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Contemporary Lives of the Past



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Table of Contents

Introduction (Violetta Julkowska, Wiktor Werner)	7
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I

Dimensions of Historical Consciousness. Studies on the Functions of History in Contemporary

Name and Place in Time. Historical Heroes in Contemporary Social Reception (Violetta Julkowska)	15
Historical Consciousness and Interest in History in Poland and Selected European Countries in the Light of Internet Data (Wiktor Werner)	33
Attitude Towards Polish People's Republic in Poland and Nostalgia For the Soviet Union in Russia in the Context of Reflections on Historical Consciousness (Wiktor Werner)	67

II

Social Reception of the Past

Visual Representations of the Past in the Contemporary Public Space (Violetta Julkowska)	95
Cultural Landscape as an element of European Heritage and Regional Identity (Violetta Julkowska)	117
From Andrzej Kmiecic to Witcher. Alternative History and Historical Fantasy in Poland at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries (Wiktor Werner) ..	139
Bibliography	165
Notes on the Authors	168

Introduction

Lives of the Past is a current reflection on various kinds of presence and functioning of the past in contemporary social spaces. Our observations and thoughts about historical consciousness, memory and social reception of the past include a broad context of the dynamically changing cultural environment which, in addition, has been undergoing, especially in the recent decade, fundamental transformations in the sphere of communication of historical content, what is significantly influenced by the development of new information technologies.

The perspectives of perceiving the past adopted in the book situate the considerations in the field of two discussions currently taking place in the humanities. The first of them concerns the relationship of the subject with its own past in the individual-subjective dimension and with the past of the community the subjects identifies with. The latter happens in one or few non-exclusive dimensions: local, national, of state, of civilization. This reflection, in the second half of the 20th century focused on the category of *historical consciousness* and was undertaking broadly the question of historical education, especially in the context of knowledge about figures and events from “great” history. By the end of the century, the emphasis was shifted towards new postmodern categories from the semantic field of collective memory and took form of memory discourse. These categories underline more strongly subjective understanding of historical events and emphasize the primacy of anthropological-cultural approach as well as partial de-

parture from the monopoly of academic historiography in the reflection on the past.

In turn, the second of the aforementioned discussions concerns new technologies of processing information and new forms of mass communication in the digital environment as well as their influence on the functioning of historical knowledge. Digital environment favors the appearance of new ways of interactive shaping of historical consciousness. It is also supported by the multimedia character of the created historical representation, shortening the communicative distance and dynamic form of conveying textual-visual content, the active creators of which is now also the receiver. The book, while referring to various aspects of both aforementioned discussions, creates a kind of bridge between specific perspectives which characterize contemporary presence of the past.

The title of the book, with its metaphoric frame, refers indirectly to the tradition which, from the field of the studies on historical consciousness, entered the area of reflection devoted to collective memory. Within this tradition, we can encounter the concept of *living history* introduced for the first time into academic circulation by Nona Assorodobraj-Kula (1908-1999) who in the 1960s recognized and defined the problem of the presence of the past in the current social consciousness. The broad definition of the phenomenon, proposed by this scholar, drawn from the considerations of Emil Durkheim (1858-1917), Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), and from research of Stefan Czarowski (1879-1937) and Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009), enables us to include the category of *living history*, created in the field of the studies on consciousness, to the later developed categories of collective memory, including *functional memory* of Aleida Assmann.

Living history (as *lebendige Geschichte*) appeared at the end of the 1980s in the reflections of Jörn Rüsen independently and without reference to the conception of the Polish scholar. Rüsen's approach makes living history a part of his own theory of history, and, more precisely, of the conception explaining the relationship of historical recognition (study of the past) and the form of historical knowledge which is

adopted by this recognition in reference to the social function of historical work. Rüsen's conception emerged in the moment of already advanced reflection around historical consciousness, and after the linguistic turn underwent further development, creating a transition to the category of *historical culture*. Rüsen understands *historical culture* as the elements of common and universal ways of dealing with the past, such as various strategies of academic research, artistic representations, school education, historical animation and procedures of public historical memory.

Another version of *living history* (*gelebte Geschichte*), as an expression of a kind of historical culture, is offered by a tradition started in the United States in the 1930s. It refers to the social and educational practice consisting in making present and experiencing the past in the present. In this approach, our category signifies representing historical worlds by specialists and amateurs whose clothes and equipment allow to realistically present given time period and to create a kind of reconstruction.

We have assumed, following other researchers of historical consciousness and receptions of the past, that the crucial question is the way in which given community includes in its communal consciousness and self-reflection any historical content, also the one which takes the form of founding myth, legend, historical epic, connected to the cult of heroes or appearing in a form of artistic and literary works. In consequence of this assumption, we consider the criterion of the study of social resonance of this content and emotions related to it as a more important one than the factual accordance or historical truthfulness of the content contained in the enumerated kinds of transmission. The consciousness of the bond which connects given community with the past is also a subject of the study.

Therefore, we present in the book, in a way resulting from our research interests, answers to the question about the ways and mechanisms of including the past into the present by a community. We do it by analyzing the way in which time lapse and change of conditions have been modifying these mechanisms and how they were inspir-

ing people to search for new solutions which were supposed to serve adjusting the past to the current needs of a community. We are analyzing and interpreting various ways of making past present and of “embodying” it in the present, including as specific ones as transforming and modifying historical knowledge in fantasy literature and alternative history (the chapter: *From Andrzej Kmicic to Witcher. Alternative History and Historical Fantasy in Poland at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries*).

Being aware of historical variability of the content of cultural and social symbolism, we are reflecting on its new meanings and functions which are ascribed to it by contemporary participants of mass culture, including users of the new media functioning mostly in the digital environment.

As co-authors, but at the same time the authors of particular texts contributing to this publication, we differ in methodological choices and in the ways of presenting the results of our studies. The thing which joins particular texts in a thematic and conceptual whole, despite the mentioned differences, is a reference to the basic categories guiding the memory and consciousness discourse. For this reason, the work divides into two parts: the first one wrapped around the category of historical consciousness: “Dimensions of Historical Consciousness. Studies on the Functions of History in Contemporary”, and the second one around the category of *reception*: “Social Reception of the Past”, which emphasizes various cultural practices of contemporary ways of dealing with the past, so it also refers to the category of *historical culture*.

In the research practice represented by W. Werner, we can observe how the hypotheses coming from intuitive interpretation of cultural phenomena are verified. In the chapter *Historical Consciousness and Interest in History in Poland and Selected European Countries in the Light of Internet Data*, the author offers a verification of the assumption about the ethnocentric character of historiography by using data obtained from Google search engine and Wikipedia which, with the use of relative (measured by percentage) intensity of search (data from

Google) and the statistics of entries onto Wikipedia pages, visualize the intensity of interest in particular concepts. W. Werner analyzes in his study the following features of quantitative data: dynamics (that is: variability of decrease and increase of interest in historical topics); patterns (that is: regularity of changes in the mentioned dynamics of increases and decreases); correlation (that is: relationship between these data). The author not only performs quantitative operations on the data obtained, but he also recognizes their social, cultural and historical location. Combination of hermeneutic methods and computational ones is visible in the chapter *Attitude Towards Polish People's Republic in Poland and Nostalgia For the Soviet Union in Russia in the Context of Reflections on Historical Consciousness*, which compares the attitude of Poles and Russians towards their modern history. The chapter *Historical Consciousness and Interest in History in Poland and Selected European Countries in the Light of Internet Data* pertains to the question of the study on historical consciousness of the inhabitants of Poland and neighboring countries (with particular emphasis on Russia) based on the data concerning their activity in the Internet – such as the lists of the most frequently searched keywords. Also their temporal correlation, including the correlation with the calendar of historical anniversaries and national holidays, was a subject of the study.

The chapters authored by Violetta Julkowska, provide, in turn, the examples of historical culture understood as practically active historical consciousness which reveals itself in ways specific for various communities and is developed in various cultural spaces marked with their past and contemporary presence.

For instance, cultural practices referring to the heroes of great and local past, presented in the chapter *Name and Place in Time. Historical Heroes in Contemporary Social Reception*, show a situation when their subject field is goal- and reflection-oriented historiography (the example of J.H. Dąbrowski) and historical education (the example of J. Kiliński), what do not omit various dimensions of social mentality. On the contrary, combined survey studies and focus studies (the example of Kiliński) conducted in schools on big sample of pupils, confirmed

both the condition of their knowledge, as well as other, non-historical dimensions of mentality which characterize given communities.

Another example of presenting historical culture as a practice of dealing with the past are propositions of showing particular historical spaces as sites marked with presence and activity of culturally differing communities. The chapter *Cultural Landscape as an Element of European Heritage and Regional Identity* brings closer specific historical and cultural landscapes, what is based on combining source analysis and fieldwork. In turn, the chapter devoted to the reception of the past on the example of various visual representations created throughout the centuries (*Visual Representations of the Past in the Contemporary Public Space*) shows the way in which historical variability of the content of cultural and social symbolism contained in images accompanies the change of the ways of representation of the past and higher and higher technological advancement in creating the image of the past.

Application of digital data and adequate methods of digital humanities raises the question about the possibility of substituting, or making redundant, traditional hermeneutic methods used in the field of humanities. Answering to this question, the authors express a belief about the necessity of complementary approach: next to the methods and tools serving generating data, calculating and visualizing research results, it is necessary to provide humanistic interpretation which allows to translate the objectively recognized manifestations and procedures of historical consciousness into subjective dimension of cultural activity in reference to the past.

If the studies conducted with the use of data, methods and digital tools lead to more precise descriptions of the quantitative dependencies, the humanistic interpretation, and solely it, can guarantee formulation of conclusions and raising further research questions.

II

Social Reception of the Past

From Andrzej Kmicic to Witcher. Alternative History and Historical Fantasy in Poland at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries

Since the mid-1980s, we have been able to observe an increasing interest in fantasy literature, especially its sub-genre: *historical fantasy* and related *alternative history*.

Fantasy's relationship with history seems exotic only outwardly. In fact, it was initiated in the moment when such form of narrative as historical literature began to develop, which, next to figures and events known from historical sources, began to feature characters and events created by writer's imagination. This combination of source facts and literary fiction brought forth an indignation of such literary critics of the 19th century, who, like Alessandro Manzoni, considered this genre as internally inconsistent and doomed to become extinct¹.

Initially, historical literature, following works of Walter Scott, introduced fictional characters to a kind of "second plan" of historical events, with time being more and more confident in intertwining historical events with literary fiction.

Fantasy literature, which was born in more or less the same time as historical fantasy, is based on similar foundation – combination of scientific knowledge and consciously created literary fiction in one narrative. Moreover, fantasy literature is, similarly to historiography, extraordinarily strongly interested in the question of causality, time

¹ See: Ann Rigney, *Imperfect histories: the elusive past and the legacy of romantic historicism*, Cornell University Press 2001, p. 16

lapse and changes taking place in civilization under the influence of particular events. An important model are here short stories and novels of H. G. Wells, especially the novel *The Time Machine* (1895), but also less commonly known futuristic novel: *The Sleeper Awakes* (1910), one of the works included in the canon of „history of the future” or Utopian literature, in which the author reflects on the future shape of civilization, and does it based on the knowledge about the present and on historical knowledge about the processes shaping cultural reality.

Favorable conditions for creating narratives combining elements of various literary traditions were, in the second half of the 20th century, present in Western Europe and the United States thanks to “parody” postmodern poetics encouraging more fresh experiments in transforming narrative forms, creating literary illusions of academic narratives, surprising the reader, etc². An additional stimulant for the development of historical fantasy was the discussion over de-totalizing historiography, refusing great historiographical narratives and subjectivizations of the image of the past – the discussion being conducted both in the field of theory of historiography and philosophy of history³, as well as in the field of theory of literature⁴.

We should emphasize here certain separateness of relationship between historiographic literature and historical consciousness which was present in Poland. There, one particular author – Henryk Sienkiewicz – had a special significance for shaping common imaginations about history (especially national history).

He had an enormous influence on Polish historical imagination throughout long decades, imposing visions of 17th century, Middle Ages and Ancient Rome. The figures described by his colorful pen became

² Linda Hutcheon, *The politics of postmodernism. – (New accents)*, Routledge 1989, pp. 93-117

³ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore 1987, pp. 1-56

⁴ Elizabeth Wesseling, *Writing history as a prophet: postmodernist innovations of the historical novel*, Amsterdam 1991, pp. 93-138

model characters. Their adventures dominated imaginations about the ways in which adventure novels should be written, and the language used by Sienkiewicz in his Trilogy marked the standards of literary archaisms. We could be enumerating the aspects of a really royal position of Sienkiewicz in the history of Polish culture a long time. Already at the beginning of the 1980s one could have had an impression that Sienkiewicz (and specifically his historical trilogy) does not age with time. His prose, which was supposed to “encourage the hearts”, did not lose its significance after gaining independence, to the contrary – it gained a new strength and vitality. Postwar communist authorities, who began to create a new society and a new Polish culture, did not dare to cross Sienkiewicz out of it – even if he was disapproved (not very ardently) as the author of “With Fire and Sword”, still he was appreciated excessively as the author of “The Teutonic Knights” and of “The Deluge”. These two mentioned novels had been filmed, what expanded the influence of the writer even more. Also “The Fire in the Steppe” appeared on the small and the big screen, what officially revived the legend of the borderlands and steppe watchtowers in the country, the borders of which were not reaching the eulogized territories any more. Zbigniew Herbert, in his poem “The Travel to Krakow”, describes “The Deluge” as a book read with pleasure by a simple boy – a novel which could be found on every bookshelf...⁵

The cinema premiere of “The Deluge” in 1973 was a national celebration and the theaters were full of the readers of the filmed novel (often people who read it multiple times). Andrzej Sapkowski, a writer and a representative of a generation for which reading Trilogy was a common habit, confesses that: *when I meet Marcin Wolski, we can outdo each other with fragments from Sienkiewicz: mr Charłamp this... province governor Kisiel that... This ends usually with our friends throwing us out of the room and saying that we are boring. But that how it is*

⁵ See: Zbigniew Herbert, „Hermes, pies i gwiazda”, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1957, p. 23 (Podróż do Krakowa)

*with the classics. After reading a new book I sometimes catch myself on not being able to remember the name of the main character*⁶.

The knowledge of Trilogy (but not only of it) was therefore a kind of a language, it was building a sense of participation in culture and history, even a sense of belonging to the nation.

The quotation of Sapkowski is again not random, as he is an author on whom Sienkiewicz had an enormous influence, not destructive any more, though.

The question of destructive influence of the Nobel Prize winner had been noticed by Gombrowicz: *A Mighty Genius! – and probably such a first-class secondary writer could not have been found before. He is a Homer of the second class, he is a Dumas Father of the first class. It is also difficult to find in the history of literature an example of a similar enchantment of a nation, a more magical effect on the imagination of masses. Sienkiewicz, this magician, this seducer, has put into our heads Kmicic together with Wołodyjowski and with Mr. Great Hetman and closed them there with a cork. Since then, anything new could have been liked by a Pole, anything being anti-Sienkiewicz or a-Sienkiewicz. This fixation of our imagination caused a situation in which we were experiencing our century as if on another planet and as if little from contemporary thought had penetrated us*⁷.

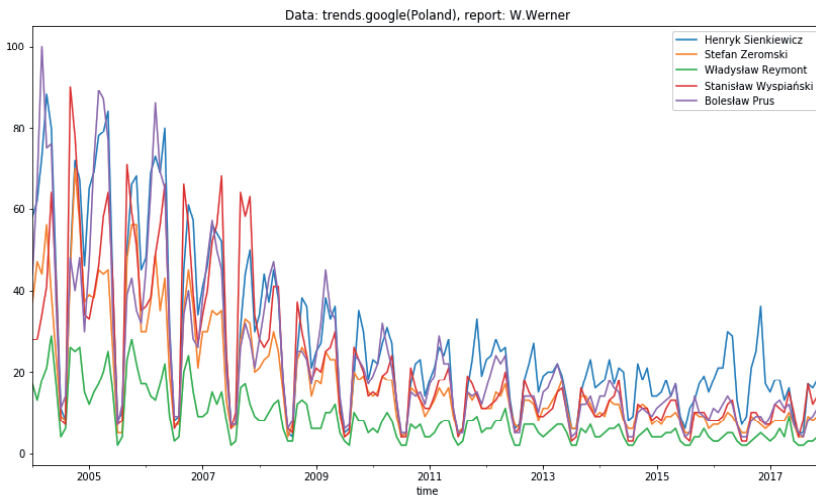
However, because every reality is a historical one, also Sienkiewicz's magic (sometimes kindly, sometimes destructive) has finally ceased to work when the narrative practice of the novel from the end of the 19th century has finally aged also in Poland. It happened together with media revolution, which we have been experiencing since the end of the 20th century, with the proliferation of new forms of entertainment (computer games) and with "maturing" of the forms of entertainment previously identified only with childish dalliance (comic books), and,

⁶ See: Andrzej Sapkowski & Stanisław Bereś, *Historia i fantastyka*, Warszawa 2005, p. 248

⁷ See: Witold Gombrowicz, „Dziennik 1953-1956”, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1989, (chapter: Sienkiewicz), p. 352

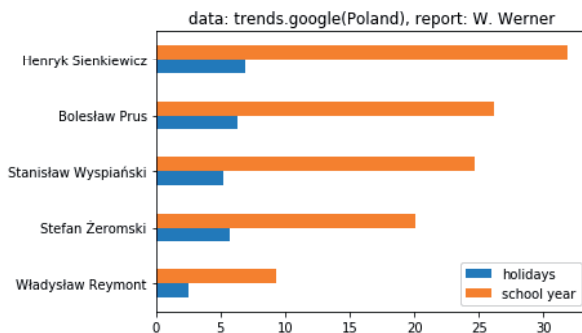
finally, in relation to the process of shaping literary tastes and expectations of the audience in a lively interaction with the author (possible due to blogs and profiles in social media). Sienkiewicz is still one of the more recognized Polish authors, but the interest in him is now more connected with school routine than with individual literary choices.

Some facts may confirm the connection of the interest in Sienkiewicz with the school practice. Firstly, if we take a closer look at the data coming from trends.google service measuring relative interest in a given word or topic occurring in the time period since 2004, we will see that the interest in the discussed author fluctuates depending on the season, and that a similar fluctuation is also present in relation to other authors of school set books such as Stefan Żeromski, Stanisław Wyspiański, Bolesław Prus and Władysław Reymont. The variables of the interest in these authors, measured by the frequency of entering questions into the Google search engine, can be seen on the following chart:



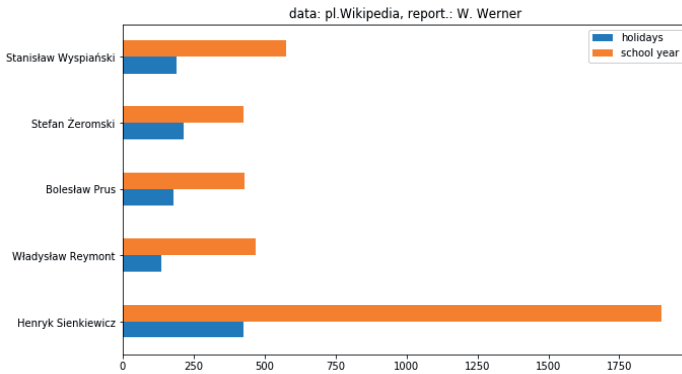
After separating particular curves of interest into sub-charts we can see more clearly that the curves have partially coinciding moments of increase and decrease, and, what is not difficult to check, that the moments of decrease overlap with the time of school holidays in Poland.

We might make sure if this statement is true by summing up the data obtained from trends.google which concern holiday months, and, separately, data concerning school months. If we calculate the average (separately for school months and for holiday months) we will be convinced that it is considerably lower for the holiday months than for school months, what also indicates a link of interest in the studied authors and school routine:

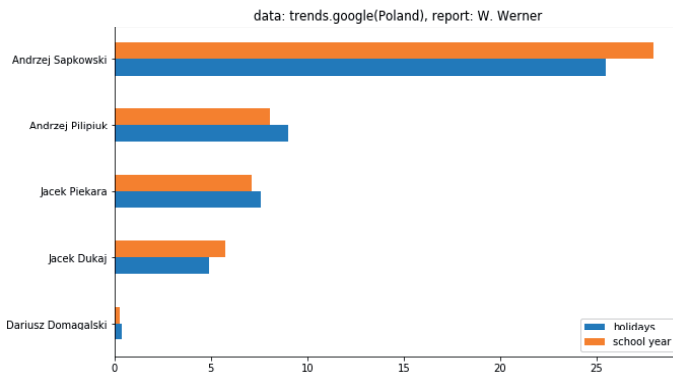


Average interest (measured in relative data, on a 0-100 scale) is therefore, in the case of Sienkiewicz 32 (for a school month) and 7 (for a holiday month). Similar relation can be also observed for other authors.

To verify this tendency, let us investigate the interest in the authors measured by the statistic of entries onto a web page of Polish language Wikipedia respective for each of them, and let us calculate also here a separate average for holiday months and for school months (this time we have absolute data – a number of entries onto a web page). We can see that the difference between the holiday months and the school months is maintained also in this case:



For a comparison, if we compare the data from trends.google concerning the interest in the contemporary writers from the field of historical fantasy and fantasy with historical elements, we will notice that a fundamental difference between the average of interest from holiday months and school months does not occur here, and in some cases the average of interest is even higher during holidays than the school year, what is not surprising as the readers have more time for looking up books of their favorite authors during holiday season. The data (relative interest) have been illustrated on the following chart:



Let us remember that we began our reflections with the statement that nowadays (since the beginning of the 21st century) a new literary genre, combining the features of historical novel with fantasy literature, Gothic (including Gothic crime story) and horror, has been developing in Poland.

The development of such literature occurs in cultural context in which the author of great (for their cultural significance and range of reception) historical novels: Henryk Sienkiewicz becomes a specifically school author who does not have especially strong effect on imagination of the readers – this results in a situation in which “young” authors do not have to imitate the master any more, or enter a stylistic dialogue with him in order to buy the readers, as their taste is not shaped by reading Sienkiewicz any more. This fact may seem banal considering the passage of time since the moment when the novels of the Nobel Prize winner were created, but in the specifically Polish conditions it constitutes a novelty. In the second half of the 20th century, Sienkiewicz was still an author shaping the tastes of readers in a stronger way than contemporary writers.

In consequence, not only literature undertaking historical topics in a brave non-Sienkiewicz way is being created, but (what is interesting) also literature which profusely uses inspirations from historical novel (not only of Sienkiewicz, also of Parnicki and Bunsch), but not in an imitating way – by creative and critical reference.

We cannot omit the fact that many of contemporary authors still belong to 20th-century generation of those “steeped” in historical prose in general and in Sienkiewicz in particular, and even not being forced by the expectations of the readers, are building on this foundation. However, they are already building a literature of another kind.

Here, we should indicate Andrzej Sapkowski, a writer who has an undoubtedly great significance in the Polish fantasy literature for various reasons. Sapkowski was one of a few writers, who in the 1980s initiated the development of the heroic-fantasy genre in Poland, not copying, however, the literary output of Robert E. Howard or even J. R. R. Tolkien, but making an attempt (in the case of Sapkowski an un-

doubtedly successful one) to give this literary genre a native character. The writing of Sapkowski was at the beginning published in a popular monthly *Fantastyka* (during the Polish People's Republic the only Polish magazine devoted strictly to fantasy). It quickly gained popularity, mostly thanks to the "flagship" character of Sapkowski's prose – Witcher (a name for a profession of a warrior-wizard and a monsters' hunter created by Sapkowski) Geralt from Rivia. In the 1990s, this popularity grew and crossed Polish borders thanks to the cycle of novels about Witcher, and to a comic book and board games devoted to this character. Nowadays, the stories about Geralt saw numerous translations, a film (not very successful), a bestseller game CD-Project, and another screening is being currently (2017) prepared by Netflix. Sapkowski is an author who uses examples of historical literature very consciously, what is expressed in his numerous public statements (an interview for historical journal "Mówią Wieki" *Wiedźmin i historia (Witcher and history)*⁸, and a long interview published as a book "Historia i fantastyka" ("Fantasy and History")⁹). Sapkowski is also an ardent reader of Sienkiewicz what is also emphasized in the mentioned interviews. His "saturation" in Sienkiewicz (and at the same time in the spirit of historical novel) is visible through his "Hussite" cycle consisting of the novels: *Narrenturm*¹⁰, *Boży wojownicy (Warriors of God)*¹¹ and *Lux Perpetua*¹² permeated with mystical, fantastic-historical atmosphere. The action of the novel takes place in the historical reality of Polish-German-Bohemian borderlands of the 15th century, touching the figures and events from Sienkiewicz's novel "The Teutonic Knights" (there is for instance Zawisza Czarny from Grabow, the Battle of Grunwald is mentioned), but with a substantial addition of fantastic events and figures.

⁸ Mówią Wieki 1(2002)

⁹ See: A. Sapkowski i S. Bereś, *Historia i fantastyka*, Warszawa 2005

¹⁰ Polish edition: SuperNova 2002

¹¹ Polish edition: SuperNova 2004

¹² Polish edition: SuperNova 2006

Finally, Sapkowski creates a “Witcher” cycle *Krew elfów (Blood of Elves)*¹³, *Czas pogardy (Time of Contempt)*¹⁴, *Baptism of Fire (Chrzest ognia)*¹⁵, *Wieża jaskółki (The Tower of the Swallow)*¹⁶, *Pani jeziora (The Lady of the Lake)*¹⁷) as a kind of an alternative for historical novel (not to mistake, however, with alternative history), in which he can describe the mechanisms of “happening” of historical events – political, economic, ideological and military, without a necessity to tangle up into historical “rights” and “interests”. Therefore, he describes here a situation of a political conspiracy leading to a war; of usage of oppressed ethnic minority as a “5th column”, military aggression camouflaged as “fraternal help”, postwar relocation and bloody repressions performed on civilians, ethnic and religious cleansing and more and more other phenomena known from real history.

The main character of the cycle brings to mind not exactly historical figures, but rather the characters known from romantic literature and historical novels of Sienkiewicz. He is a romantic protagonist for his maladjustment to the world, an impossible need of love, a sense of humor unacceptable by people, and, finally, a uniqueness described here as mutation. The Witcher Geralt is for many reasons a continuation of Romanticism in the Polish literature, although he also has many features of a positivist protagonist described in historical novel (especially Trilogy of Sienkiewicz), which include an exceptional resourcefulness and professionalism (meaning “witcher’s vocation”). Geralt from Rivia combines romanticism of goals with positivist means, what creates a new quality in the Polish literary tradition of creating “heroic” characters.

In his second cycle of novels – Hussite Trilogy, Sapkowski keeps much closer to the “real” history, as the reality described refers to

¹³ Polish edition: SuperNova 1994; English translation: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 2008.

¹⁴ Polish edition: SuperNova 1995; English translation: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 2013.

¹⁵ Polish edition: SuperNova 1996; English translation: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 2014.

¹⁶ Polish edition: SuperNova 1997; English translation: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 2016.

¹⁷ Polish edition: SuperNova 1999; English translation: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 2017.

a concrete time and space: Lower Silesia and Prague during Hussite wars. Sapkowski uses historical sources of Jan Długosz, historical maps and iconographic sources, and, of course, historiography. However, the prose he created belongs to the genre of historical fantasy, which is intensely developing both in Poland, as well as in other countries (particularly Russia). In such literature we can find various proportions of “history” and “fantasy”. Sapkowski describes many historical figures, very often in a way generally not far from their historiographic images (Zawisza Czarny as a brave and ethical knight) or those taken from the sources (bishop Konrad Oleśnicki – the figure described by Długosz as sinister). Besides, we have here fictional characters (similarly as in historical literature), as well as fantastic creatures, which can be divided into two groups. The first group includes fantastic creatures in the sense of their relation to historiography – that is, currently considered as fantastic: dragons, witches, gnomes, etc., but in the described historical time period considered to be real – thus their presence in the literature is not always surprising, it suits to the climate of the world presented in the sources. The second group may include characters about who we know not only that they are fantastic, but also that their presence in the described historical reality is surprising, as the sources (from the epoch) do not confirm a belief in such creatures. In Sapkowski, we can consider Samson “Miodek” – a mysterious creature moving between alternative universes summoned by one of the protagonists of the cycle Reynewan through an unsuccessful exorcism into the body of an addle-head strong man.

Historical fantasy of Sapkowski is not an alternative history – it does not present an alternative course of historical events trying to answer the questions like “what would have happened if Hussitism had survived in Bohemia?”, or “What the fate of Poland would have been if Jagiello had accepted Hus’ faith?”. The fate of the protagonists intertwine with dramatic historical events but their activities do not change the course of events know from historical elaborations. In the novel, we have magic and fantastic creatures, but neither magic not the creatures interrupt the course of events – despite a clear warning

from a fantastic creature similar to a leprechaun Zawisza Czarny goes to a war with Turks under the flag of Sigismund of Luxembourg, what ends with his martyr death; Reynevan is not successful in avoiding the grab of the painting of Virgin Mary from the Jasna Góra monastery (that according to Długosz was not a doing of Hussites, but Polish reaver-knights). Therefore, the fantastic part is here scenography, but not the course of historical drama.

In a similar way, history is combined with fantasy by Rafał Dębski, an author of science-fiction books, and also of a trilogy belonging to historical fantasy devoted to “wilkozacy” (“Wilcze prawo” (“Wolfs’ Law”)¹⁸, „Krew z krwi” („Blood from Blood”)¹⁹, „Księżycowy Sztylet” („Moon Dagger”²⁰)). This term signifies a tribe of “cossacks-were-wolfs”, and the action starts in the wild fields in the times described by Sienkiewicz in his Trilogy (the cycle of Dębski is actually also a trilogy). The novel has a fantastic-adventure character and the historical reality makes a scenery for fictional events. The fictional and fantastic events do not have any influence on the course of historical events, and they cannot have such influence, what is emphasized in the last book of the cycle where the protagonists try to prevent the partitions of Poland by using a magical artifact subordinating the “wilkozacy”. Those, transforming into wolfs and gifted with superhuman speed and strength, arrive when summoned, but there are too few of them to be able to change the course of history. The fantastic dimension of the cycle of Dębski accompanies historical one, but it does not influence it.

This kind of interaction between history and fantasy occurs in popular novels of Jacek Komuda located in the spacetime neighboring with the Trilogy of Sienkiewicz and making kind of references to it. The participation of fantasy in Komuda’s work is not dominant, at times we

¹⁸ Fabryka Słów, 2010

¹⁹ Fabryka Słów, 2012

²⁰ Fabryka Słów, 2015

event do not deal there with “pure” fantasy, but rather with “eeriness” referring more to Gothic novels than to fantasy²¹.

A bit different idea of combining historical dimension with the fantastic one is represented by Dariusz Domagalski, the author of the “Teutonic” cycle of novels: „Delikatne uderzenie pioruna” („Soft Thunder Strike”)²², „Aksamitny dotyk nocy” („Velvet Touch of Night”)²³, „Gniewny pomruk burzy” („Angry Murmur of the Storm”)²⁴. The author creates a vision of history which is alternative not in the sense of the fundamental course of events (not counting the presence of fictional characters next to historical figures such as Jagiello, Ulrich von Jungingen, Sigismund of Luxembourg or Zawisza Czarny), but in relation to the sense of historical events. Dariusz Domagalski describes reality based on cosmology contained in the cabalistic book *Sepher Yetzirah* dated to the 3rd- 4th century, though some of its fragments may be coming even from the 2nd century BC. This book of a gnostic character, describes the creation of the universe as a process of disintegration of primeval unity. In result, the “Tree of Life” is created, which is a bridge between the ideal being: at the same time the process of becoming of the universe as well as its mystical foundation. The components of the “Tree of Life” would be the emanations which are sending the energy of the Creator to the creation. Each of these emanations has its own specificity, according to which it modifies divine energy and shapes material reality. In Domagalski’s novel, both individuals as well as historical entities (such as the Teutonic Order) are under the influence of certain emanations, and are realizing its dynamic in the material (and historical) world. Due to the distortions of particular emanations, the originally harmonious universe found its self in the state of war – here Domagalski appears in front of the reader not only as an author-fantast, but also as an interpreter of the gnostic text and

²¹ See: J. Komuda, *Opowieści z dzikich pól*, Fabryka Słów 1999

²² *Fabryka Słów* 2009

²³ *Fabryka Słów* 2009

²⁴ *Fabryka Słów* 2010

as a philosopher of history. The Teutonic Order serves the emanation (sefira) Binah which has a feminine and maternal character. In its original uncontaminated form this emanation used to embody maternal love, which, in a perverse state, is transformed into rapacity and destructiveness what reshapes the Order of hospitalers into a cruel war machine. Jagiello serves the emanation called Chokhmah residing in the “masculine” path of the Tree of Life embodying harmony and order. This emanation constitutes a natural counterbalance to Binah, and in the moment of imbalance, when Binah aims at dominance in the universe, needs to oppose it. Because of that, the conflict between Poland and Lithuania and the Teutonic Order is not only a historical, but also a mystical necessity. The author describes historical events “ascribing” to them a mystical dimension related to conflicting emanations. The cosmologic war on the Tree of Life causes another sefiras being forced to chose between one of the sides of the conflict. They are followed by their carriers in the material reality – the Awakened people gifted by the emanations with powerful possibilities but, at the same time, bound by destiny. Among the awakened are the protagonists of the novel created by Domagalski but also those known from history. A characteristic feature of the Teutonic cycle is meticulousness in the descriptions of outfits, armament, details from life in the Medieval Poland and Europe. Also, the references to Sepher Yetzirah are not a violation of the rule of historicity as the cabalistic tradition was present in the Middle Ages, and in this sense, its use for the construction of an “additional” dimension of history also constitutes a reference to the sources from the epoch.

The books discussed above belong to historical fantasy, where the two realities coexist on the pages of the same narrative in various configurations. In Sapkowski and Dębski, fantastic elements make the course of fictional events (according to historical fiction conventional-ity) more attractive while not changing “actual” (in reference to historiography) historical events. Teutonic novels of Domagalski “build”, through fantastic references (although grounded via sources in the ep-

och of the novel's action), a dimension additional to the events known from historiography. A similar intervention is also made by Andrzej Pilipuk in his short story "Czerwona gorączka" ("Red Fever") in which he "explains" the outbreak of the communist revolution by referring to a fantastic cause (a mysterious virus of red fever), but without modifying the course of events known from history²⁵.

Books of alternative history have a different character. Their important element is the fact that historical events do not happen here in a "realistic" way, but are directed by the imagination of the writers into ways not known from history textbooks. Polish literature gave birth to an already significant collection of novels of such type.

An attractive book from the field of Polish alternative history is the work of Jacek Dukaj „Lód” („Ice”)²⁶. It is a very complex vision of the world in which "normal" course of history was interrupted at the beginning of the 20th century by the appearance of mysterious creatures called in Polish "lute" in Siberia which had been freezing everything around them. A new Ice Age is coming to a large part of Asia and Europe changing political, economic and social reality, and even physics, logic and philosophy. The ice created by "lute" has exceptional properties of conserving the matter and while penetrating metal ores it gives them new properties which are applied in the new branches of industry pioneered by Poles – former Siberia deportees and their descendants. The Ice Age "freezes", metaphorically and literally, the political situation in Europe, and because of that the world wars and revolutions do not happen. Binary logic is found within the sphere of influence of "lute", as in the area of eternal winter there is nothing else than "yes" and "no", existence and nonexistence, truth and falsehood. The logicians known from real history, Tadeusz Kotarbiński and Alfred Tarski (who "freezes" here his identity and holds his ancestral surname Teitelbaum), and for a change also an occultist Aleister Crowley, write different books in which they work out different conceptions of reality and its rules. Po-

²⁵ Fabryka Słów 2013

²⁶ Wydawnictwo Literackie 2007

litical and religious ideology develops in a different way concentrating around such terms as “winter” and “thaw”.

An extensive and multi-layered vision of an alternative reality is also presented in the cycle of books of Krzysztof Piskorski „Zadra” („Splinter”) (Volume I²⁷ and II²⁸) and „Czterdzieści i cztery” („Forty and four”)²⁹. The point of “scission” of history are the times of Napoleonic Wars when, in the novels of Piskorski, a new kind of energy – “ether” – is discovered and, in result, history begins to take another course. The novels are written from the Polish perspective and the reader is firstly acquainted with the consequences of the development of new technologies and accompanying them new discoveries of new alternative worlds significant for Polish independence cause. The ether extends the period of Napoleonic Wars and the existence of the Duchy of Warsaw, the empires gain new deadly types of weapons and imperial wars for new colonies are transferred to new words, while capitalists administer new tools of oppression of the proletariat, what “sharpens” the class struggle. We encounter in the world created by the imagination of Piskorski figures known from real history, such as Emilia Plater, Lord Byron, Ada Lovelace and, of course, Napoleon and Louis Bonaparte. However, their situation in the world, and the role which that need to play, is a bit different. Byron is a luddite aiming at elimination of ether inventions, Ada Lovelance also works on the first programming language in the world, but, in the alternative reality her invention has a chance to find a practical application in the ether-powered differentiating machine which is being constructed by a Polish inventor and entrepreneur Konrad Załuski (who had bought an unrealized patent from a bankrupt Charles Babbage). His plans might be, however, baffled by Eliza Żmijewska, a sister of Emilia Plater. Emilia Plater was a heroine of the November Uprising known to Poles very well both from history and from literature. In the novel of Piskorski she is in ad-

²⁷ Wyd. Runa 2008

²⁸ Wyd. Runa 2009

²⁹ Wydawnictwo Literackie 2016

dition a priestess of an old Lithuanian god – Źmij, whose power gives her the strength to resist Russians armed with ether weapon, and only the intervention of monsters from another parallel world – also summoned by Russians, makes it possible for them to pacify the Polish uprising and becomes the cause of Emilia Plater’s death. Eliza Źmijewska, in turn, is supposed, on behalf of the Polish Immigration Committee, to execute the death sentence on Załuski given by Juliusz Słowacki. The last one is, in the alternative reality, not so much a prominent Polish poet and a bard, but rather an inexorable and fanatical politician accusing the entrepreneur of selling patents for ether weapon to Russians who supposedly used the opportunity and pacified a Polish uprising in Lithuania aimed at attaching that province to the Duchy of Warsaw. The world depicted in the novel is enriched by mysterious and dangerous creatures percolating from other realities by the open ether gates...

The theme of alternative energy, and of a gate to another world opened by this energy, appears in the novel of Adam Przechrztza „Wilczy legion” („Wolf’s Legion”)³⁰ which plot is situated in an alternative interwar period. The new – ‘oddic’ – energy seemingly does not change the political balance of power. The newly restored Polish state deals with double danger: of Nazi Germany and of the communist Soviet Union. The ‘oddic’ technology is used by all to a degree proportional to political and economic potential of a state. The 2nd Polish unit of Intelligence reinforces the combat potential of its soldiers and the chief of state Józef Piłsudski is being sustained by healing oddic machines and does not die like in the reality in 1935, but lives up to 1940s when he again leads the Polish army in the fight for survival of the state and nation. The Soviets create machines crushing people’s will to live, so called squeezers, and torture machines, so called agonies. Nazis use the influence of oddic energy on people’s mind and create a machine of total propaganda in order to make their troops even more fanatical. Therefore, the events go only slightly in a different way than that

³⁰ Fabryka Słów 2009

known from history textbooks – the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact is signed anyway, and Poland fights on both fronts. Even though, thanks to “resuscitated” Piłsudski, the mistakes from the real defense war of 1939 are not made, the defeat seems inevitable. The situation is changed only by the intrusion of the creatures from another dimension of reality through a gap made by the usage of oddic energy...

The issue of “the gates to another world” occurs quite often in historical fantasy, but it is used in various ways – sometimes it becomes the theme of alternative history where the authors change completely the course of events, sometimes (as in many stories of Andrzej Pilipiuk – e.g. short story “Wieczorne dzwony” (“Evening Bells”) from the collection “2856 kroków” (“2856 steps”)³¹) it do not exert any bigger influence on the global course of history, but gives to the author a possibility to describe fantastic events in the historical world presented.

“A history turning point” may also be a religious miracle. Such vision of an alternative history of Europe is depicted by Jacek Piekara in a popular cycle of books (e.g. *Płomień i krzyż (Flame and Cross)*³², *Ja, inkwizytor. Wieże do nieba (Me, the Inquisitor. Towers to Heaven)*³³, *Ja, inkwizytor. Dotyk Zła (Me, the Inquisitor. Touch of Evil)*³⁴) about an alternative history of Europe, where Jesus comes down from the cross and kills his oppressors. Therefore, the “christianity” described by Piekara renounces mercy and the right to revenge acquires religious dimension – although, paradoxically, the author does not describe any phenomena not known from the real history, where religious persecution, witch hunting, inquisition (here having more secular than sacral character) did also take place.

An important component of many of the texts of alternative history is the historical revisionism visible in perceiving the real course of history as, for some reasons, inappropriate or inequitable. This type of

³¹ Fabryka Słów 2012

³² Fabryka Słów 2008

³³ Fabryka Słów 2010

³⁴ Fabryka Słów 2010

literature is intensely developing in Russia, but we can also encounter such publications in contemporary Poland.

Very popular are the books of Marcin Ciszewski – especially „www.1939.com”³⁵, where the author presents an alternative history of the September campaign of 1939. There, next to the forces that Poland disposed at that time, also contemporary troops, equipped with tanks “Twardy”, helicopters Mi-24, armored vehicles Wolverines, and far-reaching artillery, are taking part. A fantastic element of the novel is an inclusion of a futuristic, AI-controlled technology which gives a possibility of going back in time to a military unit in order to fix the mistakes that had occurred on the battlefield. Artificial intelligence shifts a Polish independent battalion, during military maneuvers with full equipment, back into the time of the beginning of the second world war, as it thinks that during the defense war had been made mistakes which could be fixed. This is not the end of the fantastic aspects of the book. The reader gets the description of the warfare together with a historical-military speculation, present in the background, if the September campaign of 1939 had been lost due to concrete avoidable mistakes in leadership. It is worth mentioning that books containing similar pattern are relatively few in Poland, but they have been appearing in Russia on a mass scale since the end of the 1990s.

A short story of Andrzej Ziemiański “Bomba Heisenberga” (“Heisenberg’s Bomb”) from the collection “Zapach szkła” (“Smell of Glass”)³⁶, also a historical fantasy, has a slightly different character, although similar because of historical revisionism. In this short story, written in a bit oneiric tone, a protagonist called Jarema Wiśniowiecki juxtaposes two visions of history, one – known from our reality, where he is a scientist constructing and testing machines for controlling dreams, as well as an alternative reality, where he is a Polish officer and aristocrat of the Three Nations Republic fighting, in the 20th century, in an alliance with Germany and Japan against the United States. The author

³⁵ WarBook 2008

³⁶ Fabryka Słów 2003

provides us with a plot which is supposed to lead the protagonist to the Polish throne (after the death) of Henryk XI Jagiellończyk and in which the Polish Empire would become an owner of nuclear weapon called the “Heisenberg’s Bomb”, like in the title. The action of the story shifts from one side of reality into the other one, and the author keeps the reader in suspense, non giving the answer which version of history is the “real” one, in a way reminding works of Philip K. Dick. However, at the end of the story he gives us a clue that we (the readers) are rather dreaming our historical reality.

The book of Dariusz Spychalski “Krzyżacki poker” (“Teutonic Poker”)³⁷ is, in turn, an example of a realistic alternative story devoid of both oneiric character present in the short story of Ziemiański “Heisenberg’s Bomb”, as well as fantastic motifs appearing in the novels of Piskorski and Przechszo. Instead, the reader is receiving a political thriller, the plot of which is situated in the 20th century in an alternative historical reality. Poland (named simply the Republic) is, in this reality, an empire in the political sense (its covers not only the territory of the Republic of Both Nations from the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, but it extends its influences to the Balkans and Northern Africa); in the military sense – it plays the role of the “gendarme” of the world who stabilizes political situation only by the presence of its armed forces; in the cultural sense: the Polish cultural universe imposes its system of measurement (in the book we find “łan” – the area measurement, “garniec” – the volume measurement, and “staja” – the length measurement), and the Polish language is the lingua franca; and, of course in the economic sense: we learn about the labor migration into the Republic, its brands and products are know worldwide, and it is the headquarters of global industry and business. The author describes the world in a great detail what gives to the reader a possibility to enjoy this world where Poland not only did not lose its superpower status in the 17th century and did not fall victim to the neighboring countries in the 18th century, but, as we learn from casual comments

³⁷ Fabryka Słów 2005

of alter-historical nature, it has been systematically developing its superpower position since the 16th century up to the times of the novel's plot. The alternative character of the reality, in consequence, do not concern only Poland, but the entire world. We learn from the book that Western Europe is an emirate, and that Southern Balkans are under Turkish occupation. The state of the Teutonic Order still exists, but due to the lost wars with the Republic, has to accept imposed limitations of its sovereignty, including the autonomy of Prussia which is manifestly aiming at gaining independence. We do not find in the book people known from real history, but many of the events from "our" dimension has its reflection in the world of the novel, thus we learn for example how the alternative Republic overcame the Cossack problem or dealt with social frictions preventing revolution.

The action starts when Teutonic spies manage to steal from Muslim Ireland a scientist working there on a new type of weapon – the Order gains a possibility to free itself from the oppression of the Republic, but in order to do it it needs both to produce and use the weapon of mass destruction as well as undermine the position of the Republic at the far ends of its empire where, on the sand of Sahara, the Polish "borderlands" nobility lives next to the Muslim Arabs. The game of intelligence starts, and the joker might appear to be the help of Prussian insurrectionists... Therefore, the content of the book is not a contemplation of an (unreal) power of alternative Poland, but the description of fast adventurous action bedizened with images kind of pleasant to the soul of Polish reader. The history presented by Spsychalski is alternative as a whole – its means that the author do not indicate a critical moment when the course of history changed.

Many authors of alternative history prefer to focus on a concrete event which was so important for the course of history that its modification would have created different reality. This is what Marcin Wolski, a Polish author working on (among others) alternative history does. In his book „Jedna przegrana bitwa” („One Lost Battle”)³⁸, he focuses

³⁸ Zysk i S-ka, 2010

on the course of history of Europe and the world in a situation if the Warsaw battle of 1920 would have been won by the Red Army. His reflection has been inspired by Lord Viscount d'Abernon who named this fight the 18th battle deciding about the fate of the world and compared its significance to the victory of Charles Martel over the Moors in the Battle of Tours. According to the guesses of the English intellectual, the defeat of Poles would have opened the path for the Bolshevik revolution to spread into entire Europe weakened after the Great War. Marcin Wolski continues this way of thinking on the pages of the book written from two perspectives: of the main character living in the Union of European Socialist Republics – Eurosoc – covering, besides the territory known from real history, also Poland, Germany, Denmark, France, Italy and the entire Balkan peninsula; as well as of his father – a veteran of memorable battle of Warsaw, lost in the alternative reality. In the book of Wolski, we will find not only an alternative course of events, but also a description of alternative biographies of people known from our history, and, finally, a description of everyday life known to the older generation of Poles from their own experience, that is of the omnipresent problems with supplying in basic products, ubiquitous surveillance, a danger of arrest, arrogance and cynicism of party activists leading a comfortable life at the expense of others. In this reality, the “pleasures” of life in the Soviet state are available not only to the inhabitants of Moscow or Warsaw, but also of Paris and Rome.

However, Wolski's book is not (contrary to appearances) completely black-and-white. The author indicates, paradoxically, positive consequences of such course of events both in the global scale, as well as the individual one. The creation of the Polish Soviet Republic reinforces the position of Dzierżyński who do not aim at a complete eradication of Polish culture, also, do not detach from the alternative “Poland” Vilnius and Lviv, instead, attaches Silesia and Pomerania. Stalin never comes to power, because the alternative course of events works in favor of Tuchaczewski, Dzierżyński and Bucharin. Also, the second world war do not happen and Nazi death camps are not created. Generally, it is difficult to say if the alternative world described by Wolski is worse

than ours. Anyway, violence and atrocities are distributed differently. Creation of subsequent soviet republics is connected with murdering the elites and destroying civilization achievements. The soviet union develops nuclear weapon as the first state, and uses it against the alliance of England and the United States. Anglo-Saxon countries, which want to insure themselves against the danger of revolution on their territory, reject democracy and introduce police system.

The main character of the book, who escapes from the soviet territory to the United States, gives the author a possibility to juxtapose the two worlds. Marcin Wolski criticizes, in his alternative reality, not only the world built on the basis of communist ideology, but also that of the "free countries" – he shows that liberty leads both to good as well as to bad things, and that it does not necessary lead to good and happiness, even if (according to Wolski) creates such opportunity. Thus, the author acknowledges importance of religion. In the alternative world the church is divided – due to the control of the communists over Rome – and ossified – as the Second Vatican Council does not take place. Therefore, the main carrier of religious ethic is here not the church but the figure of John Pawłowicz, a Pole coming from Wadowice (of course he is an alternative equivalent of Karol Wojtyła), who after escaping a labor camp, ends up in the United States where he becomes a preacher and "tele-evangelist". He integrates dispersed and conflicted Polish diaspora and leads to religious rebirth by inciting the flame of faith through his powerful sermons.

This review, of course, does not comprehend all the variety of books created in Poland, the content of which might be associated with the genres of alternative history and historical fantasy. The large quantity of works which are created within those genres, and, first of all, variety of images of world and reflections they contain, allows us to notice the possibilities hidden in these kinds of writing.

Combination of history and fantasy is, of course, not a new phenomenon in literature and has been present in it at least since the times of chivalric romance created in the 16th and 17th centuries, through romantic literature and Gothic novel. Also, it quite quickly

found its place in the fantasy literature of the 20th century. The idea of historical novel, where fictional elements should not exceed the limits of realism or probability, is rather the one which seems to be a temporary enforcement of stiff rules of the genre on literary creation. In fact, such combination of history and fantasy gives the authors multiple opportunities to surprise and entertain the reader and, at the same time, does not deprive him of some kind of support in the understanding of the meaning of the described events and characters.

Alternative history, in turn, gives a possibility not only to combine fictional events and figures with the real ones (what, of course, occurs in the “ordinary” historical novel as well), but also to transfer the reflection over the causality in history to a completely new level. This possibility seems to answer to the expectations of the readers of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, whose historical imagination is influenced by computer games including historical topics more strongly than by participation in “static” descriptions of historical events contained in traditional media. A characteristic feature of computer games undertaking historical topics, both “strategic” ones, such as *Civilization*, as well as military-tactical ones, like “*Total War*”, or those based on plots, e.g. *Assassin’s Creed*, is that the player does not recreate concrete historical events, but creates (by his activities) an alternative cause-and-effect path where the point of departure is more or less a real historical situation (depending on the game), but the course of events is parallel to the historical one.

Classical historical novel was developing in the cultural situation dominated by the mode of observation and experience. It is a mode which constitutes a foundation for traditional media. Alternative history uses the increasing significance of the mode of participation which builds the popularity of computer games and web 2.0 where the ability to experience and observe is more connected to the possibility of participation in the observed reality.

In Poland, historical novel was fulfilling the needs related to the experience of Polish history, emotional immersion in the history of laudable victories and defeats bringing martyrdom. This kind of a novel

would build Polish national community of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The Polish society of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries is already different. Although it shares (at least declaratively) many of symbolic values of its ancestors, however, it experiences the presence of history in the current times in a different way. The past is treated more as a virtual reality – not existing in a material way, but having an effect in practice. It is more inflicted than given; more open to interpretations and modifications than closed in a concrete narrative form and demanding only an emotional reception.