

HENRYK SIENKIEWICZ' QUO VADIS?: A DOCUMENT ON EARLY CHRISTIANITY OR ON EUROPEAN MODERNISM?*

Traditional Polish literary criticism has popularised the view that Sienkiewicz is the Polish national version of Walter Scott¹ and that as such he has taken the genre of the so-called "historical novel" to unprecedented heights in Polish literature of the end of the 19th century². With his trilogy, set against 17th century Polish history, which appeared between 1883 and 1888 (*Ogniem i mieczem*, *Potop*, *Pan Wołodźowski*), Sienkiewicz gained immediate acclaim from his Polish contemporaries, but it was with his 1896 novel *Quo vadis?* that his reputation as the author of a 'best-seller' was established right across Europe and the English-speaking world. It was translated into English in the same year by Sienkiewicz's American translator, Jeremiah Curtain, who made a fortune out of the royalties for the English editions. The earliest film version of the novel was made in Italy in 1912 (gaining the Pope's approval) and then exported to America. In eight reels, it was the longest (silent) movie shown in that country up to that date³. The Nobel Prize for Literature, awarded to Sienkiewicz in 1905, testified to his popular appeal in his own time, while with *Quo vadis?*, at least, with its Christian theme set against a meticulously reconstructed Rome of A.D. 64, Sienkiewicz still captivates the reading public of our own day.

But is *Quo vadis?* a "historical" novel about the early Christians in Rome? And what is the status of the historical material used in the novel?

Historical data

It is an established fact that Sienkiewicz had intimate knowledge of both Italy and of the available historical material on classical Roman civilization. He made extra trips to Italy during the composition of the novel in order to check on details for the setting. There is a very large number of characters in the novel who either appear "on stage" or who are mentioned by name, who are based on known historical prototypes. The character and portrait of Nero are meticulously constructed around the details passed down through writers such as Tacitus (in his *Annales*) and Suetonius (in his *The Lives of the Caesars*). Similarly, the character of Petronius is based entirely on Tacitus' sketch of Caius Petronius, "a man of refined luxury" and Nero's advisor "in matters of taste". The hero, Vinicius, for whom no historical prototype exists, is attached to general Corbulo's Roman Legions, who defeated the Armenians in the Parthian War of 62 - 64⁴.

The heroine, Lygia, also has no ready-made historical prototype, but her fictional biography is based on a combination of facts related by Tacitus in his

Annales. She is a Roman hostage, which gives her a kind of privileged legal status as ward of the state and not slave. Giving high-ranking hostages was a common practice when ratifying peace treaties in Roman times. Compare, for instance, Tacitus' account regarding Vologeses, king of the Parthians (present-day Iran and Irak):

"[...] messages were sent from the confederate kings of Armenia to [...] king Vologeses, advising him to choose peace rather than war, and to give hostages and so continue the habitual reverence of his ancestors towards the people of Rome."⁵

Lygia is cast as the daughter of a tribal leader (who remains unnamed), whose people are a historical entity known to Tacitus as the Ligii and who, according to him, were attacking Vannius, a Roman puppet king of a people called the Suevi (probably modern Swabians) and thereby threatening the peace of Rome during the reign of emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54), Nero's immediate predecessor. Sienkiewicz, in fact, renders the passage from Tacitus almost verbatim in trying to situate his fictional character in a piece of real history. Compare, for example, the two following passages, one from Tacitus' *Annales*, the other from Sienkiewicz' novel:

I. "At this time, Vannius, whom Drusus Caesar had made king of the Suevi, was driven from his kingdom. In the commencement of his reign he was renowned and popular with his countrymen; but subsequently, with long possession, he became a tyrant, and the enmity of neighbours, joined to intestine strife, was his ruin. Vibillius, king of the Hermunduri, and Vangio and Sido, sons of a sister of Vannius, led the movement. Claudio, though often entreated, declined to interpose by arms in the conflict of the barbarians, and simply promised Vannius a safe refuge in the event of his expulsion. He wrote instructions to Publius Atellius Hister, governor of Pannonia, that he was to have his legions [...] encamped on the river-bank, as a support to the conquered and a terror to the conqueror, who might otherwise, in the elation of success, disturb also the peace of our empire. For an immense host of Ligii, with other tribes, was advancing, attracted by the fame of the oppulent realm which Vannius had enriched during thirty years of plunder and of tribute. Vannius' own native force was infantry, and his cavalry was from the Iazyges of Sarmatia..."⁶

II. "Per adventure you have heard of Vannius, King of the Suevi, who, having been expelled from his country, lived for a while in Rome [...] Well, Drusus restored him to his throne, and for a while Vannius ruled the country with credit, and made some fortunate expeditions; but, later, he took to fleecing not only his neighbours, but also his subjects; with the result that his nephews Vangio and

Sido (their father was Vibilius, king of the Hermanduri) hatched a scheme to induce him to return to Rome [...]

War broke out, and Vannius summoned to his aid the Yazigi, while his nephews stirred up the Lygians. The latter - who have a great weakness for plunder, and had heard of Vannius' wealth - mobilised in such numbers that Claudius Caesar began to tremble for the security even of our own frontiers; so much so that, though he always disliked taking part in barbarians' quarrels, he sent orders to Atelius Hister, commander of the Danubian Legion, to keep a sharp eye upon the fortunes of the struggle, and in no case to permit the peace of Rome to be troubled..."⁷

But while Tacitus does not connect Vangio and Sido with Vibilius, king of the Hermunduri, in any other way than as allies against Vannius, Sienkiewicz finds it necessary to embellish Tacitus' data by making Vangio and Sido the sons of the king of the Hermunduri.

This is part of a standard technique used by Sienkiewicz with regard to the historical sources which he exploits for the *sujet* of his novel. In order to make his fictional character, Lygia, plausible in the context of the historical setting which he selects for his novel, Sienkiewicz surrounds this fictional character with as many actual historical names, dates and locations as are available to him. But since he cannot use this historical data in the same sequence of connections which organises it within the historical text (of Tacitus, for instance), Sienkiewicz has to invent new connections in order to have an excuse for bringing to bear the historical data in such concentrated form around the figure of his heroine. Hence the invention of the (a-historical) family tie between contiguous historical figures.

Deviations from history

Although Sienkiewicz makes no bland transgressions against historical dates and facts (his novel is set in the period of Nero's reign between A.D. 54 - 68, with the main action of the plot concentrated around the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64), his method is not that of a *historian* nor is his *primary aim* to collect as many disparate historical sources and to try and find a composite truth which they may yield. He relies mainly on two ancient writers, Tacitus and Suetonius, but he also knows later modern writers like Ernest Réan, and he uses each one, in turn, to extract whatever line of interpretation of the historical facts best suits his novelistic purpose.

Thus, for example, Suetonius attributes the firing of Rome to Nero and relates the episode of Nero singing his own poem, "Sack of Ilium" (his version of the *Trojade* which has not come down to us) "in his regular stage costume" while "viewing the conflagration from the tower of Maecenas and exulting [...] in 'the beauty of the flames'..."⁸ But Tacitus, who is the earlier writer of the two, is not

so sure of this fact and only reports that there was a "sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order".⁹ Tacitus was 12 years old at the time of the death of Nero and his account of the events was written down in A.D. 117, whereas Suetonius was born in the year following Nero's death and wrote his *Lives* in the course of his adulthood (the probable date of his death is c. 140 A.D.). Sienkiewicz' preference for Suetonius' interpretation of the events in question is fuelled by supporting detail from a writer of his own time, namely Rénan, in whose *Histoire des Origines du Christianisme* (1863 - 1881), Nero is seen unequivocally as the historical personification of the Anti-Christ. It is hence to Rénan's version of Nero's portrait, based as it is on Tacitus but embellished, that Sienkiewicz turns when constructing the portrait of his Nero. This is seen clearly if we look at the following passage from Rénan and then compare it with *Quo vadis*:

"He was there in the front row, on the podium, with his wicked face, his short sight, his blue eyes, his elaborately curled auburn hair, his obstinate lips, his bearing at once evil and foolish like that of a great baby, stupidly solemn and puffed up with vanity, whilst brazen-throated music vibrated in the air pervaded with the reek of blood."¹⁰

It is this portrait of Rénan's which is adapted by Sienkiewicz when he allows us a glimpse of Nero through the eyes of Lygia:

"[...] a huge head [...] terrifying, [...] grotesque - a head which, from a distance, resembled that of a child of tender years."¹¹

But Sienkiewicz also *adds* features to *his* portrait of Nero which are not explicitly contained in either Suetonius' "chatty" memoristic description of Nero's appearance or in the portrait of Nero which emerges from Tacitus' account of the emperor's actions (there is no actual portrait of Nero in the extant books of the *Annales*).¹² Thus in a detail such as the "Olympian" traits of a "demi-god" reflected in (the fictional) Nero's forehead ("In the striking prominence of his forehead above the eyebrows there was something Olympian, [...] yet under that forehead of a demi-god [...]")¹³, it is not the historical Nero that comes to expression (although it would not be inconsistent with the actually extant historical data on the man), but a *fictional* Nero, whose supreme (*will*)power and elite position in the arts of his time place him in a genealogical connection with the heroes of legend and mythology of a civilization immediately preceding his own and in which his own time had its cultural and archetypal roots.

Thus, while not constituting a bold deviation from historically known data, Sienkiewicz' adaptation of this data turns what was originally a simple fact (let us say, for the moment, a simple "historical fact") into an interpreted fact. Consequently, we can no longer say that we are dealing with history; after the

adaptation of the "historical fact", we are dealing with a new "legend", created by Sienkiewicz. This "legend", however, is not important in its own right. For Sienkiewicz is not out to give his readers new "legends" about ancient Rome. On the contrary, according to his own views on the "historical novel", he was after maximum adherence to an already extant "historical truth".¹⁴ What happens to the "historical fact", however, once Sienkiewicz has turned it into an interpreted fact, is that it becomes part of the material of the *sujet* and as such is absorbed into the structural system of the novel. And within this system it has a new life, as a function of the chief idea or the main complex of ideas, for the sake of which the author has written the novel in the first place. Thus, what has started off as a "historical fact" or a fact belonging to "historical reality" (leaving aside, for the moment, the question of the status of the various "historical" sources in which this "fact" existed as a "historical fact"), has, through semantisation within an autonomous narrative, become a "fact" belonging to another ontological level of reality, namely the level of fiction. And as a "fact" of fiction, this originally "historical" fact becomes subject to the rules of fiction and therefore is subordinate to the structure of the narrative. It may, therefore, be interpreted only as an element within that structure, as a specific function in relation to the whole structure.¹⁵

Thus, notwithstanding recent attempts in Polish literary scholarship, going back to the Marxist critic Georg Lukacz (and his 1937 thesis on the "historical novel")¹⁶, it has not been possible to isolate a specific genre and to put up a satisfactory model of the so-called "historical novel". The ontological laws of narrative turn the "historical material" into simple "raw material" which is semanticised in the work of fiction like any other "raw material", be it history or contemporary life or other fiction (the latter operating as literary allusion or quotation in the broad sense of the term). Sienkiewicz uses historical sources to obtain prototypes for his fictional characters in the same way in which a scrupulous Realist like Dostoevsky used newspaper accounts of contemporary murder cases to obtain prototypes for his Raskolnikov and Mitia Karamazov. And yet no one cares to call *Crime and Punishment* or *The Brothers Karamazov* a "historical novel". In the same way in which Dostoevsky checked the physical details, such as whether it was possible for a person to survive lying between two rails while a train passes overhead (detail needed for the biography of the precocious Nihilist, Kolia Krasotkin, in *The Brothers Karamazov*), in the same way Sienkiewicz meticulously reproduces the *realia* of Roman life at the beginning of the first century A.D., and treats his readers to details of Roman houses ("tepidarium" or drying-room, triclinium or breakfast-room, unctorium, frigidarium, the "epilatores" or masseurs etc.), Roman games ("played mora unter the peristylia") and Roman forms of torture (semaxii, sermentiti).

Thus, to answer the question of whether or not *Quo vadis?* is a historical novel about the early Christians in ancient Rome, it is possible to say that the reader who is seriously interested in history (not to speak of the professional historian) is not going to read Sienkiewicz' novel as source material on the subject of Christianity or ancient Roman civilization. The reader who wants reliable material on how the Romans lived or how the Christians were persecuted by Nero will turn to ancient authors or to archeological treatises on the subject rather than consult Sienkiewicz' work of fiction. But if the purpose of reading Sienkiewicz' novel is not in finding out about "life as it was", what is the function of the historical subject-matter and what is the ultimate message of the novel?

Firstly, the point is made by followers of the "historical novel" theory¹⁷, that because of the reader's remoteness in time from the "historic" details evoking the life of the past, the setting acquires a certain "exotic" flavour. It cannot be claimed, however, that such "exotic" *realia* (as the names of rooms in Roman patrician houses) do much more than enhance the "interestingness" ("zanimatel'nost'") of the narrative and, if anything, bring the effect it has on the reader closer to the feeling of *wonder* produced by fairy-tales than to the impression of *vraisemblance* or closeness to "reality", which a contemporary "realistic" novel (of manners) has on the contemporary reader.

The "exoticism" of the setting of a novel or other work of literature which has as its *sujet* a historical or legendary period, remote in time from the author and his reading public, implies a certain degree of stylization and hence "unnaturalness" of presentation.¹⁸ But it is precisely this "unrealistic" quality (despite its paradoxical reliance on a body of ancient "historical" *realia*) which is the *hallmark* of much of fin-de-siècle European literature, broadly classified under the umbrella term Modernism.

Stylization is a structural feature of the so-called "historical novel" of Dmitry Merezhkovsky (his trilogy *Khristos i Antikrist*, 1896 - 1905). History is taken as subject-matter for a great deal of turn-of-the-century drama, particularly in the literatures of Slavic nations. S.Wyspiański's dramas (*Warszawianka*, 1898, *Noc Listopadowa*, 1904) are based on Polish historical subjects, but attempt to integrate this with Greek mythology. Lyrical "historical" drama also flourishes among Czech dramatists of the fin-de-siècle, such as J.Hilbert (Falkenstein, 1903) and Arnošt Dvořák (*Kniže*, 1908, *Kral Václav IV.*, 1910). The same is true of Serbian and Croatian "historical" drama of the period, represented by M.Bojić (*Kraljeva jesen*, 1913) and I. Vojnović (*Dubrovačka trilogija*, 1902). It is no accident that the Moscow Art Theatre opened in 1898 with a revival of Russian "historical" drama, by staging part of A.K.Tolstoy's trilogy *Tsar Fiodor Ioannych* (1866 - 1870). Closely related to these excursions into the national historical past are the literary works which go even further back, into the national folkloric or mythological times. The rich repertoire of Slav mythological subject-matter, in

such works as Lesia Ukrainska's *Lisova pisnia* (1911), J.Kvapil's libretto for Dvořák's opera *Rusalka* (1910), N.Roerich's ballet score *Velikaia zhertva* (1910), later turned by I.Stravinsky into his *Rites of Spring*, and many more, testifies to this predilection for "exotic" material, which can in no way come under the auspices of the Realist aesthetic of reproducing in art "life as it is".

Similarly, Wagner's musical dramas (that is, the libretti which he composed in verse for his own operas) were stylized reconstructions of Germanic pre-history and ancient sagas and legends. And while not based on history itself, A.Blok's Symbolist lyrical dramas like *Balaganchik* (1906) rely on stereotype characters of the *commedia dell'arte*, whose literary profiles (costume, appearance, standard pose) are as fixed as that of any "historical" figure.

The stylization which characterises Sienkiewicz' novel through its historical subject-matter, is also strongly in evidence in the method of characterisation. Both major and minor characters are endowed with expressive, melodramatic gestures (they cry, throw out their arms in supplication even in tête-à-tête scenes, or they faint) and generally display emotion through expressive and stage-like body language which is closely related to the stylized stage language of opera. With this, Sienkiewicz' novel touches upon another major feature of Modernist art in that the lyrical drama of Bojić, Vojnović or Hugo von Hofmannsthal (the latter's play *Der Rosenkavalier*, set in 18th century Austria, for instance) is also distinguished by operatic methods of character portrayal, while the swift emotional peripetyas dictated by plot can be better sung than acted, which accounts for the fact that works like *Der Rosenkavalier* are more successful as opera than when staged as verbal drama¹⁹. The stylization, which is one major feature of the genre and structure of Sienkiewicz' novel and which through that places it right at the centre of the Modernist aesthetic, is matched by the *problematik* (or message) of the work, which also belongs to the aesthetical and philosophical sphere of the turn-of-the-century artistic movement.

The problem of art in *Quo vadis?* is perceived through the dichotomy of two types of beauty: beauty as form and beauty as soul. The pagan Roman (and Greek) world, the "classical civilization", serves as a metaphor for beauty as form. The nascent Christian world supplies the metaphoric framework within which the birth of a new aesthetic ideal - the ideal of beauty as soul - is couched.

In trying to interpret the Christian theme of *Quo vadis?* literally as a "true to life" dramatisation of the early history of Christianity, traditional literary criticism on the novel has found that the Christian characters are the least convincing characters in the novel and that the hero's "conversion" to Christianity does not ring true.

Certainly, Vinicius' chief motivating force in seeking conversion to the new dogma is his desire, amounting to an obsession, to gain Lygia's affection and to win her in marriage. The entire plot of the novel is a protracted "quest", expressed

in repeated disappearances of the heroine, for Lygia. She is Vinicius' "idée fixe", which induces both his "peak experiences" (of ecstasy) and traumas of loss and disorientation. And while marriage to Lygia happens to conform to the Christian concept of marriage as a mystic union of body and soul ("taina"), the love of Vinicius for Lygia at the same time transcends orthodox Christian mysticism and enters the realm of the mysticism of the Symbolist theurgists of the turn of the 20th century. Throughout the novel, Vinicius refers to Lygia as his "divinity" and on his long "quest" adopts the pose of the "supplicant". His love is described as consisting of the elements of "pity, veneration and respect" or, again, as a mingling of "sadness, adoration, respect and desire". He literally adopts the gestures of prayer when he approaches Lygia: "He fell with his face to the earth, and pressed his lips to the hem of the cloak on which the young girl was lying."

The imagery of adoration focussing on Lygia as the main object of piety far outnumbers the imagery in which the vision of Christ is the focus, at least of Vinicius' piety. Moreover, the portrait of Lygia, far from evoking a Christian Pieta figure (the pitying Mother of God - of which there are two micro-portraits in the novel, in the figures of Pomponia and Acte), brings to mind various mystical heroines of turn-of-the 20th century art.

At first she appears to Vinicius almost as a vision - bathing (in the nude) in a fountain, as the "rays of the dawn" are "playing right through her body", so that Vinicius expects "the rising sun to disperse the vision, even as it disperses the morning mist"²⁰.

Subsequently she is referred to as a "perfect nymph", a "lesna boginka". Further epithets or names used to describe her are "The Dawn" or "Aurora", "Diana", "The Spring", and "Psyche". To Vinicius she also appears as a "sibyl" or "priestess" among the Christians, who seem to respect her and obey her.

These are precisely the terms in which A.Blok addresses himself (or his lyrical "I") to his Beautiful Lady, the elusive female figure of his 1903 cycle *Stikhi o prekrasnoi dame*. Blok's poems are described as "prayers" and the poet of that emblematic Symbolist cycle as a "monk" or a "novice" sending supplications to his deity.

Moreover, Blok's poems of this cycle, like the plot of Sienkiewicz' novel, are built on the tension between the poet's "quest" for his Beautiful Lady and the unattainability of this ideal woman. At one stage, Lygia awaits her lover dressed in a white robe and is bathed in silvery moonlight. This pre-empted similar imagery in Chekhov's first play *Chaika*, dismally premiered in 1896 - the year which also saw the appearance of *Quo vadis?*. In *Chaika*, Nina Zarechnaia is dressed all in white, and recites a monologue against the background of a natural moon in Treplev's "play within the play", while in the 'real' play she is adored by the young poet and representative of the "new art" as his "sorceress" and "his dream" ("Volshebnitsa, mechta moia", says Treplev to greet her first appearance).

Similarly, Lygia's eyes do not reflect Christian piety, but rather preempt the image of yet another of Blok's lyrical heroines, the stranger (Neznakomka) of 1906:

"Lygia had listened with her blue eyes fixed upon him (Vinicius) - a pair of eyes that, in the moonlight, looked like mystic, dew-bespangled flowers."

The above imagery seems to be echoed in Blok's

"I ochi sinnie bezdonnye
Tsvetut na dal'nem beregu." (1906)
("and blue fathomless eyes
flower on a distant shore")

And, finally, Lygia is perceived by Vinicius as a kind of "porfironosnaja tsaritsa Mira" (Empress of the World, dressed in purple), conjuring up an almost exact visual replica of Nikolai Roerich's painting of the same title (Tsaritsa Mira), clad in a purple robe resembling a sort of classical toga (Vinicius even says: "I should clothe my Lygia in purple, and make of her the sovereign of the universe").

Thus Lygia emerges as a symbol not of Christian womanhood or even of Christian love, but as the embodiment of a World Soul:

"Whenever watching over her sleep, he [Vinicius] felt as though he were watching over the whole world."

The idea that Lygia is a symbol of the Eternal Feminine or World Soul is reinforced by an allegorical motif which is introduced into the novel at the very beginning, even before anything is disclosed about Lygia's affiliation with the Christians. She is seen playing with a ball, with a child (young Aulus) and Vinicius. Some time later, Petronius is given the following lines, which serve as a key to the allegorical picture of the trio playing ball (a child, a man and Lygia):

"It is not Atlas that supports the universe, but a woman, and perhaps she is playing with her burden as with a ball."

There are several other important themes and motifs in the novel which situate it right at the centre of the turn-of-the-century aesthetic debate and identify it as a progenitor of the imagery and *topos* of Modernism. These include the theme of love and death, which is treated in the manner of the *Liebestod* in Wagner's *Tristan*, and the theme of the Apocalypse, the end of the world or rather of the world of Western civilisation, based on the Graeco-Roman cultural model. Such

and similar features make *Quo vadis?* first and foremost a document of European Modernism, couched in the form of a historical stylilation which, contrary to the claims of traditional criticism, removes it from historical reality into the realm of fairy-tale, abstraction and pure art.

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Notes

- 1 See, for example, Julian Krzyżanowski, *A History of Polish Literature*, PWN-Polish Scientific Publishers, Warszawa, 1978, p. 397. While not concerned specifically with the problem of the "historical novel" genre, Krzyżanowski sees a genealogical link between Sienkiewicz' novels and those of his older contemporary, J.I. Kraszewski (1812 - 1887). An uncritical approach, as far as the problem of the genre is concerned, is adopted by M. Giergielewicz in his monograph *Henryk Sienkiewicz*, Twayne, N.Y. 1968, p. 88 ff., where the author situates Sienkiewicz among writers such as Walter Scott, Krasiński, Kraszewski, A. Dumas and V. Hugo, but also Pushkin, Gogol and Zola(!), all of whom are perceived as writers of the "historical novel".
- 2 Compare also the Soviet history of Polish literature, *Istoriia pol'skoi literatury*, AN SSSR, Inst. Slavianovedeniia i Balkanistiki, "Nauka", Moskva, Vol. I, 1968. While on the whole uncritical about the genre of Sienkiewicz' novels, I.G. Gorskii, the author of the chapter on Sienkiewicz, does point out the difficulty of analysing and evaluating Sienkiewicz' seemingly simple and lucid style (see, particularly, p. 561). However, all three critics quoted above treat Sienkiewicz under the heading of "Positivism" in Polish literature and accept the traditional view that Sienkiewicz was at variance with the poetics of Young Poland (Młoda Polska). This classification is based on Sienkiewicz' much publicised attack on the "new poetry" and the return of fire by the "Młody" on Sienkiewicz. (Compare Henryk Sienkiewicz, "[O Młodej-Polski]", *Programy i dyskusje literackie okresu Młodej Polski*, wyd. 2, Z.N. i. Ossolinskich, 1977, pp.153-4, and Section 5, entitled "Atak Młodych na Sienkiewicza".) An attempt was made at re-evaluating Sienkiewicz in Polish and Western literary criticism (compare the article by Kazimierz Wyka in the Cracow monthly *Twórczość*, 1946, and Wacław Lednicki, *Bits of Table Talk on Pushkin, Mickiewicz, Goethe, Turgenev and Sienkiewicz*. Nijhoff, The Hague, 1965). However, these attempts were aimed at "rehabilitating" Sienkiewicz' literary reputation (against the backdrop of attacks on his "commercial success" as a writer of "popular" novels), and not at redefining his place within Polish and

European Modernism. As late as 1968, Wyka, in his monograph *Modernizm polski*, Biblioteka Studiów Literackich, WL, Kraków, Wyd. II, affords Sienkiewicz only a few intermittent pages, mainly in connection with his novel *Without Dogma* (1891), the only work which the Young Poland writers accepted "as their own" from among (numerous!) works of the previous, older generation of writers (up to 1890):

"Z bogatej produkcji literackiej pokolenia starszego około 1890 roku (Młodzie) jedno tylko dzieło uznali za swoje - *Bez dogmatu Sienkiewicza*." (K. Wyka, *Modernizm polski*, op. cit., p. 128)

Thus a re-evaluation of Sienkiewicz' place in turn-of-the-century Polish and European literature, which would be based on a textual analysis of his works, is still pending.

- 3 Compare M. Giergielewicz, op. cit., p. 39.
- 4 Compare Tacitus, *Annales*, Book XV. *Complete Works of Tacitus*. Random House, N.Y. (Modern Library College Edition), 1942, pp. 357 ff. [This reference will be abbreviated to Tacitus, MLCE, plus page number.]
- 5 Tacitus, MLCE, p. 289.
- 6 Tacitus, MLCE, pp. 262-3.
- 7 Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Quo vadis?* Tr. C.J. Hogarth, intr. Monica Gardner. Dutton (Everyman's Library), N.Y., 1941, 1980, pp. 9 - 10 [This reference will be abbreviated to *Quo vadis?* Hogarth, Everyman, plus page number.]
- 8 Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars* (Book VI: Nero). In: Suetonius II, with an English translation by J.C. Rolfe. Heinemann, London, 1914, 1959, p. 155.
- 9 Tacitus, MLCE, p. 380.
- 10 E. Renan, Antichrist. Quoted in: Gaston Boissier, *Tacitus and Other Roman Studies*. Tr. W.G. Hutchinson, Archibald Constable & Co., London, 1906, p. 86.
- 11 *Quo vadis?* Hogarth, Everyman, p. 49.
- 12 Compare G. Boissier, op. cit., pp. 80 - 81.
- 13 *Quo vadis?* Hogarth, Everyman, p. 49.
- 14 Compare H. Sienkiewicz, "O powieści historycznej", in: H. Sienkiewicz, *Dzieła*, vol. XLV, Warszawa, 1951, pp. 102 - 124. Sienkiewicz took for

granted that a body of knowledge, passed down through time, could be described as "history" or "facts of history". This is the premise underlying his article on the historical novel. According to the latter, "history supplies general authentic facts, on the strength of which the historical novel can reconstruct details", issuing from probability, logic and, above all, intuition. Thus a historical novel, according to Sienkiewicz, will "explain" history and "not distort historical truth". This faith in "history" as a self-generating force of "truth" must, however, be weighed against Sienkiewicz' view, that the process of "reconstructing" (or guessing) the gaps left by "history" for the purpose of writing a so-called "historical novel" is no different to the process of "reconstructing" reality for the purpose of writing a "psychological" or "physiological" novel. Sienkiewicz was well aware of the "interpretative" role of the writer, who took "ready-made facts of history" for the material of his novel, but he did not think that the artistic process of interpreting "facts of history" was any different from the artistic process of interpreting "facts of contemporary reality". In both cases, the writer's imagination, or intuition or feeling ("uczucie") was the vital force imbuing the "raw" material of the novel with life:

Na mocy tych danych można by tylko oddać i rozświecić dawne stosunki dziejowe i prywatne, ale trudno by było je rozgrzać. Jak pojęcia dostarczane przez wiedzę ciała i zmienia w kształty dopiero wyobraźnia, tak kształty, już przez nią stworzone, ożywia i napełnia ciepłą krewią uczucie. Może ono być głęboką miłością pisarza do dziejów swego społeczeństwa; może być tylko rozmiłowaniem się autorskim w pewnym narodzie, w pewnych formach minionej cywilizacji. W pierwszym razie działać ono będzie potężniej, w drugim mniej potężnie, w każdym jednak razie uczucie będzie grało niezmierną rolę przy tworzeniu. Bywa ono nawet częstokroć pierwszym powodem tworzenia. Ono porusza wyobraźnię, daje jej niezwyczajną moc; ono czyni z niej rodzaj soczewki, która ma dar skupiania wszystkich promieni na jeden przedmiot, z czego znów wypływa jasne, artystyczne widzenie rzeczy. Od niego zależy także rozmach tworzenia, dzięki któremu utwór - jeśli się tak można wyrazić - sam się niejako pisze; od niego wreszcie zależy szczerłość, główna podstawa wszystkich dzieł sztuki w ogólności i literatury w szczególne.

Im więcej uczucia, tym przedzej róże wieje marmur dziejowy. Galatea przestaje być posagiem - pierś jej się podnosi - i ona zaczyna kochać, zaczyna płacić wzajemnością artiście...

Oczywiście, każdy ma najwięcej zamiłowania do tego, co własne. Dlaczego zaś autor w dziedzach swego społeczeństwa wybiera taką, a nie inną epokę, dlaczego niekoniecznie najświeńcszą, najbardziej zwycięską przypada mu bardziej do serca - to jest tajemnicą jego organizacji uczuciowej i artystycznej. Rozprawa nad tym byłaby zbyt dłużą i przechodzącą zakres tych uwag. Co do mnie, pozwole sobie tylko nawiasowo wtrącić, że

wszelkie rady udzielane autorom przez krytykę: jakie epoki lub jacy ludzie stanowią materiał najwdzięczniejszy - są prosta strata czasu, bo autor, jeśli chce być szczerym, pojedzie i powinien iść zawsze za swym własnym uczuciem i artystycznym widzeniem rzeczy.

Na koniec, jeśli czy nie jest powieść historyczna narkotykiem, który upaja, odrywa ludzi od ideałów nowożytnych i przepełnia społeczeństwo niezdolnymi do czynu marzycielami? Ze stanowiska estetycznego można by na ten zarzut nie odpowiadać. Sztuka nie ma obowiązku liczyć się i naprawdę nie liczyła się nigdy z kwestiami pożytku; a gdyby jej nawet dowiedziono, że jest dla ludzkości szkodliwą, nie przez to przestałaby istnieć.

Although Sienkiewicz' article on the "historical novel" cannot be taken for a piece of serious literary theory, it does allow us a glimpse of his poetics. The emphasis he places on the concept of *uczucie* (feeling) as the mainspring of *life* in a literary creation is very reminiscent of Przybyszewski's poetics of *dusza* (soul) as the source of the vital force in art (compare his *Confiteor* of 1898). Despite Sienkiewicz's literary quarrels with the Young Poland movement and, in particular, his attacks on Przybyszewski's "decadence", Sienkiewicz himself proclaimed a non-utilitarian (and hence non-Positivist) stand on art in his article, which makes him both implicitly (through his artistic practice) and explicitly (through his "professions de foi") a Modernist writer, sharing perhaps despite himself, the artistic platform of *Młoda Polska*.

15 A model of narrative, which lends support to this view, is put forward by Robert Champigny in his slim but definitive monograph *Ontology of Narrative - An Analysis*, Mouton, The Hague, 1972. Champigny unequivocally places fiction and history on two different, mutually exclusive, ontological planes. Champigny's model of narrative is not in contradiction with Structuralist approaches to narrative theory, to be found in S.B. Vladiv's *Narrative Principles in Dostoevskij's Besy: A Structural Analysis*, Lang, Bern, 1979 (compare, in particular, the "Methodological Preliminaries", pp. 1-39). In his article on the "historical novel" Sienkiewicz also makes the (theoretically valid) point that "fiction is beyond reality" and that "fantasy creates reality" in a novel according to the laws of 'vraisemblance' (prawdopodobieństwo) or likeness to reality (rzeczywistość). The laws of probability, or of the probable (możliwość) and vraisemblance (prawdopodobieństwo) apply indiscriminately in a "historical and a non-historical novel". Sienkiewicz stresses repeatedly that there is no difference between a "historical novel" and any other type of novel ("psychological" or "physiological" - the latter probably being a reference to the "physiological sketch" of proto-Realism in France and Russia) and claims (correctly) that a historical character within a "historical novel" can only be evaluated by the reader according to fictional criteria immanent to the narrative, not according to some "objective" criteria of "historical" truth lying outside the narrative.

¹⁶ Compare Georg Lukacz, *The Historical Novel*. Tr. from German by Hannah & Stanley Mitchell. "Merlin Press", London, 1962 (first published in Russian, in Moscow, in 1937). Lukacz's book fails to produce anything resembling a model of the so-called "historical novel". What is more, it confuses two separate issues, namely the procedure of viewing the world from a historical perspective, which entered the European novel with the works of Sir Walter Scott at the beginning of the 19th century, and the function of the "historical" facts (i.e. the question of the "historicity" of the factual material) used to formulate the *sujet* of the literary work. Because the European novelists of the 19th century adhered to what could be called a Hegelian and materialistic view of society (that is, one in which a force called History determines social development), Lukacz is perhaps correct in classifying the European Realist novel as a "historical" novel, but only in this limited sense and without endowing the term "historical" with more specific critical meaning.

¹⁷ Compare Tadeusz Bujnicki, *Sienkiewicz i historia*, Studia, P.I.W., Warsaw, 1981 (particularly Chap. I "Z teoretycznych problemów powieści historycznej", pp. 5-25). Bujnicki is aware of the fact that "historical facts" modify their meaning within the parameters of the work of fiction and "become partners" of the "created facts", through which they become "fictionalised":

Wtapiając się w fabułę o fikcyjonalnym zasadniczo charakterze, fakty źródłowe przekształcają się w fakty literackie. Regulująca jest tutaj funkcja kontekstu: zdarzenia i postaci historyczne zostają włączone w wątki wspólne ze zdarzeniami i postaciami fikcyjnymi, wiążą się z nimi różnorodnymi motywacjami, nabierają dodatkowych znaczeń oraz z kolei użyczą swych znaczeń faktom planu fikcyjnego. Motywują ich prawdopodobieństwo bądź same stają się "mniej prawdopodobne". Historyczność podobnie jak i fikcyjność jest - w pewnych granicach - wartością stopniowalną.

But he nevertheless insists that what takes place in this process is a "historification" of the world of fiction, through which, in his opinion, the structure of the work of fiction acquires properties of a "historical illusion", varying in degree of 'vraisamblence' (or closeness to reality). Bujnicki claims that the history of the genre of the "historical novel" in Polish literature "reflects this internal dialectic of fiction and history". Although Bujnicki makes many interesting and pertinent observations about the so-called "historical novels" of Sienkiewicz, his model of the "historical novel" remains unsatisfactory. The main objection to it would have to reside in the fact that one cannot adopt a *sliding scale* to measure "historicity" in a work of fiction, nor base the definition of a genre on a relativistic (subjective, unspecified) "dialectic" relationship between fiction and history. Something is either fact (history) or fiction (art) and the two ontological levels will never become one, just as 1+1 does not equal 1 but 2.

18 Compare T.Bujnicki, *Sienkiewicz i historia*, op.cit., p. 11, who quite rightly speaks of the "mannered" style of the "historical novel".

19 The same may be said of Bojić's lyrical "historical" drama *Kraljeva jesen* (*The Autumn of the King*), which, like the music drama of Hofmannsthal, has lent itself to operatic treatment. Bojić's text was turned into a libretto by Josip Kulundžić and the opera *Simonida* was composed by Stanojlo Rajićić in 1956. Similarly, Vojnović's *Trilogy of Dubrovnik*, or rather the middle part of it, became the basis for Stevan Hristić's opera *Suton* (*Twilight*).

20 It is a curious fact that the translation by Hogarth fails to interpret the passages in *Quo vadis?* relating to the Christian characters and their expression of faith as an artistic metaphor and that as a result of the translator's dogged attempts to read the novel as a panegyric to Christianity, there are marked deviations from Sienkiewicz's original text. These deviations can only be seen as attempts to "doctor" the original where too many "artistic" details appear to "obscure" the Christian dogma and hence obstruct the translator's reading of the text as a pedagogic work of Christian education. Compare, for example, the following passage, in the original Polish text and in Hogarth's translation:

Winicjusz nie myślał już jednak, że w słowach starca nie masz niczego nowego, ale ze zdumieniem zadawał sobie pytanie: co to za Bóg? co to za nauka? i co to za lud? Wszystko, co słyszał, nie mieściło się wprost w jego głowie. Był to dla niego jakiś niesłuchany nowy pojęć. Czuł, że gdyby na przykład chciał pójść za tą nauką, musiałby złożyć na stos swoje myślenie, zwyczaje, charakter, całą, dotychczasową naturę i wszystko to spalić na popiół, a wypełnić się jakimś zgoła innym życiem i całkowicie nową duszą. Nauka, która mu nakazywała kochać Partów, Syryjczyków, Greków, Egipcjan, Gallów i Brytanów, przebaczać nieprzyjaciołom, płacić im dobrem za złe i kochać ich, wydała mu się szalona, jednocześnie zaś miało poczucie, że jednak w samym jej szaleństwie jest coś potężniejszego niż we wszelkich dotychczasowych filozofiach. Mniemał, że z powodu jej szaleństwa jest niewykonalna, a z powodu niewykonalności boska. Odrzucał ją w duszy, a czuł, że rozchodzi się od niej, jakby od łąki pełnej kwiatów, jakaś woń upajająca, która kiedy ktoś raz odetchnął, musi, jako w kraju Lutofagów, zapomnieć o wszystkim innym i tylko do niej tęsknić. Zdawało mu się, że nie ma w niej nic rzeczywistego i zarazem, że rzeczywistość wobec niej jest czymś tak lichym, że nie warto zatrzymywać nad nią myśli. Otoczył go jakieś przestwory, których się ani domyślał, jakieś ogromy, jakieś chmury. Oż cmentarz począł czynić na nim wrażenie zbiorowiska szaleńców, lecz także i miejsca tajemniczego i strasznego, na którym, jakby na jakimś mistycznym łożu, rodzi się coś, czego nie było dotąd na świecie.

By this time Vinicius had creased to blame the patriarch's discourse for containing nothing new; yet still he kept asking himself what it all meant, and what sort of people these were who were present. He felt lost in an unsuspected void - a void at once infinite and dim. This cemetery appeared to be a refuge for madmen - a mysterious, wonderful place where, on a mystical bed, there was in process of birth a new ideal. Though he retained in his mind all that the old man had said concerning life, truth, and the love of God, the young man's thoughts were in a state of dazzlement - of dazzlement from a succession of blinding rays. All that he had heard he looked at through the medium of his love for Lygia, and that light revealed to him the fact that if, as was probable, she was present in the cemetery, and assenting to that doctrine, never, never would she now become his mistress. He might seize her, but he would never possess her.

As can be seen graphically from comparing the above passages, the Hogarth translation is a paraphrase of the original text, which leaves out many important phrases and thus obscures the original metaphore of Sienkiewicz' text.