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## Romanticism – Folklore – Literature: On the Romantic Fascination with Folklore

### 1. Definition

Ethnologists, anthropologists, and scholars of literature dealing with the complex field of relations between high, popular, and folk art tend to repeat that: “In a cultural system of each community and each ethnic group, an important part of mental culture is connected with folklore. Folklore satisfies all needs of an ideological, magical, normative, artistic, religious, and carnivalesque character. It plays an essential role in social communication and, as a result, in the transfer of culture as well” (Bukowska–Floreńska 66).

The word itself (*folk* and *lore*, as in its German prototype *Volkskunde*, standing together to mean people and knowledge) was first used by the British antiquarian William John Thoms to mean “all activities, rituals, customs, superstitions, songs, and adages of historical origin” (Bauman 29). The popularity of the name itself is confirmed by its strong position in a number of languages (German *Folklore*, Spanish *folclore*, French *folklore*, Italian *folklore*, Czech *folklór*, Russian *Фольклор*). Currently the term is applied both to forms of traditional culture, and to the discipline devoted to the study of them, more and more frequently called folklore studies (Bauman 29).

A considerable amount of hesitation accompanies any attempt at delineating some boundaries between folklore studies and ethnography. Julian Krzyżanowski, editor of the *Polish Folklore Dictionary* claims that:

“the whole material called folklore includes phenomena of different kinds: general, common, non-individual customs, rituals, demonology, as well as meteorological, medical, professional associations, and elements of artistic culture – verbal and musical components of what can be called oral literature.

With such an understanding of the issue, folklore does not include only one discipline, whose status can be disputable – this would encompass sculpture and painting, together with decorative art of embroidery and paper cutting. All these are impossible to be refused a place within folklore as such, since the concept we are dealing with builds an essential bridge between material and mental aspects of culture” (Krzyżanowski 106).

The concept of traditional, folk culture appeared in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century as “a part of a unified vision of language, culture, literature and ideology

in the service of romantic nationalism” (Bauman 29). Richard Bauman discusses two valid ideas connected with the perception of folklore by an external observer: “According to the first approach, folklore is a worthless, antirational remnant of a previous stage of social development of the human being” (31). Supporters of the second idea, which Bauman calls Romantic, see in folklore a reaction against an insensitive Enlightenment and the pseudo-science of the writing of the time. Bauman believes that a specific “Romanticisation of folklore” follows Johann Gottfried Herder and his ideas of *das Volk* and a folk tradition. Bauman traces the basic assumptions of Herder’s argumentation, and claims that the Romantic glorification of folklore (and all similar phenomena that followed the Romantic approach) results from the fact that folklore contains the very foundations of national culture that reflect the identity of the people. Important criteria for understanding the phenomenon under discussion here are the following: orality (folklore texts function in oral form, their transcriptions are secondary texts), observances (rituals, games, songs, dances, identifying elements of clothing), specificity (folklore differs according to place; it always has its features and belongs to somebody), and collectiveness (folklore is group feature and activity). These criteria are also connected with characteristic elements of folk artistry, expressed through oral art and handcraft (clothing, folk products). Bauman stresses the role of tradition as a natural carrier and, at the same time, a process that guarantees particular folklore elements be seen as traditional, that is, temporally uninterrupted.

## **2. Folklore Message or Romantic Convention?**

As I said, in Romanticism we can trace the advent of folklore. It is important to note that the grounds for this fascination in Poland were strikingly different that they are now. Krzyżanowski, again, offers a comment:

“The first folklorists-ethnographers, who worked within the aura of Romantic enthusiasm for folk culture and its manifestations, saw their basic task to lie in collecting and making available for the public all the oral works that existed. This enthusiasm allowed them to overcome numerous difficulties of transportation, natural phenomena, and the specific character of rural culture. Biographies of Dołęga-Chodakowski and Kolberg indicate that these enthusiasts wandered on foot for weeks on end, cold, hungry, and exhausted. It must have happened more than once that they had to flee a village in the face of some rather belligerent doubts that the locals had about the whole idea of making detailed notes and sketches of the countryside” (110).

Notes made of folk songs, sayings, and legends from different regions became, with time, a basis for a more detailed study of Polish folklore and its different mutations. A lot of attention has recently been paid to Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Lithuanian folklore elements within the artistic work of numerous Romantic authors. It was only in the second

half of the nineteenth century, with the first attempts at studying folklore as such, that Polish folkloristic discourse gradually achieved a degree of scholarly character (Krzyżanowski 110). Symptomatic as it may seem, the interest in folk culture that was generated at that time was closely linked to literature and art of the time (see folk inspirations in Chopin or Moniuszko).

Thus, what Romantics do with folk motifs and how they subject the folklore of different regions of nineteenth-century Poland (including elements of Ukrainian and Belarusian folk culture) to existing literary conventions, is the central issue of my analysis. If we look at the major works of Polish Romanticism – *Ballads and Romances* and *Forefather's Eve (Dziady)* by Mickiewicz and a number of texts by Kraszewski, Lenartowicz, and Pol – we will clearly see that folk culture is one of their prominent elements, though it is always poetically, stylistically, and discursively reworked. Songs and motifs taken from folk culture, as well as free experiments with folk style, are introduced into Romantic texts or even become the central elements of their composition. A good example is “*Kalina*”, a poem by Teofil Lenartowicz, in which: “Poetic skill is extraordinary, especially the artistic use of some of the most beautiful folk songs, and of parallelism (so typical for folk poetics) that comments on the human condition by referring to natural phenomena” (Nowakowski xxiii).

Again, the poet “differs from a copyist tracing a pattern” (Nowakowski cv). The local culture of Mazovia, a region in central Poland, inspires him, but not to a degree that would disable his awareness of poetic conventions, which rework the material on some emotional and imaginative grounds. This convention allows the poem to offer a depth, desired not only by a country girl with a broken heart, but also by a representative of the intelligentsia. Even so-called folk protagonists (Karusia in Mickiewicz, the Cossacks in Goszczyński) can be seen rather as embodiments of what the epoch sought – authenticity, zeal, courage – and not as genuine representatives of the nineteenth-century peasantry. A philosophical-anthropological addition, visible in the presentation of these characters, determines their function in the texts. As I will try to explain below, similar reservations can be applied to the concrete, regionalized, rural background of some of the works of the period.

I would also like to add that the Romantic, affirmative way of looking at the folk and its productions, although initially popular only among artists, with time started to affect political and ideological discourses (manumission of peasants, etc.) and, subsequently, a flourishing ethnography and the disciplines connected with it. This particular attitude is, unfortunately, still present in much of what is written by folk and literature scholars. Maria Janion notices the following issue:

"Folklore occupies a privileged position in modern Polish culture, but this does not mean that the former is monolithic and is not involved in internal literary debate that has been more or less heated since Romanticism. It was Romanticism that irreversibly... put the mark of elevation on folk culture. The Polish cultural gesture inherited from Romanticism almost inevitably associates folklore with authenticity, honesty, spontaneity, familiarity, attachment to land and custom, patriotic zeal, and devotion. It almost always treats the village as a source of genuine truth, clean, unspoiled by the slime of civilization – and creates the peasant as an embodiment of all the virtues, a redeemer of the nation – both the archetypal Piast the Wheelwright, and a bearer of all other archetypes" (Janion qtd in Sulima 60–61).

### 3. Folklore and Exoticism

One of the problems that come to mind when we read the major texts of Romanticism is to what degree, if at all, the image of folklore of a given region is a mutation of the exotic background presented in the texts. A good example of how folklore and exoticism are related is the genre of the poetic novel, so popular in Europe in the initial phase of Romanticism. The genre, including works by, among others, Byron, Pushkin<sup>1</sup>, Mickiewicz, and Słowacki, was a symptom of a new attitude to the literary work, whose genre identity resulted from a free, associative absorption of different elements. Among the typical components of the poetic novel we could mention its specific fragmentary narration, open composition, the nihilistic rebel hero, an exotic background, and contemporary themes. Polish equivalents of Byron's tales (e.g. Antoni Malczewski's *Maria*, Goszczyński's *The Kaniow Castle*, Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod*) comply with these basic rules, although, with a free attitude to form, they are rather reworkings of the genre than its genuine continuations.

One particular aspect of the poetic novel seems especially important here: the exotic background of the events presented. In the works of Byron (*The Corsair*, *The Giaour*, *Lara*, *The Bride of Abydos*), it involved the oriental scenery of alluring, if rather non-specific, landscapes of the East, characteristic garments and requisites (turbans, shawls), as well as vocabulary (Allah, giaour, harem, odalisque). In the novel by Goszczyński the same function is played by Ukrainian folklore. Although Ukraine is also the setting of Malczewski's work, there we are dealing with another version of it – "noble" and without folk elements. *The Kaniow Castle*, in turn, follows Byron in the presentation of setting. There is not only geographical and historical context (references to Cossack rebels and the Massacre of Uman), but also cultural association with Ukrainian peasantry

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<sup>1</sup> Although Pushkin did not write poetic novels as such, some of his narrative poems are clearly inspired by elements of the genre (composition, narration, type of protagonist, background, etc.).

(presentation of their garments, mentality, and folk beliefs). The text makes extensive use of lexical borrowings from Ukrainian. We should also stress that exoticism and folklore both share an intellectual distance between the observer and the object of perception. The distance produces the impression of unfamiliarity, and generates interest or dislike towards the world and characters presented. At this point, we may want to think more closely about the function that Romantic exoticism played. Marta Piwińska writes that “it is all about offering local colour. Ethnographic and geographic elements are foregrounded. The poetics of unfamiliarity dominates with its impressions of savage, unusual, attractive, if at times repulsive, strangeness” (Piwińska 655).

The most common of the uncommon exoticisms of Romantic literature was, of course, orientalism – present not only in Byron, but also in Mickiewicz and Goethe, linked to a new anthropological understanding of the man of the East not as a Rousseau-like type of “good savage”, but as “a rebel against the laws of the land” (Piwińska 655). In Byron, this perspective was expressed through the specific creation of the hero – a key genre trait of the poetic novel, present also in some of the Polish works following the genre. When combined with the geographical-historical background of orientalism, in Byron this offered an attractive space for dialog between the author and his European readers, in which they could embark on a “journey of the heart” and express the nostalgias of their generation<sup>2</sup>.

As part of a more general trend all over Europe, a similar function was also assigned to Ukrainian exoticism (Byron’s *Mazeppa*, Pushkin’s *Poltava*). When it comes to *The Kaniow Castle*, however, we may wonder if the elements of exoticism mentioned above have the same function as they do in the narrative poems of these English and Russian authors, or whether, perhaps, they are more similar to what was dominant in the works of Taras Shevchenko. While Byron and Pushkin treated Ukraine, and the whole East, as an attractive background for expressing concrete anthropological, social, or political content, in the case of Goszczyński and Shevchenko, we face another attitude. In these two authors, we notice a need to elevate the homely, native, neglected folk culture, to make it worthy of literary or artistic adaptation. Shevchenko is still a more dramatic case in point. His work touches upon his social background (he was born the son of a peasant, later sponsored by friendly painters, and allowed to study at the Fine Arts Academy in Petersburg) and the status of the Ukrainian language, which was only then gaining a literary value. This context makes us believe, however,

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<sup>2</sup> Irena Dobrzycka, biographer of Lord Byron, believes that “the poet clearly and thrillingly expressed the thoughts and feelings of his generation: fury, despair, rebelliousness against the existing moral, social and political order. [...] Their ‘fury of despair’, their conflict between the need to act [...] and incapacity for action are reflected in the poems about Selima, Konrad, or Lara” (Dobrzycka 49).

that the poetic diction the poet uses is no longer the local rural dialect of illiterate peasantry.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from the reading of Goszczyński's work. Born and brought up in Ukraine, in *The Kaniow Castle* the poet presents a world saturated with the folk culture of the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands.

The above mentioned elements of appearance, mentality, and belief become in *The Kaniow Castle* elements of national heritage that, at the same time, express the spirit of a wider Slavic culture. Michał Grabowski, a contemporary literary critic, wrote about the Ukrainian school of Polish poetry:

"Our whole poetry is based on the familiar spirit of all Slavic regions, so rich in ready poetry and in unspoiled epic shapes. Justice to them – to the poets of our time who struggle to make public the customs and poetry of the folk – alive, not yet lost, not distant, but pulsating, originating in the ancient cradle of a world so different from ours. [...] We could assume that our poets [Goszczyński, Malczewski, Zaleski – A.W.] give a hand to the hard labor, initiated all along the Slavic land, of casting some light onto our misty past" (Grabowski 82).

Unlike Goszczyński, Byron and Pushkin were not interested in the folklore of Ukraine.

"[Pushkin's *Poltava*] owes its specific character to beautiful pictures, which would inevitably come from a fantastically gifted writer. Among these we could list the scenery presented in battle descriptions, and the description of Peter the Great. Still, however, the image of Ukraine is offered only as a public profile of a historical kind; the intimate, private lives of the land, the individual character of the people, their customs, the provenance of nations and landscapes (...) are not given attention. Figures who act according to their names and follow only the experience they know are Ukrainian, but in their speech and their motivations there is no character, no custom so typical of the people at the time. And this specificity, we should remember, with its savage shape, is the most useful and fruitful material for poetic reworking" (Grabowski 77).

My example of a Polish poetic novel clearly shows that the Romantic perception of Ukrainian folklore exceeds the concept of exoticism (and Ukrainianism as one of its mutations), so much enjoyed by Byron and Pushkin in *Mazeppa* and *Poltava*. Although all the works I mentioned are marked by some intellectual distance – both of the author and of the reader – the function of the Ukrainian background is different. Goszczyński goes beyond the simple association of Ukraine with the steppes and the savage, free man living at peace with nature. He enriches this image with motifs of folk culture: customs, mentality, and demonology as elements that affect human life. The poet, in the social-political context of the 1768 Massacre of Uman, presents these folk aspects in a contrastive manner, opposing the lives of Polish noblemen with the lives of Ukrainian

peasants. On the other hand, however, *The Kaniow Castle* makes one ask a question about the identity and originality of folklore.

#### **4. Goszczyński – a Folklorist. From *The Kaniow Castle* to *The Diary of Travel to the Tatra Mountains***

The influence of Romantic literary conventions on the presentation of Ukrainian folklore in Goszczyński's work is the more visible, if we look at the creation of the principal characters. Maria Janion believes that "Nebaba is a Cossack-Romantic hero with a broken consciousness" (*Gorączka romantyczna* 344). She goes on to claim that "the strong traits of a Byronic corsair-rebel must be unknown to a leader of Cossack mutiny" (344).

This kind of central figure is, as I said before, a conventional genre element, which, in my opinion, makes the tragic story of the hero open to more than folk wisdom. The protagonist becomes a universal symbol, "an Everyman, doomed to devastating, unending evil" (*Gorączka romantyczna* 344).

The Romantic attitude to folklore is visible in yet another of Goszczyński's works – in *The Diary of a Journey to the Tatra Mountains* (*Dziennik podróży do Tatrów*). As Janion puts it, this very text makes Goszczyński "the father of ethnography" and "a poetic Columbus" (*Gorączka romantyczna* 355) of the mountain regions of Poland. Years later he was to be followed by other writers, such as Witkiewicz and Przerwa-Tetmajer. *The Diary* seems, however, very much heterogeneous in terms of genres and style. Stanisław Sierotwiński, in 1958, wrote that the text "judged from our point of view reveals elements of reportage, travel monograph, ethnographic study, literary essay, and folk tale" (lxxi). Some scholars see it as one of the first folkloristic documents of Polish culture.

The image of the mountain people, their products and customs is, however, far from scholarly objectivism. The circumstances in which *The Diary* was written are interesting. The opening passage of the text includes a date of 4 April 1832 – a moment immediately after the end of the November Uprising, in which Goszczyński took part. The poet notes the following:

"For five months I have remained in the country which I missed since childhood. (...) I am grateful to fate for being here. No, not to fate, but to God. (...) For a few months I have been as if in a port just before a horrible storm that rages at the heights of the world. A small port, not entirely safe, but at least for a time I can rest, take a breath and prepare for further storms. This is the way I see the village and the cottage where I am now living. It is pleasure to reflect on the place and the country" (Goszczyński 6–7).

The opinions of an amateur ethnographer and folklorist, who travels around the mountains, are accompanied by the opinions of a Polish ex-insurrectionist, who

is being hunted by the Tsarist police, a rebel who finds shelter among his fellow citizens – the mountain people. What is more, the characteristic commentary, which Goszczyński offers all through his diary, is equally important – it includes weather forecasts, folk tales, superstitions, beliefs, and other elements, which the poet summarizes by claiming that “there are perhaps more predictions of this sort – and for all possible situations. The people of these regions are worth investigating for the poetic dimension that they possess, based on reality, on a deep spiritual coexistence with nature” (74).

The presentation of the land and the specific style Goszczyński uses are also crucial to the text. We can clearly sense here the imagination of a Romantic poet:

“Everywhere the cattle grazed. On the spiral peak of Yew Rock a dozen or more young shepherds, still children, danced and sang. There was strangeness in this image. Their clothes, tight and short, open at sleeves, tied at the collar, floating in the whirling dance. Their movements fast, agile, floating. Thus the sun presented to me a group of supraerial dancers” (69–70).

A mountain dweller, like a Cossack in another work by the same author, becomes “the realization of distant or present ideals of natural folk life, of communal feeling, and of free existence” (*Gorączka romantyczna* 325). All this is, above all, a projection of Romantic imagination which saw in it some universal values relating to man and nation. Again, as in *The Kaniow Castle*, we are dealing with the perspective of the Slavic land, of a cultural and spiritual heritage that shaped a genuine part of Polish identity, though one that was belittled by civilization,

## 5. Summary

The work of Goszczyński clearly shows how the literature of Romanticism made extensive use of folk motifs. Not only the early novel *The Kaniow Castle*, but also the later *Diary of a Journey to the Tatra Mountains* offer typical Romantic conventions and refer in an interesting way to central about Polish and Slavic identities. At the same time, however, they clearly point to the essential role conventions played in Romantic presentation of the rural cultures of Poland and Ukraine. Descriptions of the customs and mentality of the folk are in a large part effects of poetic, literary elevation (the Byronic hero being a good example). Still, there is also a turn from exoticism to native culture, in which the “spirit of the nation” is to be found. These elements, together with exotic or biblical colouring, become yet another convention that departs quite strikingly from folklore as such.



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