

The Virtually Virtual Reader (or, How Jacek Dukaj Invented the Reader of Contemporary Polish Literature)

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Every reader of Jacek Dukaj's prose knows (and usually likes) the special kind of stupefaction into which the author's range of world-creating speculations lead. In *Czarne oceany* we have to accept the existence of a reality that would emerge if memetics were to enable a completely new form of managing the human memory, if genetic engineering provided a way to design our entire bodies, if telepathy turned out to be a fundamental human ability and if several similar ifs were to become realities. Much of the thrill that this kind of writing allows us to experience "first-hand" springs from the fact that we have to emigrate into alternative histories, for practical purposes

co-inventing with the author altered social conditions and political constellations, imagining grammars and lexicons divergent from our own. Importantly, the detailed nature of the projected vision amazes us with its ironclad consistency; Dukaj truly adheres firmly to principles once he sets them, bending everything to conform to them – including readers. This may even lead us to suspect that the way Dukaj operates within the space of Polish literary culture also resembles his method for generating variant realities. The author takes the existence of a certain state of literature as a working hypothesis and treats it as if it were an actually existing condition. His novels thus not only recreate recent and older forms of literary tradition and conventions of both mainstream literature and science fiction, but also dream up certain passive procedures, nonexistent readerly habits, putative events of earlier or current literary life; and for the time of reading, they attempt to provide us with an opportunity to participate in a complicated, bifurcated reception situation.

Let us begin from the observation that one of the most frequently heard, but rather shameful, complaints about Dukaj's novels is the charge of being (too) gargantuan in size. At a thousand pages (in fairly small print on a cleverly enlarged page format!), *Lód* or the only slightly shorter *Inne pieśni* are capable of frightening away many readers. No doubt Dukaj does not particularly have in mind the empirical Polish reader (he has spoken forthrightly of this in several interviews), that is, he is not concerned about such readers' resistance to the number of words; he sim-

ply resolves for as long as he is writing that willing readers exist and goes ahead with his storytelling. Obviously, lovers of multi-tome sagas and thousand-page texts must exist somewhere in the world, but let us be frank here: they nowadays constitute a decisive minority. The full-length format of Dukaj's works thus sometimes leads us to think of them as representing a startling anachronism. They are works that seem to be telling us that the nineteenth century is still in full effect, that everyone still focuses primarily on book-reading (as opposed to watching, listening, clicking in their encounters with other media) and gets acquainted with the world that way, hence the need for hefty tomes and multi-volume visions of reality. The time of Balzac, who wrote his *Comedie humaine*, with more than a hundred installments, or Zola, who endlessly wove his divagations on the genetic relationships of the Rougon-Macquarts – here seem not to have ended. The ease with which the author of *Xavras Wyzryn* spins his narratives, the narrator's hidden conviction that an attractive plot can develop in a massive format, thus appears to be the result of a literary-historical hypothesis posited by Dukaj. According to this hypothesis, throughout the whole 20th century and still today, mass culture experiences have included immersing ourselves – following the model of readers in the Belle Époque – in reading family sagas or depictions of entire societies, recorded in highly capacious or even baggy novelistic cycles. At the same time, while there have been many experiences to corroborate the claim, we can by no means assert that they represented the central or dominant component of

readers' orientation. They wore rather the aspect of surrendering to a noble, old-fashioned approach to encountering the text, and were perhaps even accompanied by a suspicion that visions of that type had to draw readers in at the price of artistic oversimplification. Dukaj in any case treated the contemporary reader as if that vanished custom were still in force, as if each reader were formed by Polish 20th century prose, as if it were a widely popular practice to cut oneself off from life for a week to become intimate with the characters of *Lód*.

Let us move on to another peculiar practice, a kind of literary-historical speculation, that Dukaj's works get us to engage in. The relationship between Polish literature and the world of science has never been marked by exceptional intimacy. The savant with his magnifying glass was to such an extent thoroughly discredited at the outset that while the Śniadeckis and others of their ilk were able, it is true, to intrigue a narrow group of hyperintellectualizing and snobbish literary eccentrics (an oversimplification, I know), they nevertheless made very little headway with the larger Polish audience established by Romanticism as paradigmatic. In such a situation, it is again surprising to find that the author of *Extensa* has deemed it fitting within the context of Polish literary and philosophical discussions to carry on a sustained argument concerning theoretical science, and that changes in time-worn scientific thought continue to disturb, intrigue and inspire Polish authors as well as their readers, while literary criticism makes competent use of related areas of reflection in its own metalit-

erary constructions. It postulates, in fact, that there exists a fairly widespread creative and receptive practice in Poland of constantly testing the most varied scientific theories of yesterday and today literarily. Hence *Inne pieśni* are quite simply built on ancient Greek scientific concepts and on speculation which posits that we as readers would very much like to follow a process of inevitable Hellenization (as opposed to the Latinization that actually took place) superimposed on all of European history which would have taken place if the science of ancient Greece were an accurate description of the world, rather than the later modern scientism. The supposition that scientific theorizing belongs to the principal factors motivating Polish readers is also made manifest by the creation of *Lód*, where the entire represented world is based on a concept of three-layered logic developed by the thinkers of the Polish Lwów-Warsaw school. Moreover, the book attests to a belief that readers permanently inhabit a house of scientific theory; at any rate, it sets up such accommodation for them for the length of their reading. The hunger for metalogical reflection, the desire to develop abstract conceptual imagining about the world is, in Dukaj's opinion, so strong among the Polish literary public that the characters in the novel speak forthrightly on such topics and their statements are, I need hardly add, more than extensive. Dukaj's characters thus conduct conversations on topics that almost never descend below various models of physics. To speak aphoristically, the Romantic rejection of scientific truths unknown to the common folk is a phenomenon that appears to have bypassed both *Lód* and its hypothetical readers.

Another feature of Dukaj's works that brings to mind speculation from the field of Polish literature's history and reception is the level or scope of the ambiguity of meaning that his works confronts us with. This is an exceptionally powerful intellectual and emotional experience, particularly notable when reading *Perfekcyjna niedoskonałość*, in which for at least 50 pages we do not know what is happening, who the protagonist is, in what time period the action is occurring, and whether any action is in fact happening, since everything may be someone's dream, something transmitted by a certain virtuality. The properties of the represented world are so unclear that we have a great deal of trouble figuring out that we are in the twenty-ninth century amid hitherto unknown possibilities of world simulation; yet that clarification only slightly reduces the degree of indefiniteness. It must again be stated that Dukaj attributes to the Polish literary reader an aesthetic sensitivity which is far from universal and might perhaps have taken root if the central tradition of Polish literary prose in the twentieth century consisted of books like Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*. It turns out that we have another literary-historical hypothesis here, involving the premise that the paradigm of the modern experimental novel has become the paradigm of Polish modernist prose. Things took a different turn, with victory almost always going to something we might call (adapting the term "traditionalist modernity," proposed by Michał Paweł Markowski) the modern traditional novel. This type of prose – leaving aside for now any verdict as to whether for good or ill – has effectively won over

the taste of readers of Polish literature, while radical experimentation, difficulty, meaninglessness, and indefiniteness have generally met with irritation and provoked a rejection of such styles of prose expression.

If we wanted to neatly organize the roles designated for the reader by Dukaj, briefly summarized above, we might invoke an old, though very contemporary-sounding, term proposed in the past by Michał Głowiński – the virtual reader. That invocation will nevertheless entail certain difficulties, since Głowiński used the term to refer to a reader who is part of a literary text, constituting an instance of reception already posited by the text itself. In the case of the novels of Dukaj, the virtuality has been doubled, since a hypothetical reader appears within his books, within a certain hypothetically postulated literary situation. That is why we should say that in Dukaj's novels there appears a virtually virtual reader, whose activities may be defined with the formula: *if there existed a different history of Polish literature and different reading practices created by it, then the virtual reader of this book would fulfill the following function...* Dukaj thus proposes to his readers an extremely rare readerly pleasure and that may be one of the reasons why his peculiar oeuvre, with its considerable demands on the reader, has met with growing recognition and popularity. To put it somewhat flippantly, the reader of *Inne pieśni* and the reader of *Perfekcyjna niedoskonałość* are able to abide such massive novelistic works precisely because while reading them they not only fantasize about an alternate techno-economico-political reality, but simultaneously

invent a whole history of Polish literature, devoting their powers of invention with particular intensity to contemporary Polish literature and themselves as its readers. They then come face to face with their own hypothetical sensitivities, remodel their aesthetic bodies and experiment with the resources of their own cultural memory... The level of aestheticization of the world of literature that follows from these hypotheses would then designate the various dangers lying in wait for readers of Dukaj's prose, while the critical value of such an awakening of readerly initiative would determine the exceptional nature of that prose.

Translated by Timothy Williams