

# Ryszard Górski

---

## Folklore and National Culture : the Polish Example

---

Literary Studies in Poland 8, 7-13

---

1981

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

# Articles

Ryszard Górski

## Folklore and National Culture. The Polish Example

Since the 2nd World War there has been a manifest increase of interest in folklore. This interest characterizes not only those people whose profession involves studying folk tradition, but also people of different social classes—both the intellectual élite and the so-called public at large, who partakes in mass culture.

This is perfectly understandable in socialist countries, whose policy of social and political reforms has led to great changes in the society's attitude towards folk culture: it is now considered to be one of the more significant components of national culture. It plays an important role in state ceremonies (e.g. the central harvest home in Poland) and other festivities of a mass character, and it now receives official support. Folklore also goes to make up the repertoire of many song and dance ensembles (amateur and professional ones), it is popularized by numerous books and by the mass media (radio, films, television).

In the past, folklore seldom crossed the boundaries of the social group which had produced it and whose needs it satisfied, but now, as a result of the above - mentioned factors, it has extended its scope of influence and is present in the culture and customs of those social groups which had previously treated it with reserve.

This process is connected with the revaluation of our cultural heritage, with the search for lasting and progressive traditions, which should be referred to at the present time in the conviction that we should not ignore the rich experience of folklore when creating contemporary culture.

It has been said that folklore is one of those aspects of natio-

nal culture which grew up in local, regional conditions, cultivated its own native traditions connected with the life of the people, and which at the same time was able to adapt inflowing material to the needs of a given community in a particular time and space. This opinion became commonly accepted both by those who created folklore and by the general public.

It was looked upon as an antidote against the continuous standardization of cultural life, for in this age of the scientific and technical revolution its various domains show a tendency towards unification and become uniform, and this is a threat to the unique character of each culture. This process is typical of the highly developed countries of Western Europe and America, where the expansion of industry and urban agglomerations has caused traditional folklore to be pushed away to the sidelines or to disappear completely. In this situation folklore had no chance of exerting any significant influence on their literature and art. Their development ran along different lines than that of e.g. the Slav countries. This entailed serious consequences and was at the root of the lack of interest in folklore in western countries. Some changes in this field, i.e. a slow revival of interest in folklore, could be observed lately, at least in some western circles. This is obviously a reaction to the far-reaching standardization of their culture, to the degeneration of mass culture, in other words it is an act of self-defence by going back to one's own folk traditions.

In Poland and in other Slav countries the cultural processes over the last two centuries have taken a different course. Poland, a country which at one point in history was partitioned, deprived of its independence, and exposed to a discriminating policy on the part of the partitioning powers, was able to retain its national identity above all thanks to the development of its national literature and art, the safeguarding of the Polish language, etc.

It became clear that this kind of literature and art could be created by referring to the sources of folk tradition, and this was to be one of the main principles of the literary programme of Polish Romanticism. Of course in this conception country people were considered to be the carriers of tradition and of national features. In the 18th century F. S. Jezierski expressed a similar view when he wrote that the lower classes "make one nation differ from others,

cherish their mother tongue, keep up old customs and follow an unchanging way of life." W. Bogusławski openly admitted that the Polish opera lacked "that which is dearest to every nation [...] its national identity," and he hoped to achieve it by introducing onto the stage "those jolly, ribald Cracow boys, who sing while cultivating the soil, and while fighting for it," and also by reproducing their customs, opinions, feelings and amusements. His play, *Cud mniemany, czyli Krakowiacy i górale* (*The Alleged Miracle, or Lowlanders and Highlanders*), is considered to be the best Polish vaudeville of the 18th century, as it answered the needs of the people and made use of contemporary events. It was also attractive as a spectacle on stage thanks to well-chosen references to folklore. This is why many authors such as J. N. Kamiński, A. Ładnowski, S. Krzysiński, and J. K. Turcki wrote its "continuations" at a later period. Folklore, and in particular folk song, was present not only in Bogusławski's works, but also in those of other writers of the Enlightenment, such as F. D. Kniaźnin and F. Karpiński.

K. Brodziński considered the folk song a model to be imitated, while A. Mickiewicz wrote a song of praise in its honour, calling it "an ark of the covenant between old and newer times," a guardian of national traditions and an instrument helping to retain national identity. Most important of all, Mickiewicz followed the literary programme of Romanticism, which was to create a national literature by referring to folk sources (see his *Ballads and Romances*, *Dziady—Forefathers*).

Mickiewicz's achievements were to blaze a trail for the poetic experiments of his contemporaries and his successors, who looked for inspiration in folklore.

This attitude towards folklore can be seen in the works of most of the poets of the Romantic period, and it can also be traced in other kinds of art, such as music, where the names of F. Chopin and S. Moniuszko are sufficient evidence of the extent and the quality of the artistic achievements in that field. The literary and artistic works which were produced at this time were accompanied by theoretical considerations and generalizations, which led to the formulation of such interesting concepts of art as that found in C. Norwid's *Promethidion*. Though in later years literary programmes and manifestoes did not stress so much the connection between literature

and folklore, and were not quite so enthusiastic about it, folklore entered for good the literature of the 2nd half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

Elements of folklore are present in the poetry of M. Konopnicka and B. Leśmian, in the prose of H. Sienkiewicz, E. Orzeszkowa and W. S. Reymont, while Wyspiański in his play *Wesele* (*The Wedding*) employed the same form of presenting his characters as that used in folk cribs.

The ways the above-mentioned authors drew on folklore and used it in their works were different and this was a consequence of their ideological and artistic principles. For some of them this meant using folk verse metres and the method of organizing material which is used in folklore with the aim to present a realistic image of the social situation of the lower classes at the time; for others, elements of folklore were a means of characterizing certain social groups and drawing psychological portraits of their representatives. Some employed the dramatic structures introduced by folk theatre in order to create plays passing a severe judgment on their contemporaries (*Wesele*), while others yet borrowed from folklore when penetrating human characters to show man's most elementary or basic feelings and reactions (*Chłopi—The Peasants*).

When Poland regained its independence in 1918, the most important task consisted in determining the direction and the ways in which its national culture was to develop in the new political reality. This issue aroused the interest of writers of various generations and was present in the literary programmes which were being formulated as well as in discussions not only of literary character.

In the literary programmes of the time, folklore was conceived as an art which was directly linked with the life of country people and expressed the experiences of those who were uncontaminated by civilization and lived in contact and in harmony with nature, as a certain type of culture based on an active participation of every member of the community, without the division into authors and consumers, as a treasury of national traditions and age-old artistic experiences, which the official literature and art wanted to make use of.

The fact that folklore was still of interest in their day was stressed by S. Żeromski and W. Orkan. Also, various poetic groups

drew on some of its aspects. The same could be observed in music (e.g. K. Szymanowski) and painting (e.g. W. Skoczylas, Z. Pronaszko, T. Czyżewski). In both these domains of art the artists were fascinated by folk music, woodcuts, sculpture and painting.

This could also be said about the theatre in the inter-war period. The spectacles staged by Reduta, one of the most renowned Polish theatres of that time, made use of folklore. Its productions of this type, in particular of the pastoral, call to mind the greatest director of the time, L. Schiller, who staged several memorable spectacles using country and town folklore, such as *Bandurka* and *Kram z piosenkami* (*The Song Vender*). He also provoked an increased interest in folk forms both in amateur and professional theatre. J. Cierniak tried to make traditional forms of theatre (beliefs and rituals) the groundwork of the amateur movement. Many rituals were adapted for the stage and acted out by professional actors, and they were very popular with the public, particularly the Reverend W. Skierkowski's *Wesele na Kurpiach* (*A Wedding in the Kurpie Region*). Folklore, as an element used to characterize the members of a certain social group, appeared in novels which described life in the country. As for poetry, folklore inspired J. Kasprówicz, E. Zegadłowicz, J. Czyżewski, and others.

The poetry of the war and Nazi occupation (1939–1945) is of particular interest. As a result of exceptional and abnormal conditions, literature had to go underground, and was to develop in conspiracy during the occupation. In these difficult “years of contempt” it took upon itself the responsibility of accompanying the nation, of mobilizing it to fight against the occupant, it kept up the spirit of resistance and helped people to survive. Poetry was able to play this role only by staying anonymous and by being passed on orally, also it could be published in the underground illegal press or by backdoor publishers. As a result, its circulation was similar to that of folklore. Since it aimed at reaching the public at large, and reflected the general feelings and experiences of all Poles, it employed the means used in folklore, the stereotypes and imagery. Poetry and folklore were in close contact during that period, and they borrowed from each other.

In the 35-year period since the war, the relations between literature and folklore have been lively and varied. There is much evi-

dence to show that writers are still very much interested in folklore. For example, J. Przyboś is the author of *Jabłoneczka* (*The Little Apple Tree*), an anthology of Polish folk poetry, which had two editions: in 1953 and 1957. Another poet, S. Czernik, has devoted several of his works to folk songs, tales and beliefs, and has also published a volume entitled *Polska epika ludowa* (*The Polish Folk Epic*) in the National Library. In a two volume anthology *Poezja polska* (*Polish Poetry*), S. Grochowiak and J. Maciejewski for the first time included folk poetry. This is how they motivated their decision:

Folk poetry has long ceased to exist as the expression of a separate cultural milieu. Today it continues to thrive in our minds (and there alone) as one of the elements of living literary tradition—an important tradition, which is proved by the fact that folklore is a constant source of inspiration for the most outstanding representatives of Polish poetry.

This inspiration can also be found in contemporary literature. Folklore is a gold mine for children's books, which like to take up and develop various myths, legends, tales, etc. (e.g. Dobkiewiczowa, Porazińska, Wortman). Quite often it also serves as a source for those who put on puppet shows for children. Nowadays there is also a trend which consists in making new versions of old folk tales written down by authors in the past (e.g. H. Sienkiewicz, J. I. Kraszewski, R. Zmorzki, B. Leśmian). The idea is to popularize these old tales.

Apart from large-scale spectacles (e.g. harvest home), which are to a great extent based on folklore, it should be said that contemporary theatre also has a liking for plays and spectacles which are based on folk motifs. The best-known play which draws on traditional theatre is the Old Polish *Historia o chwalebnyim Zmartwychwstaniu Pańskim* (a Resurrection play) by Mikołaj from Wilkowiecko, but there have also been other spectacles of this kind, e.g. *Dziś do Ciebie przyjść nie mogę* (*I Can't See You Today*) by I. Kanicki and L. Budrecki, based on songs from the Nazi occupation (in Warsaw alone it had several hundred performances), then there was the folk musical *Na szkle malowane* (*Painted on Glass*) by E. Bryll and K. Gaertner, and an oratory by the same two authors entitled *Zagrajcie nam dzisiaj wszystkie srebrne dzwony* (*Let All Silver Bells Ring for Us Today*). Contemporary prose also draws on country folklore and the folklore of other social groups. The idea is not

only to give a realistic picture of a given group, but also to make use of its language, its vocabulary, in order to refresh and enrich the style and language of prose. Examples of this are M. Dąbrowska's *Na wsi wesele* (*The Country Wedding*), E. Redliński's *Konopielka*, and many others.

Much of contemporary poetry is also inspired by folklore. This may be seen in the works of poets from peasant families (J. B. Ożóg, T. Nowak), and also those of other social classes (J. Harasymowicz). Some poets portray the country, its landscape and its world of beliefs (e.g. Ożóg), others try to fathom the characteristic features of folk poetry, its way of looking at things and describing reality (e.g. T. Nowak), others yet only make use of certain forms which folklore has made popular, e.g. ballads, folk songs (Harasymowicz).

This short outline clearly shows that folklore is ever-present in contemporary Polish literature, that it is very valuable in recreating the world of country people, and has become an important element of national culture.

Transl. by *Agnieszka Kukulska*