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ANCIENT, GOTHIC AND ROMANTIC INFLUENCES IN *LALKA* BY BOLESŁAW PRUS AS EXAMPLES OF INTERTEXTUAL INTERDEPENDENCE

Lalka by Bolesław Prus is undoubtedly a versatile novel, which presents, next to the positivistic vision of Warsaw, a wide range of questions concerning social, political, intellectual as well as psychological issues. Among numerous aspects according to which this famous novel is analysed, it is worth investigating those elements which may be treated as foreign influences creating some specific analogies and allusions.

As far as the term *influence* is concerned, it is important to note that it is the whole range of popular literary conventions that affect the artistic work of an individual writer (Corstius qtd. in Janaszek-Ivanickova 1997:42–143). It is clear that any influences on a particular literary work enrich it and, what is more, they help to understand the national characteristics of the writer, as is claimed by Brunetière (qtd. in Bassnett 1995:24). Corstius is of the same opinion, stating that it is the influence that shows the most individual features of a particular work (qtd. in Janaszek-Ivanickova:141). The influence is a powerful factor; according to Durišin (qtd. in Janaszek-Ivanickova:100), it shows the wide connections between the works from different countries, most crucially, according to the scientist, importing the influences from other works, not exporting them is the most objective criterion of assessing whether the work is world-class (qtd. in Janaszek-Ivanickova:103).

Dispute with Antiquity

Exploited by Prus, the elements of the culture of ancient Greece and Rome seem to be the essential dominant in terms of constructing the portrait of the protagonists of the novel. The writer repeatedly uses mythological figures, as well as historical persons, mainly in order to characterize a nineteenth-century

hero, the European citizen. Those references are of a diversified character and they can create a specific image of antiquity in the eyes of the reader.

Undoubtedly, the exploitation of mythological influences makes the novel consistent; this is perceived as one of the most important features in the work which is analysed in the terms of influences (Frye qtd. in Janaszek-Ivanickova:155).

According to Van Tieghem (qtd. in Bassnett 1995:23), Greek and Latin influences on modern literature belong to the most essential literary relations. The crucial point is here to analyse not so much the location of the sources, but the questions they raise, like: what was borrowed, what was rejected and how successful the process of influencing modern work was (Bassnet 1995:32).

Around the main heroine of *Lalka*, Izabela Łęcka, there floats the spirit of the ancient god, Apollo¹, who takes the form of various figures in her dreams. The statue of this ancient god even revives in the female's imagination, having on his face the features typical for all those men who happened to be the object of her admiration:

Once he was similar to [...] a general- hero. [...] Another time his face resembled the most famous tenor [...]. Another time he was a cheerful and beautiful prince [...], then a brave firefighter, [...] a great graphic artist [...]. (Prus 1890:51–52)²

Apollo also takes on the shape of Stanisław Wokulski whenever Miss Izabela is enchanted by the figure of this rich merchant. In Łęcka's imagination the ancient god became the symbol of the ideal male, who she would like to possess. Simultaneously, Izabela's attitude towards men showed her attachment to the statue more than to a real man: she could freely manipulate with her image of an ideal male, selectively giving him particular features in accordance with her current needs. The reference to ancient tradition can be here perceived as the emphasis put on the ancient cult of the body and, at the same time, a critique of any shortages characteristic for men of the nineteenth-century, none of whom proved to be good enough for Izabela Łęcka.

A similar role in the novel is played by the comparison between the marshal – a candidate for Łęcka's husband and Adonis, who is an allegorical figure in numerous literary works (Makowiecki 2000:12). The marshal, as a man, belonged to the circle of Łęcka's interests, but only as the direct result of economic factors. Beside this, his figure was much different from the image of

¹ Apollo is seen as a god of numerous and even contradictory authorities (Kempiński 1993:38–40). For the considerations about his crucial and symbolic role he fulfills in *Lalka* it is important to see him as the symbol of a young, attractive and well-built man (Kopaliński 2003:51).

² The translation here, and further, from *Lalka* are self-translated.

a beautiful young man, Adonis.³ Both, Apollo and Adonis are mythological archetypes, who become symbols frequently repeated throughout numerous literary works (Frye qtd. in Janaszek-Ivanickova:153).

The admiration of a fit body, which is similar to a sculpture, is connected also with the reference to the figure of an ancient gladiator, to whom Wokulski was compared by Miss Florentyna. Łęcka as well, having seen how popular he was among the aristocrats, noticed the resemblance of the rich merchant to the statue of a victorious gladiator, which she had once seen in Florence. Essential here is the fact that the ancient wrestler, fighting for life and death (Kopaliński 2003:395) is perceived by Izabela and Florentyna as someone from the lowest classes of society, who has the honour of amusing the upper classes. A direct analogy to the situation of Stanisław Wokulski may be presented here. This rich merchant moves in a clumsy way among the representatives of upper classes, similarly to a gladiator in the arena in the eyes of the watching aristocracy. Nevertheless, he receives much admiration, like the winner in a fight with another Roman wrestler. The analogy of the figure of a merchant from Warsaw to the figure of a gladiator is also based on their respective professions. Merchandise, for the nineteenth century aristocracy, belonged to a list of jobs which they would never take up; fight in the arena was not appropriate for free people in ancient Rome. Nonetheless, in both cases one may notice some admiration for the professions but, at the same time, some reserve towards them, probably resulting from a slight contempt.

The figure of Wokulski frequently met with the critique of the aristocracy and the employees in his shop and friends. Thanks to the diary kept by Rzecki, one becomes familiar with the way Wokulski's wedding with the widow after Jan Mincel was perceived: *He sold out to the old woman [...] like Brutus!* (Prus 1890:384).

Undoubtedly, all who knew Wokulski saw in this action some kind of a resignation, or even rebellion against his ideals, and choosing the easiest way of life, as well as fulfilling some cunning plan, in a markedly similar way to the historic figure of Brutus.⁴

All the allusions to antiquity, which Prus used in his novel undoubtedly influence the way in which the reader perceives the protagonists. Beside the image of a male, the writer also presents the figure of a female using numerous analogies to the ancient sources. Miss Ewelina is, in *Lalka*, the ideal of beauty and chastity. She is the fiancée of the elderly baron Dalski, who compared her

³ Adonis is known as a man born as the result of incestuous love, the embodiment of beauty and charm (Kopaliński 2003:18, as well as Willis ed. 2000:10–11).

⁴ Marcus Iunius Brutus is a historic figure, who became famous mainly for taking part in the slaughter of Julius Caesar in 44 B. C. He is also the symbol of a traitor, pretending to be a friend and a loyal colleague (Makowiecki 2000:108).

to the embodiment of the image of a vestal.⁵ According to the baron, Ewelina possesses features typical for the priestesses of Vesta; she was not only young and beautiful, but she also had natural modesty and a noble background. The mutual relationships of baron and Ewelina in the time of their engagement are a clear reflection of the life of the ancient priestesses: they were as inaccessible as Ewelina.

Among the people staying with Dalski and Ewelina in Zastawek we also meet other female persons who are compared to ancient ideals. Mrs. Waśowska, the energetic and seductive widow, is seen by the narrator as the embodiment of the goddess Juno, who was a mature, experienced woman, not without personal charm.⁶

Waśowska used her sexual charm towards Wokulski, which might be perceived as the sphere dominated by the ancient goddess. What is more, Waśowska, thanks to her life experience, can be the embodiment of a dignified and noble femininity, in exactly the same way that Juno was held to be (Kopaliński 2003:493).

Among numerous references to antiquity, one of the most interesting can be the perception of Łęcka as Messalina⁷ by Wokulski. In his inner considerations about his unhappy love he analyses the figure of his beloved woman, seeing her as a selfish female, who is interested only in balls and concerts. He suffered from the fact that he was not the only man in her life; he was supposed to fill the role as only her legal husband and, this aside, she would have many other lovers. This obvious analogy between Łęcka and the wife of a Roman emperor Claudius shows female slyness and the ability to manipulate, which, however, finishes tragically for the woman.

The dispute with antiquity is, for Prus, also the tool to present the ancient space of the novel. The space refers to such places as high Olympus, or the ancient architecture and it is a changeable space. To present the relativity of the space Prus chose two cities: Warsaw and Paris. For Wokulski Paris is a place where antiquity is charming and light, where the huge buildings similar to the Greek temples contrast with ordinary buildings in Warsaw. What

⁵ Vestals in Roman mythology were shown as royal daughters aged 6 to 10, chosen by the *pontifex maximus* from among twenty girls. During their 30 years of being the priestesses of the fireside, they had to remain virgins, nor could they get married (Willis ed, 2000:87, as well as Kopaliński 20003:1409).

⁶ According to Roman mythology, Juno was responsible for female sexual and marital life (Grimal 1987:170).

⁷ Messalina was notorious for her nymphomania; she led a depraved life not only at court. She deliberately delivered her husband women, as well as murdered her rivals. The main cause for her execution was the fact that despite being a wife of the emperor, she married Gaius Silius – the most handsome man in Rome (Kopaliński 20003:758).

Wokulski does not like about the Polish city, is the fact that in Warsaw some important places are *covered by the mould of shady antiquity* (Prus 1890:467).

The image of antiquity is dependent not only on its architectural image, but also on the place where it is included. This ambiguous image of ancient architecture is connected with the perception of a man in two different places of Europe. In Warsaw a hard-working man *is pilloried [...], is called a miser, a money-maker* (Prus 1890:467–468). In Paris, on the other hand, *such factors as work, reason, will, creativity, knowledge become important* (Prus 1890:467).

The space of action becomes a pleasant space only in the case when an individual is perceived in an honest way, like in Paris. In Warsaw, antiquity means prison and backwardness.

For Łęcka, the image of antiquity was totally different. The space of Warsaw was similar to Olympus, but one of the French factories she visited was seen by her as *a hopeless abyss of Volcano* (Prus 1890:48). She did not understand the situation of workers, who in her eyes were similar to the Cyclopes.⁸ On one hand, antiquity is something unknown and mysterious, as well as dangerous; on the other hand it is a safe place, because it is located far from any dangers like Olympus.

Romanticism in *Lalka*

In the novel one may find not only significant traces of antiquity, but also romantic influences. They are the examples of those influences which show the connection of literary work with some trends popular during the romantic époque, some ideals of constructing the hero and the atmosphere of the work.⁹ Despite clear positivistic ideas, which stand in the opposition to the romantic ideals, *Lalka* contains numerous elements typical of romantic literature (Kowalczykova 1991:843).

One of the most characteristic romantic elements is the figure of Stanisław Wokulski. His unreciprocated love towards Izabela Łęcka turns him into a suffering hero. He envies simple people, whose only problems are cold and hunger, who do not know mental suffering. His unhappiness is expressed in one of his numerous soliloquies. Undoubtedly, Wokulski can be called the individualist, who is in direct conflict with the contemporary world. That is why

⁸ According to one of the numerous stories, Cyclopes worked in a great noise, one could hear their breath and continuous roar of the anvils (Grimal 1987:64–65).

⁹ As Bassnett claims (1995:31), comparative literature is not only the study of the influences of one work on another, but it also presents the connections of the work with other fields of knowledge, like: philosophy, arts or history.

he frequently expresses his emotions in his monologues, which are often similar to the thoughts of a mentally-deranged person:

Four days ago I almost killed a man, today I almost put another man to prison, and – all this for her for one: merci [...] For her also I made a lot of money, I employ hundreds of people, I will make my country richer [...] Whoever would I be without her? An unimportant merchant. But today I am discussed through the whole of Warsaw! [...]. Love lets me live. But what if she burned me? O God! What a miserable World [...]. Woman is a mean beast: she plays with the thing she cannot even understand. (Prus 1890:240)

A typical feature for Wokulski's thoughts are rhetorical questions, as well as contradictory statements. Without a doubt he is also a dreamer and an idealist, who was brought up accompanied by the works of romantic poets. He longs for those works, which may be seen in his admiration for the collection of the poems by Mickiewicz. The poems reminded him of his youth. Although the works of great Polish poets were familiar to Wokulski, they appeared to be a tricky prism through which he perceived women and through which he saw love in an unrealistic way:

It would have been better for me to perceive women not through the eyes of Mickiewiczes, Krasińskis ans Slowackis, but through the statistics which shows that every white angel is in a tenth part a prostitute; so, if you became disappointed, it would be at least a pleasant feeling [...]. (Prus 1890:696)

The greatest disappointment Wokulski faced was probably the fact that he could not make the romantic ideals become real. That is why he suffered. Although his poetic ideals were unrealistic, they were still alive in Wokulski's thoughts and they become the object of worship.¹⁰

Besides reading poetry, the romantic hero sought peaceful places where he could find consolation. As Ewa Paczoska claims (2008:44), such a hero suffered and rejoiced being close to nature. Wokulski, being abroad and longing for home, was looking for a desolate place, where he could hide himself from the whole world.

Zasławek could be perceived as such a mainstay for a suffering soul. It was a magic and desolate place, where Wokulski had a chance to stay. According to Paczoska (2008:45), this place may be compared to the mansion with a garden, which Słowacki dreamt about, being in Switzerland. Mrs. Zasławska, the owner of the mansion, could be for Wokulski an expert at defining the romantic ideals; she is the only one who understands the idea of

¹⁰ It is the plot presenting romantic poetry that seems to be the basis for the statement that *Lalka* contains the elements of romantic tradition (Kowalczykowa 1991:844).

romantic true love, as she experienced this feeling as a young woman. She also tries to convince Łęcka to appreciate Wokulski's love.

Wokulski's whole potential is characterized in the best way by doctor Szuman, who sees in him two contradictory natures: the nature of a positivist and romantic individualist. He describes very acutely the conflict between Wokulski and his contemporary world, his being inconsistent, and even some kind of madness in his actions:

This man never in his life acted in a logical way [...] When he was a shop assistant, he used to think about inventions and about the university; when he was accepted at the university, he started playing with politics [...]. When he finally started making money, he was no longer a merchant but the admirer of a woman, who for many years has had the reputation of a coquette. It was not enough: having obtained both the lady and big fortune, he left them. Whatever does he do now? Wherever is he today?...[...]. Halfwit! [...]. A pure Polish romantic, who is constantly seeking something more than reality [...]. (Prus 1890:787)

His image of the main hero might be surprising in the light of his social and economical achievements. This dualism of his nature is, however, the perfect exemplification of his position in the society: he is not understood by men, underestimated by women and he still was looking for the place, where he could be happy. This constant search leads him to be perceived as a very romantic person.

Gothic Elements in the Novel

In *Lalka* numerous gloomy and mysterious elements of landscapes, of human psyche and of history can be found, which show the gothic influences on Prus' novel. During his walk on the streets of Warsaw, Wokulski comes across the gothic scenery, as well as the people who are embodiments of suspicious figures. Near the Vistula River the main hero found an abode full of dirt and misdemeanour. The poorest classes of the society lead a nomadic ghost-like life, and they gloat over the stranger like *savage dogs* (Prus 1890:91). The comparison made by Prus between the poorest people and ghosts and beasts creates a particular image of nineteenth century Warsaw in the reader's imagination. It is a critique of the social politics of those days, when work was one of the most basic social ideas, but at the same time beggary was frequent among the citizens.

During another walk, to the Łazienki, where he saw a couple of lovers, Wokulski is thinking about an evil deed: a murder. Seeing the happiness of other people and suffering from his own failure, Wokulski dreams of thrusting a dagger in the hearts of the lovers. These theoretical considerations are, in the case of Wokulski, the symptom of his romantic nature and his personal failure.

The idea of death and sin is undoubtedly typical for the plot of a gothic novel (Paczowska qtd. in Bachórz and Kowalczykova 1991:323).

When Wokulski was in Paris, he experiences some unusual visions, partly sleeping and partly while awake. He thought he had been followed by an unidentified ghost from Warsaw. The image was so strong that Wokulski left the hotel room for fear of this mysterious phantom. It is obvious that the protagonist, against his own interests, used to come back in his thoughts to what he left in Warsaw: to the woman he loved and hated at the same time, to unfulfilled dreams and ideals. All these things swirled through his mind and took on the figure of a mysterious ghost.

There is also a scientific plot in *Lalka*, which seems to be of a gothic character. On one hand the reader becomes familiar with the figure of Geist, a progressive scientist and inventor, admired by Wokulski, on the other hand, the reader witnesses a disrespectful attitude of experienced scientists towards modern discoveries. Geist shows Wokulski some heavy, light and transparent metals, which for the chemists are suspicious; they are like *claptrap and deviousness*, as well as the fact that they *violate the laws of nature* (Prus 1890:450). Such perception of any progress by well-educated people is an example of backwardness, which Prus criticizes in his novel. In such a way the writer shows social primitivism and isolation from any development. In such social conditions the individual like Wokulski, who is a progressive person, is doomed to solitude.

The space in the novel also contains some gothic elements. According to Paczoska (2008:55), *Lalka* is one of the darkest novels by Prus, mainly thanks to the space full of shadows and mysteries. One of the examples of a dark space is the living room in the house of baroness Krzeszowska. To get to this room requires the unlocking of numerous doors. It is the place which looks like a space not visited by mortals. All the pieces of furniture are covered with grey dustsheets, and the only living thing is a spider. The lack of symptoms of life is probably connected with losing a daughter by the baroness. After her death life started to be passive.

Both romantic and gothic elements interlard each other in the novel. Wokulski's monologues provide an example of the coexistence of those two kinds of elements. In his monologues, the protagonist shows his mental suffering, as well as presents the deepest levels of his mind. Wokulski becomes a versatile hero, so it is difficult to categorize him according to one particular type of a character. There are also many other allusions to the three literary traditions. Due to this fact the novel by Prus becomes a universal, classical and at the same time modern work. It is the example of a novel that matches the idea about literature expressed by Matthew Arnold:

Everywhere there is connection, everywhere there is illustration. No single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures. (qtd. in Bassnett 1995:1)

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