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**ROMANTICISM'S AXIOLOGY
IN THE CONTEXT OF OLD POLISH LITERATURE
(AN INTRODUCTORY SKETCH)**

It is obvious that in the first decade of Polish Romanticism and in the few decades preceding it we can observe the whole set of values, aesthetic, ethical and spiritual, which were the culmination of various aesthetic events, which could be discerned in Polish culture in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The closer to the specific events we locate our point of perception, and the more we strengthen the perspective of continuity, the more their axiological character becomes apparent.

Such aesthetic values include the issues of genology (traditions, for example, of hymns, odes, Mickiewicz's ballads, qualities of the lyric language, which had developed mostly on the basis of vernacular literary traditions), and the problems of the widely conceived poetic imagination of that period. It should be noted that although the impulses that came from German or English literature (Scott, Goethe, Byron, Schiller) resulted in the development of this imagination, it was the experiences and observations within the vernacular culture that were transferred to artistic constructs, even if this culture had to be carried in the memory of a wanderer or an exile.

It is also characteristic that the first discussions about the nature and character of literature were carried out on moral grounds; under the cover of aestheticism there existed deep layers of ethics and spirituality.

After all, what was this notorious dispute between Brodziński and Mochnacki about? Which values were “Warsaw classics” supporting when they scolded Mickiewicz for his sonnets, and why did Mickiewicz remain “in his own right” when he was writing them?

Why did Śniadecki defend Malwina Wirtemborska, deeming her superior to Shakespeare, and why did the generation of Romantics not want to agree with him?

Usually, what was at stake was the anthropological truth. The truth of understanding a man and his diverse experiences. The kind of truth that had earlier been revealed in *Lament świętokrzyski* (Świętokrzyski *Lament*) and in *Treny* (*Threnodies*) by Jan Kochanowski and in many later poems of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

It is obvious that the expression of authenticity of experiences is closely connected with the level of organization, with artistic and aesthetic values of a given text. Only the most remarkable texts tell us the whole and deepest truth about a man.

Within the area of Polish literature (if we disregard phenomena more distinct, such as Mickiewicz, Malczewski[...]), apart from minor poets like Goszczyński, Gorczyński and Zaleski, we have, for example, the phenomenon of a young Słowacki, marking the key problem of later Romanticism and which had been revealed earlier, before the November Uprising of 1830-1831, for example, in *Jan Bielecki* (1829-1830), where the influences of Scott and Byron were simply “strategies of showing the Sarmatic past.”¹

It is almost a model situation showing the type and functions of borrowings from other literary traditions during this period. They were first of all instrumental and stimulating, and they built the originality and uniqueness of Polish Romanticism to a much larger extent than they supported the claim of its derivative nature.

“Battles over Romanticism” have been fought for a long time. It happens that they are pitched in rather surprising places and fields of literature (here differences in the treatment of motives can be

¹ Marzena Kryszczuk, *Juliusz Słowacki wobec tradycji szlacheckiej*, Warszawa 2011.

considered, and to a lesser extent the search for archetypes and paradigms). It seems that two different approaches to this period can be set aside, if we take into account the "textual" depth of a probe.

One approach, more external, is more concerned with the expressiveness, boisterousness, and exuberance of forms, extreme superfluity of thoughts and emotions, frantic searches, excess, and explosions of enchantments. Maria Janion, in her *Gorączka romantyczna (Fever of Romanticism)*, while looking for specificities of Polish Romanticism quotes Jean Fabre:

[Polish Romanticism] too often forgotten or unknown, however, contains within itself the most expressive and liveliest [Romantic features]. A bit later and, as we know, also in many of his later further works, he will refer to this period in Polish culture as "demonic great Romanticism."²

The second approach, more internal, is connected with the disclosure of texts' deep structure and complexity, ultimately revealing the ethical and metaphysical character of the poetic message (for example Marian Maciejewski's works on Malczewski's *Maria*, Romantic lays, Mickiewicz's lyric Lausanne poems). These works show indirectly and directly the deep roots which the Polish Romanticism had in the vernacular tradition. Thanks to this perspective, we can look at the greatest artistic events of this period as a logical follow-up of the culture and values characteristic of Poland from these earlier periods.

² Quoted in Maria Janion, *Gorączka romantyczna*, Warszawa 1975, 95-96.