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Ryszard Berwiński and his Travels into the Peasants' Memory. Some Reflections about a Personal Disappointment in a National Matter

The statement that there was a connection between the preoccupation with folklore and the romantic ideas has been a truism for a long time. Romantic writers, regardless of the kind of writing they pursued, noticed this feature of their creativity and sometimes reflected on it. Zorian Dołęga Chodakowski, a person described and adduced in virtually all essays and articles concerning the Romantic preoccupation with folksiness, is the perfect example, as he testified to it not only with his writing but also with his life.¹ Maria Janion, who years ago characterised the attitudes of Polish writers towards folklore, judged that in Polish Romanticism (similarly to the German Romantic circle) two kinds of attitude towards folksiness can be distinguished. The first one she defined as “aesthetic-literary,” the second as “recognising the evidence of myth and revelation in the folk transfer, believing in the truth of the proto-myth of the proto-times, treating the folk as part of the unconscious nature, demanding faithfulness to the unconscious and collective art production of the people.”² As the representative of the first option she took, among others, Adam Mickiewicz, who transformed themes contained in folklore in a creative and literary fashion; as a representative of

¹ On this subject see the paper by M. Janion, in the collection *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury*, Kraków 2006, pp. 49-79. For biographies of this exceedingly interesting and inspiring person see biographies by J. Maślanka, *Zorian Dołęga Chodakowski. Jego miejsce i wpływ na polskie piśmiennictwo romantyczne*, Kraków 1963 and by F. Rawit-Gawroński, *Zoryan Dołęga Chodakowski. Jego życie i praca*, Lwów 1898. See: Cz. Zgorzelski, *Z dziejów sławy Zoriana Dołęgi Chodakowskiego*, “Pamiętnik Słowiański,” 5 (1955), pp. 110-136.

² M. Janion, *Gorączka romantyczna*, ed. 2, Gdańsk 2007, pp. 89-90. See: D. Simonides, *Folklorystyka wobec mitologizacji politycznej w pierwszej połowie XIX wieku*, in: *Polskie mity polityczne XIX i XX wieku*, ed. W. Wrzesiński, Wrocław 1994, pp. 69-74.

the other option Zorian Chodakowski who saw in the folklore an unchanged, even “frozen” form of the past.

In his programme and in some sense prophetic paper *O Sławiańszczyźnie przed chrześcijaństwem*³ (“On Slavdom before Christianity”), printed in 1818, he gave an apotheosis of the people, its rites, songs, and legends that did not die away in spite of the harmful effects of Latin education spread for ten centuries by the Evangelisers of the foreign Christian culture. Those who surrendered to it became, in his opinion, “foreign to themselves.”⁴ Chodakowski did not make use yet of terms, which in the post-November period would enter the texts of contemporary folklorists. He did not speak of folk literature or poetry, nor of the literature or poetry of people. Instead, he drew attention to the practical side of the preoccupation with the folklore, namely the necessity of gathering and writing down of what was left. Connected to it was the necessity of travelling to the people. This travelling was the main and constantly repeating itself theme in Chodakowski’s writing, and the post-November Romantics associated the image of a traveller mainly with Zorian Dołęga. The travelling as means of reaching the past was gradable. Chodakowski wrote: “It is natural that the farther the epoch, the longer one has to travel.”⁵ For the young researchers fascinated with him, the travelling was a certain kind of a research method.⁶

Ryszard Berwiński belonged to that very circle of young Romantics, fascinated with the Slavic and national past, who followed Chodakowski’s ideas.⁷ His variant of travelling to the past took shape of a “national pilgrimage,” which can be understood as a form of sacralisation and mitologisation of both the destination and its fruit. From a present viewpoint, Berwiński’s travel

³The first printing of this paper was published in „Ćwiczenia Naukowe,” t. 2: 5 (1818), pp. 3-27. Its text was then corrected by the author and published again in „Pamiętnik Lwowski,” 4: 1(1819), pp. 17-48. A modern edition was prepared by J. Maślanka: Z.D. Chodakowski, *O Sławiańszczyźnie przed chrześcijaństwem oraz inne pisma*, ed. J. Maślanka, Warszawa 1967, pp. 19-38 [all references address this edition].

⁴Z.D. Chodakowski, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁵Z.D. Chodakowski, *Projekt naukowej podróży po Rosji w celu objaśnienia starożytnych dziejów Sławian*, in: *idem, O Sławiańszczyźnie...*, p. 102.

⁶Besides R. Berwiński, travelling to the people was undertaken by, among others, P. Goszczyński, R. Zmorski, and many others. Chodakowski’s ideas had a particularly strong impact on the Galician circle of literary men publishing in the new-yearly „Ziewonia.” Its two tomes were published in 1834 and 1838 (2nd ed. 1839). For Chodakowski’s influence on Polish Romantic writing, see: J. Maślanka, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-142.

⁷For a description of Berwiński’s folkloristic work, see: T. Brzozowska, *Poznańskie*, in: *Dzieje folklorystyki polskiej. 1800-1863. Epoka przedkolbergowska*, (edp.) H. Kapetś, J. Krzyżanowski, Ossolineum, 1970, pp. 391-393; A. Fischer, *Ryszard Wincenty Berwiński*, „Lud,” 37 (1947), pp. 141-159.

was a folkloristic sightseeing excursion to “seek and gather legends, stories, tales of the people of Great Poland.”⁸ By naming it a pilgrimage, however, Berwiński bestowed on it a status of ideological undertaking, where not only the travelling is important but the destination as well. His pilgrimage had, considering the young age of the traveller (Berwiński set out at the age of 18–19), relatively solid ideological basis. He confronted the Enlightenment individualistic attitude, oriented towards knowing particular individuals, with the Romantic attitude, oriented towards the discovery, characterisation, and strengthening of certain social groups and nations. The fascination with the spirit of the collective is strongly visible in him, and his belief he showed in his letters from the national pilgrimage about the uncontaminated nature of “people’s poetry,” expressing the truly national spirit, is characteristic for his writing from that period.⁹

Also, in the letters from Berwiński’s “national pilgrimage” there is another theme that connects him with the attitude promoted by Chodakowski, namely the relation to space. For it is not unimportant where one looks for that mythical people to whom one’s pilgrimage leads. Just as for Chodakowski the land was “charmed,” for Berwiński the space and objects left in it “remember.” This remembrance related to the historical events tied to the past of a community or nation which in contemporary writers’ beliefs shaped its character. They referred then to the past before Mieszko’s baptism, or at least to the times of struggle between the Paganism and the Christendom. Such a shrine of pre-Christian past was e.g. the Lake Świtez, introduced to the collective consciousness by Mickiewicz in a literary form. The writers of the younger generation changed this geography of memory. Years ago, Alina Witkowska noted that:

... native writers who shared the interest in the Slavic broke the domination of *kresy* and Lithuania in the Romantic geography, chiefly in the choice of unusual places where the mysterious meets the miraculous and which the poets’ fantasy so adores. Before all, they discovered Gopło and Kruszwica not only as the proto-Slavic cradle of Poland but as a place radiating importance and significance, as the space of poetry and mystery.¹⁰

Berwiński was a classic example of such a “native writer,” bewitched by Gopło and the Mouse Tower in Kruszwica. He dedicated to Gopło two

⁸ R. Berwiński, *Listy z narodowej pielgrzymki. List drugi*, „Przyjaciel Ludu” [further ap. „PL”], R. V, vol. 1, no. 11 (1838), p. 82.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 83.

¹⁰ A. Witkowska, *W mrocznej krainie Popiela i Piasta*, in: *idem*, „Ja, głupi Słowianin,” Kraków 1980, p. 31.

letters from his “national pilgrimage”¹¹, a separate touring account¹², several small poems¹³, and most importantly it is by Gopło that the plot of his most important work from that period, the poetic novel *Bogunka na Gople* (“Nymph of Gopło”),¹⁴ takes place.

The travelling-pilgrimage was thus a relocation both in space and in time. The first step, however, was to define the world one needed to leave behind when going for a pilgrimage. In his poem *Wyjazd*, (“Departure”), part of which was later included in the prologue to *Bogunka na Gople*, Berwiński confronted two worlds, the present one and the past one. The former is an “ungrateful land,” the land of sorrow and unhappiness “where but briars and thorns ... where cold hearts and souls.” It is a world in which the pilgrim finds no understanding, where the pilgrim moves around as in the fog.¹⁵ The destination of the pilgrimage is the “land ... where better past from graves does flower.”¹⁶ The world of the past is “better” because that mythical “then” was tied to the most glorious historical events, full of mythical characters of old men, knights, and maidens; also because the true and pure idea lives in this world, uncontaminated by foreign influence, the spirit of community which determines its history and the form the contemporary community takes. The recollection of this pure idea, according to Berwiński, was to aid in the healing of the present, since it was contaminated by a foreign culture because of which the community-nation lived in a peculiar state of split; it was, quoting Chodakowski, “foreign to itself.”

Going for a travel-pilgrimage, Berwiński reached that “better” world of the past, or at least to the places he believed were links between the present and the past. In the prologue to *Bogunka na Gople* he wrote:

¹¹ The fourth letter was withheld by the censorship, the fifth was published in: „PL,” R. V, vol. 2, no. 27, 1839, pp. 215-216.

¹² R.W. B.[erwiński], *Gopło i jego okolice (z podróży malowniczej po WielkoPolsce)*, „PL,” R. V, vol. 2, no. 51, 1839, pp. 401-403; no. 52, pp. 414-416.

¹³ See works in the collection: R. Berwiński, *Księga życia i śmierci (wybór pism)*, opr. M. Janion, Warszawa 1953. Cf. also the comprehensive characteristic of Berwiński’s early works in the article: M. Janion, *Z narodowej pielgrzymki*, „Pamiętnik Literacki,” 42: 3-4(1951), pp. 723-765 and *eadem*, *Wstęp do* [„introduction to”]: R. Berwiński, *Księga życia*, pp. 5-72.

¹⁴ *Bogunka na Gople* was first published in the collection: R. Berwiński, *Powieści Wielko-Polskie*, vol. 1, Wrocław 1840, pp. 1-228; present edition in: R. Berwiński, *Księga życia*, pp. 215-319. Quotations and references in the article pertain to this edition. About works similar to *Bogunka na Gople* created in the circle of Galicia, see: A. Goriaczko-Borkowska, *Pieśń historyczna Ziemończyków*, „Pamiętnik Literacki,” 50: 3-4 (1959), pp. 379-401.

¹⁵ R. Berwiński, *Listy z narodowej pielgrzymki. List pierwszy*, „PL,” R. V, vol. 1, no. 8, 1838, p. 60.

¹⁶ *Ibidem* and *Bogunka na Gople*, p. 217.

Let us hurry then... As a mendicant in a temple of keepsakes, I walked from village to village, from hut to hut. [The carefully gathered accounts of memory] I took as pilgrimage donations and carried eagerly for a great monument of the past. That evening I stopped in Kruszwica.¹⁷

Having thus placed the destination of his pilgrimage, Berwiński developed a lengthy invocation to the mythical lake. It began so: "Oh, Gopło! Among our waters the one, the magnificent; cradle and grave of Slavic past..."¹⁸ The confrontation between antiquity and modernity is very strong in the prologue to *Bogunka na Gople*. It can be seen on many planes, appearing in Berwiński's text like snapshots of the past or an erratic stream of thoughts. In the prologue, the pilgrim is being tossed between the poetic observation of the lake's waters and the fragments of the past that, although dead, constantly mark their presence. They tempt, they scare, they attract, they appal. The predominant theme, it would seem, is that of seeking communication, understanding between what is ancient and what is contemporary. In his mentioned above poem *Wyjazd*, Berwiński showed that the land he leaves is the land of incomprehension, since "in vain does a singer burn with inspiration here, in vain he wakes the people with native chant, the people do not listen to his song."¹⁹ Berwiński the poet cannot thus reach the people with his writing, because he believes the people live in another dimension; the people live in the land of the past that, although it is already gone, is still remembered thanks to the existence of special places, the temples of the past, and the true national poetry, the poetry of the people, or people's literature as others had it. To introduce the people to the present and at the same time to revive the contemporaries with the true spirit of national poetry, it was necessary to build such compositions that would take advantage of that new spirit and simultaneously would fulfil the need of the present.

That "mendicant in the temple of keepsakes" could not, in Berwiński's mind, simply write down the accounts of memory acquired from the people. Berwiński the poet was aware that doing so would "kill" the poetry within. This is clearly visible in his attitude to Kazimierz Wójcicki's *Klechdy*,²⁰ published in the same year, 1837. Publications of this kind were the result of numerous exhortations, by Chodakowski and others, to gather songs of the people, as well as the work of the Society of Friends of Science in Warsaw, which

¹⁷ R. Berwiński, *Bogunka na Gople*, p. 218.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 218 f.

¹⁹ R. Berwiński, *Listy z narodowej pielgrzymki. List pierwszy*, p. 60.

²⁰ K. Wójcicki, *Klechdy, starożytnie podania i powieści ludu polskiego i Rusi*, Warszawa 1837.

supported such activities.²¹ It is hard to say whether this kind of publications arose from the need to save the people's literature from oblivion or from some personal sentiment. Both K. Wójcicki and Waclaw z Oleska, one of the authors of a collection of the people's songs,²² stated that the motivation for their work were their personal childhood memories, when they listened to village story-tellers weaving unending tales of miracle and wonder.²³ Berwiński also recalled tales and parables of nurses and nannies told to his younger siblings. He also mentioned folk ballads written by Franciszek Morawski, which carried him away from the world of the Aeneis and the Iliad to the "native flowery fields or sat [him] by a calm chimney."²⁴ In quite a wide analogy, it can be said that as the authors of folkloristic collections referred to their childhoods, so the folk literature itself referred to the beginning of nationality, and thus to pre-Christian times.

In the letters from his "national pilgrimage" Berwiński emphasised how strong was the impression he gained from reading Wójcicki's *Klechdy*. The difference between the folklore gatherers and Berwiński lay in the different treatment of the subject. The former had an ambition to record the people's tales faithfully in order to "let know the fantasy of the people of Poland and Rus', and show together a part of unwritten literature which still shines in all its splendour by the hearth in a village hut."²⁵ Berwiński, on the other hand, told tales "as he pleased," "like the poet-storyteller among the people." He added then: "Mr Wójcicki is a historian, or rather a chronicler of folk literature, I wanted to be a living part of it."²⁶ Thus the pilgrim was by no

²¹ Hugo Kołłątaj's letter from Ołomuniec, sent in 1802 to the bookseller Jan Maj, is recognized as the first call to gather folklore; it was only published in: "Pamiętnik Warszawski," 1810, vol. 2, z. 4, pp. 17-42, pages 38-40 are of special interest. On the activities of the SFS in Warsaw, see e.g. R. Wojciechowski, *Warszawskie*, in: *Dzieje folklorystyki polskiej...*, pp. 17-60. On the gathering activity of K. Wójcickiego and other authors, see: *ibidem*, pp. 111-168.

²² *Pieśni polskie i ruskie ludu galicyjskiego*, 1833.

²³ K. Wójcicki, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-9; Waclaw z Oleska shows a whole catalogue of emotions related to this childhood memory. He wrote: „When it was time to go to town for vocation and stay there, I missed the country. ... Groves came to my mind, and meadows, and those spreading fields, and that pond by the manor; all that were objects of mourning, even the marshes where I would noisily scatter the lapwings. A tenderness came that only the songs heard in my childhood could soothe.” (*Pieśni polskie...*, p. IV).

²⁴ R. Berwiński, *Bogunka na Gople*, p. 288.

²⁵ K. Wójcicki, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

²⁶ R. Berwiński, *Bogunka na Gople*, p. 289. One of the ways to "enter" the folk literature was a conscious building of language, which Berwiński most likely intended to actualise the events he narrated. His rich "Slavic" or "folk" vocabulary was analysed by Z. Gosiewska, *Uwagi nad językiem "Bogunki na Gople" Ryszarda Wincentego Berwińskiego*, „Prace Polonistyczne,” series XII, 1955, pp. 31-52. She drew a conclusion that after Berwiński's treatment, the text

means a tourist who visits foreign countries and collects souvenirs of his travel. The pilgrim “entered” the world of his destination and accepted its rules, making do with “pilgrimage donations.” The poet-pilgrim transformed so into a story-teller, a folk-tale narrator, like the Slavic Bojan—a character from *Bogunka na Gople*, taken from the epic *Tale of Igor’s Campaign* discovered in the end of 18th century—who told stories of the past in a verse similar to that of Wajdelota from Adam Mickiewicz’s *Konrad Wallenrod*.

The people’s poetry was then to bring motifs and themes²⁷ which the poet should then transform, minding the spirit of national poetry contained within, to bring out the elements of the past which exist within, and on the other hand to make it alive, or receivable both for the people and the educated part of the society. To do so, one had to go to the country where a “better past from graves does flower.” The people and its poetry were, according to ideas of the time, unconscious carriers of historical accounts which could not be found in any chronicle. In the prologue to *Bogunka na Gople* Berwiński summed up his reflections on the poetic views of the lake, writing: “Strange things—strange events! I sought wisdom in old books, nowhere was it written about; but much was being told among the people in the villages by the shore, and I listened to the tales.”²⁸ A reference to the people’s memory could supplement the account of the past, become another source beside the written ones. Some, like Berwiński, rated this memory higher than the written accounts, chronicles. Its advantage was that it had not yet been transformed by an author. Berwiński wrote:

... creations and fruit of the people are not works of art but logical results of historical occurrences and events: truly the history is their mother, though sometimes she did not leave a single mark of her features on her children’s faces. ... the imagination of the people is but a mirror of time; the image it reflected could be only so, not different.²⁹

This utterance reveals a belief about the lack of authorship in folk literature and about its ability to preserve historical accounts undistorted. The historical events could overlap one another in such account, but this resulted only from the passage of time and the changes in the tale related to the transformations characteristic of oral transfer.

became “tedious” and its content “incomprehensible and complicated.” Berwiński must have been aware of it, since he added a glossary with explanations to the text of *Bogunka* and the specialist hunting terms he used in the poem was explained by the author in the notes.

²⁷ Berwiński wrote in his notes to *Boginka na Gople*: “This tale is based on a folk legend” (p. 286).

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 231.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 301.

The dualism of folk account and written history was also expressed, later but in the same mindset, by Józef Kremer:

So every nation has two kinds of history, one based on historical evidence, and other that flower from the heart and breathe in the legend and story. Who knows! Maybe that internal history of the nation's feelings and desires, maybe that belief in events without any historical evidence is the image of its soul more faithful than those external, spectral, evident, and proven records of its life.³⁰

The dualism sketched above concurs with that of Berwiński in the division into the “pure-Polish” and “Latin-Polish” literature or, speaking in a more modern language, into the history and the memory, i.e. written and oral history.

Berwiński most likely drew his division from Michał Wiszniewski, who presented it in his *Historia literatury polskiej* (“A history of Polish literature”).³¹ He divided the development of Polish literature into ten periods, of which the two oldest were of greatest significance for Berwiński. In the earliest era of Slavic literature, which ended in Poland about 960, Wiszniewski included under the term literature virtually everything that is commonly associated with culture, namely religion, customs, details of every-day life, and obviously the songs and tales of the people. It was a pure epoch, uncontaminated by foreign influence, truly national.³² In the second period, after the baptism, when Poland entered the Christian culture circle, there is a visible division of national literature into two accounts, different and independent of each other, the Slavic-Polish literature and the Latin-Polish literature.³³ The separation of these two circles of literature reverberated far and wide among the writers interested in folklore and generally among all writers occupied with investigating the Slavic past of Poland.

Berwiński, who made use of this division, characterised both literatures so: “The first [Latin-Polish—M.M.], lain in books and folios, that hardly anyone reads today; the other mobile, oral, transitory, not yet coalesced in any forms or rules of poetics.”³⁴ It was believed that the two literatures were independent of, did not influence, and did not know about each other; what is most important, the Slavic-Polish literature was held to be native, while the other was culturally and linguistically foreign. The native literature lived in hiding, unseen by the representatives of the mainstream. Only in the early

³⁰ J. Kremer, *Podróż do Włoch*, vol. 3: (*Medyolan, Pawia, Genua, Florencyja*), Wilno 1861, p. 78.

³¹ M. Wiszniewski, *Historia literatury polskiej*, vol. 1, Kraków 1840.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 165-180.

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 182-280.

³⁴ R. Berwiński, *Bogunka na Gople*, pp. 287-288.

19th century the potential hidden in the people's poetry began to be noticed and the Latin literature began to be joined with the Slavic literature.

It seems that for Berwiński that deified Slavic-Polish literature had also its material dimension. The centre of the primal, Slavic, national world were, as I mentioned, the surroundings of Gopło. In Berwiński's writing they focused everything that was tied to the lost sense of community, with what had been displaced by the Latin literature and the Christian culture. Berwiński's Gopło was full of corpses of the past, which came back to life under the life-giving influence of the Slavic-Polish poetry. This benefited from the material remains of former glory, which were kind of triggers of the past. In *Bogunka na Gopłe* Berwiński mentioned oaks which "still remember Piast" but what stirred his imagination the most was the ruin of the Mouse Tower, then commonly identified with Popiel. For the contemporaries, however, it was only a ruin which "looks like a coffin." The Mouse Tower could frighten and depress only because it had a material form. Since Popiel was identified with a ruin, where could one look for the materiality of Piast, son of a poor yokel: "where is at least a remnant of Piast's humble abode? Not even a remnant!" If there are not any material remnants, there may be something else, perhaps. "We [the contemporaries—M.M.] have one more consolation yet —Look at that old leaning thatch, ... who knows if it's not Piast's abode?..."³⁵ The people thus is the social group that preserves the memory of the past, since the materiality of the past is but a ruin.

It was perhaps the material remains that most clearly showed the dualism of worlds: the present and the past. They were ruins but, at the same time, they told of past splendour. For the Latin-Polish literature they were coffins of the past long gone, for the Slavic-Polish literature they were full of ghosts and phantoms that "lived" after death. The ruin of Popiel's tower was a visible sign of the fall of the state, that creation of the Latin-Polish culture. It served as a metaphor of the fall of the Commonwealth in 18th century. The travel into the past was thus, in this case, conditioned by contemporary events.

The contemporary events became an excuse for Berwiński to revise his views on people's literature or, more generally, folklore. Patriotic activity, which dominated the poet's life during the following years, his involvement in the events in Galicia in 1846, then the defeat of the Springtime of Nations in the Greater Poland and the times in prison connected with it as well as a nervous breakdown³⁶, all contributed to a thorough revision of his views

³⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 283-284.

³⁶ For biographical material see above all: J. Maciejewski, *Ryszard Wincenty Berwiński, 1819–1879*, in: *Wielkopole XIX wieku*, red. W. Jakóbczyk, vol. 2, Poznań 1969, pp. 197-234 (especially p. 215-223). Bibliography on Berwiński's life and works was gathered in a

on the potential inherent in the people as the social group holding the uncontaminated spirit of the nation. In the interesting introduction to his extensive *Studia o literaturze ludowej ze stanowiska historycznej i naukowej krytyki* („Studies on folk literature from the standpoint of historical and scientific criticism”)³⁷, Berwiński made bitter reckoning with his former views on the people’s literature. Some passages sound almost neophytic, considering his earlier rapture and euphoria over the potential rooted in the people.³⁸ Undoubtedly, the introduction to *Studia o literaturze* is very personal in character. A bitter tone of disappointment, surging through Berwiński, is predominant; the disappointment over unfulfilled hopes, and maybe also self-resentment over the expectations being too far-fetched. The contrast between idealistic assumptions and the practice of the political and social events of the 5th decade of 19th century must have been painful. Berwiński wrote that just as for the Romantic poets the people’s literature was to be the life-giving element, so for the Romantic noblemen-insurgents the life-giving element was to be the people itself. The expectations rested in the people were reflected by Berwiński in a change he made in a part of the conclusion to *Bogunka na Gople*, which he published in 1844 as a separate work *Mysza wieża* (“Mouse Tower”). In the 1840 version, the descendants of Piast, the people, “with folktales wake the speechless glory,” while in 1844, on the eve of the Uprising, the people is identified with Piast and the noblemen-insurgents come like angels to his hut to proclaim future glory and ask for support.³⁹

So it was understood and so it was reckoned! And so did I reckon with others. In 1846 an attempt at reckoning was to come and came. And lo! Beyond all expectation the attempt showed that the reckoning was wrong! Either Providence or Fate led me just to those parts, where such an error

work entitled: *Ryszard Wincenty Berwiński (1819–1879) (bibliografia — wybór)*, Leszno 1984, published by the Voivodeship Public Library in Leszno, pp. 10-17.

³⁷The *Studia o literaturze* were published in two volumes in Poznań in 1854. The work was published again entitled *Studia o gustach, czarach, zabobonach I przesądach ludowych* (“Studies on witchcraft, sorcery, and superstitions of the people”) in Poznań in 1862. Both editions share the same pagination.

³⁸E.g. a passage, in which Berwiński explains his choice of folk literature as the object of his writing: “as there is an atmosphere for a physical organism ..., from which a certain spread at this time disease ensues; so there is a spiritual atmosphere, ... which in [some epochs] is filled with a virulent miasma which falls on brains, hearts and souls like a physical disease on a body and causes commonly that in the sphere of spirit some epidemics sometimes spread, and so do mental diseasep. Such a spiritual atmosphere, I think, must have influenced me as well during my early career as a writer” (*Studia o literaturze*, p. IX).

³⁹Cf. R. Berwiński, *Bogunka na Gople*, pp. 284-285 and *Mysza wieża*, in: *idem*, *Księga życia i śmierci*, pp. 152-153.

most obviously, though terrifyingly stuck out in the eyes of even the most blinded utopists. I found myself in Galicia⁴⁰

Looking for the reason of this “error in reckoning,” Berwiński reached a conclusion that it lay in the “false understanding and comprehension of the rules, according to which both individual notions of the people and its whole intelligence form and develop; then it lay in the false comprehension of the relation of the spiritual and ethical life of this people to the other strata of the society.”⁴¹ *Studia o literaturze* are an attempt at looking for those rules and describing that relation. Also the “falsity” of previous opinions was proved in great erudition and in analyses of people’s literature.

Berwiński was aware that he was speaking against fixed and widely-held views, therefore he made reservations in the introduction to the *Studia o literaturze* that his earlier works testify to his knowledge of the subject, while there he presented a different point of view, filtered through social practice and subjected to scientific criticism. It is significant that the former poet invoked the language of science, which he earlier only used to comment on literary works. In his bitter considerations, Berwiński often referred to the opinions of Józef Ignacy Kraszewski found in his *Studia literackie*, in which the latter author approached warily the Romantic writing on the subject of folk literature, and also postulated subjecting them to the rigours of historical and literary criticism.⁴² Berwiński made an apparently ground-breaking statement that previous writing on people’s songs and tales focused on differentiation and formal classification, while omitting the most important issue, namely the spirit of these works which did not change, as it was the case of their form. This spirit, according to Berwiński, were “superstitions, witchcraft, and our people’s beliefs in various demons and supernatural phenomena performed through them, or sorcery.”⁴³

Addressing the issue of folk literature in this way pushed the considerations over the historicity of individual folktales and songs to a farther plane and accentuated judgements over the sources of those beliefs and superstitions and their critical discussion. The following parts of Berwiński’s *Studia o literaturze* are dedicated to this,⁴⁴ and the analysis performed within is unusually erudite and complete. In the analysis, the author tracked individual beliefs, superstitions, and customs of the people hoping that it would allow him to improve his knowledge of the Slavic

⁴⁰ R. Berwiński, *Studia o literaturze*, p. XIV.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. XV.

⁴² J.I. Kraszewski, *Studia literackie*, Wilno 1842, especially the part dedicated to “folk tales.”

⁴³ R. Berwiński, *Studia o literaturze*, p. 68.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, part II, IIIA; vol. 2: part IIIB.

religion, following the belief that in the people's customs some undefined memory of pre-Christian beliefs had been preserved.

Did such investigation of present day witchcraft and superstitions shed the expected light on Slavic mythology? I resolve this question with a categorical answer that no such light has ever flashed from it.⁴⁵

Then added, with emphasis:

... therefore the people, or rather its impressionable mind, is not like a Daguerre's plate, on which an external image, reflected with the light of the sun, is fixed forever and remains unchanged.⁴⁶

Berwiński argued that just as the views and customs of the nobility changed, so did the views and customs of the people, although the content of these views and customs was different. It was the Church who had, according to Berwiński, the crucial influence over what the people had believed and believed in, as well as which superstitions and sorceries they followed.⁴⁷

Drawing conclusions from this answer, Berwiński took an extreme position on the issue of folk literature:

The people do not have ... any independent creativity of spirit, and if so, it has it only in such capacity, *mutatis mutandis*, as a child. The strength of its spirit, or rather imagination, is rather only reproductive. What the external relations of place and time, where it lives, put in or throw in, that according to the development of its mental powers it sometimes processes, but not always so. Most often and usually, it only repeats what it learned from its teachers, who are first – the priests ..., then – the nobles and gentlemen and all frock-coaters ..., and finally – the current government.⁴⁸

Fifteen years stretching between the publishing of *Powieści Wielkopolskie* and *Studia o literaturze ludowej* show the change of Berwiński's views, which ensued from the confrontation of ideas with social practice. Already adduced in this paper, Maria Janion, who divided the Romantic attitude to folksiness into aesthetic-literary and mythical, showed elsewhere, together with Maria Żmigrodzka, that Romanticism was a period when idea had primacy over reality, and literature over life.⁴⁹ Undoubtedly, Ryszard Berwiński was a perfect example of such an attitude, when he dwelled on the life-giving spirit

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 208.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 209.

⁴⁷ „For the Church was and is the main and primary school of the people” (*ibidem*, p. 210).

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 216.

⁴⁹ M. Janion, M. Żmigrodzka, *Romantyzm i historia*, Gdańsk 2001, p. I.

of folk poetry. Undoubtedly, he was also uncompromising in a Romantic way, when he was slaying his former convictions.

Ryszard Berwiński and his Travels into the Peasants' Memory. Some Reflections about a Personal Disappointment in a National Matter

by Maciej Michalski

Abstract

In this text I would like to analyse the romantic attitude towards the so called "literature of the peasants". The person in question is Ryszard Berwiński (1819-1879), a poet, a folklorist, a social and political activist. The analysis is concentrated on his poems, novels as well as scholarly essays about beliefs and superstitions of the peasants. Berwiński is an example of a mystical folklorist, who believed in true, pure and original character of a creation of the peasants and especially their oral tradition. He believed that it went back to the pre-Christian era, and that it preserved a true spirit of the nation. Berwiński, as many others in that times, travelled through villages. He called these travels a national pilgrimage. The places he visited were connected with historical monuments and historical events dated back to the Middle Ages. He believed that the stories he collected contained some true historical facts and true spirit of that times. He transformed them into poetical form (e.g. poetical novel *Bogunka na Gople*). He hoped that such literature will renew the social and national identity. He also hoped that such literature will be useful for peasant in the process of including them into political life. Berwiński as a social and political activist observed that his hopes and believes were wrong. He changed fundamentally his opinion about the potential power of the peasants. His disappointment was especially connected with the true and pure nature of the literature of the peasants. In his scholarly and erudite study about folklore he noticed that beliefs, customs and oral tradition are imitative and are constructed by clergymen and noblemen.

Keywords: Medievalism, folklore, memory, national identity, Ryszard Wincenty Berwiński.