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Citizens of the Universe – Poles in Jacek Dukaj’s Prose

Obywatele (wszech)świata – Polacy w prozie Jacka Dukaja

Słowa kluczowe: fantastyka naukowa, Jacek Dukaj, historia alternatywna, Polacy, Polska

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The history of Poland and Poles provides an important destination point for literary peregrination undertaken by our compatriots creating science fiction literature. However, it was not always possible to speak directly about our country and its inhabitants. At the time of communist censorship, “wanting to present a true image of reality, writers departed from realism moving towards different types of allegories, construction of fantastic or historical worlds, alluding to modern times; also using, on a large scale, the Aesopian language” (Jarzębski 2011: 100). Science fiction was, therefore, a language capable of testing and describing the reality of the Polish People’s Republic. The change took place with the breakdown of the communist system. A long-term editor of the “Fantastyka” magazine, Maciej Parowski, described this breakthrough point in “Czas Kultury” in the following way:

The 1990s denote a violent release of Polish energy blocked so far on many fronts. We stopped being an imitation of a country. In the Polish all-in gamble, rates and temptations go up, it becomes fascinating – it can be a subject and scenery of Polish SF writing. Texts by Jacek Inglot, Janusz Cyran, Konrad T. Lewandowski, Ziemkiewicz, Dukaj, Oramus, introduce characters with Polish surnames, living in Polish communities. They depict our streets, factories, schools, parliament or general staff. This reality (also conventional cyberspace), extended by the space of myth, magic and allegory, is entered by characters resembling those from the horror novels of King and Barker, and sometimes as tough guys depicted in Władysław Pasikowski’s movies. They have Europe behind their back, the world in which demons, previously closed in the cold-war refrigerator, explode (Parowski 2011: 16).

The freedom to talk about Poland and Poles, brought strongly idealized literature, characterized by “presenting images depicting the future of Europe (the

world), bringing a negative assessment of the phenomena and processes occurring in contemporary societies, mostly associated with globalisation, post-modern ethics as well as European integration” (Będkowski 2014: 112). The works by Ziemkiewicz (*Pieprzony los kataryniarza* [*An Organ-Grinder’s Fucking Fate*]), Marek Oramus (*Kankan na wulkanie* [*Cancan at a Volcano*]), Jacek Piekara (*Przenajświętsza Rzeczpospolita* [*The Most Holy Republic*]) and many others, feature criticism (often spiteful) towards the dictate of political correctness¹, the policy of multiculturalism or feminism². The anthology of stories published in 2004, titled *PL+50. Historie przyszłości* [*PL+50. Histories of the Future*], edited by Jacek Dukaj provide a literary confirmation proving Eurosceptic approaches of Polish SF authors writing at the turn of the century. The works of authors differing in their political opinions and outlook (including, among others, Lem, Kapuściński, Bauman, Staniszkis, Tokarczuk, Wnuk-Lipiński, Oramus, Jęczmyk, and Orbitowski) are dominated by the tone of scepticism towards Poland’s joining the European Union. In the introduction to the book, Dukaj writes: “Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński is the only one to use slightly lighter colours, while Jadwiga Staniszkis and Stanisław Lem see the advantage in imposing procedures on Poland by the EU that even our politicians will not be able to ruin” (Dukaj 2004: 8).

The European Union is presented in the collection in a grotesque and caricatural way (see works by Dajnowski, Zimniak, Świdorski or Żerdziński). The vision of denationalization emerges in stories by Grzędowicz and Regalica. Texts by Bauman, Kapuściński and Staniszkis discuss the inevitability of globalisation. Marek Oramus, just like in the *Kankan na wulkanie*, scares us with the invaders coming from the East. Interestingly, this collection lacks the vision of Poland as a world power and images of its domination in Europe – “The authors perhaps feel that healthy, strong and rich Poland of the 21st century is too improbable; the readers will not believe it, but rather laugh at it” (Dukaj 2004: 8).

¹ More about the phenomenon of political correctness in the context of Polish science fiction literature can be found in Leszek Będkowski (2014) *Science fiction i polityczna poprawność. Perspektywa polskich dystopii społeczno-politycznych drugiej połowy XX i początku XXI wieku* [*Science Fiction and Political Correctness. The Perspective of the Polish Socio-Political Dystopias of the second half of the 20th century*], In: *Literatura popularna* [*Popular Literature*]. Vol. 2: *Fantastyczne kreacje światów* [*Fantastic Creations of Worlds*], E. Bartos, D. Chwolik, P. Majerski, K. Niesporek (eds), Katowice: 103–122.

² The nationalist-conservative approach of Polish science fiction authors became a subject of an article by Michał R. Wiśniewski, published in “Gazeta Wyborcza”. When asked what the right-wing SF writers were afraid of at the beginning of our decade, Wiśniewski responds: “of the same as in 1990s – and the same that terrifies 40-year-old readers of their books, clad in thermal T-shirts, stylized after Hussar bucklers or cyber-armor, supporters of the Nationalist Movement, Korwin or Kukiz. The European Union that would exterminate Poland, making , in its place, multi-culture districts, erasing the memory of Polish heroes. [...] Feminists hunting priests for fun. The Soviet Union of Europe, American intervening forces at the streets of the national-Catholic Warsaw. The generation of the Independence March was raised on such books” (Wiśniewski 2018: 18–19).

The works by Jacek Dukaj, and the person of the writer himself, seem to be interesting in terms of struggles with Polishness and presentation of the image of Poles. At this point it is worth referring to the non-literary context. When asked by Wojciech Orliński “What in today’s Poland gets on your nerves and what delights you?” the writer responds:

Perhaps, it does not go so far as to get on my nerves or delight, as I hardly ever get into such extremes. I do not like the common hang-ups revealed e.g. in the obsessive palpating, measuring, comparing Poland in never ending analyses of “experiencing” Polishness, in setting up and defining against non-Polishness etc. As regards literature – I can see – it is already an obligatory dance. If I refuse to enter this game, I encourage more discussion: and why doesn’t he want to talk about Poland? Oh, it is where it hurts him, it is his painful spot. It is even easier to disentangle oneself from Freudian suspicions (Orliński 2011, online).

With regard to the subject matter undertaken in this paper, the confession of the author of *Lód [Ice]* referring to the specific role of the writer creating in the Polish language seems to be equally important:

The very description “Polish writer” is already a two-level structure – the author writes in Polish, so it seems to be obvious, but you also have the second meaning, strong, chaining the unfortunate one to this our entire tradition of specific duties and entanglements of the writer of the enslaved nation, from partitions to the People’s Republic. And I absolutely do not feel obliged by this (Orliński 2011, online).

Dukaj’s assurances are particularly confirmed in the construction and types of literary characters created by him. It is here that the similarity of subsequent works by the writer from Cracow is revealed. On the other hand, my aim is to distillate features proper for Dukaj’s protagonists.

In *The Writer’s Journey*, Christopher Vogler claims that a good hero is at the same time common and above average.

Heroes should have universal qualities, emotions, and motivations that everyone has experienced at one time or another:[...]. But Heroes must also be unique human beings [...]. Like any effective work of art, they need both universality and originality. (...) A Hero should be fully active, in control of his own fate (Vogler 2010: 33–34).

Jacek Dukaj creates his characters in a similar way. First of all, they are active heroes³. Secondly, they are both persons with rather common features, and

³ Dukaj, as he often emphasizes himself, “takes on” active heroes, who are better suited for implementation of tasks assigned to them by the author. “If I have a choice, I always prefer to select an active than passive character. Sometimes plot requirements force me to create a weaker hero, dominated – such as Hieronim Berbelek at the beginning of *Inne pieśni [Other Songs]*. [...] This

– which is revealed in further reconstruction of events – they prove to be above-average individuals, situated in differently understood elites, located in “cosmo/geographical, political, economical” (Jonak online) avant-garde of civilization expansion. On one hand, the membership of this avant-garde results from their unique predispositions (mental and physical), and on the other from their origin – “their uniqueness often is derived from their father, whoever he was” (Gorliński-Kucik 2017: 157). This motif seems to be both interesting and important in the context of Dukaj’s prose. To capture its essence, we should investigate the parent-child relation (taking often in Dukaj’s works the father-son form⁴) and the privileged status of the parent (father), situating him, as previously mentioned, in the elite group.

Let us start with *Lód [Ice]*. The father of the main character of the novel, Benedykt Gierołowski, Filip, is a man who has mastered the skill of communicating with the lute (alien organisms, resembling moving ice blocks), forms of being that have escaped from the impact point of the Tunguska meteorite and penetrate everything they meet on their way. It is justified to ask: why is the ability to communicate with them so important? The answer refers us to the first law of thermodynamics, specifying the dependence of the changes in internal energy on the supplied heat and work. The higher temperature, the more chaotic movement of particles in a given system, and the lower temperature, the more organized body structure. Ice of crystal structure, contrasted with vapour with its chaotically moving particles, becomes a metaphor of human mentality. Since the low temperature of the lute affects arrangement of matter and human thought, the one who masters the lute can control human thinking. Following the same logic, it should be stated that if Filip can talk to the lute and Benedykt, as his son, can have a certain impact on him, then also he can indirectly have the power over history and the course of events. Thus, the person of Benedykt reveals huge potential and the perspective of great power, which is not foreshadowed by anything at the beginning, as we meet Benedykt as an able, but poor student.

However, *Lód* is not only a story about individual Poles, but also about the Poles as a nation. Dukaj presents in his great novel historical facts driven out from the memory of most Poles. The juxtaposition of representatives of our nation with Siberia always brings associations with exile and backbreaking work. Instead (or rather, besides) “Benedykt finds in Irkutsk Polish industrialists bossing around

is what in the mainstream literature makes me damn irritated. It is very difficult for me to point to a contemporary Polish novel in which the hero has got balls. That he is after something, that he is not »scruffy«, and has a kind of drive in his soul. Most of those heroes are often reactive: something happens to them, they respond because they have to. The world makes an impression on them, but they do not make their impression on the world. I cannot read that! This general scruffiness creates an image of the man I disagree with at the aesthetic and ethical level” (Dukaj 2007: 299).

⁴ Piotr Gorliński-Kucik points to the fact that this is “a travesty of the Biblical relation between God and Jesus Christ. The scheme is more or less as follows: absence of the Father → »crisis« of the world → salutary mission of the Son → preventing the threat” (Gorliński-Kucik 2017: 157).

the local trade and mining industry” (Mizarkiewicz 2013: 194). Przemysław Czapliński writes about this breaking down the myth of Siberia in the Polish literature in a similar vein: “Siberia functioning in our martyrdom imaginary as the ice hell inhabited by starving Polish exiles seems to be an area of intensive industrialization, supported and managed by Poles, who are the manufacturing class in this process” (Czapliński 2016: 135). In *Lód*, Poles belong to the elite exploring Russian lands in economical, intellectual and economical aspects. They make fortunes here, extracting raw materials brought by the meteorite (tungstite and zimnazo [cold iron]). They are industrialists, traders, financial magnates – they even conquer tsarist Russia.

Faking Russia by Dukaj is only one of the topics investigated by Czapliński in *Poruszona mapa [A Moved Map]*. Analysing the Polish literature of the last three decades, the critic draws a performative map of Europe. Wanting to cope with the question posed in the first verse of the paper: “Where is Poland located?”, the researchers use the notion of imagined geography coined by Edward Said.

Our imagination for 300 years has been organized by horizontal thinking – initiated by partitions, reinforced by World War I and sealed by World War II and its consequences. The Yalta treaty and the cold-war order confirmed the dominant global position of the eastern and the western hegemonies. For three centuries, the biggest fears and hopes of Poland were situated between those poles – between too close Russia and Germany and too far France, England and the USA (Czapliński 2016: 6–7).

The image of Poland as a country situated on an east-west axis generates the constant need to determine one's own affiliation. According to Czapliński, this consists in emphasizing the foreignness of Russia and dissimilarities between “us” and “them”, based on oppositions, such as: democracy – lack of democracy, civilisation – wilderness, Europe – Asia.

Literary journeys to the East⁵ and an attempt to construct national identity based on the narration about our largest neighbour are particularly important in the context of the oeuvres by the author of *Wroniec [The Crowe]*. History, logics of history and the causativity of phenomena are one of “great topics” in Jacek Dukaj's works. He confronts the issues of an historico-philosophical nature through alternative history.

Consequently, it is worth presenting the alternative history of the 20th century Poland as depicted in *Xavras Wyzryn*. The plot of the novel starts in 1996. Poles

⁵ Czapliński distinguishes three perspectives used to describe Russia in the Polish literature. They include: “poetics of visitation (centralized around an expressive person of visitor and his disciplining look, poetics of participating gathering (with the central figure of a gatherer, focused on social practices of everyday life) and the poetics of faking (in which the main role is played by Russia as the unready reality)” (Czapliński 2016: 16). The researcher classifies the narration about Russia presented in *Lód* by Dukaj into the latter category.

lost the war in 1920 with the Bolsheviks, did not regain their statehood and Poland became the Vistula Republic. In the area of the Central and Eastern Europe, the so-called EWZ (European War Zone) was created – a zone making a scenario for ruthless military conflicts and at the same time, the symbol of human bestiality, reducing individuals to their biology and function of war machines. The EWZ is the place on Earth, “where the protection of law (and not only) has been suspended. The only rule here is the historical Darwinism, permanent and common war of everyone with everybody” (Uniłowski 2014: 260). In such a reality, a *quasi* reality show takes place, broadcast by international media, all efforts of which are focused on filming “the Ever-Elusive Xavras Wyżryn” – a fighter for the freedom of Poland, a new Messiah (with comic book origins), and finally, the icon of pop culture printed on posters and T-shirts⁶:

Jan uśmiechnął się do niego, mrugnął porozumiewawczo, podciągnął sweter i wyszarpnął ze spodni kraciatą koszulę, ukazując czarny T-shirt z logo MGM, srebrnym nadrukiem: NIEUCHWYTNY XAVRAS, oraz zdjęciem Johna Fourtree w roli Xavrasa Wyżryna; za aktorem kłębiły się czerwonożółte płomienie, pędził czołg, biegnęło kilku żołnierzy strzelających z biodra z włodów, a sam zabójczo przystojny Fourtree, w podartej panterce, z ryngrafem z Matką Boską na piersi, z kawaleryjską szablą przy boku i ze straszliwych rozmiarów granatnikiem w ręce, uśmiechał się drapieżnie do obiektywu.

[Jan smiled at him, winked knowingly, pulled up the sweater and jerked out from his trousers a checked shirt, revealing a black T-shirt with the MGM logo, silver print: EVER-ELUSIVE XAVRAS, and a photo of John Fourtree in the role of Xavras Wyżryn; red and yellow flames whirled behind the actor, with a tank speeding in the background, several soldiers running and hip shooting, while Fourtree, killingly handsome, in his torn army camouflage, with a gorget featuring Our Lady on his chest, a cavalry sabre at his side and a huge grenade launcher in his hand, was wildly smiling to the camera.] (Dukaj 2004: 26)

Xavras attracted the attention of the entire world and great audience in relation to his declaration to detonate an atomic bomb in Moscow. The use of mass destruction weapon as the tool to restore historical justice generates the following questions/problems, to which Dukaj obviously does not provide any clear answer: does the quest for independence justify the means? What do patriotism and Polishness mean and when they turn into terrorism? As Uniłowski writes, “The partisan commander represents Polishness in the state of ‘evolutionary degeneracy’ and ‘bestiality’, but it is also about absolute Polishness, Polishness presented literally – as the most perfect incarnation of the spirit of historical justice” Uniłowski 2014: 261).

⁶ In this context, this procedure permits us to read Dukaj’s book as an example of metatext prose. *Xavras Wyżryn* is the story about how pop culture appropriates and processes historical characters and events, and at the same time, the novel itself is an example of this process.

Dukaj indirectly asks about the validity of the “Romantic paradigm”. Interestingly, the question is posed by the prose writer associated with the circle of popular literature, several years after announcing the twilight of this parameter by Maria Janion. The literary criticism was divided in this matter: Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz wrote that “*Xavras Wyzryn* proves national and conservative approaches in SF writers of the middle and younger generations (Uniłowski 2014: 262), distinguishing a group of “conservative Romanticists”, where he classified the author of *Lód*. However, Wojciech Orliński, always analysing subsequent works by Dukaj in detail, claimed that:

Xavras read after 9/11 sounds rather as an anti-patriotic work, showing the patriotism as a potentially destructive force, regardless of noble intentions. Dukaj can be equally read as the last epigone of the Polish Romanticism and as somebody who wants to reject and crush the myth of Konrad – and obviously, the writer, avoiding author's own evaluations and commentaries, wants to emphasize this ambiguity (Orliński 2001: 20).

Therefore, it seems very risky to talk about Dukaj in the context of specific political views or his attitude towards national myths.

There are more exceptional Poles presented in Dukaj's books. In *Wroniec* [*The Crow*], the person swooped away by the bird from the title, the father of little Adaś, is an oppositionist, therefore an individual dangerous to the government system. This implies a specific behaviour of the young protagonist, who is not entirely aware of the importance of changes taking place through him. Adaś himself has mastered an unusual power over the word and outstanding resistance to designs of the evil world. The name “ADAM” typed by the boy becomes a pass to the world ruled by the Crow. The hero can travel using U-Lotka [Leaf-let] and can recognize Double Agents. He is the only one with appropriate skills and sensitivity to rescue his Father.

A “parent” of another Adam, Adam Zamoyski, a stash (Standard Homo Sapiens) from *Perfekcyjna niedoskonałość* [*An Ideal Imperfection*] is ... *Inkluzja Ultymatywna* [*Ultimative Inclusion*]⁷, from which the hero emanates.

Similarly to other Dukaj's characters, the uniqueness of Zamoyski is not only related to his origins, but also results from the features he possesses:

In a perfect world of higher intelligence it is imperfection, mistakes or tiny distortions that make people such interesting creatures [...] The entire intricate tissue of the post-human world created by Dukaj is arranged to form a perfect pattern, but just because of that, it seems to be inhuman, devoid of errors, mistakes, weaknesses, feelings. A difference between humans and stash, phoebes and inclusions

⁷ “[...] inclusion of such combination of physical constants that this combination ensures the efficiency of a logical construct placed in the inclusion higher than the effectiveness of all constructs from all other inclusions, of all other physical constants” (Dukaj 2004: 175).

presented in *Perfekcyjna niedoskonłość* is indeed based on feelings, weaknesses and flaws (Gajewska 2010: 229).

Treating the human being as a defective and perfect creature at the same time seems to implement the “ideal imperfection” oxymoron, related to “Baroque mannerism” (Mazurkiewicz 2014: 367). However, the novel includes one more paradox. *Perfekcyjna niedoskonłość* clearly establishes the primacy of the anthropic principle, according to which basic laws of physics, such as the Planck constant, speed of light or gravitational constant, have exactly the values they should have to facilitate emergence of life, and in particular, to make it possible for man to appear on Earth. Therefore, this principle somehow wipes out the non-anthropocentric vision of the world derived from posthumanism. If “the universe seems to exist to enable and glorify human existence as something absolutely most important” (Gajewska 2010: 230), this is just this defective human being, and not phoebe or inclusion, that is the most privileged creature in the world.

The situation of the characters from the novel *Córka łupieżcy* [*The Plunderer's Daughter*] is also worth noting here. The father referred to in the title is an archaeologist – an exceptional person, since, firstly, he investigates ancient space civilisations, and secondly, because he leaves his entire inheritance to his daughter, Zuzanna. Such a situation is not frequent in the worlds of Dukaj's novels, dominated by men.

The list of exceptional compatriots in the books by the writer from Cracow can be concluded with references to *Linia oporu* [*Line of Resistance*] and *Starość aksolotla* [*The Old Axolotl*]. Here, an aberration is the absence of the father figure. Paweł Kostrzewa, a character from the first story, is one of the best creative ones – programmers whose task is to create sense of life (the only thing desirable in the world where you can have everything). Grześ, in turn, is a sought-after IT specialist. He survived the extermination of humanity caused by a neutron wave hitting the Earth. As one of the few, he was able to scan his mind to the computer and after thousand years, subsequently changing mechanical shells, he participates in the restoration of the human species.

The above list allows us to reconstruct the image of Dukaj's character. Such factors as exceptional predispositions, typically related to – although not exclusively – the origin, allow the persons called to life by the author of *Lód* to receive “the beyond-normal scope of human spiritual” and physical experience. The characters created by the writer are outstanding individuals, open to others and Space, Poles being citizens of the world and affecting its fate – far from Eurosceptic protagonists presented in right-wing coloured science fiction. Those individuals:

accomplishing the tasks assigned to them and performing great deeds in the name of the welfare of others, their countrymen, actually reflect the status of an individual in the universe. They explain to man the changes, as well as the tests, he

is subjected to through his life, and acquaint him with the thought that is most tragic and incomprehensible for him – concerning his own finiteness, limitations or mortality (<http://www.puzdro.pl/1/29-almanach-pop.htm>)

To some extent, they can also perform a compensatory function – giving hope that even a citizen of a small country spread between economic and military powers can play a significant role in the history of the entire globe and the human species.

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Summary

The fate of Poland and Poles is an important topic in Polish science fiction literature. Until 1989, writers could comment on the state and the nation only by means of metaphors, and thus, science fiction was a great tool for describing reality. After the fall of communism, Polish authors could finally speak about Poland and Poles directly. However, as a result, we received politically and ideologically inspired literature. In this respect, the works of Jacek Dukaj seem to be an exception. The writer shows Poles as the elite of civilization development. The aim of this paper is therefore to identify certain characteristic features of the model hero of Dukaj's novels.