

On Ghosts, Vampires, Heroes and the Living Dead: Maria Janion's Late Critique of Polish Romanticism



Professor Maria Janion—a historian of literature and ideas, a scholar of the humanities, professor at the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, an unquestioned intellectual authority and charismatic teacher who educated many generations of Polish intellectuals, and who became known above all as an outstanding scholar of Romanticism as a literary style, historical period, and paradigm—became, in the final years of her life, one of its fiercest critics. This was due to its caricatured manifestations in contemporary Poland, which invokes the Romantic myth in a simplified manner, distorting and flattening it. Although Romanticism constituted the principal field of her scholarly interests, an era to which she devoted her entire life as well as numerous books, academic studies, and textbooks, toward the end of her life Janion revised her fascination with it and came to regard the central concept of Polish Romanticism—messianism—as the “curse of Poland.”

For most of her academic career, Professor Janion studied above all the distinctive Polish form of Romanticism, entangled as it was in the struggle for independence and the search for national identity, in all its manifestations: its genealogy and peculiarities, its philological hermeneutics, its Slavic origins, its beginnings in pagan myth, fairy tale, and history, its distinctive Eastern spirituality, and its most hidden and repressed aspects, concealed within the collective unconscious and the irrational sphere inhabited by phantoms, vampires, and ghosts.

Central to these reflections was her concept of what she called *phantasmatic criticism*, formulated in her 1991 book *Projekt krytyki fantazmatycznej. Szkice o egzystencjach ludzi i*

duchów (*A Project of Phantasmatic Criticism: Essays on the Existences of Humans and Spirits*), in which Janion examined the earthly existence of spirits in Romantic literature and in the Romantic ethos. She continued this research for many years, including in her later 2003 publication devoted to the vampire topos, *Wampir: biografia symboliczna* (*The Vampire: A Symbolic Biography*).

Belief in ghosts and vampires—which Mickiewicz himself considered extraordinarily characteristic of Polish culture and, more broadly, Slavic culture—interested Janion as culture’s alternative, nocturnal, subterranean side. She was fascinated by what had been repressed and rejected, by the search for the limits of knowledge, and by the writing of another, alternative version of history. As she herself says in *Rozmowy poszczególne*, in an interview with Kazimiera Szczuka: “I have always searched culture for its nocturnal and tragic elements.” She came from Vilnius, and perhaps for this reason she felt close to the “patriotism of the borderlands, full of terrible premonitions and tragic entanglements.”

It is precisely this kind of patriotism that permeates perhaps the most important Polish Romantic drama, which has been compulsory reading in Polish schools for generations: Adam Mickiewicz’s *Dziady* (*Forefathers’ Eve*), particularly Part III, centered on the character of Konrad, who is characterized by a sense of his own extraordinary nature and uniqueness, by pride and narcissism extending to the point of heresy, arising from his conviction that he is a great poet:

“I feel immortality, immortality I create,
What greater thing could You have done—God?”

(*Forefathers’ Eve*, Part III, Scene II, lines 54–55)

Konrad is the embodiment *par excellence* of Romantic messianism: a Christ-like figure, a martyr who suffers on behalf of the entire Polish nation.

“I and my homeland are one.
My name is Million—for millions
I love and suffer torments.”

(*Forefathers’ Eve*, Part III, Scene II, lines 259–261)

Messianism, which according to Professor Janion in its contemporary form is equivalent to nationalism, appears in Polish culture as a manifestation of national masochism arising from an unconscious sense of guilt, which leads to the adoption of the position of victim in the name of great patriotic ideals. From this, in her view, stems “the suicidal tendency of Poles, their fantasy or dream of dying, of suicide, of resurrection.”

This attitude, in turn, leads—as Dr. Monika Rudaś-Grodzka, one of Janion’s most distinguished students, says in Agnieszka Arnold’s film *Bunt Janion* (*Janion’s Rebellion*)—to the creation of “a certain perverse narcissism that produces a sense of superiority while simultaneously concealing a sense of inferiority.”

Professor Janion also takes a critical view of the “special covenant with Providence; with God” articulated in this context and of the resulting arrogance of Poles—their “delusions of greatness,” as she calls them. Fundamentally, she thereby criticizes a Polish identity whose very core is founded on the Romantic myth: a narrative about Poland sustained by rhetoric

full of pathos and fantasies of greatness and of being condemned to death, originating in an ancient Slavic narrative and spirituality, while concealing a Polish inferiority complex in relation to Europe and a certain narcissism that masks it.

The crucial Scene IX of Part III of *Forefathers' Eve* depicts the ritual of the titular *Dziady*—the commemoration of the dead, a cult of the deceased profoundly important and deeply rooted in Polish customs. *Forefathers' Eve* is, fundamentally, a poem about the dead rising at night, about living corpses, ghosts, and dead heroes, about suicidal sacrifice and heroic death. In the figure of Konrad, Mickiewicz introduces the figure of a vampire thirsting for patriotic revenge, blood, and suffering.

The Romantic phantasm of the vampire, or living corpse, belongs to Polish identity and historical experience, particularly during the partitions of Poland and thus during the Romantic era. The vampire articulates the destiny of the Poles, their eternal damnation and fundamental inner division, but it is also a symbolic figure: a character embodying the transgression of evil, misery, and historical injustice.

In Maria Janion's understanding, phantasmatic criticism is also, more broadly, a reflection on the hermetic nature of art and on the dormant potential of myths, archetypes, representations, and illusions contained in literature, film, and art—a potential that persists and is transmitted across centuries through cultural patterns shaped consciously and unconsciously and rediscovered in contemporary images that automatically reproduce these myths, archetypes, and hidden meanings.

For many years of her scholarly work, Maria Janion saw Romanticism primarily as a manifestation of the subject—that which is individual and singular; in other words, sovereign subjectivity, or simply freedom. In her interpretation, Romanticism represented a great revolution of the imagination and a fundamental imperative of freedom. She always emphasized its diversity and multifaceted nature, but also its dark side; she perceived within it what had been forgotten, hidden, and repressed.

In her interpretation, Polish Romanticism was above all a matter of the struggle for independence and an unconditional affirmation of freedom. In Agnieszka Arnold's 2006 documentary *Bunt Janion*, she says:

“Romanticism can play its role as a great school of freedom. The struggle for the subjectivity of the collective is closely connected precisely with the subjectivity of the individual in Romanticism. Today, however, individual freedom is increasingly being negated or subordinated to the significance either of the collective or, above all, of the State. The Romantics dreamed of having their own State, but they did not know that the State could also become such a terrible form of oppression of the individual.”

In books including *Gorączka romantyczna* (*Romantic Fever*, 1975), *Romantyzm i historia* (*Romanticism and History*, 1978, with Maria Żmigrodzka), *Wobec zła* (*In the Face of Evil*, 1989), *Życie pośmiertne Konrada Wallenroda* (*The Afterlife of Konrad Wallenrod*, 1990), and *Romantyzm i egzystencja* (*Romanticism and Existence*, 2005, with Maria Żmigrodzka); in her *Selected Works*, published in 2000–2002 under the editorship of Małgorzata Czermińska—Vol. 1, *Romantic Fever*; Vol. 2, *Tragedy, History, Privacy*; Vol. 3, *Evil and Phantasms*; Vol. 4, *Romanticism and Its Media*; Vol. 5, *Romantic Biographies*—as well as in the later *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna: fantazmaty literatury* (*Uncanny*

Slavdom: Phantasms of Literature, 2006), Maria Janion investigated Polish Romantic spirituality, which in her view grew out of Slavic spirituality.

Her writings addressed questions of the Slavic complex and Slavic self-consciousness; visions of pagan Slavic aesthetics, spirituality, and mythology; the functioning of Slavdom within contemporary Polish consciousness; and its overwhelming influence on Polish identity.

Other important themes in the professor's scholarship included otherness, difference, exclusion, discrimination, and feminism. *Kobiety i duch inności (Women and the Spirit of Otherness*, 1996) was an attempt to restore women to their proper place in Polish literature and an acknowledgment that women are, and always have been, excluded; that their subjectivity is consequently different; that they occupy in society the role of the Other, the excluded; and that they have therefore always been subjected to discrimination.

In contemporary Poland, Professor Janion observed with concern the triumph of sexism and misogyny and the regression of women's status; in her view, women today are treated not as subjects but as sexual objects. One example is the Polish public debate concerning women's right to abortion. She was deeply disturbed by the extraordinarily aggressive tone of this debate and by the superficiality and vulgarity of this new interpretation of women's role. She regarded it as yet another symptom of the superficiality, fragmentation, haste, and flattening present in contemporary culture.

Following Freud, she argued that the private sphere, and thus the sexual sphere as well, was once again becoming politicized, influencing a reevaluation of the significance of feminism and minority rights in Poland. In this way, she drew attention to everything that is different and excluded, including discriminated groups deprived in many respects of freedom and subjectivity, such as women and LGBT communities.

It is no coincidence that her students became pioneers of gender studies in Poland, of research into feminism and women's rights, and of scholarship on Polish antisemitism. Maria Janion consistently represented a critical stance, advocating a "philosophy of suspicion," rebellion or resistance toward existing reality, intellectual rigor, and the necessity of constructing another, alternative narrative. As early as the beginning of the 1980s, she introduced postmodernist authors associated with subversion into the Polish academic canon: Foucault, Bataille, Susan Sontag, and R. D. Laing.

In later years—though, as she always emphasized, much too late—she also entered the discourse on Polish antisemitism. After several decades of unpublished and scattered research and reflection on the subject, she formulated what she called the "founding myth of Polish antisemitism," present above all in Zygmunt Krasiński's *Nie-Boska komedia (The Undivine Comedy)*, a work to which she devoted many years of research.

These reflections resulted in the 2009 publication *Bohater, spisek, śmierć. Wykłady żydowskie (The Hero, the Conspiracy, Death: Jewish Lectures)*. In her controversial 2000 book *Do Europy tak, ale razem z naszymi umarłymi (To Europe, Yes, but Together with Our Dead)*, Janion writes unequivocally about the Holocaust and about Polish guilt, stating, in her own words, that "our dead are above all the Jews—they were excluded from the history of Polish martyrdom," but, as she adds, "the process of restoring them is now taking place."

Janion's growing criticism of and distance from Romantic ideology, connected with her many years of research and reflection on the subject, ultimately led to a reevaluation and

disillusionment in her thinking. This resulted from confronting the Romantic myth with what was shameful, hidden, and repressed in Polish culture, but also with a newly forming Polish identity and a new, exaggerated reality defined by politics, which consciously instrumentalizes, distorts, and manipulates that myth.

This led Professor Janion to proclaim the “end of the Romantic paradigm” and to conclude that its values were in crisis. According to Professor Janion, Poland today is experiencing an “alarming regression in the sphere of myths, archetypes, symbols, and values” and a “centrally planned turn toward the culture of a fallen, epigonic Romanticism.” Her troubling diagnoses from years ago remain particularly relevant today.

In Agnieszka Arnold’s film, Maria Janion says on this subject:

“The language of mass communication prevails, reducing virtually everything to a handful of stereotypes, a handful of banalities. Above all, it is based on absolute amnesia. It is the forgetting of everything that came before.”

Thus, in her later years Maria Janion regarded messianism as the “curse of Poland.” In her view, a sense of grievance and a certain historical incapacity among Poles go hand in hand with an imagined sense of greatness, producing “indifference and deafness to the surrounding reality.”

Those in power, meanwhile, react so aggressively to her criticism of national myths because—to quote the Professor—they “believe that national identity is founded upon heroic or messianic myths, and they are unable to create a sense of community based on civic values rather than mythical-national values.”

As early as 1981, during her address to the first Congress of Polish Culture—which was interrupted by the imposition of martial law—Professor Janion, speaking about Solidarity with reference, inevitably, to Romanticism, appealed for the transformation of an “emotional movement” into an “intellectual movement,” “because if this does not happen, we will remain trapped in the Romanticism of popular stereotypes and emotional responses.”

Since, in her view, the Romantic myth was a myth of the intelligentsia, the task of the intelligentsia—even then, in the face of its contemporary crisis—was to formulate a new myth of identity based on democratic and civic values. These reflections were accompanied by the hope that Solidarity might become the beginning of a civic conversation about equal rights and equality.

After the political transformation of 1989, Maria Janion expressed herself even more emphatically, directly proclaiming the “end of the Romantic paradigm”—that is, the end of the Romantic model as the fundamental model of Polish culture, understood as heroic, martyrological, and messianic.

In her view, the omnipresence and absolute dominance of the Romantic myth in Polish culture had always been harmful and resulted from an educational system in which the aforementioned Part III of Mickiewicz’s *Forefathers’ Eve* occupied a privileged position—a work that is fundamentally, as Janion puts it, “a collection of messianic stereotypes.”

The fundamental significance of the Romantic myth in shaping Polish identity, its deformed and grotesque manifestations in contemporary Poland, and finally the entire contemporary

ideology of Romantic stereotypes, saturated with the martyrology of messianism—all of this Janion categorically rejected.

In a letter opening the Congress of Polish Culture in 2016, read aloud by perhaps one of her most prominent students, Kazimiera Szczuka, we read:

“(...) The canon of God-and-Fatherland stereotypes and Smolensk as a new messianic myth are supposed to unite and console those who feel wronged and humiliated by the previous government. How ineffective and harmful is the martyrological model dominant in Poland! I will say it plainly—messianism, and especially its state-clerical version, is a curse, a disaster for Poland. I sincerely hate our messianism. (...) A nation that does not know how to exist without suffering must inflict suffering upon itself. Hence the shocking sadistic fantasies of forcing women to give birth to half-dead children, hence the digging in the graves of the victims of the plane crash, the assault on natural monuments (...).”

In the 2006 documentary devoted to her life and work, *Bunt Janion*, Professor Janion also said, in the context of messianism, that suffering does not ennoble:

“Those who suffer have hearts of stone.”