

# Romanticism, Spam and the Struggle for Air. 1989–2009 Polish Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature After 20 Years of Freedom

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The line between knowledge and superstition is a fine one. My impression is that fantasts are often slightly undereducated. They are unaware of the achievements of contemporary prose and the fact that certain kinds of narratives have now been deemed obsolete, and certain themes not susceptible to capture in the language of the present day. That unseen impossibility makes them similar to the uneducated Albert Einstein, who was also unaware that the science of his time was full of superstitions.

By virtue of such ignorance and obsolescence, fantasy and science fiction edge into taboo subject matter. What is worse, this state of ignorance keeps it from grasping its own inferiority, pushing it towards ambition, rapacity and rebellion. That gives them a particular affinity with the Romantics and the Positivists, who before they became canonical assigned reading, were young, rapacious disruptors. And fantasts are, in my view, people who for the most part liked the works they were assigned in school. They had not yet acquired literary prejudices, and were in fact fascinated by Mickiewicz's political involvement, Słowacki's phantasms, Krasiński's sociological reflection, the science fiction elements in Prus, and Sienkiewicza's historical adventure tales. They remained faithful to the tradition against which later Polish literature rebelled.

### **Behind the Walls**

Fantasy literature (understood here as including science fiction) sees its individuality and, unfortunately, walls itself off from the rest. Fantasy fascinates lovers of the genre so powerfully that they gather in fan movements which represent both a blessing and a curse. They testify to a boisterous literary life; they are a prosthesis of a real discussion which sadly has died down outside the fantasy ghetto. But also, instead of bringing readers into contact with other literature, the fan culture brings them into contact with toy action figures and narrative-based games. Instead of a full literary life, a limited universe of intermedial experiences has arisen.

The walls also rise up on the outside. In the Polish literary debate, the epithet “SF writer” still comes across in magazine articles sounding like “kindergartener.” There was a notable statement in one article in *Newsweek*, diagnosing the views of journalist Rafał Ziemkiewicz. Ziemkiewicz was denied the right to comment on political attitudes of the 1980s since at that time he had written nothing besides a few SF short stories. Of course nobody drove poet Zbigniew Herbert away from public debate because he spent the period of martial law writing some stupid messages (of Mr Cogito) and reports from a city under siege instead of fighting for freedom. Yet many still fail to grasp that for a whole multitude of people in the ‘80s and ‘90s, it was science fiction, and not poetry, that represented the “struggle for air” proclaimed by Różewicz.

### **Spam Fiction**

Science fiction fell into a meat grinder.

Years ago, there was a clearly defined system—you had SF, fantasy and horror. Now those concepts no longer work to classify anything. A single, unified stream has taken shape—a kind of fantastic spam.

These trends came from the West, where the formulations of *Urban Fantasy* and *New Weird* enjoyed great popularity. Perhaps there is some difference between them, but the fans of both refer to the same books. They describe them as fantasy literature without conventions or limitations in inspiration and style. That, too, is an attempt to storm the ghetto walls, a diffusion of literary particles with main-

stream prose (a model here is China Miéville, inspired by Kafka and Schulz).

Polish authors seem to be transported by Western currents. Jarosław Grzędowicz won readers' hearts with his novel *Pan Lodowego Ogrodu* (Lord of the Ice Garden) which set old-fashioned fantasy in scenery from Bosch paintings, while Maciej Guzek created his cycle *Królikarnia* (Rabbitarium) about the discovery of hidden layers of magic in the Wielkopolska region. Łukasz Orbitowski and Jarosław Urbaniuk in their cycle *Pies i klecha* (Dog and Shaveling) describe a priest and policeman's joint battle with metaphysical crime. Andrzej Pilipiuk, one of the most widely read authors, made a name for himself with stories about a folk exorcist. The prose of popular authors Andrzej Drzewiński, Eugeniusz Dębski, Jakub Ćwiek, Jacek Piekara, Magdalena Kozak, and a whole mass of other authors of less renown similarly skirts genre boundaries. They are not inhibited by concerns about setting or themes. Unfortunately, however, their freedom and lack of inhibition frequently does not extend beyond scenery to problems of artistic creation. It is relatively rare for these authors to work on developing their literary style, creating new symbols, or original characters.

The crowning achievement, in some sense, of the Polish iteration of *New Weird* consists of a number of texts from the beginning of this decade. In *Inne Pieśni* (Other Songs) Jacek Dukaj presented a philosophico-linguistic experiment set in ancient times. The boundaries of fantasy

literature were also burst by Huberath's *Miasta pod skałą* (Cities Under the Rock), traveling somewhere in between Dante and Eco.

### **Let's Choose the Past**

The disparate literary elements include one that used to entail an occasional, casual frolic but has now come to dominate the SF scene: alternative histories.

At one time there appeared a number of experimental novels based mostly on the premise that a war had been won by a different side than in reality. For example, the Nazis conquered the US (*Man in the High Castle*). Stories in that vein often wove deep reflections on the nature of history. But it would not have been easy to predict that it would become something more than a secondary stream in which each author could momentarily dip his feet.

In Poland in 1997 (a time of troubles in publishing) three such novels suddenly appeared: *Xavras Wyzryn* by Dukaj, *Quietus* by Jacek Inglot and *Ostatnia podobizna w alabastrze* by Huberath. The last two represented a Polish speciality, describing the world without Christians. The last decade, however, has seen an explosion of historically-inspired creations. The point is not always an alternate course of events; more often we see historical prose with elements of SF or fantasy.

SF authors have a relatively easy time visiting any period from antiquity to the baroque (Andrzej Sapkowski's

*Narrenturm* or Jacek Komuda's novels are cases in point). Science fiction authors are drawn to the nineteenth century and nascent modernity (Steampunk, Dukaj's *Lód*, Michał Protasiuk's *Punkt Omega*, Krzysztof Piskorski's *Zadra*). The twentieth century is a mine of subjects for all. There is a whole cycle about the First World War (by Anna Brzezińska and Grzegorz Wiśniewski). There is a whole rash of books about interwar Poland (in which Witkacy most frequently appears as the protagonist). And the last war hangs over authors, an unused inheritance, and the tanks of September or the soldiers of the Home Army constantly flash by in books, even if only incidentally.

I see several reasons for this fascination with history. First of all, historians are displacing engineers among SF authors. In addition, writers are weary of futurology. They have also lost the desire to play Cassandra (the silence of Cassandra is a bad sign). The former atmosphere of a war of ideas has vanished, and in its place an appetite for storytelling has appeared. A rather simple discovery has also occurred: that philosophical and scientific speculation can be woven in other forms than interplanetary scenery, and that there is a great deal of pleasure in rearranging the building blocks of history.

There is also a more prosaic reason. History is a mine of plots. It is fallow ground that has been abandoned by mainstream authors who have become fascinated with the vivisection of their own stairwell. In fantasy literature there remains a certain freedom in going back to historical

motifs. In the mainstream, when someone starts writing about history, they become stamped as a writer of period pieces. Whereas in SF, authors can shift a given passage back by two centuries and nobody even notices that a change of convention has occurred. This lack of prejudices recalls Prus, whose contemporary novels of manners set no obstacle to his writing the costume epic *Pharaoh*. The reader flexibly shifts places (and times) to follow the author's imagination. And writing about history remains a means rather than an end.

### **Chains of Freedom**

These thoughts about Life's Teacher lead us to yet another area from which the main body of literature hides its gaze. I refer to social murals.

In the 1980s science fiction was hailed as the literature of freedom. 80. Works by Zajdel, Wnuk-Lipiński, and Oramus tormented with visions of how a society could be enslaved and what the chances for liberation might be. When freedom arrived, those ideas were discarded, but a few years later social reflection returned to the genre in the form of sociology at close range. Rafał Ziemkiewicz, Jacek Dukaj, and Konrad Lewandowski saw European society fighting under the banner of (anti-/)terrorism in a few decades. Tomasz Kołodziejczak painted an allegorical depiction of a planet located between two hostile great powers (what associations might that bring to mind?). For a few years now, given that everything is suffused with history, sociological novels likewise have seized the banner of historiosophy.

The chief theme in these books is sweeping social change. The authors have picked up the baton tossed by Zygmunt Krasiński. Szczepan Twardoch tries to show the extent to which revolution orders our life. To the somewhat mawkish image of such cruel social change which has been established in art he opposes an image that belongs to the laboratory, having been created in the test tubes of alternative history. Rafał Kosik approaches this literary discussion from the other side of the barricades, applying the tools of old, cosmic science fiction. In his *Kameleon* he shows the mathematical inevitability of the fall of the *ancien régime* and the succession of a new order. A similarly inevitable emancipatory revolution appears in Dukaj's *Lód*. In this powerful panoramic novel, Dukaj shows the world through the eyes of nineteenth century historians, a world in which the laws of history are as deterministic as those of physics. Grzędowicz's *Pan Lodowego Ogrodu* overflows with similar observations – the history of the surviving descendant of a royal line who seeks refuge from the avenging arms of social transformations. Why linger on such a theme? Writers relate to the world as pigeons do to miners. In a few decades we will be able to judge whether they felt another peculiarity of history coming to change everything in its wake.

### **Horror Poloniae**

Everyone knows that the literature of the Polish Positivism dovetailed with the simultaneous emergence of science fiction (Prus's *Lalka* and Wells's *Time Machine* are the same age). But where should we put the legacy of the

Romantics' fascination with the fantastic? On the contemporary map of Polish literature I can see only one place to fit the heirs of *Balladyna*, *Dziady*, *Król Duchy*, and *Kordian*—horror.

No appropriation of our national treasures is intended here. The ingenious works of the greatest Polish poets that had represented emotions of beating heart of the whole enslaved nation bards are graven in the hearts of Poles (even when they “do not enchant us” as Słowacki's poems in *Ferdynand* by Gombrowicz). The point is rather to show the dramatic evolution of the literature of ghastliness—horror originally referred to encounters with monsters, shocking in their terror and cruelty. Every shock weakens with time, and the lively stream of horror has thus changed into a flooding river, improved and overtaken whole new areas.

In Poland this change was completed by Orbitowski. He is identified with paths that have since been trodden by , Grzędowicz, Inglot and Sobota. They discovered a few simple, but literarily devastating devices, in part originating in the works of King and Barker.

First and foremost, they focused on homely, familiar settings. Gone were scientists' laboratories, gothic towns and medieval castles. In their place appeared high schools, trains, shared apartments. The action in the new horror books plays out among small business owners, tram conductors, or taxi drivers. It leads us into a reality accessible to us at arm's reach, but simultaneously one that is uni-

versal (to consider how easily it translates across cultures, consider the international success of *Night Patrol*, by Russia's Sergei Lukanenko).

Another basic principle involves abandoning exotic mythologies. The authors begin from the premise that since they are telling about ordinary Poles, only what comes from the Polish soul will be frightening to them. Aztec demons, Siberian spirits, and vampires have been chucked by the wayside. Haunted apartment blocks, text messages, alley cats, watchdogs, icons of the Mother of God, minor Slavic deities, and last but not least, the devil of traditional Catholicism have sprung into action. All of this tends toward a departure from horror literature toward metaphysical thrillers. It is more than just a change of the scenery and the actors. It amounts to a proposal for new kinds of reflection. Protagonists often engage in introverted struggles with their own morality instead of wrestling with impetuous demons. The failures that affect them rarely have to do with disembowelment; more often they relate to moral collapse, or to social isolation. Morality stands just beyond the door of horror.

The public's appetite has begun to grow and authors' ambitions have ceased to remain at the level of barely adequate prose. The concerns of their protagonists are becoming more eschatological, as they struggle with an authentically framed end of the world. Another manifestation of authorial ambition is seen in references to the Romantics and their great metaphysical programs. Orbitowski's story

*Popiel Armeńczyk* and to a certain extent his novel *Święty Wrocław* constitute a contemporary interpretation of the vision presented by Słowacki in his book *Genezis z Ducha*. Towiański's circles have attracted the Orbitowski–Urbaniuk authorial team as well as Maciej Guzek. Contemporary horror books are shifting toward significative games with biblical, cultural, historical and psychological figures.

But this would all amount to very little without an exceptional literary style. It is possible to claim that horror snatched away one of the last weapons that the mainstream had at its disposal. The assertion is often made that even though science fiction may build finely-wrought logical constructions, it uses at best adequate sentences and offers characters who function merely as pretexts for the plot. When, however, a master wordsmith of Dukaj's caliber writes books in the genre, his style is credited as being speculative and sparse– which is not a flaw, simply a creative choice. At the same time, Polish horror has used an emotional style, equal to the one refined by the mainstream for describing drunken stupors, drugged states of consciousness and erotic conquests. The flooding river of the horror renaissance mentioned above has attracted younger authors (Jakub Małecki, Piotr Rogoża) and is merging with other waters from mixed SF and fantasy currents.

### **Always Scientific**

Let none make the mistake, however, of thinking that SF has given up its scientific calling. Not now that people have begun to walk the true path of scientific progress.

Of course the time of daydreams has passed into oblivion. The conquest of the cosmos is not going to happen within the next fifty years. We no longer find rocket trails, Aliens, time machines and other props that seem as natural to SF as horses in westerns. Most authors have lost their keenness for futurology as well, if for no other reason than the disappointment that greeted all the prophets of the past whom the digital revolution took by surprise.

Still, there is no concealing the fact that the onward rush of civilizational development is not slowing down. Every one of us feels like an inhabitant of the future when we look at the world of a few years back. We stand before some kind of boundary, beyond which lies the unknown. The progress of digitization surrounds us with information. Increasing possibilities for recording are generating an alternative world. Technology and the globalization that comes with it are turning the hitherto existent models of enterprise, science, scholarship and culture on their heads. Biotechnology and genetic engineering are already providing people with the possibility of manipulating life and the genome, developing synthetic protein structures.

These perspectives coincide at one point, and are the object of a heated debate that rages from Vancouver to Tokyo among people with no connection to SF. The debate hinges on the human being. Up until now people have tried to change the entire world but have meddled in human nature only to a relatively modest degree. Now digitization and biotechnology permit us to think of ruling

over reproductive cycles, body exchanges, extraction of emotions, selection of specimens, breeding of organisms, and finally, immortality. These are audacious visions, but the question is already being formed about whether we can allow boundless experimentation.

Science fiction explored the topic decades ago, but has now undertaken it anew. Today's SF is devoted to the theme of Humanity 2.0. Where the old-fashioned writers of the 1960s were more like Cassandras, contemporary writers feel more comfortable in Prometheus's skin and are brimming over with enthusiasm. I think they are infected with the hubris of contemporary scientific circles, which in the face of resistance from society are consolidating and attempting to force their will on others in an arrogant way.

Writers, in spite of their enthusiasm, do not create agit-prop, but complex visions, remaining as faithful to their own beliefs as possible. Anyone can understand what is at issue here.

In the west, the hardcore SF stream described above is led by Greg Egan, who, applies a "total" literary method to describe the world of the new human being. There are two Polish authors who have taken on this theme. Dukaj, with an equally total approach, showed a world in *Perfekcyjna niedoskonałość* as radically other as contemporary scientific hypotheses permit. The otherness of the characters and world also constitute the book's narrative exoticism. Since there is no death, linear time, or old world emotions,

there can also be no classical plot structure. The book, though captivating, is an anti-book that cannot be read in the way we so far have understood the verb “to read.” If, for some, literature hinges on the artistry of experiments, here is such an experiment.

Andrzej Zimniak is one author who has the nerve to engage in futurology. His journalistic book *Jak nie zginie ludzkość* presents a bittersweet potpourri of all the many dangers that may eliminate humankind, as well as optimistic conclusions regarding how human beings will find their way out of those troubles. Literarily Zimniak looks ahead with more precision than do the phantasms of Egan or Dukaj. In *Biały rój* he inquires into how genetic information might be used by a whole mass of people to evolve a new human being who escapes the dinosaur apocalypse. Zimniak is not afraid to present difficult issues, such as the breeding of half-female organisms, the secret insemination of a country’s population, or experiments on *human exemplars*.

A small but cohesive group of Polish SF writers are not inspired by the idea of tinkering with the human being. Michał Protasiuk and Rafał Kosik address questions of the philosophy of science. To what extent we see determinism operating in reality, and to what extent is there causality in the phenomena we observe? What are the effects of total freedom of philosophers and scientists, and what thoughts and inspirations push people to crack open the mysteries of our reality?

## Still Metaphysical

Religion as a topic of science fiction is a contrivance or rather contribution of Polish science fiction from the 1990s. In recent times the theme has faded, but a prized possession, once captured, is not easily given away.

What is exceptional about this use of religion? It appears that SF long ago discovered the formula for carrying out theological disputes. Such books as the Polish *Na Srebrnym Globie* (1903), the British *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), and the American *A Case of Conscience* (1958) come to mind. Novels such as these used a unique formula for theological speculation that lay beyond the grasp of such mainstream texts as *Matka Joanna od Aniołów* or *Bramy Raju*.

We are talking here about theological speculation and not observation of social manners and mores. Those are most appealingly presented through realistic prose. The fact that a priest has a mistress or that the Catholic community alienates AIDS patients no doubt constitute weighty subjects, but ones that have little in common with eschatology. SF authors in the early '90s, meanwhile, discovered something more than those novels mentioned above did— by adding a mystical anxiety. One can speculate on many themes, but to engage the heart of the reader and place him straight in the clouds— these are the challenges of true literature. Not many were up to the task: Huberath (SF), Orbitowski (horror), Sobota (fantasy), sometimes Szyda, Szostak, Twardoch and Dukaj. This last, despite

the fact that religion is one of his main obsessions, is such an extreme exponent of Logos, that he overdoes that aspect, such that something of mysticism eludes him. A few years have passed now since the epochal works *Miasta pod skałą* (2005), by Huberath, and *Głos Boga* (2006) by Sobota. Those were later followed by Szyda's *Miasto dusz* (2008) and Twardoch's *Epifania wikarego Trzaski* (2007). But this is the calm before the storm. When one looks at the list of authors nominated for literary awards in recent years, it's clear that diamonds are being polished in shorter forms. In the short stories in his book *Balsam długiego pożegnania* Huberath reaches some devastating reflections on the subject of death. Szyda's *Hexenhammer* introduces Jan Paweł II into the world of SF. Guzek in *Adwent* uses a horror style to enunciate his views in the discussion of human predestination to do good works. Anna Kantoch's *Światy Dantego* presents a technologized trip to hell in a world where the adherents of different religions end up in separate forms of the afterlife. Finally, Andrzej Mischczak's *Harpunnicy* deals with the subject of Marian apparitions on a planet of Aliens. Let us also not forget the formula for the new horror mentioned above.

Rockets, space, Aliens – those are old SF props, which today are found most useful within theological inquiries.

**Translated by Timothy Williams**