

*Where the Marshes Are:  
Romantic Mediumism in the Novels of  
Tadeusz Konwicki*<sup>1</sup>

Maria Janion

TADEUSZ KONWICKI, AS HE acknowledged in a 1971 interview, became bored with the solitary act of writing. So he has, for some time now, tried to engage readers in the creative process, leaving about 30 percent of the novel making to them. He thus explained the fragmentary nature of some of his work as a deliberate creating of indeterminate zones in the novel, zones that the reader as cocreator could fill in through imaginative effort. This idea assumes and admits, of course, the possibility of a wide range of readings and, therefore, a certain amount of arbitrary distortion. Konwicki would be the last, however, to worry about it—so devoted is he to playfulness, to mystification, to pulling pranks, to juggling various versions of his own alleged biography, and also, finally, to a close cooperation with his readers, to establishing an understanding with them.

Konwicki can do that: *Kalendarz i klepsydra* (The Calendar and the Hourglass) is a story seeking to disentangle the drama of his life that is “all the more interesting and authentic because it’s prefabricated before your very eyes” (CH 7).<sup>2</sup> His artistic project derives precisely from the attempt to create work that manages to appear both authentic and consciously “prefabricated.” While such a project might prove unworkable, Konwicki, like his Romantic predecessors, manages to pull it off. Konwicki’s graftings from the Romantics are not accidental; from them, he inherited a particular understanding of literature, which identifies its artificiality (from “art”) with authenticity evidenced by intense feeling. Literature, in such a formulation, must be in equal measure “made,” as well as “lived through” and “experienced.” The fact that a work of literature is created (“prefabricated”) does not deny its emotional genealogy and expression. Such an understanding of the process of creating literature is crucial to an apprehension of Konwicki’s work, which has, at times, been charged with being false, slippery, dishonest, distorted, deformed. The issue here is not only that of the writer’s undeniable right to his or her own vision, but rather of something much broader and at the same time more idiosyncratic, namely the conviction that only what has been “prefabricated” as literature can be authentic, can be trusted. In this, of course, lies the belief in the elevation of literature over life, a seminal Romantic idea.

Konwicki derived this idea from his youth and has, over the years, remained faithful to it, though naturally not without a sense of irony. In his novel *Rojsty* (Marshes) Konwicki offers insights into the nature of the biography of one of Poland's many "Romantic generations" (I will explain what I mean by this term shortly), a generation that has played a major role in the psychic life of modern Poland. Indeed, he has even characterized himself as a "medium of Romanticism," and I can see no reason not to trust him, so deeply is his sensibility rooted in distant times, while being attuned imaginatively to the immediate Romantic world. Of course, that world has been often ridiculed, even harshly attacked, by Konwicki, but still it demarcates the only arena of his internal theater.

The most important characteristic of the "Romantic generation" involves an upbringing on books, an embracing of literature as an ideal, model, and style for life. In Poland the poetry of the great Romantic period first played such a role for the second and third generations of Romantics, then for the generation that fought for and won independence in 1918, and finally—together with post-Romantic literature—for the generation to which Konwicki belonged, the one defined by the Warsaw and Wilno uprisings during World War II. In an interview with Zbigniew Taranienko Konwicki emphasized that he belongs to "a generation brought up on literary models, a generation . . . which encountered war as gymnasium students, at a time when one was absorbing the most interesting ethical-intellectual debates of the thirties." The philosophy of life of this generation was shaped by the power of literature: "Our outlook on the world was heavily influenced by literary traditions, especially Zeromski. But then we came up against extremes: war broke out. Pausing on page 344 of Zeromski, we headed off into the woods."<sup>3</sup>

Pausing in the middle of a Zeromski novel was not the opposite of heading off into the woods. On the contrary, reading Zeromski, reading other "murderous books,"<sup>4</sup> pushed Konwicki and members of his generation into the partisan groups that constituted the underground Home Army. In *Kalendarz i klepsydra*, he writes about literature's complete stranglehold on him and his peers: "My generation read itself to death. What was worse, my generation believed in books" (CH 74). Konwicki is convinced that today it is difficult even to imagine that literature could be such a demoniacal force: "In my region, in my circle, reading books was the first, and maybe the last, rung of hell. My mentors treated books like Satan" (CH 74). Feverishly consumed, most often in great secrecy, books became the cause of a strange disease. Because they were so fervently believed in, they really had the capacity to transform life, had a clear effect on actual intentions and deeds:

When the first bomb fell on Wilno, I crawled out into the world, into the modest provincial world of Wilno, drunk on the ambrosia of books like a leech on blood.

And from all of our Polish, Polish-Polish, and ultra-Polish books, we tore out, as if the most crucial page, one single glowing imperative: to die for Poland. . . .

Now about myself: six months in a partisan group, 1944-45, which near the end was chaotic, not guided by anyone, or maybe guided only by our literary erudition. To die for Poland. To die in general. (CH 74-75).

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The literary "ambrosia" becomes transformed into metaphorical blood, only to become actual blood very soon. This typical metamorphosis is one decried by enemies of the insurrectionist mentality, among them poet Kajetan Kozmian and Father Krupinski, author of *Romanticism and Its Effects*. Thus emerges a phenomenon peculiar to the Polish-Romantic strain of European history: a partisan group guided by "literary erudition."

Konwicki gives extended treatment to this unique situation in *Rojsty*.<sup>5</sup> In it can be found the ironically Romantic truths of a generation, clearly influenced by books. Indeed, literature and its critique become the subject of an interesting stylistic operation in the text. This tremendously metaliterary work (like *Kalendarz i klepsydra*) can be analyzed as an inner-romantic critique of Romanticism.

In *Rojsty* the literary inspiration for political uprisings is marked—unlike the cited passages from *Kalendarz i klepsydra*—by the venomous irony of a book lover grown disenchanted with books imbued with prophetic force and declaimed passionately by teachers. But finding himself in a dangerous situation within a dwindling partisan group, the narrator reflects on his life before the war: "The day was rainy, but warm. At that hour, I was usually sitting around the house, bent over a book, from which I wrung a longing for the lofty and the beautiful" (166). Earlier in the text, Konwicki characterizes the outlook of the young people of Wilno from his generation rather sarcastically: "And so we all feared that the opportunity for fighting over our ideals would pass us by, ideals that we had gotten from books and from the lofty words of the noble, crystalline-pure teachers in our underground schools" (153). The issues really were enchanting, the teachers noble, and the books great, but some dissonance, some terrible incongruity between what was being studied and the realities of underground warfare always intruded.

Of course, such a sensitivity to dissonance is not uncommon in either Romantic or post-Romantic literature, and especially for Zeromski. What is new and fresh about *Rojsty* is the unabashed fury of an adolescent, whose claws are sharpened by life experience and who then is forced to use them—especially against books and teachers.<sup>6</sup> Gustav from part 4 of Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefathers* behaves similarly, harshly accusing his teachers and the "murderous books" themselves: "You murdered me: you taught me how to read, / To read in beautiful nature and in books! / You turned earth for me into Hell and Paradise as well! / But this is only earth!"<sup>7</sup> The hero and narrator of *Rojsty* is in a similar psychic state.

In *Kalendarz i klepsydra* Konwicki shows the process whereby he frees himself from the youthful Romanticism of his partisan days: "You have to remember that we had been beaten. There in the forests around Wilno, we encountered defeat. We lost our very own war." A common reaction of war survivors who know that they themselves are not without guilt is raw aggression: "Suddenly I became enraged at the daily prayer, at the nightly dream about Poland, 'Christ of Nations,' at the national gospel of the Romantic magnum opus" (CH 77). That response is, in fact, a typically anti-Romantic reaction,

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encountered often in the psychic life of Poland. Sometimes it assumes a positivist cast. In Konwicky's case and that of his generation Marxism played such a role at that time, representing healthy skepticism. One had to smother one's memory daily, he has written of his Marxist period.

Konwicky acknowledges that he is indebted greatly to Stanislaw Dygat, one of the great ironists in regard to the Romantic sublime (his masterpiece in that vein is *Bodensee*). He inculcated in Konwicky a "healthy mistrust of literary messianism." He taught that literature—despite what the Romantics believed—"doesn't confer any special rights or privileges, doesn't canonize anyone, and doesn't make one God-like." Literature, in fact, "is only as much as one wants to read into it." But Konwicky, despite Dygat's influential pronouncements, has managed to preserve his own self. Thus this slippery sentence: "Thanks to Dygat, I didn't gain anything, but neither did I lose anything" (CH 107). Konwicky is clearly referring to Romanticism here as well, which for him has taken on an exceptionally pluralistic cast. How, therefore, can we characterize Konwicky's many kinds of romanticisms?

#### **Breastplate Emblazoned with the Madonna of Ostra Brama<sup>8</sup>: Popular Romanticism, Folk Custom, and Pastiche**

In *Rojsty* a kind of popular romanticism predominates, one widespread among the Polish population of Wilno and its surrounding area. The narrator, describing his beloved's father, who is completely devoted to the cause of Polish independence, goes on to generalize about the people and customs of that region: "People like him were pretty common among us. In the evening, they would read from long versified prophecies, which were stored behind pictures during the day. They derived comfort from the most insignificant omens, and they held children in thrall with [their devotion to] their weary country and its people, who gave their lives for it" (35). This folk romanticism associated with the Eastern regions of prewar Poland delighted in various prophecies, especially those of the legendary prophet Wernyhora<sup>9</sup> (to whom Konwicky alludes several times in his novels), and fed into the cult of patriotic martyrs.

In *Rojsty* Konwicky frequently serves up pastiches of typical folk romantic customs recorded in literature. It seems clear that this technique is calculated to demystify the mentality of people brought up on literature. This demystification is subtle and complex, running through the novel on many levels but at the same time not destroying the psychological base and literary expression of this popular brand of romanticism.

It is in the passages about the long-suffering mother, the beloved heroine of the insurrectionist poetry of the gentry and nineteenth-century novels, that the broadest pastiche occurs. The following are just two of many such instances in the text:

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Mother sat in the light of an acetylene lamp, praying from a worn prayerbook [dating from an earlier uprising]. . . . "I'm going to enlist one of these days," I said to provoke her. "I won't try to stop you," she replied. "Your father gave his life for his country. Just look out for yourself. You know you've always been frail." (M 21).

At home, a final scene with my mother awaited me. Removing the crucifix from the wall, she blessed me for a long time, while I loaded cartridges into Stefan's rifle. I bid farewell to the dusty bust of old Pilsudski with my eyes. Mother hung the crucifix back up in its place. (M 24)

There are also elements of pastiche in the construction of the narrative lines of Konwicki's novels. For instance the episode with Zygmunt Mineyko in *The Polish Complex*, which takes place during the 1863 insurrection, was assembled from familiar narrative devices, beginning with a leave-taking scene, then a visit to the manor house—the place of Zygmunt's initiation into the uprising, the unsuccessful battle itself, and finally the peasants' betrayal of the insurrectionists into the hands of a Cossack band. Konwicki integrates these motifs and narrative devices into a coherent analogy between a partisan group in the January Uprising of 1863 and a partisan group from Wilno during World War II, building a consciously autobiographical identification between the twentieth-century narrator and his counterpart eighty years earlier. For example:

Then came the time for parting, a separation for a short stretch of mortal danger, or perhaps forever. Everyone wept, including you. Your mother made the sign of the cross over you with an old crucifix from her native Balwaniszki. You, of course, thought to yourself that this was how Byron had set out for death and glory, but you did not know that many other generations of twenty-year-olds would, in just the same fashion, bid farewell to their family homes and that I, too, one December night, with the exact same message, would walk those snow-covered country roads, eighty years after you, that I, too, would set out to fulfill your ambiguous and still-unfinished fate. (36)

Of course, the pairing of Balwaniszki with Byron contains an element of humor, but it's good-natured rather than spitefully grotesque.

The use of Romantic myths and stereotypes does not derive from an unconscious imitation of the Romantics or Zeromski. Rather, *Rojsty* testifies to Konwicki's conscious literary strategy. It is Romanticism that becomes Konwicki's theater of war and territory of operation. In *Rojsty* Konwicki unreservedly wrestles with popular romanticism, with its moral imperative, its power in patriotic belief which becomes a religious dictate.

The inflated quality of popular romanticism in the end becomes apparent, however, as we see in an excerpt from *Kalendarz i klepsydra*, which describes the heroic pretensions of a group of Polish drunks: "That one with the unbut-toned fly led an uprising, the one with the big gut died and was resurrected in a crematorium oven, and the guy with the red nose directed the 'Intelligence Service.' They tell each other their own imagined Iliads, have apocalyptic science-fiction dreams, and suffer for the millions hanging on to the railing of the bar." These are obviously the megalomaniacal fantasies of desperate, unhappy

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people. But what, Konwicki asks, gives rise to them? "But if you decide to grab them by the arm and hammer away at their lies, you'll find that although they didn't lead an uprising, they nonetheless lost a hand in an uprising, that although they didn't die in an oven, their wives and children did, that although they didn't direct the British Intelligence Service, they spent ten years in prison for it" (CH 124). Thus the drunken tales at the core reveal an element of truth, which comes to light in a surprising fashion. At the same time, the murkiness of that truth cannot be denied nor can the ambiguous quality of the hopes and dreams that the Polish nation has for itself.

In the thirty years that have passed since the writing of *Rojsty* popular romanticism has returned in *The Polish Complex* as a value sustained by Polish society. And Konwicki can be seen as a traditionalist—outlandish but not without integrity—as were the aforementioned drunks. In *Kalendarz i klepsydra* he pokes fun at the slavish imitation of Mediterranean civilization, even down to its sickness and degeneracy; he ridicules Poland as the parrot of nations.<sup>10</sup> And yet, is there not something beneficial in this Polish trait? Of course Konwicki answers: "We hang on desperately to the last remaining ledge of an ancient Roman building, thinking that if we don't, we will fall to the depths of nonbeing, we will become forever an anonymous horde. Stupidity is also a nation's shrewdness" (CH 126). And so we hang on to Polish romanticism as if to a Roman ruin even if this is a popular romanticism, even if it is reduced to the song "Red Poppies at Monte Cassino."<sup>11</sup>

#### **The Double Meaning of Eastern Romanticism: Landscape of Extremity, Landscape of Insurrection**

There is another kind of romanticism in Konwicki's novels, particularly in *Rojsty* and *The Polish Complex*, which, though a variant of what I have called the popular kind, is sufficiently autonomous and individual to deserve separate mention here. I would call it eastern romanticism—specific to the part of Poland east of the Bug River—because it refers to that region and because it embodies this fundamental idea of "going to the borderline."<sup>12</sup> In *Rojsty* Konwicki's way of characterizing his generation of romantics makes reference to the region: "They brought us up in strict and patriarchal eastern clans" (77). We are reminded of those insurrectionists during the January Uprising of 1863 who entered the peaceful homes "where the happy and silent ones slept" and sang out spitefully: "Let them get up, let them come with us." The motif of leaving one's warm home and going out in the winter frost to join the insurrection is repeated many times, as is the conviction that one must hold out to the end: "'We will keep on going till the end.' We spoke all the time of this mythic end, not knowing what this appointed time actually meant" (M 114). But the following passage makes clear what "the end" means: "So we will remain and hold out to the moment when we will be able to enter the free city of Wilno or—what seems more certain—we will die, as did our fathers, in the forests of

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the Wilno region" (94).

The drama of this eastern brand of romanticism must necessarily take place in the forests, which Konwicki has called "the stronghold of all Polish uprisings" (NN 8).

The forest had its own history. A Romantic history from [the uprising of] 1863, which gave names to its secluded crannies like Church Mountain, where the insurrectionists heard Mass. But also that of the German occupation, when the paths were running with Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish, and Polish partisans. In their wake, there remained rotten hay and tree stumps shattered by German bombs. (M 145)

In Konwicki's forest it is common to find places that are both sacred and also pulsing with a nebulous fear—the grave of an insurrectionist, a cross erected in memory of the fallen in the 1863 uprising. The descriptions of this space tend to recur in Konwicki's work. In this way he signals to the reader that this is a chosen land, the center of his world, as in Cyprian Norwid's *Song from Our Land*: "There, in sight of the last gallows, / There my center lies—there my capitol. / There lies my fortress." Repeating the description of the forest as a place of an insurrectionist's death in nearly all of his novels, Konwicki leads us to understand that his "center" is unchanging and that he can always be found there.

In Konwicki's forest it is also possible to find marshes (*rojsty*). That word, so commonly used in the Wilno region, was ushered into Polish literature by Konwicki. Among many words and expressions from the eastern region that have found their way into contemporary usage, *rojsty* is perhaps the most intriguing in sound and the most mysterious in both its literal and figurative meanings—and not only because it's the title of one of the most interesting postwar Polish novels. Rather, from the first of Konwicki's novels, the word has taken on the connotation of an accursed and frightening place in the forest and also, as it turns out, the name of an ambivalent spirit who pushes humans to pursue destinies that are tangled and tragically ironic. A curse from the Wilno region—"May the devil take you to the marshes"—clearly indicates that the *rojsty* are considered a local hell, a place of torment and suffering.

Konwicki describes this demonic space as "somewhere in the distance, at the edge of the forest, in the swamps and clearings that people tended to avoid" (NN 25), where "an echo died out . . . , faded into the fog hanging low as the beginning of the world" (97). There, at night, madmen and ancient ghosts come out. It is a seat of death: "On either side the eternal marshes, frightening, bottomless, overgrown with sickly grasses and broken by the trunks of dead trees. In the cadaverous white mist the herons stood stock-still, like clay Kermis figurines. Black and putrid, the marsh waters slurped and gurgled greedily beneath your feet" (PC 71). The greedy gurgling of death takes on additional meaning here. Earlier the narrator addresses his insurrectionist counterpart from 1863: "You looked, as I would have looked, now, at this hour, at the end of the road, on the edge of the unending swamps, the swamps that are known in these parts as *rojsty*" (29)<sup>13</sup> Thus the true definition of *rojsty*: "the unending swamps."

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**"I'm unraveling and untangling everything":  
Konwicki's Bildungsroman**

Nearly all of Konwicki's novels are based on a certain principle of composition, that of building a symbolic biography, or rather, several such biographies. According to John Keats, "A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory."<sup>14</sup> Life, then, is a continuous effort to grant sense to our existence—allegorical or symbolic. There are several literary genres that serve that end; as examples one might mention the medieval morality play and the nineteenth-century bildungsroman. Konwicki's *A Dreambook for Our Time*, *Wniebowstapienie* (Ascension), and *Nic albo nic* (Nothing or Nothing) all share traits of the novel of initiation. What is most characteristic of this form is the process of searching for and experiencing truth in a journey—either alone or in a small group. An eagerness to become initiated, the feeling of living on the edge of death, and frequent interactions with the dead—all traits common to protagonists of novels of initiation—have been adapted by Konwicki, often with humorous effect.

*Wniebowstapienie* depicts the protagonist's ascent from the underground labyrinths of the Palace of Culture to its very top on the thirty-third floor. He is with a band of drunks, who, as if in a trance, keep circling around the same area. The story is told by a first-person narrator who has forgotten his name and where he's from, so he assumes the nickname Charon. Wandering through the bowels of the Palace of Culture with the other drunks, he aims at something unknown but becoming clearer: some not-quite-defined truth. As tends to be the case in novels of initiation, the search is more important than the finding. Yet an element of truth, however uncertain and tentative, finally emerges.

Konwicki said in an interview that he felt compelled to rework the initiation novel because of his "stubborn search for meaning in [his] own biography, a search for order, a search for neatness." The narrator of *A Dreambook for Our Time* echoes this conviction many times in the voices of characters haunted by their war pasts:

"You see, I've gone around in a great circle in my life, and on returning, certain matters have become important to me. . . . For now, apart from the anecdotal value, I'm seeking some greater significance in them, some meaning which determines the order of our being." (DT 117)

"I'm near the end already," I said. "I'm unraveling and untangling everything." (DT 186)

Instinctively we feared the inertia, chaos, chance that lay in wait for us everywhere. We yearned for order, hierarchy, logic. We wanted to take meaninglessness unawares, forestall its attack, and sever its terrifying hydra heads in advance. (NN 68)

This is Konwicki's ironic reference to the Herculean deed in Mickiewicz's "Ode to Youth."<sup>15</sup> In *Kalendarz i klepsydra* a similar ambition is revealed, though in a quieter tone: "I, too, am propelled by curiosity—not the same as



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before, but nonetheless curiosity as to what all this means. As to what I mean, what you all mean. . ." (CH 8).

But this goal of finding meaning in a life is undercut by the monumental loss and defeat that came to be the lot of this generation. In the symbolic life stories constructed by Konwicki, frightening and humiliating episodes appear: in *Rojsty* the accidental shooting of a fellow partisan, with the ironic comment, "Stefan wasn't there anymore. He died, if accidentally, for the cause" (96); in *Nic albo nic* the shooting of a German POW on the grave of an insurrectionist, under a cross (the irony of this situation is underscored by disclosing more particulars: "Komm mit! I said in the good accent of a high school student, who had been reading Goethe's poetry for years" [102]); in *A Dreambook for Our Time*, "For the hundredth time you recalled that hour when your weapon was taken away from you and they expelled you from the unit" (57); in *Wniebowstapienie*, included among the many life stories of successful people, there is also the memoir of a traitor.

#### Fraternizing with Ghosts

As with Gustav in part 4 of Mickiewicz's *Forefathers*, determining the ontological status of the heroes of Konwicki's novels is rarely easy. It's not clear if they are phantoms, ghosts, or living people. Nor is it certain if they come from this world or the next. Maybe they've escaped from somebody's dream? We will never be sure of that either. The Romantics, of course, created a similar way of being,<sup>16</sup> though Jan Walc has rightly noted a genealogical link to Konwicki's work of more recent vintage: "Rather like in Witkacy are those countless deaths, after which the heroes get up as if nothing had happened, as well as the nightmarish atmosphere and the axiological debates."<sup>17</sup>

But the Romantic receptivity to the world of ghosts predominates. Konwicki's protagonists are, quite simply, mediumistic. They want to fraternize with ghosts. They slip easily into trances and bouts with amnesia. Gaps frequently occur in their memories. They worry incessantly about their own states of being, about the division into "I" and "not-I" comprising their internal battle, but also about the potential of succumbing to yet a third force, one that is demonic and comes from another world. It is not merely the subconscious: "Are there moments or maybe longer periods that occurred without our consciousness or knowledge? Do we possess full control over our own lives?" (NN 108). Later on the protagonist wonders: "How much of my life slipped away behind the back of my consciousness? What is consciousness? Where does it begin and end? How does it start up and die out? Who took a reading of it and began to extort it from me?" (NN 131). And finally he realizes: "I am a stranger here" (NN 157).

In *Wniebowstapienie* the narrator introduces a significant variant: "I'm not completely sure, but maybe something happened in my life, no, not in life, that was stupid of me to say, but with me, with my person, with my existence" (71).

"Life" and "being" or "life" and "consciousness" are always in opposition. These distinctions lead us into the very thicket of the mysteries of existence. Especially in *Nic albo nic* the main theme of Konwicki's interests becomes evident: how the inner life touches on various levels of consciousness and on the zone beyond consciousness.

#### "A Lithuanian in the Salon": Alternative Romantic Personae

One of the most interesting indications of Romanticism's influence on Konwicki's work is his experimentation with diverse stylized versions of his own alleged biography. Let us examine some examples, taking care not to overlook their shades of irony.

First, there is the direct reference to himself. For example: "I am wearing a homemade jacket and officer's boots. I take part in countless activities for young people, overlaid with sentiment, patriotism, and budding sexuality. I am one of the elect. I belong to a secret gang of national heroes, a bit like Mickiewicz's Conrad, but more like Sienkiewicz's Kmicic" (A 210). There is also the lure of taking on the persona of a condemned outcast: Romanticism thrives on such figures. In Konwicki's work the persona is usually a ghostly father, illegitimate child ("accursed bastard" [CH 14]), or Jew. "It occurred to me suddenly that I'm a Jew and that I felt Jewish. My obliging imagination provided me instantly with an image of my grandfather, a young handsome Jew from Oszmiana, Mejszagola, or Swieciany. A young Jew, a wandering merchant, a Talmudic scholar, or a poet writing sentimental verse in awful Yiddish jargon" (CH 14-15). Paradoxically Konwicki's persona is romantically elevated even as he is overshadowed by the doom of a passionate, sinful love. In *A Dreambook for Our Time* the unique condition of being a Jew, both pious and accursed, is expressed in a different manner: "I'm a Jew because I don't have my own country, because I wander from place to place, because nobody understands what I say. I'm a Jew because I can be crucified with impunity on any telegraph pole by the road" (256).

Following the lead of the Romantics, Konwicki also sets up an opposition between Lithuanians and the world of "salons." He characterizes himself right after the war as a "homeless, impoverished, dark Lithuanian" (CH 20), as one coming "from a poor, provincial town in the Wilno area" (CH 23), and he later adds, "And so a little wild, a little dull, a little disoriented, I made my appearance, under Mach's tutelage, on the parquet floors of Kraków's postwar salons" (21). In this same vein Konwicki contrasts the courtly tractability of the capital with Lithuanian toughness: "On my iron, Lithuanian bones, I wore a thick layer of plasticine," which various people loved to mold. And imagine seeing "the disappointment and fury in the faces of the backslappers, when suddenly the plasticine fell away revealing my iron skeleton from Wilno" (CH 70).

Konwicki also has inherited language conflicts from the Romantics. In

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*Kalendarz i klepsydra* he contrasts himself with Wilhelm Mach, thereby reenacting Mickiewicz's clash with the classicists: "He [Mach] knew Polish very well; he was steeped in the language of Kochanowski, Rej, Krasicki, while I cackled in a pidgin of Polish-Lithuanian-Belorussian-Russian" (23). Of course, it is hard to believe these protestations of inferiority by someone who, by his own admission, was supposed to wade "through gutters full of swill" (24). We are reminded of the "Lithuanian scullery maids" whom Kajetan Kozmian imagined to be the sole admirers of Mickiewicz's *Ballads and Romances*. Truly enough, somewhat later in the text, Konwicki adopts a superior air when he settles accounts rather cruelly with literary critics: "I want to admire you in my Russified, halting Polish" (50).

In addition, Konwicki shares with the Romantics a dislike of cities. In *A Dreambook for Our Time*, together with the protagonist, Konwicki unfavorably describes the city as "hot and aggressive" (222). Elsewhere we find this magnificent tirade: "There we were whipped by winds from the continent, smothered in snow half the year, isolated forever from the outside world by forests; we despised machines, we feared machines like the devil, we were disgusted by bread from the city, sausage from the city as if by products that were not kosher" (CH 52). Thus, the coarseness and toughness of people of nature and labor (that is, Lithuanians) are contrasted with the abominable and devilish urban civilization. Finally, following the Romantic preferences for nature, common people, magic, faith, good-heartedness, and simplicity, Konwicki introduces himself as an "old sorcerer from the forests of Wilno" (CH 7).

**Passionate Love in Lithuania:  
The Tension between the Individual and the Collective**

In Lithuania the passionate love of lovers separated by class barriers ends in suicide. Any Polish schoolchild knows that that is the gist of part 4 of *Forefathers*. But also, any child knows that Gustav, "the lover of women," becomes transformed into Conrad, "the lover of his country," and that in our literary tradition, great works of literature about passionate love simply do not exist. Part 4 of *Forefathers* is the only work of this kind, and still it is dominated, even canceled out, by the double suicide of Gustav: the first time from love and the second time when Conrad, later in the text, writes on his prison wall the oracular words: *Gustavus obiit*. In *Kronika wypadków miłosnych* (Chronicle of Love Events) Konwicki provides us with what seems a continuation, or rather a peculiar repetition, of part 4 of *Forefathers*.

But first we must begin with the Polish literary "system," formed during Romanticism—specifically after the crushing of the November Uprising of 1830—which imposed upon Polish culture a contradiction in terms, unparalleled in other modern cultures, between what is individual and private, social and collective. At the same time it provided a solution for this antinomy: all moral weight is accorded to the latter. Thus it is crucial in the construction of

the Polish literary hero that he undergo a transformation, which sometimes takes on the character of enlightenment. The metamorphosis of Gustav into Conrad is the model, and thanks to literary critic Julisz Kleiner, these symbols were projected onto one of Poland's most legendary biographies—that of Mickiewicz himself. Every Pole was supposed to internalize and emulate it.

The initiation into the collective requires a break with private life, especially one's love life, which is considered unworthy of note. The Polish hero has to dedicate himself unswervingly to the patriotic-social cause. Private, internal life will always be reduced to something of secondary importance in light of the great national mandates of Service and Mission. The miracle of love is replaced with the miracle of messianism. Thus the transformation of the relationship "Gustav/his lover" into the relationship "Conrad/Father Peter" is symptomatic of a change of perspective in Polish Romanticism: the individualist perspective is transformed into the collective one. The evolution of the Polish novel, like that of all other genres, was conditioned by various reinterpretations of that schema—at times pathetic, at times satirical—from Micinski's *Father Faust*, through Zeromski, to socialist realist novels; from Witkacy's *Insatiability* to Dygat's *Bodensee* and Mrozek's *Moniza Clavier*. The dictates of social service and messianism always triumphed over Polish imaginativeness and sensibility; one could at the very most parody them.

The small circle of Polish advocates of the reprivatization of private life includes Miron Bialoszewski and Konwicki. Each of them, of course, regards private life as "private property" but in completely different ways. However, they have one thing in common: the often disregarded or ignored part 4 of *Forefathers*, which Bialoszewski has acknowledged as his favorite work.

The excitement of young love, which so fascinated the Romantics, has found in Konwicki its most extravagant bard. Romantic love pulses with a magical force, transforms reality beyond recognition, creates another dimension, another life, transcends the unbearable dullness of dailiness. It is risk, bliss, narcotic. Emotion shatters that which the intellect cannot defeat; the wonder of love alters the world mapped out by the learned people without imagination or heart.<sup>18</sup> Everything can change in a minute's time, everything can happen, one's fate could turn on the basis of a chance meeting. Feeding on the spirit of hope and risk, Romanticism encourages "betting it all on one card"—as long as the card is love. In Poland, however, that brand of Romanticism exploded and unfortunately died out in part 4 of *Forefathers*.

If the Romantics at times made the bold move to blasphemy, the author of *Kronika wypadków miłosnych* doesn't hesitate to do so either. Because of the censor, Mickiewicz cut a famous, extended passage from part 4 of *Forefathers*, which compares the sacrament of holy communion to a lovers' kiss; what remained of course was Gustav's song about heavenly pleasure-harmony-love. In Konwicki's novel our literature's new Gustav accepts death from the hands of his lover: "He opened his lips and waited as if at communion. . . . She looked him in the eyes, and with trembling fingers placed on his tongue the small white circle that tasted like a Christmas wafer. Instinctively, he closed his

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eyes" (CLE 237). The devotion of lovers makes up a necessary part of the religion of love. Konwicki doesn't neglect a single detail of the sacred rituals between lovers: his gymnasium students from Wilno operate in a trance reminiscent of the troubadours, whose code was transformed by romantic love. If it promises its true believers happiness, it is the happiness of angels, nowhere else to be found; but if it leads to the depths of unhappiness, it does so irrevocably, overwhelming and destroying one's whole life. Konwicki plays on the multiple meanings of the word *wypadek* (event, accident), so that every love becomes in some sense a *wypadek*—as is the case in melodrama.

Romanticism, borrowing from "low art," without hesitation appropriated the conventions of melodrama and wrung from them all possible emotion, as has Konwicki. He imports the potboiler tale of a cruel romance from the pages of the interwar newspapers of the twenties. Does he place Wicio and Alina in such a specific time period to intensify the "social" setting of *Kronika*? On the contrary, Konwicki merely exposes the everlasting verities of melodrama, in which love is associated invariably with unhappiness and death; he implies that love is the same everywhere.

Polish literary criticism, which of course reflects the tendency of Polish society as a whole, separates Konwicki's work into "the private part" and "the social part," giving preference to the latter at the cost of the former. But in *Kronika wypadków miłosnych* can we really assign more value to the "realistic" part and less to the private, "less realistic" part that has to do with love? If this narrowly defined realism has to do with Lithuania, the answer is clearly no; Konwicki's Lithuania is in the traditional mythic-Romantic vein. Just as for the Romantics, his Lithuania seems mysterious with its woods and gods, sacred and primordial. The lovers' first love is like that: "a landscape full of wildflowers, sweetly scented herbs, the woods evoking mysterious dread . . . a land of sorcerers and fortune-tellers, a land of prophets and messiahs" (CLE 127-28). Here is concealed an organic convergence, which becomes the project of Konwicki's poetic effort—a convergence between Lithuania and love. In Konwicki's work we are returned to the "most beautiful valley in the world," praised by Mickiewicz. Is it the same valley or a different one? That doesn't matter as long as it's a valley in Lithuania famous for Romantic wonder, the valley in which Walter Alf, who later becomes Konrad Wallenrod, plants a garden for Aldona.<sup>19</sup>

But—as always in Konwicki's novels—everything passes away and ends in defeat. "Various incidents from the sewer of history" divide the past from the present. Thus the frequent use of such phrases as "formerly," "at one time," and "never to return," as well as of the older *doppelgänger* of the young protagonist who gives in inevitably to unhappiness and death. Konwicki's protagonist—overwhelmed by historical events? the metaphysics of historical fate? the cliché that "Poles never win"?—invariably meets with defeat when he attempts to return to himself, his neglected private life. Love is unattainable, and despair doesn't release its hold on him for an instant. In confusion and pain he struggles to transcend these barriers, but he collapses from the strain.

Konwicky returns to us the missing link of Polish Romanticism, though a link—as a result of historical events—that had been damaged, even destroyed. In the context of most current works of literature, however, when privateness appears, usually narrowminded, destructive for any authentic inner life, the absolutism of love, praised by Konwicky, is essential as air.

Translated by Karen Kovacic

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article originally appeared as "Tam gdzie rojsty. Przypadek romantycznego mediumizmu," in Maria Janion, *Projekt krytyki fantazmatycznej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo PEN, 1991).

<sup>2</sup>The following abbreviations will be used

*M: Rojsty* (Marshes) (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1956).

*DT: A Dreambook for Our Time*, trans. David Welsh (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969).

*A: Wniebowstąpienie* (Ascension) (Warsaw: Iskry, 1967).

*NN: Nic albo nic* (Nothing or Nothing) (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1971).

*CLE: Kronika wypadków miłosnych* (Chronicle of Love Events) (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1974).

*CH: Kalendarz i klepsydra* (The Calendar and the Hourglass) (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1976).

*PC: The Polish Complex*, trans. Richard Lourie (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982).

[Translations of excerpts from Polish texts are mine. Trans.]

<sup>3</sup>[Stefan Zeromski (1864-1925) was a novelist and short story writer, whose blunt naturalistic style became marked later on with what Czesław Miłosz calls "an unrestrained lyricism." A neo-Romantic, Zeromski was considered in the first quarter of this century to be the preeminent Polish novelist. Trans.]

<sup>4</sup>[The phrase "murderous books" (*książki zbójcekie*) comes from Mickiewicz's *Forefathers* in which Gustav passionately accuses certain "worldly books" (*książki świeckie*) of shaping his frame of mind, thus leading him to his present state of loneliness and misery. He says, "Heaven and torment of my younger days! / They sprained the setting of my wings / And broke them upwards, so / That I could no more fly below." See Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefathers*, trans. Count Potocki of Montalk (London: The Polish Cultural Foundation, 1968), 41. Ed.]

<sup>5</sup>In fact, *Rojsty* was Konwicky's first novel. It was written in 1948 but released for publication only in 1956, after two later (socialist realist) novels—*Przy budowie* (At the Building Site) (1950) and *Władza* (Power) (1953).

<sup>6</sup>That this bitter attitude has been modified over the years is clear from a reminiscence in *Kalendarz i klepsydra* about Konwicky's Polish and history teacher, Miss Kasia Piotrowiczówna (who was also my teacher), in an underground high school in Wilno. The fragment devoted to her, among the most revealing in the book, ends with high praise both of education and of the teacher herself. "What would have become of me," Konwicky asks, "if Miss Kasia didn't see to my education? If the memory of her self-knowledge didn't keep me from mean-spiritedness, from . . . a comfortable nihilism?"

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Thus Konwicki acknowledges the lasting greatness of his teachers from Wilno, who were faithful disciples of Romantic ideals—which doesn't mean, of course, that he doesn't question those ideals at times.

<sup>7</sup>[Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefathers*, 72-73. Ed.]

<sup>8</sup>[Ostra Brama ("pointed gate") in Wilno is the location of an image of the Virgin Mary, well known to every Pole and reputed to work miracles. Hence the popular belief that a pectoral with her image will guide its wearer and miraculously save him or her from misfortune. Ed.]

<sup>9</sup>[Wernyhora, deeply rooted in the Polish literary tradition (e.g. Slowacki, Wyspianski), is a legendary Ukrainian or Cossack prophet, an embodiment of Polish messianic hopes for national resurrection at the sound of his lyre. Ed.]

<sup>10</sup>[This alludes to Juliusz Slowacki's poem "Grób Agamemnona" (Agamemnon's Tomb) which appeals to Poland to "rise up from its silent grave" and blames its pretense and its readiness to imitate other countries blindly as reasons for the loss of independence: "But, Poland, they fool you with tinsel! You were the peacock and the parrot of the nations, and now you are another's handmaid!" T. M. Filip, ed., *A Polish Anthology*, trans. M. A. Michael (London: Duckworth, 1944), 405. Ed.]

<sup>11</sup>[Sentimental song celebrating Polish bravery and mourning loss of life in fierce battle. Trans.]

<sup>12</sup>[This region, now divided up among Lithuania, Belorussia, and Ukraine, is known by Poles as the *kresy*, a word which also has the connotation of *borderland*, even *hinterland*. People from the *kresy* are often characterized as being both hospitable and mystical, and many of Poland's major writers, including the Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz and the Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz, come from the *kresy*, as, of course, did Konwicki himself. Trans.]

<sup>13</sup>[This translation is mine, not Lourie's. The page number refers to the Polish edition. Trans.]

<sup>14</sup>[Keats's letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 February-3 May 1819, in *John Keats*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 456. Ed.]

<sup>15</sup>[The poem praises the power of youth to achieve the impossible, to bring the re-birth of all humanity. In the translation of the fragment Konwicki alludes to, "the hydra's head" is translated as "the serpent's brow": "Who, yet an infant, crushed the serpent's brow, / In youth will choke the centaur's breath, / Snatch victims forth from hell below, / And win heaven's laurels after death!" George Rapall Noyes, ed., *Poems by Adam Mickiewicz* (New York: The Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America, 1944), 70. Ed.]

<sup>16</sup>[This brand of Polish Romanticism corresponds particularly well to the works of the second generation of English Romantics, especially to Byron and even Shelley. Polish literary tradition has developed a cult of Byron; it is Manfred or Prometheus rather than Wordsworth of *The Prelude* who in this passage embodies what is Romantic. The hero's ambiguous ontological status is the basis on which Konwicki constructs his *Wniebowstapienie* and, in some ways, *Nic albo nic* and *The Anthropos-Specter-Beast*; in other books this ambiguity may appear in minor characters. Ed.]

<sup>17</sup>*Pamiętnik Literacki*, 1 (1975). [Witkacy (Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, 1885-1939) was a playwright, philosopher, and artist, whose work often had a nonsensical, strident or absurdist quality, which shocked theatergoers of his day but came to be appreciated by later critics. Trans.]

<sup>18</sup>[Janion places Konwicki in a specific literary tradition by alluding to two of Mickiewicz's poems, the first, "Ode to Youth" (see note 15). While substituting love for

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youth, she suggests that love is also such an overwhelming, elemental force: "Brave youth, reach outward far beyond thy sight, / Crush what mere human reason cannot harm" (Noyes, *Poems by Adam Mickiewicz* 70). The other poem referred to is "Romanticism" ("Romantycznosc"), in which a maiden sees her dead lover by means of strong emotion—something those who perceive with cold reason cannot do: "Feeling and faith to me [i.e. the poet-observer] far more reveal / Than eyes and spectacles" (Noyes 69). In fact, this distinction captures the Romantics' major premise in their argument with the opposing group, the Classicists. Ed.]

<sup>19</sup>[Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod* is a long epic poem about the hero's masked patriotic struggles for Lithuanians' freedom from Germans. The hero, Walter Alf (later Konrad Wallenrod), and Aldona, a Lithuanian princess, are husband and wife. Ed.]