic would be buoyant enough for it to win the favor of both publishers and readers. By deciding on the dramatic form, he was probably counting on future theatrical productions as well. He could not have known that he had chosen a subject that was to obscure him twice over. On the one hand, a work on this subject was the dream of the potential reviewer, while on the other hand an alternative play, rated as excellent by Gor'kij, had already been written. Of course, we should also take the quality criterion into account. Leśmian's play, to a certain extent written on an assigned topic, may simply have been mediocre. Gor'kij's fairly emotional reaction, however, may suggest that its fate was predetermined by entirely different considerations. Documents may turn up one day with more detailed knowledge about this issue. Perhaps Leśmian's drama will also be found. Let us therefore believe that manuscripts do not burn.

[32] Cf. A.D. Golubeva, *Gor'kij – izdatel'*, Kniga, Moscow 1968. Cf. http://fantlab.ru/publisher2424 (accessed 20.05.2016).