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## The International Potential of the Polish Nineteenth-Century Novel – a Review of Grażyna Borkowska and Lidia Wiśniewska's (eds.) *Another Canon: The Polish Nineteenth-Century Novel in World Context*

Elżbieta Rokosz  
Uniwersytet Rzeszowski  
ORCID: 0000-0002-7311-6165

**Abstract:** The article is a review of *Another Canon: The Polish Nineteenth-Century Novel in World Context*, edited by Grażyna Borkowska and Lidia Wiśniewska, published in 2020 by Lit Verlag, Switzerland within the *Polonistik im Kontext* series. The first part of the monograph includes articles that provide a reinterpretation of selected novels (including Krasicki's *The Adventures of Mr. Nickolas Wisdom*, Orzeszkowa's *On the Niemen*, and Sienkiewicz's *Without Dogma*) in relation to the main currents of world literature. The second part focuses on the reception of selected nineteenth-century Polish novels in Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Russia, France, Spain, the United States, and Great Britain. The publication is aimed at raising the interest of non-Polish recipients in the nineteenth-century novels during a period when twentieth and contemporary Polish literature has already gained relative popularity abroad.

**Keywords:** nineteenth-century Polish novel, reception, Polish literature in translation, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Eliza Orzeszkowa

### Międzynarodowy potencjał polskiej powieści dziewiętnastowiecznej – recenzja monografii zbiorowej pt. *Another Canon: The Polish Nineteenth-Century Novel in World Context*, pod redakcją Grażyny Borkowskiej i Lidii Wiśniewskiej

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł jest recenzją monografii wieloautorskiej wydanej w 2020 r. przez szwajcarskie wydawnictwo LIT w ramach serii *Polonistik im Kontext*, poświęconej recepcji polskiej powieści dziewiętnastowiecznej za granicą. Autorami artykułów są poloniści związani z zagranicznymi ośrodkami akademickim. Pierwsza część zawiera współczesne analizy wybranych powieści (m.in. *Mikołaja Doświadczyńskiego przypadki* Ignacego Krasickiego, *Nad Niemnem* Elizy Orzeszkowej i *Bez dogmatu* Henryka Sienkiewicza) prowadzone w kontekście współistniejących nurtów literatury światowej. Artykuły zawarte w części drugiej

dotyczą recepcji wybranych powieści w takich krajach, jak Białoruś, Bułgaria, Gruzja, Rosja, Hiszpania, Francja, Wielka Brytania i Stany Zjednoczone. Celem monografii jest zainteresowanie obcojęzycznych literaturoznawców polską powieścią dziewiętnastowieczną, w czasach, gdy dwudziestowieczna i współczesna literatura polska zyskała już za granicą znaczącą popularność.

**Słowa kluczowe:** polska powieść dziewiętnastowieczna, recepcja, literatura polska w tłumaczeniu, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Eliza Orzeszkowa

*Another Canon: The Polish Nineteenth-Century Novel in World Context*, edited by Grażyna Borkowska and Lidia Wiśniewska, is a 2020 Lit Verlag, Switzerland publication, which appeared within the *Polonistik im Kontext* series. It contains fifteen articles authored by Polish Studies scholars from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Italy, the US, Georgia, Great Britain, Brazil, France, Spain, Germany, and Sweden. The monograph aims to raise the interest of non-Polish language recipients in nineteenth-century Polish novels during a period when twentieth-century and contemporary Polish literature “has succeeded in penetrating the glass ceiling that separated it from western readers” (5).

The book opens with an introductory chapter titled “Is a New Canon Possible? The Polish Canon as a Universal Canon (On the basis of the Polish Nineteenth-Century Novel)” where the editors provide a broader context in which Polish nineteenth-century novel functions nowadays thanks to the translations which made the texts accessible to foreign readers. As the editors notice, even though the nineteenth-century novel might appear anachronistic to many, to some readers it would still appear to be attractive, particularly so in translation, which allows for some modernisation of the language.

In the opening chapter, the editors also explain the whole concept the publication is a part of, and briefly introduce the content of individual articles. The book is addressed to readers interested in Polish culture, or Slavists in general, and the title of the monograph, *Another Canon*, is a reference to the possibility of the extension of the existing, acknowledged canon of nineteenth-century literature to include Polish literary works. The question as to whether it is or will be possible remains open.

The first part of the monograph includes eight articles which re-interpret one eighteenth- and several selected nineteenth-century novels in the context of world literature. Luigi Marinelli (“Sapienza” University of Rome) in “Doświadczyński. Our Contemporary” refers to Ignacy Krasicki’s *The Adventures of Mr. Nickolas Wisdom*, the Enlightenment novel Marinelli translated into Italian in 1997. Placing Krasicki’s text in its broader, international literary context, the author confirms the opinion of Teresa Kostkiewiczowa quoted in the article, that readers will always find something contemporary in the adventures and misadventures of Krasicki’s protagonist. Marinelli stresses the novel’s generic complexity, adhering to Jan Kott’s concept of classifying it as a union of three different

literary genres, namely biography, philosophical journey, and didactic novel, and suggests that Krasicki's work, used as a social and didactic tool, grounded in its contemporary situation, had a great impact on the further development of Polish fiction. He enumerates such authors as Kazimierz Brandys, Ryszard Kapuściński, Aleksander Wat or Jerzy Andrzejewski as those whose novel-essays or reportages might be interpreted as indirectly stemming from Krasicki's "first modern Polish novel" (32).

The next article, Mariya Bracka's (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine) "Myth and Politics in the Historical Novels of Michał Czajkowski", introduces the colourful and controversial author of historical novels and discusses Czajkowski's (later known as Sadyk Pasza) representation of Ukraine through the prism of his usage of myths: the archaic and the ideological. Czajkowski, recognised as a Ukrainophile, or a Cossackophile, used Ukrainian folklore in his historical novels, transforming it in a way he found appropriate, idealising Cossackdom. Although Bracka stresses the influence Czajkowski had on Ukrainian writers, such as Taras Shevchenko, as well as his general popularity in Ukraine, her analysis focuses on his exploitative treatment of Ukrainians and their heritage.

The article which follows, authored by Ursula Philips (University College of London) and titled "'Thesis Novel' or Pastoral Elegy: Key Tensions in Eliza Orzeszkowa's *Nad Niemnem (On the Niemen)*", is devoted to the discussion of Orzeszkowa's best known novel, only recently translated into English, challenging the view that the novelist is "a dated' or inaccessible writer with nothing much to offer to the contemporary non-Polish reader" (54). Philips stresses the universal human resonance of the novel, which together with – or despite – the geographical and historical specificity of its setting, makes it a read interesting for non-Polish recipients. The same novel by Orzeszkowa is studied in the next article, Bożena Shallcross's (University of Chicago) "Between Desire and Inaction: On Domestic Interiority in Orzeszkowa's *Nad Niemnem (On the Niemen)*". Its author analyses everyday domestic spaces created by Orzeszkowa, to prove that they have certain ideological implications, due to either oblivion or erasure of references to the January Uprising of 1863. In her analysis, Shallcross focuses on three contrastive textualisations of a boudoir (Emilia Korczyńska's, the lady's-of-the-house, her son's, Zygmunt's, and Andrzejowa Korczyńska's) to illustrate how those rooms reflect states of mind represented in the novel.

The next two articles are devoted to the literary output of Henryk Sienkiewicz, the most internationally recognisable nineteenth-century Polish novelist. In "The Allegorical Dimension to the Nineteenth-Century Historical Novels: The *Staatsroman* as Interpretive Key to the Political Philosophy of Sienkiewicz's *The Deluge* and *Quo Vadis?*" Maria Zadencka (Stockholm University) examines Sienkiewicz's historical novels with reference to the seventeenth-century political romance known under the generic name *Staatsroman*, represented, first of all, by John Barclay's 1621

political romance titled *Argenis*. Relating to that particular genre Zadencka finds an interpretative key to the theoretical basis of the political culture of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Sienkiewicz sets his Trilogy in. The author suggests that the generic model was fundamental, first of all, in the creation of *The Deluge*, acknowledging, however, that the novel is also constructed according to the conventions of the novel of love and adventure. She also argues that the same interpretative key can be used in the case of *Quo Vadis?*, in which discussion on the topic of the state and its elites is also present.

In “Sienkiewicz Is Closer to Our Literature...”: The Introduction of *Without Dogma* to the Russian Reading Public” Irina Adelgeim (Institute for Polish Studies of the Russian Academy of Science) examines the entry of Sienkiewicz’s novel *Without Dogma* into the Russian reading environment, which took place at the end of the nineteenth century through Y. M. Lavrov’s translation published in serialised form in the journal *Ruskaia mysl’*. Adelgeim discusses the critical reception of the novel, proving that it was read in Russia as topical, characteristic for the *fin de siècle* and very “western”. She also notices that the novel’s protagonist, Płoszowski, was in numerous reviews contrasted with the protagonists of both nineteenth-century Russian novels (e.g. Rudin, Onegin, or Pechorin) and those of world literature (including Hamlet), referring also to the main characters of other Polish novels which appeared in translation more or less at the same time. The popularity of *Without Dogma* is reflected in the fact that between 1890 and 1917 in Russia it appeared in print twelve times.

Jens Herlth (University of Fribourg, Switzerland) in his “Late Nineteenth-Century Polish Novels and the ‘Social Imaginary’” has selected two novels, namely Stefan Żeromski’s *Homeless People* and Bolesław Prus’s *Emancipated Women*, “to test the applicability of the concept of the social imaginary for a contextual understanding of the late nineteenth-century Polish novel in its intersection with social practices, ideas, and emotions” (129). The point of reference in his considerations is Cornelius Castoriadis and his *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. The author studies imaginary representations of the late nineteenth-century Polish society in the two novels selected, referring also to Stanisław Brzozowski’s views on both Żeromski’s and Prus’s works.

The last article in Part I of the monograph, authored by Brygida Helbig (a Polish scholar living in Berlin), is titled “Seduced by a Dwarf: *Halszka*, Maria Komornicka’s Novel of Emancipation” and discusses the first and only novel by Maria Komornicka, a writer practically excluded from the Polish literary canon. The article introduces the novelist and provides an analysis of *Halszka*, stressing the novel’s innovativeness in presenting family relations and its psychological insightfulness. *Halszka* is a novel of initiation, but is far from typical since it breaks with the standard narrative models of the subgenre, and its heroine, a young, unmarried woman, proud and argumentative, elopes with a man old, ugly, and still married, but the only one

to recognise her uniqueness. The novel, whose one part only was published in *Głos* in 1901, as Helbig puts it, “clearly and courageously steps beyond the emancipatory aims laid out by Polish Positivist women writers” (163), and hence seems to have prepared the ground for Polish Modernist women.

Part II contains seven articles on the reception of selected novels in several different countries. Henryk Siewierski (University of Brasilia) examines reception of Henryk Sienkiewicz’s works in Brazil. Sienkiewicz is the most translated, published, and read Polish writer in that country and his most popular novels there include *Quo Vadis?* and the *Trilogy*. Siewierski provides information about the attitude of numerous Brazilian reviewers, first of all to the former novel, praising Sienkiewicz’s work. The *Trilogy* is now available in a modern translation, published between 2004 and 2006. Among other works of Sienkiewicz which appeared in Brazil, Siewierski enumerates *In Desert and Wilderness* (Brazilian edition 1944), *The Teutonic Knights* (probably in the 1930s), *On the Field of Glory* (1951), and collections of short stories published in the 1950s and 1960s.

Michał J. Mikoś (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) discusses the history of translations of Polish prose into English, focusing on the presence and reception of the nineteenth-century Polish novel in the US and Britain, concluding that its “prominent place and lively reception” (189) in the two countries should be acknowledged to Henryk Sienkiewicz’s reputation and the devotion of Sienkiewicz’s contemporary, Jeremiah Curtin, an American ethnographer and linguist, who translated the Polish novelist’s prose into English. Besides rendering into English Sienkiewicz’s vast output (the *Trilogy*, *Quo Vadis?*, *The Teutonic Knights*, *On the Field of Glory*, among others; 16 novels and novellas in total) Curtin also translated Prus’s *The Pharaoh* and Orzeszkowa’s *the Argonauts*. Mikoś also provides information on the critical reception of the texts in question.

Marek Tomaszewski (a Polish scholar living in Paris) focuses on the popularity of *Quo Vadis?* in France in the context of the nineteenth-century French novel. Sienkiewicz was known for his admiration for French literature, travelled to France several times and even wrote part of his most popular novel during his stay in Paris suburbs. Tomaszewski, similarly to other authors referring to the reception of *Quo Vadis?*, notices that the novel was well received in conservative circles, hoping for a religious revival in their own country. Sienkiewicz’s return to Christian religious ideals stood in opposition to Émile Zola’s anticlerical position, explicitly expressed at the time. Tomaszewski refers to the critical reception of Sienkiewicz’s prose, classified as “Christian” or “Catholic” (the 2013 pocket edition of the *Trilogy* has been thus labelled) in France, to provide us with a broader social and political context for the variance in the assessment of the Polish novelist’s achievements by ordinary readers and contemporary literary critics.

Bożena Zaboklicka-Zakwaska (University of Barcelona) discusses the reception of Sienkiewicz, until 1975 the most published Polish writer

in Spain and Catalonia, but starts her article with references to Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, the first Polish novelist to have his novels published in Spain. The author discusses the history of critical studies devoted to Polish literature, of translations of Polish novels into Spanish (starting with Kraszewski's *Ułana*), and of the success of Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis?* at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A survey of critical reviews of the novel gives us a broader cultural context in which we can also see how *Quo Vadis?* was perceived as an expression of Christian thought, which, nevertheless, had to be censored before being published by Spanish Catholic publishing houses. The censored translations (or adaptations, actually) led to Sienkiewicz being classified as a Catholic writer and, as Zaboklicka-Zakwaska puts it: "exploited by ultra-Catholic circles for ideological ends" (210). Sienkiewicz's presence in Catalonia is discussed separately, as in the broader political context his novels seemed to serve to arouse patriotism in Catalan society.

The history of the reception of the nineteenth-century Polish novel in Georgia is presented by Vera Otskheli (Akaki Tsereteli State University in Kutaisi, Georgia), who stresses that Georgian readers have been successively acquainted with selected novels by Henryk Sienkiewicz, Bolesław Prus, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, Eliza Orzeszkowa and Zofia Urbanowska, as well as with plays by Stanisław Przybyszewski or Jerzy Żuławski. Otskheli stresses the interest Georgian readers have had in Polish literature, finding similarities between Polish and Georgian history. Again, the popularity of the nineteenth-century Polish novel starts with Sienkiewicz (the *Trilogy*, *The Teutonic Knights*, *Quo Vadis?*), but concerns also Zygmunt Miłkowski's *At Daybreak*, Eliza Orzeszkowa's *Mirtala*, or Bolesław Prus's *Pharaoh*, translated at the end of the nineteenth century, and – as the author claims – continues well into the twentieth century, with Sienkiewicz's, Orzeszkowa's, Prus's, Kraszewski's or Jez's novels being available in either Georgian or Russian translations.

Although Margareta Grigorova (Cyril and Methodius University, Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria) refers to the popularity in Bulgaria of topical nineteenth-century Polish novelists such as Sienkiewicz, Prus, or Orzeszkowa, she eventually narrows her study to the reception of nineteenth-century Polish novels on Bulgarian themes. This is a rare perspective in the analysis of Polish literature, hence it is illuminating to find out that Polish authors in whose works we can find reference to that country include Michał Czajkowski (aka Mehmet Sadyk Pasha), Zygmunt Miłkowski, and Walery Wołódzko. Grigorova discusses the history of the translations and publication of their works into Bulgarian as well as their reception by Bulgarian readers. She explains the historical connections between Poland and Bulgaria as well as the presence of translations into Bulgarian of the above-mentioned writers' works (e.g. Czajkowski's *Kirdzali*, or Miłkowski's *Asan*) and concludes that Polish novels associated with Bulgaria "can provide an incentive for mutual reflection today on Polish-Bulgarian relations" (261).

The final article, authored by Mikalaj Chmiańnicki (Belarusian State University, Minsk), is devoted to the reception of nineteenth-century Polish novels in Belarus, including the works of Kraszewski, Orzeszkowa, Sienkiewicz and Prus. Chmiańnicki stresses the general importance of Polish literature for Belarusian readers as being both “western” and Slavic, and available in translations into Russian and Belarusian. Eliza Orzeszkowa, having spent most of her life in the territory of present-day Belarus, is perceived by Belarusian readers as a compatriot, which contributes to the popularity of her novels and the general interest in her life as well. The author also provides extensive information on the reception of Sienkiewicz’s and Prus’s novels, to conclude that, for Belarusians, Polish literature remains present in what is considered the world literary canon.

The articles found in the collections can be highly informative to both non-Polish and Polish literary scholars since they present and discuss Polish novels through the prism of other cultures and other literatures. They also show the extent to which nineteenth-century Polish literature has been accessible to readers abroad. Sienkiewicz’s popularity comes here as no surprise. After all, *Quo Vadis?*, his most “universal” novel, is known to have been translated into multiple languages and adapted into films. However, the popularity – even if relatively limited – of Czajkowski’s, Miłkowski’s, or even Prus’s works is far from obvious, hence the articles on the reception of their novels shed new light on what non-Polish readers can find interesting and in a way universal in Polish literature. The articles re-interpreting Polish novels in their international cultural context provide different analytical perspectives. The authors show expert knowledge of the subjects and their genuine interest in the Polish novels discussed. The collection of articles, in most cases clearly argued and engaging, can be of interest to various Polish studies specialists, both abroad, and at home.

Reviewed: Grażyna Borkowska, Lidia Wiśniewska (eds) *Another Canon: The Polish Nineteenth-Century Novel in World Context*, Polonistik im Kontext, LIT Verlag, Switzerland 2020, 299 pp. Eleven out of the fifteen articles have been translated into English by Ursula Philips.