

The Unobvious Legacy of Romanticism?

Due to the upcoming event of the bicentenary of the publication of Adam Mickiewicz's *Ballads and Romances*, the Parliament of the Republic of Poland declared the year 2022 to be the Year of Romanticism. This decision inspired various circles to undertake numerous artistic and scientific initiatives to commemorate the epoch which played a key role in the history of our native culture, contributing both to the development of the foundations of collective identity and memory, and to the formation of ideas about the validity of the Romantic canon of literature and art. Returnings to this heritage, not only unconditionally approving, are therefore an almost obligatory element of the Polish cultural debate, and the commemoration of the anniversary of the event, which is customarily considered to be the beginning of Romanticism in Poland, seems fully obvious and justified.

Other Slavic cultures, however, are rarely observed and interpreted as depositories of sustaining, affirming and keeping the Romantic tradition up-to-date. This is because the components of its paradigm have not taken root in them to such an extent as to define their constitutive distinctive features, and the paradigm is often treated in terms of a peculiarly foreign intrusion – an external influence disrupting the indigenous character of identity projects and patterns of artistic creation. In its creative practice and meta-cultural discourses, Romanticism entered the Slavic cultural space “with difficulty”, overcoming insurmountable, so to say, barriers, and as a result had to find for itself either specific philosophical and artistic niches, and thus consciously give up its prominent position and remain outside the main (and approved) current of

artistic activity, or was “forced” to give up a considerable part of its – usually fundamental – assumptions. Among these, those components of Romantic discourse that conflicted with inclusive nationalist projects came to the fore. These did not include, among others, concepts of individualistic anthropology, the idea of art divorced from all forms of socio-political involvement, the phantasm of romantic love (and, more generally, patterns and models of emotionality highlighting the right of the human individual to uninhibited expression of personal emotions), metaphysical dilemmas and ciphers of transcendence or epistemological questions. Thus, the “anti-romantic obstacles” were most often motivated by the need, widely felt in revival circles, to regain the distinctive features of national separateness, and the highest goal was considered to be the building of a collective identity and, consequently, the shadowing, (i.e. condemnation) of all centrifugal tendencies, which would break down the consolidation of a society uniting under the auspices of emancipatory aspirations from within. These aspirations were more favoured by dissenting models corresponding to the programmes of the various national revivals. They too, however, did not avoid being “infected” by Romantic inspirations, only carefully selected and, as it were, “tamed.” In the first instance, this “taming” concerned questions of updating the definition of national identity, which in the first decades of the nineteenth century began to be perceived and shaped on a new basis, resulting in the ennoblement of previously not very strongly exposed (or ignored at all) components of identity and national discourses. In turn, some of the components of the Romantic model of culture provided persuasive tools that proved extremely useful for the process of reconstructing (producing) the foundations of national consciousness in a society accustomed rather to linking patriotic emotions with traditional categories, (e.g. territorial and state affiliation, loyalty to the ruling monarchy) rather than with a sense of unity with the local Slavic language, pride in native history filtered through the prism of collective memory and additionally subjected to the mechanisms of (de)mythologisation and the cult of autochthonous (archaic) folklore heritage. However, such design of integration strategies, regardless of any *explicitly* declared reservations, opened the way towards the reception of selected philosophical and aesthetic propositions of Romanticism. As a result, its

rejection or reduction to a few appropriately crafted slogans and ideas required the clarification of the “acceptability criteria” which opened up this path and *de facto* obliged the participants in the (anti-)Romantic discussion to focus their attention on the dangers/benefits of introducing certain attributes of Romantic world-feeling into the gradually emancipating spiritual space of Croats, Czechs, Serbs, Slovaks or Russians.

In his famous treatise *On Literary Reciprocity Between the Various Strains and Ethnicities of the Slavic Nation*, Ján Kollár, in an attempt to program a cultural model desirable for all Slavs (corresponding to their spiritual predispositions and beneficial in the universal sense, i.e. useful for the development of humanity), strongly opposed the reception of only the most radical, Byronic “wing” of Romanticism. For in his eyes, the Romantic idea, although:

not without benefit and consequence to mankind has created and nurtured chivalry, Christian devotion, humility, love, subtleness, hope, longing, and many other virtues, but in more recent times it has lost almost all of its qualities and has borne, above all in the form of Byron’s muse, bitter fruit, growing into unnaturalness, sentimentalism and tenderness, then into dreaminess and deceitfulness, and finally into exaggeration, oversensitivity feverishness – in short, Byronism. (...) This kind of art, poetry or any fruit of education, which consists in violent and spasmodic upheaval and shaking by effacement, cannot, after all, lead peoples towards a new life, but can only exhaust them still further. (...) Every extreme, eccentricity, and caricature, arising from the oversaturation and excess of what is better, and leaving the forms prescribed by nature, is evidence of a declining taste and withering culture (Kollár, 1954, 76–77, 79–80).

This catalogue of harmful qualities (cardinal sins?) of nineteenth-century Romanticism, in Kollár’s reflection treated, by the way, in terms of a kind of degeneration of the original Romantic idea born in the Middle Ages – expressing authentic culture-creating values – not only explains (and justifies) the reasons for the aversion surrounding (often also: tracking) all manifestations of “Byronic extravagance”, but also, as it were, indirectly indicates what model of art/literature corresponds

with the nation-building project, or, alternatively: what artistic strategies should be at the disposal of the reborn national community in order to deepen that community, strengthen it and provide adequate arguments confirming its right to autonomous functioning. Thanks to Kollár's direct contacts with the leader of the Croatian National Revival, Ljudevit Gaj (1809–1872), his concept of a unique Slavic people, divided into four branches (tribes and languages) (Russian, Polish, Czech and Serbian) proved particularly influential in shaping the modern Croatian language as “Illyrian language” (cf. Stančić, 1997, 70–75). Gaj also made a strong impression on Kollár with his efforts to establish a unique Croatian language and script, which prompted Kollár to mention “Gaj Chorwat” in the second edition of *Slávy dcera* (1832; cf. Stančić, 1997, 73). Interpersonal and intertextual contacts among representatives of Slavic cultures thus generated the concepts of Slavophile, Pan-Slavism and Illyrianism as recognizable ideas of Slavic literatures of the Romantic period.

Kollár's vision of Slavic reciprocity (*Gegenseitigkeit*) (utopian from today's perspective and to some extent counter-productive, as it failed to take into account the differences in historical traditions differentiating the cultural systems of individual nations), while exposing the hope for the imminent fulfilment of the dream of a historical role for Slavs as envisaged by Herder, was based on imagological views about ethnic character, mythical in their provenance. This means, among other things, that imagological, rather than a realistic recognition of one's own conditions, governs the interpretation of reality, subordinating all action strategies to the construction of an “imagined community” (the term of Benedict Anderson), and consequently blocking access to any “cultural intruder” who might question the coherence of the whole project and break up this imaginary integration.

Bearing in mind the absolutisation of individualism and the cult of the autonomous character of artistic creation, Romanticism could be (and was) seen as such a – decaying and harmful – factor. Particularly as it was “a cultural intruder”, which in this case means: surrounded by a set of suspicions where everything that does not come from indigenous sources is often burdened and thus hinders the legitimisation of national emancipation. For, as Vladimír Macura argues in recapitulating the

concept of an ideal (representing a synthesis of all the valuable achievements of the European literary canon) so-called “Slavic poetry”, which, “purified” of every kind of deformity, will dominate the space of world writing in the future:

The set of functions of Revival literature did not include – theoretically at least – only the demand to catch up with modern Europe, but from the very beginning it served the purpose of developing a kind of filter in the form of designing an indigenous (in its essence harmonious, avoiding extremes, morally irreproachable) literature and thus building a dam to stop disturbing and destructive influences coming from the West. (...) The ideology of the Revival produced a coherent system of instructions and norms which in no way facilitated this catching up with European literature, and in particular, were hostile to Romanticism with its appreciation of individual subjectivity and the extraordinary. Western Europe of the time posed a threat to the revivalist project because it posed questions that (...) violated its ideological monolithicity. (...) The polemic against Romanticism unequivocally precedes, in effect, attempts to incorporate it (even if only in a truncated form) into the framework of national culture (Macura, 1995, 208–209).¹

The signals of the romanticisation of this cultural and literary space (poetics world-feeling, metaphysical anxieties, ennoblement of virgin nature, etc.) thus appeared – cautiously and tentatively at first – only on the margins of the dominant artistic and philosophical trends. In their time, these symptoms of “timid romanticisation” thus played a peripheral role. In some Slavic cultures, such as Croatian, Romanticism was known as a concept at the time when it was dominant in European literature, but it was paid no further attention (cf. Barac, 1954, 150–152). On the other hand, certain features of (pre)Romantic poetics were reflected in the early-19th-century Croatian literature, but they were largely adapted to the dominant trends of the National Revival (cf. Barac, 1954, 149).

1 Translated by Anna Gawarecka.

Many years later, signals of romanticisation reappeared in Slavic literatures, where they had previously been absent or underrepresented, in a more or less modified and camouflaged form, and in this way enriched the range of creative possibilities and expanded the boundaries of artistic imagination. They filled a peculiar gap, disrupting the continual character of the accumulation of elements of tradition and forcing the individual Slavic cultures (excluding, of course, the Polish and Russian cultures) to “make up for their romantic arrears”, as Maria Janion states (2000, 201)² citing the words of Adam Ważyk. In this case, the researcher has in mind the puzzling geography of the spread of surrealism in world literature and art, noting a peculiar regularity in this area, consisting in the comprehensive reception of the assumptions of Breton’s formation in places where Romanticism had not fully formed. This regularity, which is clearly visible, for example, in Czech literature, where traces of surrealism still define a considerable and significant part of artistic creation, can also be applied to decadent-symbolist trends from the turn of the 20th century, as well as found in postmodernists’ fascination with the “dark” sides of the national past. The weak presence of Romanticism, which in the first half of the nineteenth century gained a “bad reputation” as a carrier of destructive and decaying mechanisms, thus left behind, as time passed, an increasingly strongly felt deficiency giving rise to the need to eliminate this lack and to at least partially reorient cultural vectors, to “disenchant” the familiarised areas of tradition, to revive them and to shift them towards a universally respected centre. After all, Romanticism – understood as a universal aesthetic, world-view and anthropological formation, and not only as a closed literary and artistic movement limited to a strictly defined historical framework – appears in Slavic literatures in various, often original and modifying the “mainstream: European model, affecting the

2 Janion’s reflections concern French Surrealism. Referring to well-known research findings, the author attributes to it the role of a kind of cultural surrogate: “More than once this phenomenon has been pondered over and, characteristically, a similar conclusion has most often been reached. That surrealism was a substitute. Of what? Well, precisely the kind of romanticism that French literature lacked” (Janion, 2000, 200).

ways in which fictional reality is represented, (e.g. the spiritual portraits of the protagonists, the structure of the space depicted, the attitude to the nature/culture or individual/collective antinomy) and the nature of the meanings conveyed in literary works. In Croatian or Czech literatures, for example, romantic characteristics had a strong influence on (proto)realistic poetics of the second half of the 19th century, at the end of the 19th and during the 20th century Romantic poetics was revived in Neo-Romantic tendencies, and in the second half of the 20th century Croatian or Czech literary historiography recognized Romanticism as a key term for the inscription of the both National Revival literatures in the European context. This indicates that Romanticism can be employed as a functional and fruitful concept for comparative study of Slavic literatures. Such a comparative approach could contribute not only to a better understanding of Slavic romanticisms, but also of their mutual relations and of their relations to the wider European literary and cultural context. Moreover, such a comparative perspective could help to illuminate the influential 20th century “debate on Romanticism”, which resulted in the fact that “we do not have a theory that speaks of a Romanticism with a unified and precise nature and not of a plurality of truly paradoxical romanticisms” (Shureteh, 2013, 1).

The articles published in this issue of “Poznań Slavic Studies” bear witness to a branching reflection on the broad thematic and problematic fields related to the Slavonic variants of the romantic vision of the world and the poetics attempting to capture it. The authors of the individual texts aim, above all, at an innovative recognition of issues that have often already been discussed many times. With detective fervour, they trace traces of Romanticism in places where hitherto scholarly findings had found only attributes of rival currents: Classicism, Sentimentalism or Biedermeier. In doing so, they not only confirm the validity of the thesis of a selective Slavic approach to the Romantic philosophical-imaginative conglomerate, but also show that this imaginarium, even if negated and viewed according to the principles of the “hermeneutics of suspicion”, is an integral component of the European spiritual climate of the time. The focus of their attention is therefore on non-obvious areas of research exploration of this heritage: the role of women, the semantics of space, the situation of the subalterns and their subversive

strategies of struggle against the partitioners, mysterious folk rituals, the complex contest between individualistic and communal tendencies, the “discovery” of the qualities of untamed nature, the idea of the correspondence of arts, the rhetoric of emotions or meta-scientific reflections. Thus, researchers are succoured here by the latest memorial, gender, spatial, post-dependency, culturological, narratological and intermedial/intersemiotic/intertextual theories and studies. There is no shortage of comparative approaches either, revealing the surprising and unexpected colligations that bind together specifically Slavic variants of Romantic poetics and its twentieth-century continuations with their Western and Northern European counterparts.

These articles thus shed new light on seemingly long-discussed and exploited research problems and dilemmas, formulate previously unasked questions and provide attempts to answer them. After all, the latest humanist methodologies offer a chance to read the Romantic tradition in cross-sections and exegetical planes that deviate (though not necessarily contradict) from interpretations that have been established in the customs of literary studies and are often “taken on faith”. May the hypotheses and conclusions presented in these texts become a source and focus of inspiration for finding as yet undiscovered artistic spaces and spiritual worlds that enliven this tradition and make it a subject of discussion that continually yields fruitful and surprising results.

*Suzana Coha,
Anna Gawarecka,
Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković*

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