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**ROMANTIC MEDIEVALISM FROM A NEW  
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE\***

**1.**

Beginning his work on a great synthesis entitled *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* in 1932, Ernst Robert Curtius presented a fundamental thesis which constituted the underlying assumption behind his research as well as a credo:

In the intellectual chaos of the present it has become necessary, and happily not impossible, to demonstrate that unity [of European culture]. But the demonstration can only be made from a universal standpoint. Such a standpoint is afforded by Latinity.<sup>1</sup>

Irrespective of all objective cognitive merits of his study on the Latin Middle Ages and the influence which this work had on literary studies in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible to perceive the book as probably the very last of the great voices supporting the tradition of European classicism in the domain of the science of philology. The postulate according to which research on modern national literatures should be integrated under the umbrella term of European literature studies was thus justified, with the main focus directed towards the domain of moral values rather than pure methodology:

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\* The article is based on excerpts from the book *Prehistoria – średniowiecze – romantyzm. W kręgu indoeuropejskich tematów mitologicznych: od Dumézila do Słowackiego*, Warszawa 2014.

<sup>1</sup> *Author's foreword to the English translation, In: Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, transl. by W. R. Trask, New York 1990, vii.*

in the introduction Curtius mentioned his article “Deutscher Geist in Gefahr”, published in 1932, in which he “attacked the barbarization of education and the nationalistic frenzy which were the forerunners of the Nazi regime”<sup>2</sup>.

When the German catastrophe came, I decided to serve the idea of a medievalist Humanism by studying the Latin literature of the Middle Ages. These studies occupied me for fifteen years. The result of them is the present book. [...] What I have said will have made it clear that my book is not the product of purely scholarly interests, that it grew out of a concern for the preservation of Western culture<sup>3</sup>.

It is important to note the fact that the concern which made Jan Śniadecki, Ludwik Osiński and Kajetan Koźmian fight to preserve the legacy of ancient literature in Polish literary tradition in the 1820s had very similar roots, which obviously should be viewed with differing historical circumstances and appropriate proportions taken into consideration. It was due to the fact that the disapproval of the Warsaw and Vilnius-based “classical writers” for their vulgar and barbarian miasmas of “Romantic spirit” had also moral rather than purely aesthetic roots: in the end they were trying to maintain the humanistic system of values based on the legacy of ancient Rome in Polish culture. It was not the apologia of normative poetics, generated in the first twenty years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the names of Horace and Boileau, which form the core of the aesthetic and literary viewpoint of post-Stanisławian classical writers; it was rather a consequence of the universal way of perceiving European culture. It may be stated that they were all driven by the same “concern for the preservation of Western culture” which motivated Curtius in the times of the Third Reich and after its ignominious collapse.

The scope of this analogy is obviously limited: it is not meant to present on the same plane casual opinions based on literary

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., viii.

criticism or even journalism formed for the sake of local national community together with philological theses based on a knowledge of the subject matter and justified according to accepted norms. It is not about a ahistorical comparison based on hasty conclusions between the intellectual opposition to 20<sup>th</sup>-century totalitarianisms and resistance to phenomena which started to form the Romantic Movement between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is also not about putting theories of a representative and an advocate of the great tradition of classical philology in Germany along with pronouncements of an extreme conservative representative of mathematical and physical studies in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, who moreover had no delusions as regards the significance of Polish culture at that time and all the more, appreciated the development of the arts and sciences in the Stanisławian era in Poland, during the years of the Duchy of Warsaw and Congress Poland, and so he was trying to prevent all occurrences which could have impeded the progress achieved at such a great cost. However, they indeed held a similar conviction, which Curtius expressed explicitly while Śniadecki had hidden it behind the cultural context of French Classicism; it was a conviction about "Latinism" acting as a factor integrating the history of the European culture and safeguarding its continuity. The aim, which the suggested analogy is to pursue, is to see that even though the views of both scholars are located on different historical scales and are incomparable in terms of their scientific value, they are still both burdened with the same distorted perspective.

2.

We have long been used to treating Romanticism along with the Enlightenment as the beginning of the modern era. In the case of Polish literary studies, it seems doubtless that it is works by Maria Janion, who has popularised this type of presentism-based approach to literature and the intellectual culture of Romanticism, that have contributed to this fact. Changes in thematic conventions, patterns of expression or ideas formed within the Romantic Movement as well as their presence in popular culture are just some of the subjects

of most intense research interest to scholars. However, this type of presentism, which undoubtedly has contributed to maintaining the Romantic tradition in academic discourse, may in some cases lead to distorting perspective, the effects of which, as far as my area of interest is concerned, correspond, in a rather peculiar manner, to the manifesto put forward by Robert Curtius. The matter of Romantic medievalism is a case in point.

Indeed, in her paper *Estetyka średniowiecznej Północy*<sup>4</sup> Janion formulated an effective thesis about “the paradox of Romantic pluralism”. It was supposed to be based on the fact that “sophisticated pluralism [of Romanticism] may be traced back to a very monolithic era; exuberant individualism finds its ideal at a time which is marked by extreme anti-individualism”.<sup>5</sup> This “extreme anti-individualism” was seen by the author as a fundamental feature of the Middle Ages. “Jacques Le Goff refers to the society of the Middle Ages as ‘a totalitarian society’”, the author concluded and in the next paragraph made a reference to George Coulton, who “refers to the Inquisition as ‘the most distinctive of all institutions of the Middle Ages’”.<sup>6</sup> It all leads to a statement in which an ideological moral can be heard, “It is thus clear how in different languages and on various levels of the medieval reality one common idea is proclaimed—the idea of the integrity of the Middle Ages and of the price of this integrity”<sup>7</sup>.

It is not difficult to recognise the Enlightenment-based stereotype of “the dark Middle Ages”, an anachronism which dominated the humanities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century for a surprisingly long period of time. Obviously, I would not like to enter here into a discussion about “society in the Middle Ages”, especially because the designation of such a general or broad term seems rather blurred if we take into

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<sup>4</sup> See Maria Janion, *Czas formy otwartej. Tematy i media romantyczne*, Warszawa 1984. (translation – A.R-K)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-64.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

consideration the geographical and historical extent of social and cultural phenomena which come under the term "Middle Ages". (Indeed, there is, for example, little resemblance between the social, legal and institutional order of the three French-speaking countries involved in the Hundred Years' War and the social and political organisation of various structures in Ireland during the time of the Viking raids). I would only like to point out that irrespective of all authentic and assumed "paradoxes of romantic pluralism", it is possible to trace yet another paradox in the discourse of Maria Janion, a paradox that seems even more interesting, since it touches windings of scholarly thought. Following contrasting lines of thought, two eminent and innovative representatives of the humanities of their times supported a similar, and yet extreme, uniform model of the Middle Ages: Curtius with satisfaction (and based on his own research) and Janion with barely hidden disgust (and *in verba magistri*), and what is more, in both cases the antithesis of the Middle Ages has been sought in tendencies typical of the Romantic Movement, which Curtius found regrettable, whereas in the case of Janion it was just the opposite (even though she was trying to unmask the Romantic utopias and alienations).

I have emphasised this paradox for the sake of my thesis. The point of departure is the following observation: it is worth noticing, then, that Romantic visions of the Middle Ages and various medievalism-based proclamations voiced between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries do not exhaust the sources of evidence which may and should be taken into consideration while forming opinions on the way tradition of the Middle Ages functioned in the Romantic intellectual culture. There are much deeper relations between (pre)Romanticism and a specific movement within the culture of the Middle Ages, relations which are known neither to old literature researchers, and even more so, nor to Romanticism researchers. What makes it possible to notice those relations are findings made on the basis of the so-called new comparative mythology.

## 3.

Making reference to commendable feats of “philology as a historical discipline in the grand manner”,<sup>8</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius seemed content that “this universal concept of Antiquity, which unites philology and history, has remained an admirable prerogative of German antique scholarship and has borne rich fruit”.<sup>9</sup> His satisfaction due to this fact was a negative vantage point for research on vernacular literary tradition. Curtius complained in particular about the fact that “Medieval research began under the star of Romanticism and has never lost the imprint of that origin”<sup>10</sup>, which as a consequence led to damaging the relations between new disciplines, i.e. German and Romance philologies, and Latin medievalistics: as a result “The lack of a medieval discipline whose view is not bounded by professional barriers” brought about harmful effects, since it “has hampered the progress and the deepening of our insight”.<sup>11</sup>

The paradox consisted in the fact that the author thought of “the road for a new universalization”<sup>12</sup> in a particular and reductionist way, as an investigation into the vernacular literary tradition of the Middle Ages in search of complex references to the legacy of ancient Rome or Greece. The complaint concerning the origins of contemporary medievalistics also had some hypocritical hues: complaining that medieval research had been born under the wrong star of Romanticism, the scholar seemed to pay no attention that under the star of Classicism, shining bright for a thousand years, such research would have had no chance to be developed at all.

It would be less harmful if the Latin-centric exclusiveness of Curtius had been present only on the level of proclamations. Alas, it also had consequences in the field of philology. And so in the introduction

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<sup>8</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature...*, op. cit., 519.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 520.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

to the chapter devoted to depicting knights and rulers in an epic of the Middle Ages, Curtius stated categorically:

Ancient heroic epic with a tragic view of existence is to be found only among the Greeks; in late form among the Persians, the Germans, the Celts, and among the French at the moment when the era of the Crusades awakened them to a consciousness of a national mission<sup>13</sup>.

The thesis is definite: not until the barbarian Germans and Celts had polished their manners in schools reformed by Alcuin and then fought with swords in their hands around the world, were they able to create the correct "heroic literature", which meant imitating Homer with the help of Virgil.

In reality, old epic literature amongst the Germans and the Celts is indeed as "primal" as works attributed to Homer. The difference is that it was written down later. The Old English *Beowulf*, which exists in manuscript form from around 1000 A.D., is a work of a sophisticated literary culture which had been forced to develop on its own for hundreds of years without any genetic relations with the Mediterranean world. Alliterative verse does not imitate the hexameter and *kennings* are not derived from Homeric similes. The important thing this archaic legacy has to thank Latin culture for is writing. Neither the Runic *futhark* nor the Celtic *ogam* were suitable for writing down longer texts and what is more, users of those sign systems did not have any special need to employ them to a wide degree: their whole culture was of an oral character, which was due not only to their lagging behind the Mediterranean civilisation, but also due to more complex ideological reasons. The Druids did not know *Phaidros*, but their critical approach to writing was motivated by the same reasons as the ones presented by Plato.

The thesis put forward by Curtius, according to which all medieval works which are good enough to be called heroic epic literature derived from Homer through the works of Virgil, was an anachronism even at

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<sup>13</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature...*, op. cit., 168.

the time when his study on *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* was being created. In a sense it had a tautological character, since apart from its ideological intention it was based on the idea of matching source material to the preliminary assumption about “Latinism” as a fundamental and almost exclusive factor forming literary works in the Middle Ages. Shifting the time boundary for the beginning of the Renaissance to the time of Charlemagne, Curtius at the same time cleansed high-brow culture in Europe of everything that did not suit the arbitrarily defined framework for “correct” epic literature. The part of the legacy of the Middle Ages that was put outside this framework was classified as “folklore”. Such an approach, which indeed was typical not only of Curtius, since it was directly derived from Renaissance humanism, as a result led to a number of philological misunderstandings, which in turn resulted in a very fervent belief about “the folk nature” as one of the basic inspirations for the Romantic Movement.

## 4.

Polish studies on the history of literature still abound with specious reasoning about the folklore-based origin of a great many phenomena in the literature of ancient times. A good example may be the definition of the word *epos* (Eng. epic) in *Słownik literatury staropolskiej* (Eng. *Dictionary of Old Polish Literature*) where the author stated (very accurately) that “The Middle Ages [...] did not accept the classical epic poem. It is true that Virgil was known [...], but new nations created their own model of epic poem different from the classical one”, and later on a necessary statement was added, “[...] characterised by the folk, national and historical song”.<sup>14</sup> It follows, then, that it was either Virgil or folklore. Similarly, the definition of the word *osjanizm* (Eng. Ossianism) in *Słownik literatury polskiego oświecenia* (Eng. *Dictionary of Polish Enlightenment Literature*) says the following, “The songs

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<sup>14</sup> Stefan Nieznanowski, *Epos*, in: *Słownik literatury staropolskiej*, ed. by Teresa Michałowska, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1990, 188 (emphasis – D. S., translation A. R-K.).



written by Macpherson are very different from the authentic texts found in Old Irish manuscripts [...], even though, undoubtedly, these were works inspired by the old folk epic literature of the Celts."<sup>15</sup>

The point is that Celtic epic literature assumed a "folk" character through a long process of social and cultural changes: at first, it was just part of the national heritage, a type of literature created, compiled and written down by members of the intellectual elite and the fact that the so-called Fenian Cycle – distinctive for its elements of fantasy and adventure – is believed to be slightly more related to folklore than other cycles of Old Irish mythology, including the Mythological, Ulster or Historical Cycle, does not change this matter of course. It is a case similar to folk relics of the great Celtic ritual calendar, "The folk-customs observed at Beltaine, Samain and Lughnasand are thus popular versions of a solemn ritual which was fundamental to the well-being of the community and which formerly required the participation of kings, officials of the court, and all classes"<sup>16</sup>.

Most probably, the problem arises from more general premises – the term "vernacular literature", which is used in the context of medieval literary tradition, seems to be neutral in its descriptive function, however, in practice it appears slightly patronising: it suggests that in the Middle Ages there had been a literature *par excellence*, i.e. literature in Latin, as opposed to works created "in the vernacular", in other words created in 'local' or 'regional' language varieties, and in the end the latter would usually turn out to be derived from "folklore" (the moderate Romanticism-based approach) or – as suggested by Curtius – to be a result of a distorted perception of Latin models (the very Classicism-based approach). If those elements of literary studies discourse, especially as regards

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<sup>15</sup> Zofia Sinko, *Osjanizm*, [in: ] *Słownik literatury polskiego oświecenia*, ed. by Teresa Kostkiewiczowa, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1996, 368 (emphasis – D. S., translation – A. R-K.).

<sup>16</sup> Alwyn Rees, Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage. Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales*, [Thames and Hudson, Print on Demand Edition], 168.

the Middle Ages, were examined from the point of view of the so-called “post-colonial critique”, it could well turn out that the literary culture of that period was basically modelled on relations between “the metropolis” of Latinism and the subordinate, peripheral and slightly “savage” dominions of ethnic folklore. Thanks to this model the school of thought represented *inter alia* by Ernst Robert Curtius became the last refuge, not to say a reserve, of Classicism, which at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century finally lost its title as the main movement in modern European culture.

## 5.

It was thanks to *The Works of Ossian* that the questioning of the Latin-centred and humanistic paradigm appeared to be possible for European culture (this questioning is correctly believed to have been one of the main determinants of the Romantic Movement). They gave the first meaningful incentive to revisit the cultural code that had been binding since at least the Renaissance.

Moreover, especially in the context of rethinking of the problem of “the Romantic turning point” in the Polish research tradition, it is still worth emphasising the philological premises of the Romantic Movement. Indeed, the revival of classical philology was also one of the objective scholarly achievements related to the Romantic Movement. Published in 1795, *Prolegomena ad Homerum* by Freidrich August Wolf presented a theory of the development of the Ancient Greek epic different from the one that had prevailed up till then. Wolf proved that Homeric poems were not the creations of an individual genius but rather a result of a long process of alterations made to the source material before the work assumed its canonical form. At first, in its oral form and then in subsequent written versions, the text would adapt to social and historical conditions, reflecting cultural changes, the taste of *aoidoi* and expectations of later generations of recipients. Employing a historical approach in philology as well as using a diachronic perspective to examine the style and organisation of the text resulted in vindicating the concept of traditional, folk creativeness understood as a culture-generating category. *The Iliad*

and *Odyssey*, the works which unerringly are placed at the top of the literary hierarchy of Classicism, turned out to be anonymous creations of collective cooperation that had lasted throughout several centuries. The model poetic excellence of the sublime register presented itself as a collective work of non-defined individuals performing in front of mass audiences over centuries. It was a blow to the elitist individualism typical of Classicism-based awareness of literature since the times of the Renaissance.

The thesis put forward by Wolf ideally corresponded to the growing interest in modern folk culture. However, the motivation behind this interest did not lie in the domain of folklore *per se*. Oral creations started (it is true that sometimes it was done too prematurely) to be treated as a medium of the lost archaic epic literature. Even if it was difficult to differentiate between oral tradition which contained authentic source material and elements of outdated official culture (accepted by means of a rule typical of folklore according to which the content which began to be outdated among higher classes of society was subsequently welcomed by lower classes), the revaluating of those sources was a fact. And this seems the right context in which to see the dispute at that time over the authenticity of *The Works of Ossian*. The dispute proved that at the beginning of the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century even the achieved merits of an aesthetic and literary character did not invalidate philological criteria of accuracy in the evaluation of this potentially archaic legacy.

From the historical point of view Macpherson's work was a consequence of the Battle of Culloden. When the last Scottish uprising ended in failure in 1746, the future author of *The Works of Ossian* was nine years old. Having reached maturity and being a descendant of the Jacobite Clan Macpherson, the poet had to find himself in a completely new political situation just as a great many of his fellow countrymen. The increasing awareness of certain threats to Gaelic culture and identity gave rise to the need to collect works of oral tradition, which on their own could not survive the abrupt wave of modernising transformations and the civilisation-embedded dominance of the English language. As a result, even a contemporary

commentator of those issues, James Porter, seemed willing to see the authorial voice in the character of Ossian.<sup>17</sup>

Inhabitants of the Highlands, who up till then had been perceived by the English as “noble savages”, agreed, even though unwillingly, to the rule of the House of Hanover, however, they did not want to give up their Celtic legacy so easily. This does not mean that they wanted to remain “good savages”. In reality their level of education was not very bad, and it soon amazed Europe: even though education in Scotland was not compulsory, primary education was common. The number of illiterate people, which was relatively low at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (50%), at the end of the century decreased to 10%, whereas in highly-developed England people unable to sign their names still formed one third of the whole population.<sup>18</sup> The energy which so far had been devoted to supporting the Stuarts and making gestures of loyalty to the “overseas king” was expended on economic growth and intellectual revival. A part of this potential was devoted to developing research interest regarding examining the legacy of the native culture.

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<sup>17</sup> “The feeling of isolation in *Ossian* is, I would suggest, directly connected to Macpherson’s perception of his position in a dominantly Anglophone culture as well as to his identification with the blind poet. The crucial evidence, in any case, of the *Highland Society’s Report* and of Derick Thomson’s detective work in *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson’s Ossian* (1952) demonstrates that what we have, in Macpherson’s so-called translations, are a freely creative adaptation of genuine tradition.” (J. Porter, “Bring Me the Head of James Macpherson”. *The Execution of Ossian and the Wellsprings of Folkloristic Discourse*, “The Journal of American Folklore”, vol. 114, no. 454: *James Macpherson and the Ossian Epic Debate* [Autumn, 2001]). See Donald E. Meek, *The Gaelic Ballads of Scotland. Creativity and Adaptation*, in: *Ossian Revisited*, ed. by Howard Gaskill, Edinburgh 1991, 19-48.

<sup>18</sup> Emanuel Rostworowski, *Historia powszechna. Wiek XVIII*, Warszawa 1984, 188. It seems easy to notice the scale of those achievements of civilisation, which are visible in the numbers, if they are compared with the situation in Polish territories: it is enough to mention the fact that still even after one hundred years in around 1880 the percentage of illiterate people among rural citizens of Congress Poland and Galicia amounted to 94% and 95%, respectively. (Ludwik Stomma, *Antropologia kultury wsi polskiej XIX w.* in: Ludwik Stomma, *Antropologia kultury wsi polskiej XIX w. oraz wybrane eseje*, Łódź 2002, p. 101, translation – A. R-K.).

Even before Macpherson "[t]here was already some interest in Gaelic subjects [...] and other collectors were active, but not in a very public way".<sup>19</sup> When in 1759 there appeared a suggestion among Scottish writers to translate one of the traditional ballads, Macpherson, who was aware of "his own incompetence as a Gaelic scholar",<sup>20</sup> decided to present a poem from his own collection. He was driven by this success to publish the volume *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Gaelic or Erse language*, which was brought out half a year later.

Contemporary researchers now usually have no doubt that the author was driven not only by his ambition, the desire to pursue a literary career or material benefits and prestige associated with it. Establishing closer bonds with the Anglophone world, Macpherson started to realise the threat posed by the spread of the English language and culture in the Highlands. His undertaking was an endeavour to preserve the legacy of his youth.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, unexpectedly, the final result started to be meticulously verified according to categories of ethnographical accuracy. The way *The Works of Ossian* was received among intellectual circles in England was a symptom of a cultural rather than purely aesthetical change: traditional literature, which so far had been existent only in the oral form and written down only for the sake of private use with a moral or educational goal,<sup>22</sup> started to be treated as an acknowledged research subject. The issue of Gaelic sources used in *The Works of Ossian* resulted directly from harsher requirements imposed on

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas A. McKean, *The Fieldwork Legacy of James Macpherson*, "The Journal of American Folklore", vol. 114, no. 454, 451. See Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, Edinburgh 1988, 63; Fiona Stafford, *Introduction*, in: *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. by Howard Gaskill, Edinburgh 1996, V-XXI.

<sup>20</sup> Bailey Saunders, *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson containing a particular account of his famous quarrel with Dr. Johnson, and a sketch of the origin and influence of the Ossianic poems*, London 1895, 67, in: Thomas A. McKean, *The Fieldwork Legacy...*, op. cit., 451.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas A. McKean, *The Fieldwork Legacy...*, op. cit., 448.

<sup>22</sup> See *ibid.*

literature that wanted to be a reliable presentation of the legacy created locally within an isolated culture of up till then marginal importance. Faced with such inquires and with no desire to lose his status and fulfil the unexpectedly high criteria of philological objectivity, Macpherson started to issue solemn declarations of accuracy and to flounder, announcing he would publish his sources, something that was supposed to finally end the dispute and assign a certificate of authenticity to his work. It was his ambition that led the way: as a result, as concluded by Porter, “his belief in his talents and the fame that came to him while still in his twenties affected his judgement, which led him into foolish decisions”.<sup>23</sup>

The endeavour to unmask Macpherson initiated by the famous Dr Samuel Johnson and the heated discussion centred not on literary aesthetics but rather on the question of authenticity were signs of growing respect for archaic oral tradition whose medium had been the till then marginalised local folklore, struggling to survive on the ever narrower margins of highbrow Enlightenment culture. The requirement imposed on the author of *The Works of Ossian* – according to which he was to confirm the source-based origin of his work – was partially a result of the historical criticism of the Enlightenment, however, the idea of appreciating the distant past and authenticity outside the Mediterranean world was actually typical of Romanticism. Thus, the dispute relating to Macpherson contributed to forming a new hierarchy of values as well as clear methodological postulates in the domain of folklore research. German researchers did not lag behind, publishing their own collections and triggering philological machinery in the field of German studies – publications such as *Volkslieder* by Herder (1778-1779), and *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano (1805-1808), encouraging methodological discussions, laid the foundations for philological works by Ludwig Uhland and Jacob Grimm. In the introduction to the 1819 edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* Wilhelm Grimm presented his critical approach to earlier works

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<sup>23</sup> See James Porter, “Bring Me the Head of James Macpherson” ..., op. cit., 422.

of this type, emphasising the difference between ethnographical documentation and literary paraphrase based on a compilation.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, Macpherson may be viewed by a contemporary ethnologist as the forerunner of ethnographic field studies.<sup>25</sup>

## 6.

However, all those circumstances seem to contribute only to a limited degree to our understanding of the role of *The Works of Ossian* in the anti-Latin backlash in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In order to leave the circle of misunderstandings connected with Romantic folklorism it is necessary to reverse the historical perspective. Instead of looking at Macpherson from the point of view of presentism and in a progressive way and see him as a forerunner of certain important aspects of Romantic intellectual culture, it seems advisable to perceive his undertakings as a way of continuing the literary movement started some centuries earlier. For the author of *The Works of Ossian* appears to creatively continue the work of medieval intellectuals of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries who spared no effort to include native literary tradition in the official culture of their times. The Ossianic initiative resembles another feat accomplished six hundred years earlier by a different Celtic writer, namely Geoffrey of Monmouth,<sup>26</sup> who during the reign of the House of Plantagenet collected Welsh oral and written sources in order to present the deeds of King Arthur, his companions and successors in the form of heroic romances composed in the style of a historical work to Norman aristocratic audiences (*Historia Regum Britanniae*). Geoffrey even had his own Dr Johnson: this role was taken on by another Welshman, Gerald of Wales (Latin *Giraldus Cambrensis*, Welsh *Gerallt Gymro*), who accused Geoffrey of forgery,

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<sup>24</sup> See Jacob Grimm, *Przedmowa* [to:] *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, transl. by K. Krzemieniowa, in *Manifesty romantyzmu 1790-1830. Anglia, Niemcy, Francja*, ed. by A. Kowalczykova, Warszawa 1975, 234.

<sup>25</sup> See T. A. McKean, *The Fieldwork Legacy...*, op. cit., 60.

<sup>26</sup> His Welsh origin does not seem completely obvious, since he tends to be considered a Breton as well.



responding with satirical verse about a poet named Melerius, who was haunted by zealous demons (merely due to touching *The History of the Kings of Britain*, let alone even reading it).<sup>27</sup>

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Geoffrey of Monmouth was succeeded by Macpherson's contemporary, a Welshman, Edward Williams, known by his "bardic name" Iolo Morgannwg, "Ed of Glamorgan". He treated sources in a purely instrumental way: in various editions written by him, he would unscrupulously insert his own evident forgeries, in which he artfully imitated the style of Welsh poetry of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, among authentic sources of Old Welsh literature. Similarly, as was the case with Macpherson, such occurrences were driven by concerns for preserving Welsh cultural identity – Iolo wanted to base it on the revival of druidism and renewal of the tradition of medieval bards, which was visible in terms of institutional activity with the establishment of the association *Gorsedd Beirdd Ynys Prydain* (English: *Association of Bards of the Isle of Britain*), which started with his initiative in 1792. The ceremonies within the association were created by Iolo on the basis of druid rituals, indeed, reconstructed in a fairly free way with inspirations coming from freemason customs, for which the author should not be blamed, since even modern scholarship has little to say about real druidic practices. A few years earlier the old tradition of *Eisteddfodau* – stemming from the Middle Ages – was revived: these were great gatherings of bards held under the patronage of noble patrons<sup>28</sup> which combined a poetic festival with debates on codifying normative poetics and verifying qualifications to work in the profession. Therefore, Macpherson's art of writing, from the technical point of view as well, forms part of a broader movement in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century revival of the Celtic tradition.

The reversal of the historical perspective seems to have even more spectacular effects in the case of the author of *The Works of Ossian*

<sup>27</sup> See Wojciech Lipoński, *Narodziny cywilizacji Wysp Brytyjskich*, Poznań 2001, 224.

<sup>28</sup> See H. T. Edwards, *Eisteddfod*, in: *Celtic Culture. A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by John T. Koch, Vol. 1-5, Santa Barbara-Denver-Oxford 2006, Vol. 2, 664-665.



than in the case of the druid and bard of Glamorgan. The idea of adopting such a perspective was presented by Joseph Falaky Nagy, who suggested that when analysing Macpherson's work it might be advisable not to fixate on the social and cultural context of Scotland and England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but rather to shift the fundamental frame of reference to the source itself, which was Ireland between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. As underlined by the author, the main work of the so-called Fenian Cycle *Acallam na Senórach* formed at that time was created in the context of a similar social and cultural crisis. Irish literary tradition, which so far had been cultivated among individuals connected with the Church, lost support in monasteries due to pressure from the Cluniac Reforms and started to move towards the patronage of aristocratic houses. This process led to "a network of scribal families professionally committed to preserving tradition (or occasionally manufacturing tradition, if need be)".<sup>29</sup> A strong stimulus for social and literary transformations was provided by external political circumstances: having not fully recovered from the Viking raids, Ireland at that time had to face another and even greater threat to its social and cultural institutions – and this time it came from the Anglo-Normans. This circumstance seems even more perplexing, since, as pointed out by Nagy, apart from the similarity in the historical reference and the parallelism in terms of the scope of the cultural role between authentic medieval Fenian literature and *The Works of Ossian*, there is also a similarity as regards the structure. Without going into details, it may be said that Macpherson, who could not have known *Acallam* directly, used a similar writing technique based on the combination of two narrative patterns, creating "a cozy arrangement of mirroring and complementing between externally glossing author and internally glossing authority".<sup>30</sup> The rationale behind Macpherson's undertaking was similar to the rationale

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<sup>29</sup> Joseph F. Nagy, *Observations on the Ossianesque in Medieval Irish Literature and Modern Irish Folklore*, "The Journal of American Folklore", vol. 114, no. 454, 438-439.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 438.

of the compilers of *Acallam* – a literary monument and compendium of the commendable past was created in order to respond to threats to the Gaelic world, with the core based on the Fenian heroic tradition that was the common legacy for the Irish and Highlanders.

## 7.

The demise of the Classicism doctrine of aesthetics towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century led the way not only in new poetics and new literature but also in new philology of old literatures – just like one thousand three hundred years earlier the fall of the Western Roman Empire had enabled the creation of new countries and new cultural communities. However, even Rome, which was politically dead, managed to preserve its status of power in the sphere of culture for more than ten centuries – from this point of view, the great movement of classical Latinism was one of the signs of the posthumous victory achieved by the broken-up empire over its conquerors. This had both positive and negative sides. The positive ones were always clear; the negative ones came to light not before between the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Forming an idea which is visible in the works of *inter alia* Benedykt Zientara, the medievalists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century dealt with subjects signalled in the pre-Romanticism period.

It is worth pausing at one aspect of Roman activity which is seldom spotted: at their levelling of the conquered area. The Roman Empire was really a whole in terms of civilisation: the same administration was introduced everywhere, [...] there was the same worship in the whole country, and finally the same law. [...] In this deluge of uniformity local influences seldom found a voice. [...]

The levelling was also done regarding the diversity of ethnic groups in Europe, western Asia and northern Africa, all of which were made subject to Rome. [...] It was only Paulus Orosius who in the introduction to book five of his *Historiae* managed to discuss the results of “miserabilis vastatio multarum et bene institutarum gentium”. They would not notice how many sources of culture and how much of the spontaneous creation was disappearing under the all-levelling steamroller of the Roman and Greek civilisations. Obviously, this is

all simplified: some features typical of specific tribes were included in this all-standardising civilisation: at least the increasingly stronger influences of the Syrian and Palestinian West and Christianity should be mentioned. But Christianity also changed due to Roman law and Greek philosophy. We have to remember that ultimately, the Romans destroyed the societies of the Celts, Numidians, Illyrians and Dacians, who had been developing independently – though not without the influence of the Mediterranean civilisation – and who were at that time building the foundations of state and cultural communities with their own character.<sup>31</sup>

Just as the Roman civilisation destroyed the proto-state organisms that had been forming on its margins, turning them into provinces of the Empire, so Roman literature colonised literary traditions in native languages after the fall of the Roman Empire. It did not happen immediately – “vernacular” intellectual elites of the Middle Ages felt a bond with the native tradition that had been living in oral form. In the case of the Celts and Scandinavian Germanic tribes this was a particularly strong bond – they were lucky to find themselves on the peripheries of the area that was undergoing the process of cultural Latinisation.

From the point of view of their literary achievements it may be stated that the first stage of the Romantic Movement in European culture should be dated to the Middle Ages. However, the fact that romanticists between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were willing to see themselves as heirs to the medieval spirit or even the fact that in some cases the adjective “Romantic” would function at that time as a synonym for the word “medieval” should not be seen as a particularly significant circumstance. As rightly observed by Janion, the Romantic manifesto saw the Middle Ages as an anti-Ancient period, a non-Latin

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<sup>31</sup> Benedykt Zientara, Świt narodów europejskich. Powstawanie świadomości narodowej na obszarze Europy *pokarolińskiej*, Warszawa 1985, 357-359 (translation – A. R-K.) (Orosius, *Historiarum adversus paganos libri VII, liber V*, in: *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, Vol. 5, ed. by C. Zangemeister, Wien 1882, 277).

and non-classical framework of cultural reference. It does not seem to be of such importance regarding the actual relationships between the Middle Ages and the Romanticism of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The actual relationships are constituted by philological premises.

Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries there appeared synthetic works aiming to preserve the native tradition by incorporating scholarly historiography into it. Geoffrey of Monmouth, Snorri Sturluson, Saxo Grammaticus, the anonymous compilers of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* and *Acallam*, and Wincenty Kadłubek – all felt they were heirs to societies that had established a rich cultural identity before they were included in the circle of the Christian community and before they came under the influence of Latin civilisation. The French adaptation of Arthurian motifs can be perceived, especially through the subject of the Holy Grail, as a great endeavour to synthesise a culture combining Christian faith with a mythological and narrative tradition originating in pre-Christian times; at some points it was very archaic, which may be proven by the analogy with the literary tradition of the Scythians indicated by Scott Littleton,<sup>32</sup> which would be hard to explain in terms of borrowings based on filiation. Features that are no less archaic may be found in the so-called Narbonne Cycle.

It is possible to see an image of a pan-national cultural community of Celtic and Germanic advocates of native ancient times, one working in the north of Europe between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries towards integrating this legacy into Latin intellectual culture as well as Greek and Roman history. Charlemagne could be considered the forerunner of the initiative, since, as emphasised by Benedykt Zientara, he “did not treat his dignity of the Emperor as a continuation of the Roman Empire, which was unexpectedly rebuilt”,<sup>33</sup> instead he felt a bond with Frankish tradition and he offered his patronage to research on “Germanic languages, the affinity of the Germanic tribes

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<sup>32</sup> C. Scott Littleton, Linda A. Malcor, *From Scythia to Camelot. A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail*, New York-Oxon 2000.

<sup>33</sup> Benedykt Zientara, *Świt narodów europejskich*, op. cit., 137. (translation – A. R-K.)

and their past".<sup>34</sup> As stipulated by his scholarly servant and biographer Einhard, the Emperor personally contributed to the development of Old Germanic language studies, since "[h]e collected and stored for future generations old barbarian songs commending the deeds and conquests of old kings. He even started working on a grammar of his mother tongue".<sup>35</sup> Those interests in Old Germanic epics could have influenced the decision to move the statue of Theoderic the Great from Ravenna to Aachen – according to Zientara; "for Charlemagne it was not a historical remnant of the king of the Ostrogoths, but rather of 'Dietrich von Bern' of the Germanic epic".<sup>36</sup> In later works devoted to Charlemagne the Germanic interests of the ruler were taken over by a convention based on universalism – both secular *chansons de geste* and writings of ecclesiastical communities created an image of Charlemagne as an archetype of a Christian ruler. In this respect the scope of his activities was defined by his armed fight against the Saracens, his attempt to spread Christianity and his deep concern for the wellbeing of his subjects. Such an image did not leave any room for preserving the image of a monarch cultivating the pagan legacy of the Germanic Franks. Yet, memories of the pagan and Germanic relationships of the Frankish Emperor found an echo in later sources (reminiscences on the subject of "Odin's spear"<sup>37</sup> are to be found in the account by William of Malmesbury of Charlemagne's lance, which

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>35</sup> Einhard, *Vita Caroli Magni*, in: *Quellen zur karolingischen Reichsgeschichte*, Vol. 1, ed. by Reinhold Rau, Berlin 1955, 200. In: Benedykt Zientara, *Świt narodów europejskich*, op. cit., 135. According to Einhard, Charlemagne was also concerned about the Frankish language of that period, working to limit the spread of direct Latin transfer. "He would name the months, using his own language, since beforehand the Frankish would use partly Latin, partly barbarian names. The same he did with the names of winds." (ibid., translation – A. R-K.)

<sup>36</sup> Benedykt Zientara, ibid. (translation – A. R-K.)

<sup>37</sup> See Thomas D. Hill, *Longinus, Charlemagne, and Óðinn: William of Malmesbury, «De Gestis Regum Anglorum» II, 135, "Saga-Book of the Viking Society" 1982-1985, vol. XXI; William z Malmesbury, *De Gestis Regum Anglorum*, in *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis Monachi, de Gestis Regum Anglorum libri quinque & Historiae Novellae, libri tres*, ed. by William Stubbs, Vol. 1-2, London 1887-1889.*

was given to Athelstan, the king of Wessex, by the proxies of Hugh Capet on the occasion of marital negotiations.)

A selective literary reception of the mythological and epic legacy adapted and preserved by those medieval pre-romanticists started as early as in the Renaissance. If the Danish chronicler and mythographer Saxo Grammaticus (*Gesta Danorum*) had not written down the history of Amleth, one of the most brilliant Nordic tricksters, there would be no *Hamlet* by Shakespeare; had Geoffrey of Monmouth not written down the mythical history of Leir, the legendary king of the Britons (his name stems from a theonym which is found in both Wales (Llŷr) and Ireland (Lir)), there would be no *King Lear*. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century alone there were three editions of *Gesta Danorum* – in the long title of the first edition, which was published in Paris in 1514, the publisher underlined the stylistic merits of the work (*Danorum Regum heroumque Historiae stilo elegantia Saxone Grammatico... abhinc supra trecentos annos conscriptae...*).

The case of Saxo Grammaticus is here very significant, since it perfectly illustrates the character of mystification committed by Ernst Robert Curtius in his apologia for medieval Latinism. According to Curtius, this “Latinism”, understood as a criterion of the cultural integrity of the Middle Ages marked in terms of axiology, was not only a matter of language. Saxo wrote in Latin, however, in Curtius’ work his name appears just once: in the index, and what is more, only owing to a mistake by the editor, since Curtius referred at that point to a completely different anonymous writer known as Poeta Saxo, who lived in the post-Carolingian era and authored a chronicle of the reign of Charlemagne written in verse.

Fervently defending the standpoint according to which all noteworthy tropes, motifs and topoi of medieval literary tradition originated in Roman and Latin culture, Curtius *de facto* belittled the role of a significant movement of medieval literary activity. Members of this international group of chroniclers and mythographers had a conscious awareness of the fact that before the advent of Christianity and Latin, social groups inhabiting Europe had created a rich and sophisticated collection of cultural traditions preserved

in customary law, social institutions, myths and heroic narratives. Another intriguing problem is related to strategies which were used by those writers in order to integrate this legacy into the state of wisdom at that time, to make it fit the history as told in the Bible and to include it in the horizon of Christian and Latin civilisation. Without going into much detail it should be said that those strategies go far beyond what is commonly understood under the oversimplified term of Euhemerism; they tend to be so sophisticated that it becomes evident that the hagiographical convention of "casting out pagan demons" (known from, e.g. *Legenda Aurea*) belongs to the then mass culture when compared with them. Medieval scholars specialising in mythography did not cast out "pagan" demons. To put it simply, in a metaphorical manner, they negotiated a solution for both sides, the "pagan" and the Christian one, a solution that would be honourable and beneficial.<sup>38</sup>

Saxo Grammaticus and other authors similar to him acted *mutatis mutandis* like Macpherson: the range of their sources was determined by the living oral tradition; as was the case with Macpherson, their attitude to those sources was marked with understanding and a sense of pride; and just like with Macpherson, Saxo and the others had to creatively adapt in order to make this legacy continue.

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<sup>38</sup> A good illustration may be the compilers of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, who stripped the old Gaelic gods of any theological significance, including them in the sequence of quasi-historical conquests of Ireland synchronised with history according to the Bible. Monastic writers transformed old mythological theogony and theomachy into a historical tradition, an integral element of the cultural identity of the Christian community inhabiting Ireland. Thanks to plot details that were meticulously created in terms of narration, the authors even managed to present the race of *Tuatha Dé Danann* (i.e., in simple words, the main generation of Gaelic gods) as the actual creators of Irish civilisation and inventors of all arts and sciences. While remaining good Christians, monastic writers could defend the good name of *Tuatha Dé Danann*, categorically rejecting the suggestion that they were demons.



## 8.

The revival of Germanic tradition came before the Napoleonic era and took place at the same time as the Celtic revival. The onset of the former may be considered 1786, when Thomas Gray published a translation of the Eddic poem “Baldrs draumar” under the title “The Descent of Odin: An Ode”. In the same volume there was also a text entitled “The Fatal Sisters”, which was a paraphrase of the Skaldic poem “Darraðarljóð” from the Icelandic *Njáls saga*. Various publishing initiatives had been undertaken much earlier – Scandinavian scholars published old Nordic texts as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century; the collection of George Hickes *Linguarum veterum septentrionalium thesaurus grammatico-criticus et archeologicus* was published in 1702. Johann Gottfried Herder used those texts when, after reading *The Works of Ossian*, he was inspired to examine skaldic metrics; he was amazed to learn how sophisticated this structure was;<sup>39</sup> he even engaged in translation activities, having translated both texts, which had been earlier translated into English by Gray, into German. In his work he demonstrated a surprisingly modern understanding of the conditions determining oral tradition.<sup>40</sup>

Several hundred years before Herder Saxo Grammaticus made a reference to skaldic poetry as source material. In the preface to his work he devoted to it a beautiful and, as a matter of fact, very Romantic passage (also in terms of the motif of runic inscriptions, which he found no less fascinating than 19<sup>th</sup>-century romanticists), which is worth quoting here:

Nec ignotum volo, Danorum antiquiores conspicuis fortitudinis operibus editis gloriae aemulatione suffusos Romani stili imitatione non solum rerum a se magnifice gestarum titulos exquisito contextus genere veluti poetico quodam opere perstrinxisse, verum etiam maiorum acta patrii sermonis carminibus vulgata linguae suae

<sup>39</sup> Johann G. Herder, *Wyjątki z listów o Osjanie i pieśniach dawnych ludów*, transl. by Barbara Płaczkowska, in Johann G. Herder, *Wybór pism*, ed. by Tadeusz Namowicz, Wrocław 1987, 185-186.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-185.



litteris saxis ac rupibus insculpenda curasse. Quorum vestigiis ceu quibusdam antiquitatis voluminibus inhaerens tenoremque veris translationis passibus aemulatus metra metris reddenda curavi [...] <sup>41</sup>

The belief that a type of runic script was also familiar to the Slavs used to be common knowledge among Polish historians of the Romanticism period. The lack of any evidence in the form of reliable sources was seen as no obstacle – a good illustration of the problem may be found in the following passage from Wawrzyniec Surowiecki:

Whoever takes into consideration the common use of script and, on the other hand, numerous settlements of the Slavs distinguished for their citizens, industry, trade and resources reaching the verge of splendour, he will find it impossible to leave the pride of their ancestors, his own deeds, rules and important matters only to stay in people's memory or oral tradition. [...]

After such a consideration nobody for sure will have any doubts concerning the use of script among the Old Slavs only because we have not seen any of their works or because they have not left us with a clear record thereof. [...] the fact the they did not make any reference to writing does not allow us to conclude that in actuality there was no writing; doubts should be dispelled, for it seems there is a lot of conjecture about this fact.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. by Jørgen Olrik et Hans Ræder, vol. 1-2, Copenhagen 1931, *Praefatio*, 1, vol. 1, 4. "I would like you to know that the Old Danes, having achieved significant feats of courage, trying to gain fame in a style typical of the Romans, did not only mention those feats with pride by means of works resembling poetry, but they also took all due care to make those wonderful feats of their fathers be heard in native songs, with Saxon letters in stone inscribed. Following in their footsteps, almost in the style of old books, and imitating authentic translations of their works, I have been trying to express the verse in verse [...]" (translation – A. R-K.)

<sup>42</sup> Wawrzyniec Surowiecki, *O charakterach pisma runicznego u dawnych barbarzyńców europejskich, z domniemaniem o stanie ich oświecenia*, in: *Dzieła Wawrzyńca Surowieckiego (z wiadomością o życiu i pismach autora, z kartą geograficzną i tablicą runicznego pisma)*, ed. by Kazimierz J. Turowski, Kraków 1861, 561. (translation – A. R-K.)

The question of Slavic runes was only a matter of secondary importance when it came to the main problem. This was lack of source data on the oldest historical and cultural tradition of Slavic languages, especially in the Western region. Deprecating “fairy-tale-like deeds” during the Enlightenment created a painful void. There was no record about Slavic tradition in Polish highbrow culture – it was yet to be established. It was an intellectual challenge which those who were seeking elements of Slavic ancient times at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had to face, aware of the fact that they would either meet it or have to acknowledge the fact that they belonged to one of the most culturally primitive ethnolinguistic communities that had ever inhabited Europe. It is true that Poles were not in danger of having the status of a nation without history, however, towards the end of the Enlightenment criteria became harsher: it was not enough to have a scholarly compiled “history of the nation”, since the historical horizon had lengthened and it was expected that the prehistory of a nation would be unearthed.

Representatives of Western Slavic tribes found themselves in a particularly uncomfortable situation, since they had no authentic archaic frame of literary reference (Eastern Slavic tribes had their *byliny*, and South Slavic tribes a cycle of stories about Marko Kraljević [Prince Marko]). Philological forgeries were devised in an attempt to solve this problem. And so Václav Hanka and Josef Linda “discovered” for the Czech nation two manuscripts, *Rukopis královédvorský* and *Rukopis zelenohorský*, with a whole collection of early medieval “Slavic” poems, even though their fellow countrymen, in contrast to Poles, indeed had an authentic epic poem written down in Czech at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, namely the *Chronicle of Dalimil* written in verse. In spite of appearances, those operations cannot be compared with the work of Celtic writers in terms of technicalities: Macpherson and Edward Williams worked on authentic source material, irrespective of what they did to it.

The lack of source data resulted in Polish intellectuals of that time regarding the pre-Christian cultural tradition of Slavic people, especially from the West, as an empty screen on which they could,

and somehow had to, project their perceptions about prehistoric ancestors formed according to the social needs and national ambitions of that time. Similarly, as was the case with the Irish, Scots and Welsh, to Poles the stake in that battle was of a political and cultural character: the lack of national sovereignty forced them to look for an even more precise definition of national characteristics. From the perspective imposed by the historicism-based necessity to vindicate "barbarians", the early writings of ethnical and cultural identity were to stem from the pre-Latin times as early as possible. The lesson learnt from *The Works of Ossian* led to folklore, but in practice by no means was it then possible to indicate elements of Slavic legacy in the spiritual culture of the Polish people with the help of rationalised methodological tools or to bridge the gap between the present of degraded and decomposed folklore and Early-Slavic past. Based on scholarly criteria, the argument in favour of cultural continuity dating from pre-history, which indeed was the point, turned out to be unfeasible due to purely objective reasons.

9.

This sense of historical and cultural deprivation was most clearly visible in the action taken by Zorian Dołęga-Chodakowski. As rightly pointed out by Alina Witkowska, "when we look at Chodakowski's passionate devotion to collecting, his fanatical clinging to once pursued ideals [...] and complete insensitivity to criticism, we may have an impression that we are dealing not with a scholar but with a worshipper of faith whose secrets he had been let into".<sup>43</sup> Wawrzyniec Surowiecki was trying to bring him back to reality, underlining the typical anachronism of Zorian's complaints about the circumstances of converting the Slavs to Christianity and referring to hard facts based on reliable sources;<sup>44</sup> he aptly listed instances

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<sup>43</sup> Alina Witkowska, *Sławianie, my lubim sielanki...*, Warszawa 1972, 33.

<sup>44</sup> W. Surowiecki, *Zdanie o piśmie Z. D. Chodakowskiego pod tytułem „O Słowiańszczyźnie przedchrześcijańskiej”*, in Wawrzyniec Surowiecki, *Dzieła Wawrzyńca Surowieckiego*, op. cit.

indicating that Chodakowski's arguments were out of touch with the state of knowledge on toponomastics, archaic social institutions and origins of heraldry symbols at that time.<sup>45</sup> But even Surowiecki himself could not resist the temptation to construct images of old Slavic life without any basic sources – as an economist following the theories of Adam Smith and the author of the dissertation *O upadku przemysłu i miast w Polsce* (*On the Fall of Industry and Cities in Poland*) he created an image of an Early-Slavic empire of trade and industry.<sup>46</sup> Waclaw Aleksander Maciejowski, on the other hand, offered a complete vision based in its deep structure on the medieval topos of *translatio imperii*: since “the theory of invasion” in its strong version undermined the feeling of being native inhabitants developed by Poles and disavowed the search for their prime Slavic legacy, it was divided into smaller pieces by Maciejowski, which means that he replaced one decisive invasion with a whole sequence of mild micro-invasions, presenting their consequences from the point of view of international cooperation and intercultural exchange. Thanks to this operation, the Romantic scholar was able to have all the freedom to equip the pre-Polish Slavs with all attributes of civilisation related to being a complete and well-organised community gained thanks to contact with Iranian tribes (“buoyant rule”, civil law, “equestrian knighthood”), as well as Celtic (“education”) and Germanic ones (increase in the level of intellectual life). Written with the pen of this Romantic historian, the amorphous Slavic identity of Poles was finally carved into a distinctive shape. The Scythians, Sarmatians, Celts, Suebi and Goths were put in a historical queue to play their historic roles which consisted in holding in turn generous power over the Central European Slavs, supplying the “very old nation” that had

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 370-372.

<sup>46</sup> Wawrzyniec Surowiecki, Śledzenie początku narodów słowiańskich. Rozprawa (czytana na publicznym posiedzeniu królewsko-warszawskiego towarzystwa przyjaźni nauk w dniu 24 stycznia roku 1824, przez autora, członka czynnego tegoż towarzystwa), in: Wawrzyniec Surowiecki, *Dziela Wawrzyńca Surowieckiego...*, op. cit.

settled on the banks of the Vistula River centuries ago with a constant influx of fresh vital forces and encouraging the development of its civilisation.<sup>47</sup>

Fryderyk Henryk Lewestam, on the other hand, presented a theory that seems contrary to a certain degree: according to his view, the fundamentals of the Polish country were created by an invasion by the Celtic Lendials of a patriarchal, amorphous community of native Slavs.<sup>48</sup> In Lewestam's version there was nothing about a mission of Slavic tribes to spread a civilisation like it was in Surowiecki, or about a bidirectional transfer of cultural inspiration, as was presented by Maciejowski. The Slavs found themselves in a state of being vulnerable indigenous people destined to be under foreign domination and forced to submit to unconditional subordination to the invader. It was a regressive reference to the old Herderian pattern of harms inflicted on the Slavs, a pattern which both Surowiecki and Maciejowski were trying to break quite successfully.

The theory of Lewestam gives rise to an image of Slavic aborigines living in a state of inertia outside history, unable to develop or to defend their possessions, people whom Lendial leaders managed to subordinate with less effort than that required from the 16<sup>th</sup>-century conquistadors when they confronted various Palaeolithic tribes in South America, let alone the Incas or Aztecs.

Those seemingly contradictory theories put forward by three Romantic historians share common ground in aspects which are related to the characteristics of the first Slavic societies. In all three cases they are distinctive due to features such as: a sense of being native inhabitants, pacifism, rich natural resources based on highly-effective agriculture, dynamic demography, a flattened social hierarchy and physical prowess.

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<sup>47</sup> Wacław A. Maciejowski, *Pierwotne dzieje Polski i Litwy, zewnętrzne i wewnętrzne, z uwagą na ościennie kraje, a mianowicie Ruś, Węgry, Czechy i Niemcy...*, Warszawa 1846.

<sup>48</sup> Fryderyk H. Lewestam, *Pierwotne dzieje Polski*, Warszawa 1841.

All those elements perfectly fit what Alina Witkowska called “the agrarian myth of Slavic identity”. Even though the idyllic concept of Polish literature did not survive the November Uprising in 1830-1831, the idyllic and passive concept of Slavic identity escaped unscathed. And it is the intriguing longevity of this concept that is hard to explain satisfactorily in terms of an ideological manifesto or purely literary aesthetics.

10.

A minor detail, seemingly of secondary importance, which appeared in works by both Surowiecki and Maciejowski, may yield clues to the mythological core of images about the old Slavic world: it was obvious to both of the writers that the identity of the Slavs was related to the Scandinavian group of gods known as the Vanir.<sup>49</sup> It would not be so remarkable but for the findings of “new comparative mythology” studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Among the most obvious Indo-European mythological themes that could be found in the source material there is the subject of the so-called foundation conflict. It appears in its canonical form in the *Ynglinga Saga*, which is the first part of *Heimskringla*, a history of the Scandinavian kings written down by Snorri Struluson around 1225. The Ynglings, residing at Uppsala in Sweden, considered themselves to be descendants of the god Frey, which after converting to Christianity caused a problem in terms of genealogy. Snorri solved the problem in a manner typical of an intellectual of his era: he placed the mythical beginnings of the dynasty in a specific historical reality and geographical space. In the first chapters of *Ynglinga Saga* there is a story about events which took place in olden times in Sweden the Great at the Tanais (i.e. at the Don river), which separated Europe from Asia. There was a mighty kingdom of Asaland, also known as Asaheim, off the east bank of the river; the capital of the kingdom was Asgard with a great temple where worship was led by twelve

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<sup>49</sup> See Wawrzyniec Surowiecki, *Śledzenie początku...*, op. cit., 459, footnote. 2, 476; Waclaw A. Maciejowski, *Pierwotne dzieje Polski i Litwy...*, op. cit., 44.

priests. As all the names indicate it was a country of the Æsir and their great chieftain Odin had such remarkable military prowess that he was able to beat everyone in battle and conquered a great many of the neighbouring lands. But finally, it took one to know one: when Odin went to fight the Vanir, he sparked a long-lasting war in which both sides would secure victory alternately. The territories of both lands were ravaged, and since there were no signs that the conflict would be settled by means of armed battles, both sides came up with an agreement, they established a truce and exchanged hostages. As a result, in spite of certain temporary misunderstandings, the agreement between the two peoples was reached (and both were partially united), Odin, having left his brothers in Asgard, went westwards together with the priests and his great army. He managed to conquer Saxland (i.e. Lower Saxony) and the Jutland Region, in order to finally settle in Sweden. After his death, power was assumed by Njörðr and then by Freyr, who founded the Yngling dynasty.

The same mythological construction, which in the Germanic world was presented in the form of a war with no final settlement other than the agreement between the Æsir and the Vanir, in the Latin context was based on relations visible during the forming of Rome (the proto-Romans of Romulus versus the Sabines, a story which was written down by Titus Livius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Plutarch) and had subsequent parallels in Old Irish and Indian literature.

The key point of this mythological scheme is based on an idea according to which at the birth of an ethnic or cultural community, at the beginning of a tribe, a country or a dynasty, there arises mythological peak of the religious and social order which marks the moment of permanent and final constituting of the community in the shape it is destined to have. However, this complete order is not provided in a ready-made form by the powers that rule the fate of the world. On the way to assuming this shape there is a dangerous conflict impossible to be settled by means of violence and to which the only solution is the integration of two temporary groups representing heterogeneous and partial subsystems of values.



The synthesis of such distinct elements creates a new, fully stable reality in terms of religion and society.

And it is this mythological structure that casts a new light on the “agrarian myth of Slavic identity” as viewed by Romantic scholars researching pre-history. The point here is not the “establishing war” itself, but instead features of the community similar to the Vanir gods (or Italian Sabins) as opposed to characteristics common to the Nordic Æsir or Italian proto-Romans. It should be underlined that it is not about the fact that Romantic creators of the image of the pre-history of the Slavs managed somehow to relate the Vanir to the Slavs, since the Scandinavian sources, where this structure forms part of the plot, date back to the times when, as it is believed, the original and archaic meaning of this myth was no longer comprehensible.

To put it briefly, the concept of “Vanir-like” communities is not literally found in narratives by Snorri or Titus Livius; it is a result of research in the domain of “new comparative mythology” studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that were done based on methods which one could compare to the work of a modern archaeologist who is able to describe a non-existent object that has turned into dust on the basis of a barely preserved print, the cultural context or the colours of the soil. Meanwhile, it seems that Maciejowski, Lewestam and Surowiecki in particular, with all the disparities between their theories, characterised the prehistoric Slavs as if they had just finished reading works by Georges Dumézil...

Of course, this type of duration of mythological structures encoded in literature and historiography is not a mystical secret. Furthermore, in this case it is possible to indicate hypothetical paths of the cultural transmission. However, this is a different subject and it cannot be discussed briefly in this paper. I would merely like to mention that the clash between a “Vanir-like” community and a community representing a pattern typical of the Æsir was presented by Juliusz Słowacki in his *Lilla Weneda* in a brilliantly thorough manner; and the aesthetic and literary quality of the text has little significance here – it is the pure mythological content of the drama that seems to have profound significance.



11.

I would like to stress that what was known by romanticists about Germanic or Celtic mythology and how this knowledge influenced their works seems to me a subject of moderate interest. What they did not know seems much more intriguing, as does what they had no right to know, considering the horizon of knowledge at that time, and what, despite all that lack of knowledge, was found in their texts presented in an objective and philologically recognised manner.

It is common knowledge that early Romantic writers often believed that the literary movement they were a part of was not an absolute innovation, but rather a "revival of the Middle Ages" and that, actually, it was a second wave of Romanticism initiated by the Middle Ages. It is true that in order to support this thesis they would form justifications that seemed historically and linguistically amateurish, often being on the verge of naivety or ignorance, orbiting somewhere around a mystified vision of the Crusades or, at best, around inappropriately defined opposition between "the literature of the South" and "the literature of the North".

However, despite all the randomness of works created under the shield of artistic license, despite anachronisms resulting from the lack of knowledge and search for "picturesqueness" at the cost of historical and cultural facts, despite the instrumental involvement in attempts to assure the national identity, and finally despite all the ideology imposed on the legacy of the Middle Ages for the sake of political and religious thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Romanticism really started the restitution of the legacy of the Middle Ages, also in terms of scholarly research. In a specific sense, limited by certain historical conditions, it was an actual continuation of tendencies which were found in the works of medieval compilers, who would combine Latin, i.e. classical, and ecclesiastical erudition with a desire to preserve and adapt in a creative way their own "pagan" and "barbarian" legacy.

From this point of view it is of no surprise that an extreme supporter of Latinism such as Adam Mickiewicz, who in the first course of *Literatura Słowiańska* (English: *Slavic Literature*) uttered

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so many ridiculous statements on the literary culture of old Slavs, at the same time uttered the most prophetic statement the whole of Polish Romanticism was able to produce. It was said from the lectern in the Collège de France on Friday, 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1841, “Maybe, the ancient culture of the tribes from the North will in turn explain many a secret of ancient Rome.”

The word was made flesh when in 1959 another professor from the Collège de France, Georges Dumézil, published a book called *Les Dieux des Germains*, in which he did exactly what Mickiewicz predicted almost one hundred and twenty years earlier.

Translated by Anna Rędzioch-Korkuz