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## Confabulations and self-creations of romantic poets: the case of Antoni Edward Odyniec : on the 210th birthday anniversary of the poet

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Zeszyty Naukowe Ostrołęckiego Towarzystwa Naukowego 27, 380-389

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2013

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## **CONFABULATIONS AND SELF-CREATIONS OF ROMANTIC POETS: THE CASE OF ANTONI EDWARD ODYNIEC. ON THE 210TH BIRTHDAY ANNIVERSARY OF THE POET**

**KONFABULACJE I AUTOKREACJE ROMANTYCZNYCH  
POETÓW: PRZYPADEK ANTONIEGO EDWARDA  
ODYŃCA. W 210. ROCZNICĘ URODZIN POETY**

### **1. *The Traveller's Letters* by Antoni Edward Odyniec**

Antoni Edward Odyniec: who remembers him today, except perhaps a few academics passionately digging in the Polish literature of the 19th century? And yet wasn't it Odyniec, who was such a splendid figure so well recognized at the literary parlours as well as by the artistic Bohemia of the Polish Romantic era? Even the Polish philologists today must be satisfied with works from the recent century, as no one has long dedicated a single paper to Odyniec since Chmielowski<sup>1</sup>, Zyczynski<sup>2</sup>, Dernalowicz<sup>3</sup>, Zmigrodzka<sup>4</sup>, Skret<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, it is not a surprise as neither was his poetic nor translational talent one of those breathtaking. We must, nevertheless, confirm that he was writing poetry briskly until the old age, even though Mickiewicz's muse had already gone silent. And yet I found Odyniec intriguing and decided to dust him off a bit and to get him out of the darkness of oblivion. In fact few romanticists were as unromantic as Odyniec and even fewer could trump up stories so craftily where memory failed.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Chmielowski, *Listy A. E. Odyńca*, „Ateneum” 1878, t. III.

<sup>2</sup> H. Życzyński, *Mickiewicz w oświetleniu Odyńca*, Lublin 1934.

<sup>3</sup> M. Dernałowicz, Wstęp do: *Antoni Edward Odyniec, Listy z podróży*, oprac. M. Toporowski, wstęp M. Dernałowicz, Warszawa 1961, t. 1; M. Dernałowicz, *Okruchy kroniki Mickiewiczowskiej*, „Blok-Notes Muzeum Literatury im. Adama Mickiewicza”, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> M. Źmigrodzka, *Wojąż romantyka smorgońskiego*, „Twórczość” 1962, nr 9.

<sup>5</sup> R. Skret, *Odyniec Antoni Edward*, w: *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, Wrocław 1978, t. XXIII.

What does the Polish culture and Polish literature in particular owe to Odyniec? Certainly it is not his refined poetry, it is not his commitment to the Filomats and Filarets movement either, where he had rather gained a reputation of a jolly lad, patented lazybones and womanizer. If anyone is familiar with the name of Antoni Edward Odyniec today, it is primarily due to the fact that he was a good friend and travelling companion to Adam Mickiewicz (the most famous Polish poet) during their journey across several European countries in the years 1829-1830. That journey they both went on was supposed to be reported 'live' by Odyniec in his letters to friends.

Some scholars have openly resented him, claiming that this mediocre poet, though a cheerful companion, shamefully benefited from the friendship with Mickiewicz and cleverly attached himself to the chariot of Mickiewicz's fame. Others complained that Odyniec 'clung tight' to the bard to get success and fame this way<sup>6</sup>, some called him an unscrupulous forger who pulled Mickiewicz down 'to the level of his mental limitations'<sup>7</sup>.

Edward Odyniec definitely had a much better opinion of himself than the others did. Referring to the treasury of his autobiographical memory – with zest and gusto he wrote and published five volumes of memoirs. Edward did his best to cover his youthful carelessness, negligence and omissions and did what he really could to hide the fact that 'he was not the perfect companion for Mickiewicz'<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. Mickiewicz in Odyniec's memory

No one for whom his common-sense is dear would ever deepen the four volumes of Odyniec's *Traveller's Letters* if they did not treat of Adam Mickiewicz to a great extent and of a little known period of his life. And yet not only about Mickiewicz can we learn from these writings, but also about other great poets such as Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Zygmunt Krasinski, Juliusz Slowacki and dozens of others. Well, was there anybody left unknown to our Odyniec? However, no matter whose parlours did have Odyniec for a guest and what figures he deigned to compliment, it was always Mickiewicz standing in the very centre of his attention.

The greatest Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz – according to Odyniec's epistolography – was a man eager to play bubbles, to smoke a pipe all day long, to loiter when he needed to tie a shawl or to get silent when he got moody. Moreover, what impressed him most in Bonn was... potatoes. Such were the colours of Odyniec's memory in which less meaningful facts curved much stronger than those much more important – at least more important from a philologist's point of view. Anecdotes, gags, gossips or compliments to ladies, dresses, menus – all

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<sup>6</sup> H. Życzyński, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> M. Dernałowicz, op. cit., s. 14. Wszystkie tłumaczenia polskiej literatury przedmiotu jak też wspomnień A. E. Odyńca na język angielski zawarte w artykule wykonane są przez autorkę tekstu.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

these slapsticks' notes are so easy to read but they are not of great help to scholars dealing with Mickiewicz's career though. Odyniec did not particularly intend to provide scientifically sound information about Mickiewicz which would eventually petrify the image of the bard as a gloomy and monumental sort of person. Odyniec rather felt like drawing a different portrait of Mickiewicz. In the introductory paragraph of *The Traveller's Letters* he explicitly expresses his conviction that 'we know so little about personal and social life of our famous writers of the past'<sup>9</sup>. Odyniec thus found himself appointed to fill this gap. And in fact we must admit that he recognised his strengths properly.

### **3. Mickiewicz stripped of the nimbus in Odyniec's memories**

It's well-known that soon after *The Traveller's Letters* were published both scholars and Mickiewicz's son Wladyslaw protested against presenting the great poet dressed in a bathrobe, stripped of the nimbus of the tragic leader of the nation. And all this happened because our good Odyniec had a memory that was a net of his honesty and parochial mentality. Hence a number of literary historians have lamented over the fact that it was Odyniec – not someone else – the Mickiewicz's companion. Maria Dernalowicz, author of the critical edition of his memoirs took the liberty, however, to utter an ironical remark that the Romanticism studies would certainly gain more splendour if, instead of Odyniec, Mickiewicz chose a poetry critic, best of all professor Chmielowski himself to be his travelling companion<sup>10</sup>. Since we do not have many other sources on that period of Mickiewicz's life available, we have to rely on what Edward Odyniec's autobiographical memory retained. Whether we accept it or not it was Odyniec who was staying with Mickiewicz for such a long time during that journey and who left us his memoirs about that time.

### **4. Memory gaps and confabulations**

It is not the end of the scholars' lamentations over Odyniec letters' records. After the initial furore and bewildering career of *The Traveller's Letters*, the authenticity of those records was questioned; soon it came out that most of those memoirs were fake. And it is probably the famous mystification in the Polish literature of the Romantic era. Those letters were not being written 'live' in the course of the journey with Mickiewicz, as Odyniec wanted us to believe, but they were all prepared... 40 years later. Obviously there must have been facts that our writer could not remember, so he either confabulated or 'refreshed' them. He patched the holes of his memory freely and creatively, with passion of which his already burnt-out Romantic poets could really be jealous.

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<sup>9</sup> A. E. Odyniec, op. cit., s. 26.

<sup>10</sup> M. Dernalowicz, op. cit.

What, in particular, did Odyniec forget? In most cases things connected with the spirit of the Romantic era, namely, erudite conversations of Mickiewicz with famous writers and artists of the époque. When Odyniec confesses that during the academic 'as cold as a stone' discussion between Goethe, David and Mickiewicz, he was truly suffering and found himself 'as if he were a stoned martyr, who kept silent and sighed turning his thoughts and eyes toward the angels' choirs'<sup>11</sup>. Aren't we assured here by Odyniec himself that his confessions were springing out of this honest and simple-minded heart?

Why did Odyniec insist on 'tuning up' his memoirs so much and why did he impute his own memory events that it had never had a chance to remember? Perhaps he did not want to be only remembered as an author of jokes and anecdotes, after having had a great opportunity to travel side by side with the genius of Romantic poetry and to record his brilliant thoughts. Therefore an over 60-year-old hero has collected around a great number of books and letters from the epoch (also his own letters) and started writing a work that was to testify to a profound understanding of Mickiewicz genius. By the way, Mickiewicz's genius would not have suffered a bit if Odyniec had not even said a word about it.

Odyniec must have been tempted to become someone more important than he really was, to be like other great romantic poets, moreover he dreamed of being compared to the great bard. He then began to reconstruct and modify his remembrances. These colourful confabulations are a real 'nightmare' to philologists, since it's virtually impossible to discern where the writer was telling the truth and where he was already rewriting other authors or confabulating.

After having destroyed uncomfortable documents and proofs, he began filling the gaps of his memories hoping that no one would never unmask the mystification. How could he have known that literary studies on Mickiewicz would one day become a separate branch in the Polish humanities and his memoirs would be a subject of investigation for dozens of scholars and academics.

The researchers are still struggling to find out what Mickiewicz really said or did and what Odyniec 'made' him say or do. We are not surprised when reading Maria Dernalowicz who says that the Odyniec's memoirs are 'a pure distress' for the philologists<sup>12</sup>.

Odyniec may have at least called his writings: *Diary from a Youthful Journey with Mickiewicz*. Diary is a sort of literary genre, in which – contrary to letters or journals – its writer registers memories, sometimes very distant in time. It's surely hard to be certain of one's memories that are being recalled after many years, it's also hard to blame anyone for modifications or forgetting part of these memories. But for the same reasons the credibility of one's testimony decreases. Odyniec, however, wanted to be remembered as a smart, young man not as a stories telling graybeard.

Therefore, that is why Odyniec deliberately decided to seduce and deceive us suggesting that we are taking part 'live' in the process of creation of his erudite

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<sup>11</sup> A. E. Odyniec, op. cit., s. 126.

<sup>12</sup> M. Dernalowicz, op. cit., s. 9.

and witty letters. The reporting form of the letters was meant to authenticate and confirm the authenticity of the events on an ongoing basis. Therefore he started with a number of sentences that may indeed deceive a reader's attention, such as:

Having returned last night I could not write, but today I got up early in the morning to report about what happened yesterday. And I need to do this quickly before Adam wakes up.

(A letter to Julian Korsak, 19 August 1829)

## 5. Exceptionality of Odyniec's memory

Literature studies have long been prejudiced against Mickiewicz's companion. Researchers have particularly been susceptible to what Odyniec could fabricate in his stories. Because which scientist would like to be suspected of presenting unreal facts? Perhaps it's time to get some accents shifted from 'fabricated' towards 'remembered'. For when you read these letters, being aware of their later provenience, Odyniec's memory starts to amaze. He neither simply read all those facts about Mickiewicz in books or articles of that time, nor could he make all those facts up out of nowhere. Apparently it is even more improbable that he confabulated every tiny detail of his friendship with Mickiewicz, for his respect and admiration to his genius friend would not have left him. Therefore we dare to admit that the overall atmosphere of the journey evoked by the letters must be taken as real.

We can thus paraphrase the popular saying and assert: 'Unveil me your memory and I shall tell you who you are'. What then did Odyniec's memory tend to remember, and what did Odyniec pay special attention to?

Colours, scents, sounds, (...) streets, yards and parlours; he remembered both the glow of torches in the Vatican museums and a street fight; ladies' haute-couture costumes as well as the peasant clothes. He enjoyed everything that – in this foreign land – reminded him of his family land, countryside scenery or old good friends<sup>13</sup>.

It is thus likely that Odyniec had to have a very well developed visual memory: an iconic memory. One of his statements could be of a confirmation, when he was saying: 'that thing remained as clearly in his heart as if it were a Flamand master-piece'<sup>14</sup>. It's certainly a very meaningful metaphor, since the main characteristic of the Flamand art is the highest fidelity in representing the world around. Scenes of daily life got this very feature that transformed them into something unusual, extraordinary and deeply moving. So much faithful in describing ordinary reality are the memoirs by Odyniec. This premise of the iconic nature

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, s. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, s. 66.

of Odyniec memories is also confirmed in the introductory passage of one of his letters to Julian Korsak:

I do feel that writing to you has become an urgent need like a tutoring for a student. It lets me deepen my memories and re-orders all that my eyes have witnessed. This time, nonetheless, I am writing not because of what I have just said, for now, from Bonn to Koblenz, I am travelling at night and can see nothing.

(A letter to Julian Korsak, 3 September 1829 )

If not for that criticised Odyniec's memory, dozens of stories and information about Mickiewicz would never have been known, mostly those of a 'lighter caliber', like this about an evening when Mickiewicz got inspired to... painting! Odyniec reports:

He lit two candles and placed them in front of a mirror, on the table, and has been painting for over an hour, portraying himself with such a zeal one would believe as if he were truly gifted in the craft. 'Gooody! Gooody My little boy, but it's high time to lullaby' – would I cry to him. But he did not even want to hear about sleeping until he finished his master-piece, over which he was levitating and kept nagging me for admiration.

(A letter to Julian Korsak, 3 September 1829 )

If not for Odyniec's memories, who would have ever known about a novel, written in French by Mickiewicz, entitled *History of the Future*. A story that would have to be compared with contemporary science fiction novels was meant to deal with Europe while arming in case of Chinese military aggression in year 2000.

## 6. True lies or self-creations?

Many Odyniec's memories were indeed true, nevertheless he was given a label of a liar. When a Romantic poet Zygmunt Krasinski very often coloured reality in his letters making it more ideal than it actually was, playing different characters to different addressees, things he wrote of in the letters, however, never got called misleading or simply lying. Scholars would read these letters in the perspective of narratologist research<sup>15</sup> or studies on self-creation<sup>16</sup> (Cysewski: 2000). Various Krasinski's poses and masks should rather be taken for a literary mode of expression corresponding so much with those of Hamlet, Byron, or Werter etc. But when it turned out that Odyniec was confabulating in his letters, no researcher really looked at him with a saving eye, no one has tried to make up a separate

<sup>15</sup> M. Głowiński, *Wokół narratologii*, w: *Narratologia*, Gdańsk 2004.

<sup>16</sup> K. Cysewski, *Teoretyczne i metodologiczne problemy badań nad epistolografią*, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 1997, z. 1; K. Cysewski, *Problem autokreacji w listach Zygmunta Krasńskiego*, w: *Sztuka pisania. O liście polskim w wieku XIX*, red. J. Sztachelska, E. Dąbrowicz, Białystok 2000, s. 73–91.

methodology to his writings in the light of which his erudition could make a *homo narrator* out of Odyniec choosing easily from various literary characters.

When another Romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki, in his famous letters to mother, claimed that he was rewriting for her absolutely everything that he had already put in the diary, we now know that he was hiding improper deeds or facts (Troszynski: 2009). And yet the academics are reading the letters by Słowacki in the key of being discrete in order to keep his mother far from knowing unpleasant details. But who would dare to blame the great poet Słowacki for his little lies?

Mickiewicz, when once asked about the meaning of the mysterious figure of '44' from the 3rd volume of his master-piece *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*), he replied that he had forgotten its very meaning, but he had certainly remembered it while he had been writing it. Scholars take now this statement for granted; if great Romantic poets must be mysterious and full of secrets, so must be their writings.

Jokingly speaking, famous poets do not struggle with memory deficits, for it's improper to blame for confabulations. What great authors do, in academics' opinion, is to make up new fabrics of alternative self-creation.

## 7. Question of poetic self-creation

The subject of self-creation understood as creating a desired image of an author in his writings is an important aspect of the literary studies on Romanticism. At such literary genres like letters, memoirs or diaries the self-creation problem is particularly often discussed<sup>17</sup>. Researchers emphasize that self-creation and truth are not mutually exclusive; what it is all about is to state that some words are being said only because (or also because) they are meant to influence or suggest a desired image of the author himself<sup>18</sup>. Hence epistolography in the age of Romanticism is full of this kind of stylizations. The confabulations in letters aim at making one's image legendary. For a well-trained reader it should be recognisable as a 'literary game', which as such can be discussed scientifically<sup>19</sup>. It's such a faux-pas to blame romantic poets for fabrication or – Gods no! – lies, so these poets are said to be creating new universes based on various literary patterns and conventions, which the reader should only be deciphering as codes of allusions or literary games. No scholar, however, has read the Odyniec's epistolography in this way. And yet he did create himself before the readers' eyes as a Virgil of the Polish literature and the poet that was polishing Mickiewicz's rhymes. Another costume in which Odyniec wanted to show off was that of being like Eckermann, Goethe's personal assistant, whose ambition was registering important conversations of the great poet. Contrarily he was given a label of a liar and no one seemed to have thought of Odyniec's memoirs in terms of self-creation project

<sup>17</sup> Idem, *Teoretyczne i metodologiczne problemy..., passim.*

<sup>18</sup> Idem, *Problem autokreacji w listach Zygmunta Krasińskiego..., s. 73–91.*

<sup>19</sup> M. Janion, *Tryptyk epistolograficzny*, w: *Romantyczność. Studia o ideach i stylu*, Warszawa 1969, s. 209–228.

which in fact overcomes the categories of truth and false. Who knows how we would now construe Odyniec's shortage of memory if he had been called a great writer? Wouldn't we perhaps be more generous today and understanding the man's memory deficits?

## 8. Unromantic romanticist

Odyniec is sometimes said not to be a representative of Romanticism. Indeed he seemed not to have grasped the very idea of the epoch in which he was living neither did he touch the most important matters troubling the minds of other romanticists. 'His memory was full of secondary matters, tiny unimportant facts and jokes'. And perhaps this statement was right indeed: Odyniec never really understood either Mickiewicz's genius or Romanticism. However, the spirit of that age got reflected in his memoirs like in a mirror. Do we really need to understand all we face in our life, all that we remember?

We know that Odyniec's memory had a tendency to reduce or simplify a deeper and complex reality; well, only few are born to be like Mickiewicz. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate or devalue Odyniec's memories. *The Traveller's Letters* certainly gather more facts about Odyniec himself rather than Mickiewicz. Our hero never went through any nervous break-down, no dark melancholia, not even a spleen of a man's soul. Neither were metaphysical concussions of his part nor Byronic paralysis. The thing that differentiated him immensely from other Romanticists was that he was a naturally born optimist, adamantly believing that he was living in the 'best of all possible worlds'. While going to bed he would pray not to be 'honoured' with visits of spooks, that was in fact what most true Romanticists were longing for.

In the Jungian sense we can say that Odyniec was Mickiewicz's Shadow. Thus, when Mickiewicz had already been resting in peace, Odyniec – the Shadow – as in a proper romantic tale would this be – kept living its own life for some time. This Shadow could not only liberate itself from its bearer but even dominated him using a role reversal. Life of the Shadow without its bearer does not last long though. Odyniec without Mickiewicz lasted only a while and certainly soon he will have fallen into the darkness of oblivion.

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## SUMMARY

The following paper is an attempt to remind of an forgotten Polish Romantic writer – Antoni Edward Odyniec. Since his 210th birthday anniversary will be celebrated in 2014 we find it a good reason to revise Odyniec's literary legacy as well as to try to place it in a broader context of the literary comparative studies.

It is hereby suggested that Odyniec, both a member of the Vilnius-based Philomath Society and Adam Mickiewicz's good friend, as an author of the Romantic memoirs should be investigated in the light of narrative studies as well as those on self-creation, which becomes an important correlate of the literary discourse. Such a scientific perspectives has been consequently avoided by the researchers, reserving and limitating it merely to the great Romantic poets such as Krasinski or Slowacki. Therefore the main proposition of the following paper is to uncover this peculiar conflict between Romantic ideas of self-creation on the one hand and genealogical aspects of some genres (memoirs, letters, biographical attempt) on the other.

**KEYWORDS:** Antoni Edward Odyniec, Adam Mickiewicz, Romantic memoirs, self-creation

## STRESZCZENIE

Niniejszy artykuł stawia sobie za cel przypomnienie zapomnianej już nieco w romantologii postaci Antoniego Edwarda Odyńca. Na rok 2014 przypada 210 rocznica urodzin tego pisarza. Sprzyja to zatem nie tylko rewizjom jego twórczości ale także próbie umieszczenia tegoż dorobku w świetle obecnych badań literaturoznawczych. Artykuł przybliża zatem osobę byłego filomaty i przyjaciela Mickiewicza, przywołuje spisane wspomnienia Odyńca, stawiając jego twórczość w świetle badań narratologicznych, a także problematyki autokreacji jako jednym z istotnych korelatów wypowiedzi literackiej. Takiej perspektywy badawczej do tej pory konsekwentnie Odyńcowi odmawiano, obwarowując tego typu badania tylko dla wielkich romantyków (Krasinski, Słowacki). Ukazany w pracy konflikt pomiędzy romantyczną kreacją podmiotu a genologicznymi aspektami form literackich (wspomnienie, relacja epistolograficzna, przyczynek do biografii,) staje się jedną z głównych propozycji badawczych przedłożonej pracy.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** Antoni Edward Odyniec, Adam Mickiewicz, wspomnienia romantyczne, autokreacja