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The *Folwark*[1] and the Fate. A Sketch on Adolf Dygasinski's Rural Works

Folwark i los. Szkic o twórczości wiejskiej Adolfa Dygasińskiego

ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to interpret selected texts by Adolf Dygasiński, which depict life on a farm in the second half of the 19th century from the perspective of agricultural workers. In Dygasiński's view, the farm appears as a distorted and dehumanised social space, characterised by omnipresent violence. The extremely difficult conditions prevailing there undermine interpersonal bonds, prompting the characters to cast various representatives of their own community as scapegoats. The article examines this social phenomenon as presented by the writer and seeks to clarify both its dynamics and the factors that cause it.

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[1] I decided to leave this term in its original form, like some researches in the field of history tend to do. Other expressions, such as farm, grange Or farmstead, fail to capture the uniqueness and complexity of this middleeuropean agricultural enterprise.

Key words: Adolf Dygasiński, 19th century Polish literature, *folwark*, farm workers, violence, 19th century rural life

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł ten jest próbą interpretacji wybranych tekstów Adolfa Dygasińskiego, ukazujących obraz życia na folwarku w drugiej połowie XIX w. z perspektywy robotników rolnych. W ujęciu Dygasińskiego folwark jawi się jako wynaturzona i zdehumanizowana przestrzeń społeczna, nacechowana wszechobecną przemocą. Panujące tam skrajnie trudne warunki demontują międzyludzkie więzi, skłaniając bohaterów do obsadzania w roli kozłów ofiarnych różnych przedstawicieli własnej wspólnoty. Autorka artykułu analizuje ten społeczny fenomen w postaci przedstawionej nam przez pisarza i podejmuje próbę wytłumaczenia zarówno jego przebiegu, jak i czynników, które go wywołują.

Słowa kluczowe: Adolf Dygasiński, literatura polska XIX w., folwark, robotnicy rolni, przemoc, życie na wsi w XIX w.

INTRODUCTION

Adolf Dygasiński (1837–1902) is a writer who occupies a somewhat marginal position in relation to the mainstream of Polish prose in the second half of the nineteenth century, shaped by the three great novelists: Bolesław Prus, Eliza Orzeszkowa and Henryk Sienkiewicz. In part, this is probably because, unlike his great contemporaries, Dygasinski cannot be described as a classical and strict realist, and traditional attempts to place him within the framework of naturalism also can not convey the richness and multilayered nature of his writing.

Classifying Dygasiński's creative legacy — which encompasses many literary genres and displays varying levels of artistic refinement — is a difficult task. In fact, it is possible to make some categorizations within it using only one criterion, the simplest question: what is it about? Three principal areas, or thematic circles, emerge from his writings. These include: works on urban affairs, prose devoted to animals and rural prose. Each of these thematic zones contains: novellas, short stories, novels, artistically more or less successful, ranging from excellent to rather flawed. Scholars have quite unanimously agreed that the first group contains a significantly greater number of imperfect narratives than the other two. In other words: when portraying urban life, Dygasiński proves to be an average writer, lacking a distinctive artistic individuality. Meanwhile, as an 'animal and peasant writer'[2], to use the phrase with which

[2] A. Dygasiński, *Listy*, preface J.Z. Jakubowski, biographical annotations A. Górski, prep. and ed. T. Nuckowski, Wrocław 1972, p. 733.

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he mockingly cited the concise verdict of contemporary critics—though one that, after all, contains a considerable amount of truth—he becomes a passionate revealer and discoverer of unusual worlds, and a creator of a style entirely his own[3]. The explanation for it is quite simple. Connected to the countryside from the very birth, he had no fondness for city life, in fact he always felt alien to it, both as a person and as an artist. He included his writing credo, a clear authorial awareness of the fact that the proper element of his work is the Ponidzie countryside and everything associated with it, already in his debut novella and has remained faithful to it ever since:

> Beautiful is the whole country, which was girded with the ribbon of Nida river, rushing to the Vistula like a daughter to the arms of her mother. And white sands overgrown with low pine, and birch forests, and fields humming with rye and wheat, and white mountains, and green and vast meadows with colorful flowers, and pastures occupied in the summer from dawn by horses, geese, cattle; all this remains engraved in the memory of one who was born and raised in Ponidzie. Nowhere do nightingales and larks sing so beautifully, nowhere do lilacs have such a pleasant fragrance, nowhere does a rose in the morning adorn the world more wonderfull[4].

Such a sensitivity to every detail, and at the same time an all-embracing and broadly engaged creative outlook will henceforth distinguish every text that the author has devoted to the rural matters. It should be emphasized that the focus is on rural, not peasant, concerns. This difference, seemingly minor, deserves attention, since researchers of Dygasiński's work have had divergent opinions in this regard. While Alicja Wysokińska uses the term 'peasant novell'[5], Mirosława Radowska-Lisak chooses a broader one: 'the rural prose'[6]. The latter solution seems to me more functional in its capacity. Abstracting from the generic differences (the 'rural prose' relates to novellas as well as fables, sketches and various intermediate forms), the 'rural key' conveys the multiplicity of the represented world of all these texts better than the narrow category of peasantry. The reason is that, among the so-called peasant novellas

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[3] See for example: D. Brzozowska, *Adolf Dygasiński*, Warszawa 1957, p. 218; J.Z. Jakubowski, *Zapomniane ogniwo. Studium o Adolfie Dygasińskim*, Warszawa 1978, pp. 9–10

[4] A. Dygasiński, *Za krowę*, in: *Pisma wybrane*, ed. B. Horodyski, vol. 6, *Nowele i opowiadania*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1952, p. 6.

[5] A. Wysokińska, *Nowelistyka chłopska Adolfa Dygasińskiego*, Słupsk 1980.

[6] M. Radowska-Lisak, *Między oralnością a literackością. Proza wiejska Adolfa Dygasińskiego*, Toruń 2015.

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or short stories, not all can be considered peasant. Some of these works do indeed bear such a character: the protagonists of *Niezdara* (*The Slouch*), *Cud na roli* (*Miracle on the Land*), *Kuba Gąsior* or *Walkowe zaloty* (*Walek's Courtship*) have some parcels of land, larger or smaller, and live in the invariable circle of neighbors, which sets the framework of their existence and defines their communal identity. The case is different, however, with the protagonists of texts such as *Znajdka* (*The Foundling*), *Na niebie i na ziemi* (*In the Sky and on Earth*), *Maciek Fuła, Podwórzowe dramata* (*The Farmyard Dramas*), *Na zwłokach zwierzęcia* (*Over the Animal's Corpse*) or *Żerty chłop* (*The Greedy Man*). These works do not focus on peasants, but on a distinct and highly numerous group in the Polish countryside during the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century: the landless proletariat, farm laborers, and their families, living in quarters near the manor or employed and sheltered by wealthy peasant hosts. The rich literary documentation of their daily life, work conditions, customs, fears and desires, constitutes precisely one of the most important contributions to the artistic glory of Dygasiński. He was well acquainted with the life on the *folwark* from his own experience, initially in its serfdom form, having been born at the end of the fourth decade of the 19th century as the son of a minor manor clergyman in the village of Niegosławice in the Pińczów region, where he grew up. The *folwark* of the post-emancipation era (after 1864) also held no secrets for him. Having worked for years as a tutor of landowners' children, and visiting his parents, who by the end of their life were already managing the Little *folwarks* of their own, he constantly expanded and deepened his circle of observations, later used in a variety of works. Naturalism, the literary movement to which he was relatively close, emphasized the inestimable value of such field studies. After all, according to the assumptions of naturalist theory, a writer was someone like a scientist, who studied the mechanisms of reality through his own methods: the artistic insight, supported by a foundation of thorough knowledge derived from experience. Dygasiński's work aligns with these postulates, not because he was a consummate naturalist, but rather due to the key features of his writing temperament—his striving for reliability and authenticity, standards he set for himself *nomen omen* in a natural manner. The resulting texts are, as noted, rich in first-class documentary qualities, but at the same time it is, certainly, an artistic creation, an image filtered through the personality and worldview of a mature author.

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RESEARCH AND RESULTS

The penetrating, critical gaze of someone who grew up within the *folwark* world, but left it for study and work, and is thus able to look at it from the outside, combines with an artistic and a purely human sensitivity, particularly attuned to everything involving harm and pain. The result is a dark and harrowing vision of the *folwark* as a unique community, not only full of evil and violence, but making a crucial characteristic of its condition. In other words, evil and violence are built into it, inscribed immanently as its qualities. This community cannot withdraw from, stand outside, or distance itself from them. On the contrary: it keeps on reproducing them mechanically, as they lie at the very core of the structure that is *folwark*' itself. Each of the works in which Dygasiński presents a picture of this particular rural (anti)community appears as an anthropological study, intended to visualize the degree of degeneration and deformation of the human relations that occur within it.

The essence of this message is remains largely consistent from the beginning until the end of his literary work. What does change, however, is the way in which the matter is perceived and interpreted. A notable example can be provided by one of the early novellas, *Wilk, psy i ludzie* (*Wolf, Dogs and Men*). Here we find an attempt to define the rules that shape the closed world of the *folwark*, contrasting it, interestingly, with the way of life of the peasant village:

> [...] traits of nobler intercourse with animals could still be found only among the good-hearted agricultural-pastoral people. But the spoiled mob of *folwark* servants is an unconditional exception here. These Word of servants is founded on hierarchy: the master orders the overseer, the overseer orders the granger, the granger orders the headmen of the field laborers, the headmen order the serving men and maids, and they in their turn torment the domestic Animals, forcing them to satisfy the whole range of these order-giver[7].

Such idealization of the peasant community – even including we can even find here a paternalistic phrase 'good-hearted people', which was frequent at the time which was frequent at the time and later subject to ridicule – would soon entirely disappear from the writer's texts. The expressions as harsh as 'the spoiled mob' are also absent in his later works, with their (seemingly) cool and impartial narration. The mechanism itself, however, once observed, recurs repeatedly, painted in ever new

[7] A. Dygasiński, *Wilk, psy i ludzie*, in: *Pisma wybrane*, ed. B. Horodyski, vol. 8, *Nowele i opowiadania*, vol. 2, Warszawa 1950, p. 79.

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and yet nearly identical decorations. Whether it's the *folwark* of Siekaczów, Dziobaków or Pałki, one encounters the same transparent, completely unchanging tangle of dependencies, perpetual downward stream of violence: the oppressed oppresses, the humiliated humiliates, the one who, it would seem, is ultimately powerless, always manages to find someone who is even more helpless than he is, and to compensate for his own torment by tormenting the weakest among the weak. The perspective of the latter is vividly illustrated in *Maciek Fuła*, whose titular character becomes the object of relentless harassment:

> The entire manor, All the fellow servants, male and female, mocked him, sneered AT him, never spoke a kinder Word to him. [...] His superiors, how many of them there were, considered the watchman a mere drudge, laid all kinds of work on him, and everyone scolded him as He pleasedd. He fulfilled such numerous duties that from morning to evening he was in constant uncertainty as to what work he should do first. [...] If he had been able to talk back, they might have left him in peace. But no... As soon as He skedaddled from the cabin, where he's been slapped on the gob by his wife, Jaga the shrew, here comes the granger with a stick: bang-bang! When the granger has finished, the cook begins, then the housekeeper, butlers, kitchen boys, serving maids... It's hard to go to the court with such people, they'd just punish you even more. If you got punched in the mug, Just keep your wits about you, politicize and do your job, work for a piece of bread![8].

It is worth noting that Maciek uses such an unusual term as 'politicise', prompting himself to submissively endure his misfortunes. It is likely no coincidence that instead of phrases like 'keep silent, bend your head, sink your teeth', he choses a term that so unambiguously captures the essence of *folwark* life. Because the *folwark*, as Dygasiński sees it, it is clearly a political project – or, more precisely, a biopolitical one. The hostage of power and violence – and on the *folwark*, the two are inseparable – is inevitably the human body. It is upon the body that power imprints its signature, for it is the only thing that truly matters. From the point of view of the agricultural enterprise, it is entirely irrelevant whether Maciek, Bartek or Nikodem reaps, harrows, plows, or mows, and whether Kaśka, Baśka, or Maryna milks the cows and weeds the flax. After all, each of these tasks is performed by working bodies, the more robust and less distracted, the better – or, more profitable – for the *folwark*.

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[8] A. Dygasiński, *Maciek Fuła*, in: *Pisma wybrane*, ed. B. Horodyski, vol. 21, *Nowele i opowiadania*, vol. 7, Warszawa 1951, pp. 183–184.

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Treated in this way, the watchman from Wybranowice hides himself deep inside, as if deliberately erasing all the features of his personality. In order to survive, he reduces himself to a functioning machine, a lifeless instrument over which everyone claims the right to act as they wish. The neglected appearance of a destitute man, at once pathetic and grotesque, becomes a testimony to the hopelessness into which the constant anguish has thrown him:

> Short, skinny, unusually dirty, shabby, he walked sluggishly on his feet covered with a shiny coat of mud. His hair untouched by a comb gave the impression of a pile of clay well dried in the sun. The Finders, sometimes without nails, ball-and-socketed, swollen at the joints, were similar to the strange cacti of the equatorial sphere[9].

Maciek's last bastion of human dignity is anger, the helpless rage he feels when someone calls him Fuła – for this is not a name, but a nickname. All other insults leave no mark on his indifferent soul; this one alone still transforms Fuła into Fury. In vain, however, as his impotent passion only intensifies the ingenuity of his tormentors.

What makes Maciek the target of harassment among all the farm workers? Is it, as the narrator suggests, his irritability combined with a lack of physical strength? When he becomes angry, he poses no real threat, making teasing him appear merely entertaining. This answer seems incomplete. Perhaps the puzzle lies partly in the watchman's job. In, other words: anyone in Maciek's anyone in his position would likely endure a life of endles drudgery. For the watchman was not only required to guard the manor at night, he also prepares fodder for the animals, chops wood, burns stoves, delivers mail, He is also a servant to the granger and performs a number of casual tasks that a day on the farm always brings. However, this does not exhaust the matter either. In addition to the continual influx of duties, Maciek is subjected to a constant barrage of blows and insults. What triggers such a widespread need for persecution? To get closer to the answer, it is necessary to examine other texts of the writer, in which the same problem is considered. It then turns out that the collective persecution takes aim at seemingly disparate individuals, between whom, after all, it is possible to discover certain similarities. At one end of this sacrificial continuum is the dogsbody Gotuj, an episodic character of the novella *Lis* (*The Fox*). His intellectual disability seems to be beyond any doubt: 'This Gotuj loitered around the manor, doing the kind of work that was in contempt with other people. He was skinny,

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 183.

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short, deaf and thoughtless, [...] he pronounced only one word: «dam[10]»'. At the opposite pole is the field hand Ocyl from *Podwórzowe dramata* (*the Farmyard Dramas*). He is a man inclined toward analysis and contemplation, insightful and curious about the world. These qualities, however, are squandered: as an illiterate farmhand, he has no opportunity to develop talents that would undoubtedly have predisposed him to the role of a scholar or philosopher. In his native village he is known only as someone silent, weak and sickly, in a word – as the *folwark* authorities used to say – 'lazybones, fit for nothin!'[11], although – according to his fellow farmhands – 'He's so artful with things, just like an educated Man'[12]. Gotuj and Ocyl differ from each other in only one respect. At the same time, this very feature draws attention more than all others, alienating each of them from the crowd: it is, naturally, their mental capacity, lower or higher than average. Apart from that, however, they share several characteristics: physical weakness, unpleasant appearance and the fact that they are not known by their proper names – it is not even clear what their names sound like. This last characteristic also applies to Maciek Fuła – although in his case the last name Boruń the surname Boruń has not yet been entirely forgotten; it is gradually falling out of use. A similar situation occurs in *Żerty chłop* (*The Greedy Man*). Its protagonist becomes a laughingstock because of his wolfish appetite, which constantly leads him into trouble. Behind the series of farcical episodes related to this behavior, however, the chronic hunger is clearly visible, a significant amount of caustic humor permeates the text. Perpetually hungry Maciek Opozda in desperation steals turnips or plums and the whole *folwark*, taking amusement at his expense, gives the unfortunate man more and more adequate nicknames: Śliwiński [Mr Plum], Rzepka [Turnip], and finally Ogon [Tail], since, as the rumor has it, 'he chewed himself up with tails of various animals'[13]. Thus, we encounter a situation in which someone's peculiar, at times significant, at other times incidental trait – an unusual appearance, whether considered unpleasant or, as we shall see, on the contrary: particularly charming, impulsiveness, intellectual disability, a tendency to ponder and speculate, or even an insatiable appetite – relegate the individual to the margins, rendering them alien and abhorred by others. The official

[10] A. Dygasiński, *Lis*, in: *Pisma wybrane*, ed. B. Horodyski, vol. 21, *Nowele i opowiadania*, vol. 8, Warszawa 1951, pp. 26–27.

[11] Idem, *Podwórzowe dramata*, in: *Pisma wybrane*, ed. B. Horodyski, vol. 16, *Nowele i opowiadania*, vol. 4, Warszawa 1951, p. 89.

[12] *Ibidem*.

[13] A. Dygasiński, *Żerty chłop*, in: *Pisma wybrane*, ed. B. Horodyski, vol. 6, *Nowele i opowiadania*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1950, p. 127.

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sign of exclusion takes the form of a nickname or sometimes a whole list of them. They are now marked with a linguistic stamp of dissimilarity, the verbal equivalent of a medieval leper's bell or a prostitute's colorful attire. Henceforth, they may be subjected to social punishment without any restraint.

A closer examination of *Żerty chłop* (*The Greedy Man*) illustrates this dynamic. One fatal trait – excessive Hunger, festered like a wound – closes the neighbors' eyes to everything else, even Opozda's steadfast diligence no longer elicits their appreciation. Tormented by constant malicious ridicule, Maciek 'became sullen, bitter, disgusted with everything[14] and, like many other persecuted protagonists of Dygasiński's prose, chooses to escape, wandering to another village, where – what a relief – no one has heard of him. A similar pattern is observed in the cases of Maciek Fuła and Ulina, the protagonist of *Znajdka* (*The Foundling*). In Ulina's case – a seemingly surprising situation, but entirely consistent with the behavioral pattern described above – she is subjected to constant harassment because, as an exceptionally beautiful girl, she involuntarily becomes the heir's favorite, provoking the envy of the other female staff.

Why do none of the victims attempt an open confrontation? Why do they either flee or, if remaining in place, endure torment? Dygasiński, an expert and connoisseur of the natural world, aptly identifies in humans an affinity with their distant and closer relatives from the animal kingdom. Those whom the community identifies as different, and therefore undesirable, are often described through metaphors and phrases from the realm of nature. Not without reason, as they say in Pospów: 'even pigs turn their Hades from Gotuj, and flies shy awal from hi'[15]. It is not without reason that when Ulina, a chambermaid, is sent to the fields by her harassing superiors, she hears such sardonic comments: 'Such a fine saddle mare was she, and now, look, they've Just harnessed her to the shaf!'[16]. Neither Gotuj nor Ulina attempts to confront their persecutors. Gotuj allows others to push and beat him, repeating only the perpetual 'damn'. 'Foundling' – the very nickname easily indicates what has made Ulina a convenient target for every malice – rakes the hay as well as she can, deluding herself that in doing so she might put an end to the sneering.

The one who is different from others feels intimidated, ashamed, avoids company, and would like to hide in a mouse hole. Very rarely does shyness turn into anger, but then a violent outburst usually follows.

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[14] *Ibidem*, p. 128.

[15] A. Dygasiński, *Lis*, p. 26.

[16] A. Dygasiński, *Znajdka*, in: A. Dygasiński, *Pisma wybrane*, vol. 8, ed. B. Horodyski, *Nowele i opowiadania*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1952, p. 182.

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[...] The rule, however, is humble submission to bullie[17] – writes Vitus B. Dröscher, author of seminal books on animal behavior. All of these strategies can be observed in Dygasiński's characters: from the angry tantrums of Maciek Fuła, through the taciturn isolation of Ocyl and the submissiveness of Foundling, humbly kissing everybody's hands and fulfilling her tasks with a painful eagerness, to the frowning of Gotuj, who, while provoking universal revulsion, utters only a single word of disgust toward the entire reality he knows. Each of these reactions, however, must be compared not with animals in fully natural environments, but with those inhabiting spaces modified by humans, or even entirely constructed by them, such as large enclosures in a zoo. Dröscher often points out that modified, artificial conditions usually entail a caricatured exacerbation or exaggeration of various natural tendencies[18]. And the *folwark*, with its hierarchy built on fear, with the terror of productivity at all costs, which in practice leads to the deprivation of any value of the human individual, who is, after all, completely replaceable from the perspective of profit—appears not only as a hostile space, but as profoundly unnatural and, precisely due to this unnaturalness, fully inhuman.

The ominous and, for the writer, deeply compelling process of the emergence of the victim and its collective persecution is depicted more vividly and in greater detail in the novel *Margiela i Margielka* (*Margiela and Margielka*), published in 1901, than in any of his other works. Although some of the observations contained therein may resemble those made in the novellas discussed above, the color and tone of it have changed. The matter-of-factness and objectivity that Dygasiński strove for in his shorter narratives is replaced here by a subtle lyricism, the nature of which the author himself commented on in these words:

> This is a sad story of a man and nothing more. He suffers, and he doesn't know what for. God holds no grudge against him and He does nothing wrong to people; more than that, he does what they wish, and yet he suffers. There are, you see, eternal matters, discovered neither by modernists nor romantics, but living genuinely at the bottom of every human soul. It doesn't matter who signs underneath: Homer or Shakespeare, or Goethe or another. The matter is immortal and eternal is life, gliding across the vale of tears through all ages.

[17] V.B. Dröscher, *Białe lwy muszą umrzeć. Zasady sprawowania władzy w świecie zwierząt*, transl. M. Auriga, Warszawa 1997, p. 237.

[18] See for example: *ibidem*, p. 143.

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The novel's unique qualities and artistic merit call for a closer examination. The functioning of this already familiar mechanism can be observed once again.

Margiela is a pariah, someone living in the lowest circle of the rural inferno. She is deprived even of a most meager forms of stability, experienced by the farmhands and their families permanently employed on the *folwark*, who have the right to a room in the quarters, a few vegetable beds, a pig or a cow. Dygasiński's heroine cannot dream of such possessions. When first introduced, she is a day laborer, so she belongs to the group of agricultural workers doing only casual work and 'not permanently tied to the mano'[19]. That's why she still moves around, wandering from place to place, residing either in an old inn or in a ruined shack called na Pomarlu [AT the deadland], where a mysterious contagious disease has taken the hosts with their entire family and, where everyone else is afraid to live. Only gradually does Margiela obtain a permanent – or at least relatively stable – position in the kitchen as a dishwasher. Until that occurrs, however, she works as she lives, moving to and fro and fitting nowhere.

The people of Gwoździeniec, where Margiela comes from, adopted two attitudes toward her, which at first appear entirely distinct but are, in fact, remarkably similar. The first is a kind of indifference originating from complete disregard: Margiela appears to them to be of such insignificance as to be unseen. This is why 'No one cared about her, she was sometimes talked about as if she were absent'[20]. And when, for some reason, her presence must nevertheless be noticed, and the silence about her must be broken, then a discourse of disgust emerges, with an impatient attitude of angry revulsion coming to the fore. Where does it come from? Margiela is considered unattractive, physically repulsive, and is also literally marked by her physical condition: 'She had some blotches on her face, her lips were pale and crooked, giving the impression that she was about to cry'[21]; 'A timid, sluggish, weeping slip of a woman; a slumsy one, still blubbering in the corners, unable to talk back, she didn't even know precisely how much she was due for her job. Immensely tearful, she did not know how to face people, to cut off her tongue and answered to any insult with silent crying'[22].

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[19] K. Groniowski, *Robotnicy rolni w Królestwie Polskim 1871–1914*, Warszawa 1977, p. 11.

[20] A. Dygasiński, *Margiela i Margielka*, in: *Pisma wybrane*, ed. B. Horodyski, vol. 17, *As. Margiela i Margielka*, Warszawa 1951, p. 198.

[21] *Ibidem*.

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 138.

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In time, the village community finds yet another justification for its overwhelming, even seemingly biological, aversion to the outcast. This is her illegitimate motherhood, which, in fact, results from a rape but is interpreted as a sign of her unchastity. And yet, despised and irritating as she is, Margiela is, like all scapegoats[23], remains indispensable to her community, which requires someone upon whom to vent frustration, anger, and humiliation. This 'scapegoat', who, in the view of the people of Gwoździeniec, Fuldy deserves Her miserable fate – 'doomed never to rise'[24], 'she did everything to go down, to Perish, so she was going down and perishing all her life'[25] – is not regarded as a fully realized human being, which is why Margiela is frequently referred to using neuter terms or described as a little strange creature: 'half-woman'[26], 'weakling' (ibid.), 'Such a 'nothing' will easily irritate even merciful people. – Here's your alms and go away, don't stick in front of me!'[27].

Margiela is regarded by the people of Gwoździeniec as living a life not worth living. This expression straight from the genocidal pages of the Third Reich may seem illegitimate, but only until its validity is confirmed by the text of the novel: 'Whether she lived or died.... all the same, Tomek Ciechoń would say'[28]. The words of this Ciechoń are, in this case, a sentence shared by the entire village, but not everyone possesses the courage or cynicism to voice it openly. Margiela's life appears to lack any rationale; it is unnecessary and does not receive the justification that, in the eyes of the traditional community, every human existence requires. Margiela is 'diligent but not laborious'[29], and so she does not properly perform her part of village duties, she does not have sufficient physical strength, so she is perceived as a burden and a kind of parasite. Her clumsy, frail and fragile body, is regarded by the village community as incomplete, composed of parts that do not fit together: 'who would want to take home a belly, a mug that lacks a hand'[30].

One crucial allegory of her existence is mud, a low, degraded matter, arousing revulsion, trampled and stirred by human feet and by the wheels of vehicles. It is not without reason that we read the following cruel

[23] It must be Said that every element of the well-known anthropological theory of René Girard fully applied to Margiela's case. See R. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, transl. Y. Freccero, Baltimore 1986.

[24] A. Dygasiński, *Margiela*, p. 198.

[25] *Ibidem*, p. 137.

[26] *Ibidem*, p. 138.

[27] *Ibidem*, p. 198.

[28] *Ibidem*, p. 216.

[29] *Ibidem*, p. 138.

[30] *Ibidem*.

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phrase concerning Margiela: 'Life drove over her as carts drove over mud'[31]. However, the mention of mud also appears in another context. To recognize it, one must first point out that our heroine's name, Margiela, is a dialect form of Margaret, which in Latin means 'pearl'. Dygasiński, not only a graduate of a classical high school, but also a philologist by avocation, was certainly aware of this etymology. In *Margiela i Margielka*, the word 'pearl' appears only once, framed in the form of an aphorism: 'Love is a beautiful pearl that, when rolled in the mud, scales, gets dirty and ceases to be a precious treasure'[32]. The text seems to hint that Margiela as well, bearing a peculiarly distorted name, 'twisted', as the narrator remarks[33], yet still evoking the image of a pearl, can be compared to the unusual jewel drenched in the mud of injustice and humiliation. The word 'margin' also echoes in the heroine's name. Margiela's zone is the border, the edge of a country road. This place is occupied by her along with all non-human beings, who co-create the Gwoździeniec life, yet whose existence is disregarded by all: 'The dishwasher remained for the multitude in Gwoździeniec a personality as unhistorical as sparrows, butterflies, frogs'[34]. Margiela's home, that literal, physical place of her life, is also a reminder of her non-human status: 'It was a peculiar cabin, comfortable for many living creatures, but not for humans'[35]. Margiela, the embodiment of marginality, suspended between life and death, shares this house with a bunch of these very creatures – toads, sparrows, swallows, mice and rats – and, in her own mind, probably with a bunch of the dead, the former owners of the farmyard[36]. The heroine stands outside the law also in the sense that she does not even have a last name, a situation already encountered in Dygasiński's earlier novellas. On the payrolls and in the parish books – the only places where the unimportant, negligible fact of her existence has been formally recorded and thus included in the symbolic order – she is listed simply as 'Margiela, farmhand from Gwoździeniec'[37]. Even there, the official, standardized version of her name is not recorded. Instead, the rural, private variant – a diminutive devoid of any affection – is used, serving as a linguistic expression of disregard.

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[31] *Ibidem*, p. 216.

[32] *Ibidem*, p. 207.

[33] *Ibidem*, p. 137.

[34] *Ibidem*, p. 216.

[35] *Ibidem*, p. 138.

[36] Mirosława Radowska-Lisak also writes about this liminal state of Dygasiński's heroine: *Przypowieść o macierzyństwie. Margiela i Margielka*. M. Radowska-Lisak, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

[37] A. Dygasiński, *Margiela*, p. 137.

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Her daughter, in turn, has three names; the first, Aurelia, which she 'brought' herself, being born on September 25, is rejected as infrequent, alien to village tradition; under the second, Tekla, she is recorded in the documents, but no one calls her that way; finally there is the third: Margielka, Little Margiela – this customary name falls heavy on the girl's shoulders, is like a prophecy of the fate threatening her, like a foretelling that the path of the unfortunate mother is likely to become her path as well. Even more vivid signs of this are present in the words and behavior of the people of Gwoździeniec: 'I don't like this little one, I don't believe anything good will come of her.... [...] such an illegitimate child; tainted by sin, she does not carry God's blessing on her, and can bring evil to my children'[38], says Magda Budzina, and does not allow the taken-in Margielka to approach her biological children, feeling 'loathing that a 'bastard ' should touch the legal ones'[39]. The tragic constriction of women's fates, the maternal bereavement imprinted in her daughter's biography, is one of the most important and poignant themes of this prose, which Mirosława Radowska-Lisak terms 'a parable of motherhood'. At this point, is worth noting that Dygasiński recommended *Margiela i Margielka* to his daughter Zofia. Wishing to share the narrative with her, he uttered the hope that this story, 'a sad story of a human being[40]', in which, he writes, 'I put [...] not my own pain, but the pain of the whole world'[41], will be of interest to his child and would 'please'[42] her as a reader.

There is only one person who shows kindness and sympathy towards Margiela: Agata Boberska, known as 'babisia' ('granny'), a midwife from Gwoździeniec, which may be considered significant. Admittedly, birth in rural tradition was important and shrouded in sanctity, yet it also placed a woman into a liminal, obscure and dangerous state. A woman such as a midwife, who, is in constant contact with the land from which a new human life arrives, was surrounded by the respect of her neighbors, but this respect was accompanied by fear, distrust and even a certain repulsion. It is not without reason that certain midwives were suspected of witchcraft. This terror comes to light in the same scene in which Magda mistreats Margiela; she also exerts her anger on Boberska, after all, it is she who supports the poor farmhand: 'So you think, you ape,

38 *Ibidem*, p. 224.
39 *Ibidem*, p. 226.
40 A. Dygasiński, *Listy*, p. 521.
41 *Ibidem*.
42 *Ibidem*.

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you'll be protected here by some pimp of a woman!'[43], shouts Budzina. The implication is that Margiela and Babisia share some kind of peculiar bond. although Boberska is respected in the village and tries to shield Margiela, so hopelessly discredited. She herself is also vulnerable to social discredit, to use Erving Goffman's term[44]. Perhaps Babisia is aware of this, or if she is not, she intuitively senses this dangerous affinity, which motivates her to act as Margiela's protector and as a kind of tutor and advisor. Endowed with extraordinary authority, she is able to persuade the wives of Gwoździeniec to assist the illegitimate mother out of because of Christian charity, when Margiela lies in childbirth the Deadland. The support does not end there, after all it is Boberska who finds Margiela a place at the manor, while Margielka is to live with Magda and Antek Buda, wealthy but childless peasants. However, the care shown by the midwife has not only a comforting and benevolent aspect, but also a dark and destructive one. As Danuta Brzozowska puts it:

> [...] based on a Christian worldview, babisia's teachings, with which she constantly feeds Margiela, not only do not bring the woman relief, but throw her into deeper and deeper spiritual slavery. [...] It is babisia, after all, who keeps on repeating along with the mob of servants: 'Pray! Work! Be obedient!' [...] Babisia's instructions destroy the poor woman's only self-defense, which is resentment against wrong-doers and a sense of the injustice. [...] She comprehends the depth of Margiela's suffering in a Rather narrow way and has but little understanding for the gloom of her feelings[45].

It is Boberska who leads Margiela to believe that by repeating her gestures of self-abasement, she might finally elicit some human kindness. Such a conviction is fundamentally flawed. For when the housewives provide Margiela with care, they do so only because they succumb to the skillful persuasions of babisia, and because they want to wish to exploit their pity, boasting of it openly before their neighbors. Such a situation cannot endure, since their assistance is coerced and inauthentic. Soon everything returns to the old patterns. Moreover, the disgust of decent residents towards this 'ape', this shameless harlot, mother of a bastard, gives Margiela a taste of a completely new form of humiliation and ostracism.

In Dygasiński's novel, even the simplest, seemingly most ordinary phenomena of life are imbued with gloom and horror. This appears

[43] A. Dygasiński, *Margiela*, p. 166.

[44] See E. Goffman, *Stigma. Notes on the Management of the Spoiled Identity*, New York 1986.

[45] D. Brzozowska, *op. cit*, pp. 314–315.

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to encapsulate the 'pain of the whole world' conveyed in the text. The kitchen at the manor, in which Margiela finds herself, resembles an abyss, the depths of hell, filled with the bang and crackle of fire, the hissing of grease, the clatter and clamor of dishes, 'the pounding of meat on the stovetop'[46], the wild screeches of butchered animals, the sounds of brawls and slaps. Margiela, and then little Margielka as well, work as dishwashers, so they stand again, although in a different way than before, on the lowest rung of the human hierarchy; beneath them are perhaps only the dogs, licking themselves hungrily at the kitchen door. As Mary Douglas observes says, 'Some kinds of labour correspond with the excretory functions of the body, for example that of washermen, barbers, sweepers'[47]. The same applies to the dishwasher, who is, by definition, considered unclean. Although she works close to the stove and table, it should be remembered that kitchen work is complex, varied, and internally strictly stratified. Jadwiga Waydel-Dmochowska, author of memoirs about the late 19th and early 20th centuries, explains this situation as follows: 'the better cooks did not undertake washing saucepans, scrubbing floors, peeling potatoes and similar coarser work. So those who paid attention to exquisite cuisine, and in addition were hospitable and liked to invite guests, had to hire the dishwasher'[48]. Although Margiela and her daughter are constantly present in the Gwoździeniec kitchen, no one would ever entrust them with cooking or serving the meal. Food prepared by a dishwasher would be considered a scandal, an archetype of contamination, for the dishwasher touches the dirt that others have left behind, mixes with it, and eventually becomes it. Indistinguishable in the eyes of all outsiders from the impurity she is supposed to eliminate, she washes away the dirt, grease, waste, makes it disappear and, while removing it from the dishes, she also removes herself, washes herself away vanishing like a stain or secretion. Agata Skała is correct in arguing, arguing that Margiela is the one with whom contact is avoided in Gwoździeniec as with 'disgusting waste'[49]. Margiela is not even committing impurity, she is simpurity, abject, to use Julia Kristeva's terminology[50]. We have evidence of this at every turn; she is, of course, dirty,

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[46] A. Dygasiński, *Margiela*, p. 204.

[47] M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, Harmondsworth 1970, p. 127.

[48] J. Waydel-Dmochowska, *Jeszcze o dawnej Warszawie*, Warszawa 1960, p. 204.

[49] A. Skała, *Niepoprawny pozytywista. Między tradycją a nowoczesnością*, Lublin 2013, p. 163.

[50] See J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, transl. L.S. Roudiez, New York 1982.

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she wears no clothes, but rags, soaked with the stench of destitution and disease; moreover, she has fallen so low that she is unable to recognize in these rags the signs of her disgrace, the condition of a social outcast that was once and for all ascribed to her. On the contrary: Margiela seems to believe that her terrible clothes look reasonably presentable. Attempting to prove it to her matron, the midwife Boberska, she displays scraps of old clothing so shabby, rotten, and torn that even the kind-hearted Agata cannot restrain a reflex of revulsion, for the rags, as she says, are too disgusting even for begging: 'Merciful God, how rotten, decayed, stinking! A turnip could be sown on the dirt here, or you could put these shreds in a mortar and press oil from them'[51]. Margiela, scolded by everyone around her, pitifully dirty, wrapped in rags, and enjoying the support of her surrogate mother, is strikingly similar to Cinderella. But she also resembles another archetypal character, destitute and covered with contempt. This is Lazarus, with whom she can be associated especially when she lies on her poor straw bed, fatally weakened, but in her worsed condition accompanied by the old dog Chwytek (Grasp). Inseparable from Margiela despite the hunger and cold they must endure, he resembles the canine companions of the biblical beggar, who licked his wounds when he was abandoned by his fellow humans.

Resting on her shabby bedding or walking around in tattered clothes, Margiela arouses disgust by her outfit. When attempting to make her looks more pleasant, and she does so when visiting her daughter living with the Budas, her new caregivers, Margiela evokes only contemptuous laughter. Neither the neatness of her clothes, nor the even more pathetic sham of attunement (flowers pinned to a modest kerchief) change the pariah's status. It is clear that she can not manage to hide it even for a moment, and not only because in Gwoździeniec everyone knows her and remembers her past very well. At every turn, Margiela's movements, downcast eyes and clumsy gestures betray her: 'she swung Her arms hurriedly, placed her feet sheepishly toward each other [...], clung to walls and corners, walked sideways, bizarrely, as if she had chains on her feet [...]. It was immediately apparent that this was a woman who had been abused who never learned to stand up for herself, who was accustomed to secretly swallowing her tears, and who was doomed never to rise again'[52]. Her battered body continuously reenacts its suffering, revealing itself through fear; it speaks in the language of symptoms, as legible and clear as words: 'I have been spat upon, punched with a fist, tugged at, pushed out of the way. Beaten in the past, it remains ready for new

[51] A. Dygasiński, *Margiela*, p. 179.

[52] *Ibidem*, p. 198.

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attacks—trauma, which literally means 'wound' in Greek.' 'The body, this frail cottage of Margiela's soul'[53], which has already been 'covered so many times with new bruises and bumps, quivered from the blows, emitted groans, squeaks, whimpers'[54]. Here violence reveals its nature of a closed and everlasting circle: the body once exposed to pain and harm somehow provokes and invites the tormentors to take up the cruel game again. And although Margiela covers and masks her body, its pains and fears, it endlessly and involuntarily reveals the past, not letting it disappear. Between the persona, the image she would like to demonstrate, and the truth of the body there is a crack, a gap, and Margiela vainly wants to remove it. Such attempts are perceived as awkward, inadequate, and therefore comical:

> Pukalina, seeing her once on Sunday, pointed her finger and laughed to herself:
>
> '– Has anyone ever seen such a chump!'[55]
>
> Boberska's efforts have been to no avail, as she clearly confuses effect with cause. By encouraging Margiela to care for her appearance, she deludes herself into thinking that this might earn her some compassion and understanding among the people of Gwoździeniec: 'I find it very strange that you, still a young woman, have no care for clothes and order. This is why people slight you, they thing you to be shabby, worst of All creatures. That's probably why it's hard for you to find yourself a place and stay in service'[56].

These sordid and rotten rags of Margiela are irresistibly associated with 'the over-torn, damp-stained'[57] cloak of Black Madonna from Częstochowa, the only picture that adorns the chamber of a destitute woman. The association goes further and deeper: after all, the figure depicted in the image is none other but Mater Dolorosa, who was nearly dismissed by her spouse as a woman scarred by an illegitimate pregnancy, covering the house in Nazareth in disgrace. It is therefore not surprising that for Margiela, Black Madonna is the only sacred figure with whom she has close spiritual bond. The presence and living care of the holiest of women, in whose proximity Margiela fervently believes, is an epiphany of the maternal sacrum, a creative and nurturing female energy. Here one is reminded of the poignant words of the female rural

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[53] *Ibidem*, p. 214.
[54] *Ibidem*.
[55] *Ibidem*, p. 198.
[56] *Ibidem*, p. 179.
[57] *Ibidem*, p. 140.

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interlocutors interviewed by the anthropologist Magdalena Zowczak. One of them cherishes the strong belief that 'Mother of God likes those girls who have a child without a father. It's heard that she has a lot of love for those [...] they are her fellow girls, those who have children without a father, for she herself had Baby Jesus as a girl, and she loves them'[58]. Another female informant offers a vivid description:

> When a married woman lies in labor, Mother of God does not rush to Her aide, no; she'll comb her hair, make a braid, then she comes to help the woman. But when a girl gives birth, you see, she's a poor thing, there's no one to pity her, everyone shouts at Her: you so-and-so, why do you have a child like that? So Mother of God feels sorry and she wouldn't braid her hair anymore, she'll just comb it for a Little while, you see, for she doesn't have time to braid them, and she'll cover herself with a shawl and off she flies to the rescue of this maid, 'cause she gives birth, and she also gave birth to her son when a girl [...][59].

In light of such rural feminine piety, it is hardly surprising that Margiela, upon meeting again with her daughter, whom she left with foster parents while wandering in search of better service, says the following about her relationship with The Black Madonna: 'if it were not for Her, I would never see you again. Day and night she clearly spoke to my heart: «Go, look for the child! » The miraculous one! She almost dragged me by the hand'[60].

CONCLUSIONS

However, even the support of the sacred, so undoubted in Margiela's belief, does not protect Dygasiński's heroine from her bitter, ruthless fate. Margiela herself apparently thinks so – and humbly bends her back under its yoke. The creator of this painful character seems to share this awareness. And here, Here, perhaps, lies the most significant difference between Dygasiński's Elary novellas and his late narratives.

The author, who began by depicting numerous pathologies of *folwark* life, which directly imposes the same, ghastly repetitive life roles on people at all times – an acrimonious mob of persecutors on the one hand, and a helpless, tormented individual on the other – also included

[58] M. Zowczak, *Biblia ludowa. Interpretacje wątków biblijnych w kulturze ludowej*, Toruń 2013, p. 470.

[59] *Ibidem*.

[60] A. Dygasiński, *Margiela*, p. 239.

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this image in one of the last and best works he wrote. However, what was initially a tragedy seemingly resulting from the depraving and dire conditions inherent in the *folwark* community and specific to it, in *Margiela and Margielka* gains the dimension of, as the writer puts it, 'an eternal and immortal matter'. And thus the fate of Margiela, a rural laborer, a miserable pariah, recognized as such both by the peasants and the manor servants, and – most terrifyingly – by herself, becomes here, under the influence of the magnifying lens of literature, simply and undoubtedly – the human fate.

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NOTA O AUTORCE

Karolina Anna Chyła – dr literaturoznawstwa. W 2023 r. ukończyła Kolegium Doktorskie Wydziału Filologicznego Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego. Jest autorką rozprawy zatytułowanej *(Nie)codzienność i metamorfoza w wybranych powieściach Stefana Żeromskiego*. Pracuje w Zakładzie Teorii Kultury i Sztuk Widowiskowych Instytutu Filologii Polskiej Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego. Członkini Stowarzyszenia im. Stefana Żeromskiego, stała współpracownica miesięcznika "Nowe Książki".

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