

Slavic “New Animism.” On the Field Research of Polish Romanticism

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Polish Romanticism is not often explored by ecocriticism,¹ which typically views it as a final departure from nature, then commonly transformed into a dream of the sublime. This research attitude could, however, be changed by having a closer look at some of the Romantic receptions of the past, and especially, the connection of man with the world, which does not wane everywhere in the same way, and can still be discerned “first hand” in some places. The 19th-century diagnoses emerging from this view seem to

¹ The notable exceptions are, for instance, the works by Aleksander Nawarecki, Marek Bieńczyk, and Dorota Siwicka [Siwicka], as well as Beata Mytych-Forajter [Mytych-Forajter] and Justyna Schollenberger [Schollenberger].

differ significantly from the anthropocentric paradigm taking hold at the time. Instead, they appear to perpetuate the models of understanding natural reality that are alternative to Western naturocentrism. This non-obvious achievement of the epoch, still awaiting its resonance, prompts us today to discuss the participation of our native traditions in changing the mentality to a more ecological one.

Paradoxically, Romantic thinking about the natural world began with the gradual severance of closer relations with it, with the loss of direct relationships between nature and people. It was the legacy of the previous epoch – the result of the Enlightenment’s denaturalization of man and the disappearance of natural reality from the horizon of everyday experiences. The perceived change in approach to nature – replacing the old qualitative-concrete attitude with a perspective based on instrumental rationalization – quickly met with attempts to describe and overcome it. One example is Rousseau’s postulate to naturalize culture, which, at first glance, declared the desire to restore the balance between man and his natural environment and to rebuild the lost system of mutual references. The Cartesian subject, located on the antipodes of the animal kingdom, was supposed to overcome the increasing separation from the environment through reflection on nature – by internalizing the animal life that had already been alien to man, and then through interiorized merging of self with the world [Baczko 34].

However, the thus understood “return to nature” only reinforced its absence and perpetuated the gap between humans and non-humans. The pre-Romantic naturocentrism turned out to be mainly a project of creating human identity, the effect of constituting oneself through thinking, and a manifestation of a modern individual examining his own vision of nature. In this way, the domain of nature became an artifact of nostalgia, through which one could indulge in longing for irretrievably lost states, conditions, and relationships.

It was a bit different in Polish Romanticism, in which the attitude of man to nature was not only a derivative of naturocentric European philosophies. In addition to the fascination with idyllic “returns to nature,” many of the domestic writers also sympathized with the folk approach to environmental realities, either drawn from their own contact with plebeian culture or from first-hand reports about life in the countryside. Due to civilizational underdevelopment, this peasant model of coexistence with nature clearly differed from post-Enlightenment strategies of distance – both in terms of imaginative and material practices. Anachronistic in relation to the West, this political model – characterized by a remnant of feudal social relations, a not fully regulated type of land ownership, and a partially autarkic way of using the expanse – made it possible in some places to retain the ancient thinking about human relations with the world, based on a sense of mutual belonging. This was especially visible in the traditions of the Rus’ ethnic minorities from the east of the

Commonwealth at the time, who lived in the vicinity of vast, relatively pristine forest areas, frequently, in a state of dependence from them [Rostafiński 3]. Probably, that is why you could still encounter a conviction that there were many similarities between human and non-human beings there; that they were subject to the same rules of life, and that animal or plant beings were also entitled to existential autonomy. This belief was based on empirical knowledge of natural reality and was usually of a pragmatic nature, calculated at either seeking out direct contact with a given representative of the natural world or avoiding it.

This combination of local traditions and post-Enlightenment modernity in Romantics also contributed to the development of complex cognitive perspectives. They often oscillated between a close bond with the natural surroundings, which was still noticeable, and the nature-centric distance that conditioned individualistic reflection on the field of nature. This resulted, for example, in spinning phantasms about the “second naiveté” – an educated mind identifying with folk beliefs [Stefanowska 19] – but also in the need to explore the achievements of native culture and find traces of archaic antiquity in it. Understood in this way, the peasant heritage became the subject of multidirectional interests of the epoch – as a field for aesthetic or political and historical considerations, and as an area of identifications that already displayed an affinity with the assumptions of modern ethnology. However, due to the ideological context of

domestic Romanticism, closely related to the loss of independence, not all of these interpretive systems were considered equally important. There were common tendencies to subject the folklore to sentimental idealization and to transform it into a component of Polish mythology. However, less frequent were the attempts to capture the relics of the rural mentality or to preserve the remnants of the ancient spiritual and material heritage, and then to conduct field research on them. Such assumptions were particularly close to those writers, historians, and ethnographers who had a chance to encounter traces of archaic customs and recognize them in a form that had not undergone a full ideological transformation yet. This group included Zorian Dołęga Chodakowski, who found in the Slavic heritage the remains of the old autochthonous thinking about the relationship between man and nature, the overlap of human and non-human worlds, and the subjective status of animal and plant beings.

Chodakowski's ethnographical research was guided by the intention to preserve the relics of the pre-Christian Slavic region that had been passed on in songs, legends, and names of the inhabitants of Volhynia, Podolia, and Ukraine. It was therefore more important for him to reflect the perspectives of indigenous Rus' communities, whose spiritual and material heritage he invariably considered as his own, than to declare a civilizational distance. This meant he had to track the vanishing customs and rituals in order to include them in the reflection on

the shape of the native culture considered in its broadest, supranational sense. Chodakowski identified with the idea of saving the relics of an ancient mind [Janion 49-61; Rudaś-Grodzka 34], which would still reflect tribal beliefs, pushed out for centuries by external value systems – the destructive influences of Western civilization and institutional monotheistic religion. In his opinion, the works of the “living word” contained the image of the oldest human practices that were shaped in relation to the natural environment, in response to natural phenomena, and as a result of coexistence with the animal and plant world. In many respects, they turned out to be consistent with the cultural achievements of hunter-gatherers of past communities, the remains of which, as ethnologists note, could still be found in the inaccessible outskirts of Europe in the 18th century, and sometimes even in the 19th century [Hall 119–136].

As today’s ethnology argues, for the past communities, the conviction about the relationship between people and animals was not so much an early stage in the development of religion, but a kind of bottom-up ontology and epistemology. The animistic or totemistic inclinations were followed by a specific model of inhabiting the world and drawing practical knowledge from communing with the natural environment. It manifested itself in interacting with one’s direct and indirect natural environment, in reacting to changes taking place in it, as well as entering into relationships

with beings inhabiting this space, which represented vital forces that permeate all living things. According to Tim Ingold, in the old types of perception, “life is not the revelation of pre-specified forms but the process wherein forms are generated” [Preface xxiv]. Each living being could function here “as an undivided center of awareness and agency – an enfoldment, at some particular nexus, of the generative potential of a total field of relations” [xxiv]. According to this concept, not only people, but also non-humans based their “dwelling in the world” on relationships with other creatures, objects, and phenomena, and all the experiences that they gained from it became a way of getting to know the reality. It had an impact on the subjective status of animals and plants, enjoyed in past communities by all beings which had the ability to influence their surroundings. This way of thinking resulted in a conviction about the ontological convergence of humans and non-humans, where no being was a point of reference for the latter, but instead, it shared an analogous perceptual and mental potential with it.

In animism, the inhabitants of the natural world were treated subjectively as non-human persons, conceived according to an anthropomorphic, though not anthropocentric, personal model [Viveiros de Castro 469–488]. They had the social attributes of a human being – similar systems of kinship, authority, and norms of behavior; similar customs and rituals, dwellings and habitation; and finally, similar sets of goods and artifacts – and si-

multaneously, the same cultural dispositions. All these beings, however, were realized in a manner appropriate to their class and experienced the world from separate physical perspectives, always dependent on the type of bodily endowment. Thus, the convergent ontological status of both human and non-human persons did not contradict their different perception or mode of functioning, and consequently, the manifestation of activities specific to each entity. It somewhat resembled *Umwelten*, known from Jakob von Uexküll’s concept [“Kultura” 73–86] – subjective universes in which the reaction to the environment depends on the bodily potential of a given creature (sensual and affective) [Pobojewska 39–40] realized in time and space. *Umwelten* remain separate and tangent at the same time; they are interconnected with different types of reciprocity that must be defined and evaluated anew with each subsequent contact. Hence, meetings between them can be based on both negative relations (hostility or competition) and positive ones (making alliances and exchanging benefits) [Chyc 114–128] as derivatives of the images of the environment produced by both sides.

In animism, this lack of arbitrary boundaries between individual existential domains – the realm of humans, animals, plants, as well as atmospheric objects and phenomena – resulted in the ability to change the point of view. Direct contact with non-people treated personally allowed the other’s perspective to materialize; it afforded a temporary metamorphosis, and an opportunity

to cross to a different side of existence. This was based on a mental projection, which, however, had a material foundation: in hunter-gatherer tribes, tracking down a creature involved imagining oneself as a related entity based on common bodily behavior. Finding these analogies – the predispositions shared by humans and non-humans to feel, experience, and succumb to affects – made it possible to observe an animal in its natural habitat. By observing its daily habits, the senses that guided it when searching for food or escaping a predator, as well as its various reactions to the environment, mimetic empathy was activated [Willerslev 97–110], compared to “becoming-other” in Deleuze’s nomadology [Watson et al. 259; Willerslev 106].

The internalization of the animal perspective, however, did not entail a sense of losing one’s own personality – rather, it was functioning between identities, both as a hunter and prey. Thus, man had two points of view simultaneously: he turned out to be both a subject perceiving the animal-object and an object perceived by the animal-subject, constituting a hybrid being to himself in the throes of an existential metamorphosis. Its crowning element was a mimetic performance in which the tracked creature was imitated (to convince it that the tracker belonged to its class of beings) and seduced as a member of one’s own community (so that it could be hunted). At that time, the hunter was constituted at the meeting point of different perceptions, in alliance with the animal based on the fusion

of perspectives, in which he defined himself through his own externality while internalizing the difference between him and the world. It was also a risky process – as a result of the convergence of all existence, a man could remain “on the side” of non-human persons, be absorbed by what is animal, and thus leave the human community forever.

Animism, grounded in the natural concrete, did not assume only the common inhabitation of the world with animals, but also the necessity to set rules that, to some extent, would respect both the human and non-human universes. It was the starting point for the creation of various systems between beings – competitive, based on not getting in each other’s way, and those assuming various forms of allied coexistence. It was also followed by respect for cohabitation with non-humans and the awareness that it is necessary to share the natural resources found in the forest or the meadow, which were there to benefit both humans, animals, and plants.

Could Chodakowski’s achievements of folk culture be a testimony to such an animistic mentality? Thanks to the pioneering combination of autochthonous and modernist sensibilities, was the researcher able to catch the specks of “ancient images” that were still resisting Christian influences? Considering that the research was conducted in a moment that was crucial for the shaping of ideas about folk nature, what role

did the epoch's climate play in it? It is noteworthy that the field research made by Chodakowski took place at a time when the context of Romantic mythology was still forming, and the messianic-national imaginary had not yet reached its fully mature form. These were the times when the future of thinking about how identity could self-construct was being determined, and the common practices of engaging folklore in the production of political and historical Polishness were yet to develop. Therefore, Chodakowski conducted research on the eve of the final consolidation of the Romantic discourse of the Borderlands, which even during his lifetime began to contribute to the transformation of the spiritual and material traditions of ethnic minorities and their gradual marginalization. It was linked to a rift with the ancient attitude towards the natural reality, which henceforth became its own equivalent – an object of phantasmic nostalgia or an exploited resource.

Thus, one can risk a claim that Chodakowski's peculiar cognitive approach – as Maria Janion puts it, his “looking for minor literature or minority literature as understood by Deleuze and Guattari” [55] – allows for looking at the folk art he collected through the prism of an animistic worldview. It would function here as “a potential subtext found in the text of the surface culture” [55]; as an effect of the ethnographer's strategy of distancing oneself from the dominant paradigm (increasingly mono-ethnic, monocultural, and mono-religious)

in order to identify the Other and the Different. The remnants of this “minority” thinking are thus present in the legends, songs, and chants² at the level of depicting the order of reality, patterns of behavior, figures of non-human persons and relations linking them with people (competitive or allied), still understood non-hierarchically and kincentrically. This is best reflected in the relationships with the animals featured in the plots, which directly affect the lives of the folk community; they either pose a threat to their lives or offer an opportunity to obtain food – an aurochs (due to the ethological probability, most likely mistaken for a bison here) and a deer.

The former of the creatures appears in these songs as a completely non-fantastic being, usually invoked in a strictly ethological context – in a situation of choosing places for feeding, obtaining food or taking care of offspring. The image of a female aurochs, outlined in one of the works (a song from the Belz Voivodeship) consists of a description of its specific life preferences and complex social relations – social and parental – which she creates within her herd. Both the nature of these ties and the implications allow us to think of the animal as a non-human person who shares the same activities, states, emotions, and even the same problems resulting from historical changes. The Belz song about the female aurochs is an attempt to reflect the animal point of view according to the animistic personal model, and also –

2 All the cited songs come from the collection *Śpiewy sławiańskie pod strzechą wiejską zebrane* [Slavic songs recorded in thatched-roof homes] [Chodakowski].

due to the closeness between people and non-people – a form of diagnosis of wrongs or injustices affecting both beings. This refers especially to the plight of the parent (in this case, applied to a non-human mother) that was common in the rural world, when, due to socio-economic inequalities, one was forced to put their offspring “in the yoke” of a feudal heir.

Traces of animistic beliefs are also present in the theme of the confrontation between an aurochs and hunters who wait for it in a grove, but after getting to know the animal’s perspective, they decide to let it go free (a song from *Jacwierz*, the Bielsko land). The creature, which has the status of a speaking person, reminds people of the moral rules that apply to them on the sharing of land, domains, and resources with non-humans. It is about the principle of equal access to forests and meadows as well as to the natural resources located there; a principle that does not eliminate relations based on competition, but does not allow to decide about anyone’s privileges “in advance.” Functioning in a world “full of non-human persons” [Harvey XXI] is associated with the imperative of self-limitation, satisfying only one’s basic needs, showing gratitude for food obtained at the expense of other creatures or readiness to compensate for their losses [Willerslev 35–42]. This also applies to the hunters who, by killing the aurochs, would violate the ancient order related to the non-abuse of violence – they would have killed the animal unnecessarily, for reasons other than hunger or defense of possessions. So despite the fact that

it left its territory (the forest) and found itself in the domain shared with humans (the grove), it is not killed and walks away unharmed.

The theme of meeting a non-human woman, who either appears as an aurochs (a song from Volhynia) or is found inside a deer antler (a song from the Brest-Litovsk region) often seems to have an animistic provenance. It reflects the metamorphosis, key to animism, which occurs most often during hunting, both in the case of people stalking their prey and animals misleading them. It is connected with going to the “other side” of existence and acquiring dispositions different from one’s own – a different worldview and bodily position that are external to one’s subjectivity – usually with the intention of deceiving the opponent. Metamorphosis understood in this way does not have to be associated only with competing relations and may favor the creation of alliances between different classes of beings, as the story of human-nonhuman marriages, known in many traditions, shows. In the works collected by Chodakowski, it is represented by the animal (a female aurochs or deer) motif of a fiancée who marries a man in order to sanction their material and spiritual kinship and the constant exchange between domains. Folk songs realize primarily the oldest version of the message, when the couple gets married successfully and learns about each other’s worlds, helping one another, for example, obtain food [Sax 23]. This alliance is also confirmed by the extensive wedding ceremony

mentioned in folk songs – the exchange of gifts between guests of various beings (wreaths and rings) or the composition of the bride’s wedding procession (the company of a deer and a swan). The latter motif would also reflect the multidirectional nature of the metamorphoses available to her and the permanent ability to move between beings, which in the animistic optics remains characteristic of the most initiated beings, the leaders of the human or non-human group (a song sung by the San river near Rozwadów).

The desire to understand one’s own multi-ethnicity accompanying Chodakowski’s research demands today to be re-read in the spirit of post-dependent humanities. The approach, favored by the ethnographer, based on combining the thought orders of the “majority” (national, instrumentalizing nature) and “minority” (indigenous, expressing a qualitative and specific approach to nature) seems to correspond in many ways to the emancipatory postulates of postcolonial, post-secular or post-anthropocentric philosophies. In this context, Chodakowski’s attempt to expand the Romantic imagination with an indigenous model of a man who enters into existential alliances with the world and bases his social relations on them seems particularly important. This idea can be understood as a proposal to build a super-species community focused on a more ethical approach to non-human beings and a fairer distribution of goods to which everyone is entitled. Such a community not only would be a response to our incen-

sant longing for the inherent order, but also an obvious remedy for the post-Enlightenment gap between man and nature, for breaking the closeness with the natural environment. In the era of the impending ecological crisis and the associated negationist reactions, also caused by the crisis of the rational paradigm, its worth seems invaluable.

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