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## On the "Gawęda"

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Literary Studies in Poland 12, 7-11

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1984

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# Articles

Michał Głowiński

## On the *Gawęda*\*

For many years literature and the common or garden practices of speech that constitute a constant factor in our daily lives have been considered to be mutually exclusive domains. Only in exceptional cases have literary researchers examined the connections between them, and such studies have not as a rule entailed any reflection on the structure of the literary work: they restricted themselves to pinning down the various colloquialisms and kinds of popular idiom that had found their way into the pages of books. In addition to this, of course, one reiterated the banal observation that the dialogues of prose narrative are closer to everyday speech than the narrative itself. It was not much to be going on with. Even if one adds the great traditions of rhetoric it still was not much. In any case, rhetoric tended to pay little attention to ordinary speech: its subject was oration, words uttered in public. One need hardly point out the fundamental disparity between oration and everyday colloquial speech.

Yet one cannot overlook the fact that in recent years there have been changes regarding this subject within the theory of literature — that researchers have turned to the relations between the literary work and the practices of speech, and no longer conceive of the work as a text in isolation from all other linguistic usage. And what interests them is not the seepage of particular elements of colloquial speech, but an issue that is far more fundamental. What is the relationship between the literary work as a linguistic structure *sui generis* and everyday speech? It is not just the successors to the

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\* A Polish variety of the tale. For further details of definition see below, page 8 [translator's note].

great heritage of rhetoric—those who have rendered the service of “making it new”—who have remarked on this problem, though they too have pointed out that structures with a clearly rhetorically-defined function and mode of construction appear in everyday statements and on ordinary occasions, and not just in Demosthenes, Cicero, or Bossuet.

The credit for raising this issue belongs first and foremost to those researchers who have asked: what is the linguistic structure comprised by the literary work, and with what linguistic practices does it go hand in hand? Here one can mention Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, who states that within the literary work speech itself is fictional in nature and is characterized by its mimetic status with regard to ordinary linguistic practices. Particular mention should be made of those who—like Richard Ohmann—have applied Austin’s theory of the speech act to the area of literary reflection. As usually happens, the new theory has not merely proposed a new problematic but also permits one to see the literature of the past in a new light. It is this aspect of the matter that concerns us both in this introductory note and well-nigh throughout this edition of our periodical. It deals with a specifically Polish literary genre which is unknown outside the sphere of the Polish language. It is also unknown to foreign researchers, even though it displays features that might interest them. For it was founded on an imitation of the typical forms of speech of a certain social level.

This genre is the *gawęda* (tale). It took shape as a distinct variety of literary utterance in the course of the first half of the 19th century, but its historical roots go back much further and extend to the noble narratives of the Baroque era and, above all, to the Sarmatian memoirs of the 17th century. At that time it was less a genre than a mode of narration. The word *gawęda* itself had a different meaning, for it referred to the speaker or teller of the tale, and was thus a *nomen agentis*. Not everyone merited the title of *gawęda*, however: the term could only be applied to a person who recounted a tale in a situation defined by custom and sanctioned by tradition. The *gawęda*—in the sense of a genre—was not ordinary speech but utterance rooted in custom, from which it arose and with which it was closely connected. As a rule there was no gap between utterance and custom: if a text broke with a certain set of noble rituals—be

they those of festival or everyday life—it became meaningless. The literary genre of the *gawęda*, which was formed during the Romantic period but had immediate antecedents in earlier noble writing, respected this connection to the full. It did not have its foundation in the reproduction of individual forms of speech but—as it were—in the recreation of the situation in which one speaks. And that particular situation was of fundamental importance to the narrative, which was often laden with references to the addressee and pursued no linear thread of development but was fragmentary and seemed at least to be careless and inconsistent. Placed in a certain perspective, the *gawęda* can be dubbed the Polish variety of the “Sterne-ism” that exerted so strong an influence on the Polish prose of the first decades of the 19th century (an excellent example of the co-presence of the *gawęda* and the tradition of Sterne can be found in Aleksander Fredro’s tales of reminiscence, *Trzy po trzy*\*).

We repeat with emphasis: the *gawęda* provided a literary reproduction of a mode of utterance that was strictly defined by custom and milieu—a mode of utterance in which phonic gestures of various kinds played a large part. As Marian Maciejewski so rightly demonstrates in his paper published in this issue, it was a represented word. The first thing encountered by the reader was a certain linguistic reality which had no right to transparency, and a story-line which as a rule was not particularly attractive in its own right, being often no more than an anecdote of the nobility. One might even say that the story is not only manifest in the language to which it owes its existence but also represents a linguistic fact in itself: that its development in language, as part of a particular mode of narration, is what matters most to the reader. For the reader does not so much get to know events in themselves as events as narrated in a particular manner in various kinds of situations sanctioned by tradition: during a feast, by the fireside, beside the campfire during a break in the hunt. The speech situation of the *gawęda* had to be stylized as authentic, as did the story, which was usually a tale about events long since past from the good old days.

And the *gawęda* was an apologia for the days of yore: for

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\* An allusion to the Polish idiom *pleść trzy po trzy* (to speak nonsense). [translator’s note].

everything that was “home-grown.” It felt a repugnance for all things alien and foreign. One could only recount it in a manor house that still kept up the Sarmatian traditions—not in a salon run along the lines of French models. One cannot hide the fact: the *gawęda* as a literary genre saw the light of day in extremely conservative surroundings and, in its classic incarnations at least, was the expression of consistently backward-looking attitudes and views. There was surely no writer and political thinker in the Poland of the first half of the 19th century more right-wing or conservative than Henryk Rzewuski, the master of the *gawęda*, who published the masterpiece in the genre in 1839: his collection *Pamiętki Soplicy* (*Soplica's Memoirs*). Xenophobic, traditionalist and conservative, the *gawęda* nevertheless cannot be reduced to these characteristics alone. It is much more than that. And this is where its paradoxes begin to appear: a variety of paradoxes.

Paradox number one. It influenced the work of writers who were neither xenophobic, traditionalist nor conservative. It left a clearly perceptible mark on the masterpiece of Polish Romanticism, Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*. A *gawęda*-like prose stylization was practised by Słowacki, the other great Romantic. So they too knew the allure of the indigenous nature of the *gawęda*. But this is not the fundamental paradox.

A dozen or so years ago Jerzy Szacki, the distinguished Polish historian of social ideas, brought out a book entitled *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy* (*Counterrevolutionary paradoxes*). It was devoted to the antagonisms within the French revolution and uncovered the social problems and conflicts to which the advocates of progress remained blind. In this case at least, conservatism proved a creative and original force in the ideological sphere. One cannot by any means term the authors of *gawęda* particularly keen-sighted either in social thought or even observation. But on the other hand it was not their *métier* to diagnose society. Their creativity and originality lay in the domain of literary form, the sphere of literary speech. The extreme conservative world-view engendered forms that were not merely original but path-finding too, having few antecedents in the native literature and hardly any parallel in other literatures (the nearest equivalent is the *skaz* in Russian literature). The conservative author of *gawęda* privileged a form of speech that was rooted

in custom but nevertheless free. And they created a specifically Polish form.

The literary life-span of the *gawęda* was a short one. It was the lode-star of a single literary season: that of late Romanticism. During the latter half of the 19th century it drifted into marginal status. The realists were consistent and ruthless in their rejection of it. Which is hardly surprising, since although they were so fascinated by customs their poetics was diametrically opposed to those of the *gawęda*. No representative of any subsequent literary movement of significance came to accept it. The *gawęda* began to seem no more than a relic of the past: a worthy one, deserving of a place in history, but one that was dead. Its situation only changed a little during the interwar period, and this was due to two writers who dealt in forms of documentary or para-documentary prose: Ksawery Pruszyński and Melchior Wańkowicz. But this did not amount to a return to the forefront of the literary scene. Their references to the *gawęda* were no more than a peculiar feature of their styles, which the literary public generally welcomed, but they had no connection with any broader literary movement.

It was later proved in a most unexpected fashion that the *gawęda* still had some life in it. In Witold Gombrowicz's magnificent novel *Trans-Atlantyk* (*Trans-Atlantic Voyage*), published in 1953, the *gawęda* became the object of superb and consistent parody. But Gombrowicz's splendid work, which transposed Polish realia and problems to the Argentina of 1939, was not concerned simply to parody a literary genre which for close on a century had seemed little more than a historical relic. This would have been too easy an exercise. For it is by means of his parody of the *gawęda* that Gombrowicz finds the form of his own literary problematic. Such is often the fate of literary forms: they return to the stage in the guise of parodies—and through this parody they live, even though their life be no more than a peculiarly literary variety of life beyond the grave.