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Children's Folklore and Its History in Poland

Does the phenomenon of the children's folklore still exist? It is difficult to answer the question without continuous contact with groups of children, as folklore has always been the attribute of the collective, not the individual. Produced and distributed by communities of children, children's folklore can be divided into shepherd folklore, backyard folklore, school folklore, or summer camps folklore. In a strict definition, folklore is a form of traditional culture impossible to be retained anywhere else but in human memory, in closed societies with the dominance of oral communication and its contents. The term, however, seems difficult to apply because of numerous alterations in the mode of a child's life and in the course of contemporary childhood characterized, for example, by the disappearance or transformation of the types of children's communities which, traditionally, generated folklore. The recent expansion of electronic communication devices in children's lives is here an important factor which begs a question about the modes of the children's specific activity: should we examine children-created blogs and text messages (abbreviations); photographs and films made, generated and disseminated via mobile phones; or media-related collectorship and gathering? This is perhaps the folklore of the so-called net-generation. But the question is whether net-folklore phenomena still belong to folklore or not.

In the 1970s scholars suggested that written works such as diaries, notebooks with lyrics, words of wisdom, etc., were valid subjects of research. Jerzy Cieślowski proposed to exchange the term "children's folklore" for the more extensive term "children's subculture". Childhood studies are nowadays seen as a broad notion encompassing numerous disciplines scrutinizing that area.

The attitude towards children's folklore – and the means of defining it – is delineated by the changing philosophy of childhood that has developed out of human philosophy bridging two contradictory ideas. The first one claims that a child is an incomplete being shaped by adult-organised processes of upbringing which effectively inscribe the "white tablet" of its soul and mind; whereas the second one claims that a child entering the world is fully equipped with respect to identity, whilst upbringing is merely to support natural development and not to thwart it. Yet the notion according to which the aim of an upbringing is to lead a child from natural savagery into

adult culture has in fact presupposed that the spontaneous forms of children's activity are insufficient in themselves to get scholarly attention. By way of digression, it needs to be added that even today children are usually reluctant to share with adults what they distribute amongst themselves. When asked whether they are familiar with some poems or anecdotes written by their friends or acquaintances, children tend to answer that they are, but add that these are mainly "stupid," "pointless," "offensive," or "valueless," which might suggest that such evaluations are adults' not theirs.

It is universally acknowledged that the culmination of interest in the problematics of children was the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Ellen Key published her famous *The Century of the Child* (1909). That point in time, however, was preceded by a period of an increasing interest in childhood in pedagogy as well as other social sciences such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Equally crucial are the literary and other artistic penetrations into the world of childhood in search of secrets and of hopes concealed in it. Thus, a number of aspects of a child's identity associated with art seemed fascinating; for example, freshness and unconventionality of perception, simple-mindedness and honesty in expressing thoughts, an ability to dwell in the world of fantasies and imagination, and more extensive sensitivity than in an adult person. As a result, the analogy between a child's psychology and an artist's psychology was drawn; an artist was someone one who did not lose some of childhood's gifts (see Papuzińska 1991).

One of the theoretical approaches which exerted influence upon the interest in childhood was the theory of cultural anachronisms put forward by Edward Burnett Taylor, a British anthropologist, the main representative of evolutionism (*Anthropology*, 1881) at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The theory in question dealt with the remnants of old kinds of behaviour that had lost their social functions and remained in customs and culture solely as relics. Such relics of ancient rituals and beliefs are still significantly operative in children's behaviour, now in the form of games and vocabulary accompanying them, despite the apparent absence of their original functionality. Similar to archaeology's reconstructing the life of past generations by means of examination of graves, remnants of old settlements, landfills, and the debris of ancient cities underneath the seas, ethnography scrutinises old customs and socially accepted types of behaviour on the basis of relics and vestiges present in vocabulary, nomenclature, games, clothes, and practically meaningless pieces of etiquette. Such a process of investigation resembles estimating the size of a floating iceberg on the basis of an examination of the small part of it visible above the water.

An identical method of analysis was applied in other social disciplines developing in the same period. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis elevated the importance of childhood because it was treated as a reason for an adult's behaviour; the unconscious was examined by means of dreams, fleeting impressions and slips of the tongue, and a person's earliest memories. The world of childhood, neglected on the level of the whole society, inaccessible and irretrievably lost on the level of the individual, began to be seen as worthy of attention and study.

Janusz Korczak was a very perceptive investigator of children's customs. As a boy, he created a scientific project entitled "A Child". It was constructed with classic anthropological categories, including, for example, beliefs and superstitions, social norms, collecting, trade, and exchange. Korczak treated children's communities as self-sufficient and separate constructs with their own system of "wisdom" and values, far more complex than adults'. He called the child's world an "unknown civilisation" and encouraged its examination. As an observer of children himself, Korczak had at his disposal a vast personal experience amassed in the course of a long period of participatory observation. Like one American ethnographer who joined a tribe of Native Americans in order to scrutinize their customs from inside, Korczak "joined" children and their environment. He spent a majority of his life watching children in various situations, even at night since he slept with them in one bedroom on and off, or allowed some of them to sleep over in his room. His investigations were buttressed by the collecting of documents of everyday life, analyses of the subjects of arguments and disputes, what they bet and what aims they had, what objects they collected and produced, what rules they followed in life and how those rules were constituted. He also began to note the children's stories whose fragments were later published in a short book entitled *Wspomnienia z maleńkości* [*The Memories of Being Small*]. Although Korczak did not collect what today is termed as a child's verbal folklore, he was interested in children's language. His notes include numerous examples of expressions and nicknames from the Warsaw dialect of the time, and phraseological clichés used in discussions and quarrels.

Korczak, however, predominantly focused on the social behaviour of children. The result of this interest can be found in the writer's literary and pedagogical works. They include the descriptions of beliefs, superstitions, dreams, plans, and the scripts of games and sports such as the "stone game". Gambling also frequently features in the games, and Korczak paid special attention to the bets laid by children. As we know, he tried to transform this passion into a tendency of self-development. Maryna Falska wrote in *Our Home* brochure:

"Spring is usually the first to mark the beginning of a wave of gambling games; and copious they are in each children's community – and sometimes – the games vary profoundly.

And attempts to employ these predilections, these preferences for educational ends and purposes ... have grown deeply into the life of the community" (Falska 94)¹.

Korczak's notes concerning children's collecting are equally striking.

"He was making an old coin up; collected used notebooks to make paper popguns, seashells, light bulbs, cinematographic films. ... he had a porcelain elephant, a Napoleon figurine, a broken mirror, small forks for chocolate, a blunt file, a broken pencil-case, one skate, a hat for a doll, a pack of old cards ... and, obviously, old postcards" (Korczak 162)².

Since the beginning of the last century, children's verbal folklore has become a point of interest for such authors as Zofia Rogoszówna who has amassed small pieces of speech, songs and games "written down from other people's mouths and my memories of childhood". They were partially published after her death in three collections: *Srocza kaszkę warzyła* [*A Magpie Making a Porridge*] (1920), *Klituś, bajduś* [*Prittle Prattle*] (1925), and *Koształki opałki* [*Horse Feathers*] (1928).

From among the texts considered as the most interesting by scholars, the counting rhyme has played a special role because of its intriguing function, genesis, and formal characteristics. It is a short text of a changeless rhythmic sequence used to establish roles in a game; the one counting out utters the rhyme pointing out subsequent people, and the persons standing where the counting stops at the end of the text are excluded from further game. Some researchers attribute the origin of the game to rituals of some ancient tribes used to decimate captives or elect an animal for a ritual killing. The contents of a text do not really matter since the most vital feature of the text is the inviolable rhythmic modes which make it sure that the counting out is "fair;" that is, destiny elects the victims. In the stock of counting rhymes we can find texts with a specific plot as well as those of asemantic sounds and of unclear or obsolete meaning. Krystyna Pisarkowa, the most famous Polish researcher into counting rhymes, in the course of comparative studies of the rhymes from different countries, discovered numerous similarities and borrowings from other languages, proving that they move internationally and inter-penetrate each other across ethnic boundaries.

¹ "Wiosna zazwyczaj pierwsze hasło daje. Pierwsze listki młode – gra – w zielone, sparzone, siadane, kolory, szpileczki, kosmate, kieszonkowe, pamiętne – w każdej zbiorowości dziecięcej – okresami – rojno od zakładów przerożnych.

Próba wyzyskania skłonności tej, tych upodobań – dla celów wychowawczych (...) mocno się ustaliła, zrosła z życiem gromady" (Falska 94).

² "Tu wytrajlował starą monetę, zbierał wypisane kajety na strzały i pukawki, to muszelki, to wypalone lampki elektryczne, klisze kinematograficzne. (...) miał stonia z porcelany, figurki.

Napoleona, pęknięte lustro, widelczyki do czekoladek, pilnik tępy, piórnik złamany, jedną łyzwę, kapelusik dla lalki, stare karty do gry, sztukę taką, żeby zdjąć drut z druta, ale nie na siłę, no i, rozumie się, pocztówki zapisane" (Korczak 162).

Easy to remember and familiar for many adults from childhood, counting rhymes do not, of course, exhaust the repertoire of folklore texts. Children's folklore includes numerous texts used in games; in fact games characterize the entirety of a child's activity. We can thus enumerate other texts accompanying children in games and play, such as name-calling, incantations, tongue twisters, and proverbs. Children's subculture also consists of a number of children's products now considered traditional, such as paper popguns, sand castles, constructions from cones, leaves, colourful pieces of glass, or bottle caps. What is specific about the culture of playing is its autotelism, process-orientation instead of result-orientation, often linked with the momentary destruction of a given product (for example, the destruction of a laboriously constructed sand castle with a single leap). The forms of literary activity of a small child, usually associated with a certain kind of movement and a repetition of the same words or phrases (so-called *ekikiki*), bring to mind magical practices of a shaman resulting in a state of confusion verging on narcotic intoxication (*ilinx*). *Kółko graniaste* [A Square Circle] is a classic script for such an activity, in which the gradually accelerating pace of uttering a text, accompanied by running in circles, ends in the loss of balance and fall of all participants.

Some research questions the absurdity and uselessness of these activities, since, at first glance pointless, those games, like any other games, play a number of roles that facilitate a child's proper development. Moreover, their true meanings have been discovered by pedagogy in the last couple of decades (tongue twisters are now put to use in the speech-language pathology exercises; other specially written texts can be found in the oeuvre of Agnieszka Frączek). These texts are also functional in a group of children and individuals alike, by regulating social roles, establishing the hierarchy in a group, channelling conflicts in its own form of, say, revilements, proverbs, nicknames, etc.

It seems that the carnivalization of the world, the poetics of the absurd, the vision of an upside-down reality became a very crucial area of literary influences drawn from children's subculture. The upside-down world (presenting reversed relations between authority and serfdom, wisdom and stupidity, childhood and adulthood, *sacrum* and *profanum*, wealth and poverty) does not only appear in children's subculture, but also in the entire folk culture. In children's psyche and customs, however, the literary motif plays a special role. Firstly, it functions as a compensatory mechanism; secondly, it verifies the logic of how a child sees reality; and thirdly, resulting from the two preceding points, it is the origin of fun and humour. Furthermore, the upside-down world is the area of the children's counter-culture in which logical and experiential relations as well as the set and axiomatic norms and values become negated. One of the popular subjects, therefore, is the profanation of food, as when something inedible (soap noodles

[kluski z mydłem]) or repulsive (a soup made of a dead body [zupa z trupa]) replaces normal and edible food items. These horrid recipes are often accompanied by a so-called sickening game, in which a recipe describes a meal a sensitive person has right in front of him or her at the moment. The recipe sometimes takes the form of a poem illustrating analogous situations:

“One old John kneading dough
Noticed well when his snot
Fell right into the pot
Thought it was a noodle so
– He boiled and ate it”³.

Similarly, the subject of ridicule can be a disease, handicap, or death (or rites accompanying it). “Funny” poems about funerals with dilapidated hearses or coffins, or the dead falling out of graves are all popular subjects of this sort. Other religious elements can be profaned as well: consider derisive rewritings of Christmas carols (a drunkard instead of Jesus), nonverbal blasphemous “tricks,” or comedic games resembling masses, weddings, or funerals.

The ludic blackening of holiness refers also to the secular realm, for example, official events, celebrated texts, or canonical hymns; the jokes about concentration camps enumerated by Simonides can certainly be included in that same category. Whereas on its margins we can find political jokes, somehow related to general social activity in that area, often copied from adults and distributed, but also those produced by children themselves. In recent years, advertising slogans and phraseological clichés or quotations placed in various new and improbable contexts have become a frequent motif of travesty and parody. Further, in the same category we can include games of linguistic deformation. Attempting to describe the method of children’s verbal games, we can see a very important, of not dominating, role of deconstruction. The poetics of “prittle-prattle” pertains to violations of logical and semantic relations and replacing them with either absurd or chaos, devoid of any cause-and-affect sequencing:

“and a doctor was drunk
and he smelled like a skunk
and the skunk was furry

³ A translation of the following passage:

Stary lcek: kluski gniółt
wyleciał mu z nosa glut
a on myślał że to kluska
wsadził sobie do garnuszka
ugotował i zjadł.

See the study by Dorota Simonides for more examples.

and out it would scurry
into an open yard
where the doctor's caught off guard ..."⁴

A similar mechanism can be found on the verbal level, where single words become the subject of the operation; they are destroyed into syllables and put in an alternative order⁵ or undergo a derivation process⁶. Verbal traps on the articulation level are also popular. This kind of game is based on the idea of competition (*agon*) and presupposes an obvious division of roles: into those of a sly and of a stupid person. We can also include them in specific rites of passage, in which a novice has to undergo various, frequently demeaning or ridiculing, trials. Undoubtedly, however, under the surface of nonsense, a deeper rational wisdom resides; without it, there would be no fun.

Examples of poetry of nonsense introduced into children's literature can be found in some nineteenth-century works, for example, by Stanisław Jachowicz. English nursery rhymes were also an important source of inspiration. The turning point, however, took place in the 1930s when these devices of nonsense became suddenly used in children's poetry; poems by Jan Brzechwa, Julian Tuwim, and Stefan Themerson are good cases in point⁷. Their poems, instead of being moralising, moving or educational, were acts of fun brought about through the negation of the dominant order, knowledge, and hierarchy, and a quasi-deconstruction of information that a child was familiar with. The above three authors do not only use ready patterns from folk works, as Tuwim does in his poem entitled *Głupi Gabryś* [*Stupid Gabriel*], which paraphrases a well-known piece drawn from Oskar Kolberg's works, but also uses the folk method to create a new poetic phenomena. Yet traditional pedagogy accepted the invasion of the upside-down world into the children's world with some reservations, as the case of long controversies regarding Jan Brzechwa prove. Irena Skowrońska in *Antologia polskiej literatury dziecięcej* [*An Anthology of the Polish Children's Literature*], edited by her

⁴ A translation of the following passage:

a doktor był pijany,
przylepił się do ściany,
a ściana była mokra,
przylepił się do okna,
a okno było duże,
wyleciał na podwórze,
a na podwórzu grali,
doktora za nos złapali... .

⁵ "Nie naliśał pistu, bo go pałał boleć" can be translated as "He didn't like a wren since his hunger was finting".

⁶ "Był urżnięty, rżnięty, nięty, ęty, ty, y" can be translated as "He was terrorised, rorised, rised".

⁷ The poems by Brzechwa and Tuwim are very well-known, whereas those by Themerson, *Był gdzieś haj taki kraj* ([*There Used to Be That Country*]1937) and *Była gdzieś taka wieś* ([*There Used to Be That Village*]1937), are in fact ground-breaking, despite the fact that they were not published between the wars.

and published soon after World War II, warned against Brzechwa's poems. She blamed the poet for simplifying poetry for children as "mindless gibberish devoid of any valuable content," in which "the teaching function has been rejected from the start" (Skowrońska); neither was the genre of the poetics of absurd and fun accepted in the socialist realist period. However, it transpired as being extremely productive and attractive for young audiences and was taken up by Wanda Chotomska, Ludwik Jerzy Kern, and Danuta Wawitow; while in the 1990s it was popular with authors such as Małgorzata Strzałkowska, Marcin Brykczyński, and others, who employed and enriched it with new subjects and forms (Papuzińska 2000: 82).

Works by Jerzy Cieślowski ennoble the tradition of children's folklore and the reason for its multifarious presence in literature in general. His most important work, *Wielka zabawa* [*The Great Fun*], was published in 1967, harbingering a breakthrough in the way of thinking about both writing for children and about childhood. Cieślowski attempts to liberate children's literature from an excess of utilitarian purpose, claiming that "all that adults have created for children, that children have accepted from adults, and that they have created themselves, served predominantly for the sake of fun" (6). Cieślowski's concepts illustrate the influence of the Dutch philosopher and historian of culture, Johan Huizinga, and his works such as *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919) and *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1938). By emphasising the formative function of games in culture, Cieślowski discovered and delineated a massive area of the "despised land," that is, children's own literary activity manifested in children's folklore texts, permeating children's environment and inextricably connected with games. He was the first Polish scholar who included folklore texts within children's literature, made it a subject of literary theory, and took it into account when editing anthologies of children's literature. Therefore, he did not only redefine that kind of literature, but also changed the formula of a child's participation in the process of literary communication. Thereby a child, instead of being an object of the persuasive mechanics of literature, became an equally vital being who transformed given literary impulses, making them its own. In *The Great Fun* Cieślowski pointed out one more underestimated phenomenon in literature; that is, the influential presence of the theme of childhood in works by Andrzej Bursa, Miron Białoszewski, Jerzy Harasymowicz, and others. Hence the works by Cieślowski, his co-workers, and students did not perhaps change the way of writing for children, but the way of thinking and analysing it.

In the next decade, a monograph by Dorota Simonides, *Współczesny folklor słowny dzieci i nastolatków* [*Contemporary Verbal Folklore of Children and Teenagers*], was the most exhaustive and complete study, compiling the stock of the Polish children's

subculture. Beginning with a classic definition of verbal folklore as texts “well known within a community, circulating in an oral form, and living as collective and anonymous works,” the author collected a great deal of work from various regions of Poland. The material was subsequently classified and divided into groups such as rhymes in games, satirical rhymes, parodies, children’s horror, beliefs, and superstitions. She also analysed the routes of folklore dissemination demonstrating its inheritance in family circles, peer groups, and penetration of media-originating contents, mainly TV.

The contemporary genre corresponding to the tradition of children’s folklore the most, is so-called anti-pedagogic literature (see Chrobak). Its name comes from one of the trends of pedagogy that, in a sense, pertains to the reappearance of the slogans of “the new upbringing” and “the centenary of the child” advertised at the end of the last century. Anti-pedagogical theories question educational violence, oppressive and repressive types of schooling, propagating a child’s subjectivity, his or her right to dialogue and point of view. By means of grotesque, parody, dark humour, or the absurd, this literature presents a small hero fighting against adult tyranny. Thus, the essence of anti-pedagogy is the interpretation of intergenerational relations as a “war of worlds”. Unlike Korczak’s works, however, this genre is not about misunderstanding dividing the worlds, but about the writer “conspiring with children against adults”. Roald Dahl seems the first and foremost representative of the genre of anti-pedagogy. His works include *The BFG*, *Matilda*, *George’s Marvellous Medicine*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and the as-yet unpublished in Poland *The Boy*, which recounts Dahl’s childhood memories. Younger anti-pedagogical writers have continued and developed Dahl’s ideas (Francesca Simone’s *Horrid Henry* is a good case in point). The fashion for anti-pedagogy is accompanied by a simultaneous penetration of unaccepted elements of the children’s folklore, usually censored by adults, into children’s literature; for example, obscenities, vulgarisms, profanations, and jokes about traditionally “embarrassing” physiological processes such as “whizzpoppers” in *The BFG* by Dahl.

From among other works inspired by children’s folklore, we can enumerate horror stories such as the series “Ulica strachu” [*The Street of Horror*], “Gęsia skórka” [*Goosebumps*] and “Szkółka przy cmentarzu” [*The School by the Graveyard*]. Equally popular is the reversed direction in which the poetics of horror – an important element in contemporary media culture and horror films – readily employs themes such as vampires, werewolves, or hauntings. We can say that these horror stories originate in orally transmitted tales within small and closed communities, and came to be applied mostly in films and popular literature for children. In the British culture of librarianship it is believed, for example, that the reappearance of genres such as ghost stories or Halloween stories

influences the growth of interest in reading and allures new readers into a contemporary library (see Bauer). Therefore, we are dealing with the specifically modern phenomenon of the interpenetration of various cultural realms as a result of processes of advanced diffusion. Some cultural scholars, however, ask questions and hypothesize about humanity becoming childish, something that manifests itself in mass culture naivety and the rejection of cultural patterns traditionally ascribed to the adults. This is one of the major subjects of thinking about modernity (see Cataluccio). Indeed, analysing some contemporary popular culture texts, we notice a sort of erasure of the divisions between what is addressed to adults and what to children; *Shrek* is a good case in point. Further, in a number of night-hour programmes on TVN and Polsat, the two most popular TV stations in Poland, we can find games echoing children's subculture such as "Zagadkowa noc" [*The Night of Puzzles*], a game that involves creating one word out of another.

Two years ago an inconspicuous book edited by Hanka Dąbrowiecka, entitled *Zabawnik* [*The Play Thing*], was published with a subsidy from the Ochota District Municipality in Warsaw⁸. The book consists of numerous different games, including counting rhymes, puns, competitions, etc., from the author's and her friends' childhoods. A couple of hundreds of games with their scripts and texts, some originating straight from folklore, others from the yard and school games repertoire or scout folklore, are all traditional children's games, mostly no longer played. The compilation was made and published without any scholarly agenda, but rather with a view to remembering and reanimating the world of the author's childhood. A similar attempt to revise children's folklore has been undertaken by the Warsaw Dance Association with their traditional games classes for young children. However valuable, such activities cannot be considered as folklore, because they originate outside of it. Hence, one might inquire whether such activities are still undertaken by children themselves, and whether their scripts circulate in a traditionally oral way. Apparently, the answer is affirmative if we consider the relatively early, pre-literate period in a child's life. Nonetheless, Dorota Simonides in her *Contemporary Verbal Folklore by Children and Teenagers* draws our attention to an interpenetration of children's texts with media messages and an extensive influence of TV marked, for instance, by the appearance of bed-time cartoon characters or popular films in those texts.

The problematics of folklore has been discussed to a certain extent by young linguists. Their point of interest does not come down to a compilation of texts *in crudo*, but theoretical examinations applying the anthropological theory of games to a child's poem or general text. This tradition was inspired by pioneering works by Alicja Baluch (*Archety-*

⁸ See also <http://zabawnik.org> (Translator's footnote).

py *literatury dziecięcej* (1993) [*The Archetypes of Children's Literature*] and taken up by, for example, Alicja Ungeheuer-Gołąb whose *Wzorce ruchowe utworów dla dzieci* (2009) [*Movement Patterns in Literature for Children*] is particularly important since it analyses writing for children from the context of the concepts of Roger Caillois.

Irrespective of scholarly papers or the extent of the influence of children's subculture on the literature of younger generations, the subject of childhood seems interesting with respect to literature for adults. This has already been mentioned above in the discussion of Cieślowski's work. A fascination with childhood has been one of the most important motifs in twentieth-century literature. At the beginning of the century, the motif mainly referred to some personal return to a lost paradise. Towards the century's end, however, the character of the child began also to appear continuously in literature and popular art such as crime fiction, fantasy stories, feature films, and documentaries. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of literary theorists and has a rich bibliography and, in itself, is too broad a subject to analyze here (see for example: Waksmund, Leszczyński). It is impossible, however, not to mention two works, virtually unknown, presenting childhood not from the psychological perspective of an individual, but from descriptions of collective behaviour, rituals, and customs, reflecting, in essence, the phenomena of folklore.

First, an extraordinarily peculiar, and little known book containing a record of school folklore was written by Tadeusz Karyłowski. Published in 1918, *Miecio Chwałibóg – obrazki z młodych lat bohatera pod Rokitną* [*God-loving Miecio. A Record of a Rokitna Hero from a Young Age*] falls under the umbrella of the so-called "literature of the historical moment" composed in commemoration of the victims of World War I. This lament, written in lines of thirteen-syllables⁹, glorifying a heroic boy, in what is obviously a hagiographic account, was supposed to present a path of "becoming a knight," that is, the school years of the protagonist at the Jesuit school in Chyrów. An attentive reader, who gets through the labyrinth of rhymes and historical allusions, can find here a naturalistic presentation of the collective life of boys in a boarding school: their games and rituals, and especially arguments, battles and tournaments included in the school calendar; the scenarios and rules of the games acted out later by the boys as soldiers.

The second peculiar literary example of children's folklore is Edward Woroniecki's *Wały graniczne* [*The Boundary Embankments*]. This is the memoir of a young Polish boy at the beginning of the twentieth century living on the boundary of various cultures, or specifically speaking in an ethnically foreign land, that is, a poor district

⁹ The most popular poetic metre in Polish, in which traditionally the most important Polish poems were created. Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* is a good case in point. (Translator's note)

on the outskirts of Kiev. Without any relation with his home culture, the protagonist spends his childhood in a multilingual community of peers – his one and only point of reference. At the same time, the universality of the children's subculture, described by Korczak, can easily be noticed, since national boundaries are crossed without any problems. In addition, with fastidiousness and precision, the author portrays the entire repertoire of children's games, from lonely, imaginary worlds, where burnt matches and stones change into soldiers, guns, and ships, depending on the circumstances, to dynamic and group competitions such as sea battles in water pools or gutters, trade transactions in which colourful pieces of glass are legitimate legal tender, to grand battles with a pre-planned scenario: Cossacks against Turks, or Redskins against Palefaces (the latter apparently drawn from *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Nick of the Woods*, or historical events). The boy protagonist's pugnacity, stubbornness, and competitiveness leads his peers to call him the "Pole", which results in reflections on his identity.

Of course, it is to be accepted that in this kind of testimony account blends with creation, in proportions difficult to define. Arguably, the memory of childhood is frequently faulty and deceitful, blurred by the writer's tendencies and ideological agendas. Grzegorz Leszczyński warns against the treatment of such literary works as historical accounts.

The paths back to childhood are closed. There are two known methods of scrutinizing children's social life. The first is retrospection, with all its faults, traps, and memory deformations. The second is to observe and participate in that life. This is also far from perfect, inasmuch as the very act of research is seen as a controlling gesture, and it frequently disrupts the examined phenomenon; by disclosing texts and customs, children often censor and transform them into a form understood by adults. This mostly refers to the late period of childhood, the period of mysteries and secret undertakings. All in all, following Korczak's example, it seems right to call contemporary childhood "an unknown civilisation".

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