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"Nad Niemnem" (The Niemen Country) by Eliza Orzeszkowa - the Ideal Positivist Novel

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Theoretical Postulates

The leading role of the novel in the literature of the Positivist period had to find its justification in normative aesthetics. It can be traced in the views of the main representatives of the period—a time when straightforward utilitarian slogans no longer sufficed. These views were not entirely new, but the choice of norms was closely connected with the objectives of the Polish movement and with the specific development of the Polish novel. If then we agree to leave aside the more extreme philosophical and aesthetic standpoints, what emerges as the mainstream is the tendency to create a closed picture of the world, harmonious, orderly, and delimited both by the structure of the novel and by the problems which it discusses. Besides, since “a noble idea” was still an important criterion of value, even after the restrictions imposed by thesis novels had been overcome, it is understandable that the concept of the novel forwarded by Flaubert and the naturalists was not readily accepted. Antoni Sygietyński had, in 1880, shown the *Education sentimentale* to be a crucial turning-point and had brought to light its novel conventions, which decried the principles of the classic French novel, that of Balzac in particular. However, the principles expounded by Sygietyński became generally accepted only after the literary group round the periodical “Wędrowiec” (“The Rambler”) had been formed.

Piotr Chmielowski, the leading critic of the period, seems to favour the principles put forward by Taine, along with Spielhagen’s

more or less parallel theory.¹ In conformity with their postulates he stresses the need for a strict composition, based on the prevalence of a teleological development of the plot. According to Chmielowski, the narrator should not interfere too much in the action, as was the case with authors in the past, and he considers that a logical progression of the story as well as the dialogue are most important in putting across the ideological and intellectual message of the novel. Looked at from this point of view, the novel resembles a play, and Taine's principle of the concurrence of effects, which aims at bringing the central conflict into resolution, excludes both pure epic description and the loose compounding of plots so characteristic of broad panoramas such as Prus' *Lalka* (*The Doll*), whose structure Chmielowski could therefore neither understand nor approve.

Symptomatic of this period is the need for a handbook which would on the one hand teach budding authors all the rules, and on the other hand prepare readers for a correct reception of each literary type, in particular the novel. Aware of this need, Teodor Jeske-Choiński outlined the poetics of the novel.² His views were certainly shared by most of the critics who were acquainted with Taine's theory and with Spielhagen's *Beiträge zur Theorie und Technik des Romans* (1882), which was well-known and extensively quoted by various literary periodicals. In short, Choiński's conception was that of an artistic and at the same time realistic novel, however it is not the concept, which determines the aesthetics of this period, but the specific way in which these two ideas are understood.

It is interesting to note that the principles of truth and artistry are subservient to the criterion of logic, which determines the intellectual and structural elements of the novel. For truth is not only a faithful reproduction of the "real, existing conditions," but also — and often this matters most — "artistic verisimilitude," that is, the ability to produce a convincing picture based on a strict, selective sequence of causes and effects, so characteristic of Positivist methodological determinism:

¹ Taine's and Spielhagen's as well as Flaubert's theories are convincingly contrasted in: J. Detko, *Antoni Sygietyński. Estetyk i krytyk (Aesthete and Critic)*, Warszawa 1971, p. 203 seq.

² See T. Choiński, *Teoria powieści (Theory of Novel)*, "Niwa", 1883, p. 207 — 208.

"The artist must act quickly, his work must be compact and clear, and he cannot take into consideration all the innumerable transitions from cause to effect. Thus he concentrates on the significant actions of a given individual and groups them into a series of causes and effects."³

Choiński considers that the fundamental principle determining the structure of the plot is the "pyramid form," a causal sequence with a well-marked beginning, a middle and an end. This applies not only to the story as a whole but also to the structure of each episode. One cannot help reflecting that today's structural theories, and in particular Claude Bremond's triplex model, only describe what might be called the classic way of creating the world of the novel.

Another basic rule of the realistic prose of this period, the principle of illusion, was also connected with the principle of a logically unfolding plot, for the idea was to create a "direct," dramatic picture of life. This principle was advanced as objective story-telling in a forceful yet not uncompromising way. If we look at the problem more closely, however, a sceptical attitude seems justified where the author is said to be totally disinterested, since the very structure of the situations and the characters in the novel has its implications. Choiński made himself quite clear only when he wrote that it was the characters who had to express the main idea of the novel and that he was against any interference on the part of the narrator as it would destroy the "illusion of reality" and obscure the clarity of style. This same principle can be traced in Chmielowski's view on the digressions in Sienkiewicz's *Szkice węglem* (*Charcoal sketches*):

"From the point of view of style, this passage is faultless: its purpose is to portray a deep and silent grief as opposed to its much more shallow and affected expression in a deluge of words. Yet because it is only a rhetorical figure created by the author and not brought on by the situation, it disrupts the effect instead of intensifying it."⁴

The dominance of indirect methods of presenting ideas, and in

³ *Ibidem*, p. 228 – 229.

⁴ P. Chmielowski, *Pisma krytycznoliterackie* (*Writings in Literary Criticism*), vol. 1, Warszawa 1961, p. 463.

particular a well-ordered sequence of events, the adjustment of structuring techniques to a logical arrangement of causes and effects, a specific kind of objectivity and finally the dialogue, which was thought to be of great importance—these were the components of a “well-composed” novel, a mature but rather out-of-date version of the classic novel of Balzac. In European literature this form was to serve to a certain extent as a basis for new forms developed in the 20th century,⁵ but at the same time, though overcome by avant-garde writers, it has remained a model of a popular idea of artistic perfection. Even now the fundamental norms which determine this model are referred to not only by readers but by those critics who have remained faithful to the Positivist tradition and its principles of harmony and perfect proportions.

In Poland, where the first half of the 19th century produced the *gawęda* (yarn) and the loosely structured novels of Kraszewski, Jeż and other authors of the 1830–1860 period, the principles of Positivist aesthetics seem to have rather specific foundations. A reaction against the classical conventions of the novel, as was the case in France, could not be expected here, since in Poland this genre was to mature only in the era of Positivism. Important also was the fostering of the French tradition as opposed to the great Russian novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevski which mostly shocked the élite, as did the new “immoral” naturalist novel, constructed according to outlandish tastes. Those who strove for a “well-composed” novel envisaged an artistic novel, with a view to ennoble this genre which in Poland had remained far behind poetry and drama. Paul Bourget’s defence of Balzac’s model bears therefore no resemblance to the situation, since in France this attitude was clearly conservative.

Orzeszkowa’s Literary Consciousness

Out of the three most outstanding novelists of the Positivist period, Eliza Orzeszkowa seems to have represented it best, for she remained faithful both to its social and philosophical ideals and to its aesthetics. *O powieściach T. T. Jeża...* (1879), a document of her literary consciousness, presents views which would be readily applauded

⁵ See J. W. Beach, *The Twentieth Century Novel*. New York 1960.

ed by both Chmielowski and Taine.⁶ Orzeszkowa's model is similar to that of Balzac (Balzac and Shakespeare were Taine's ideals), even though like most Positivist critics, with the exception of Chmielowski, she was not an admirer of *The Human Comedy*. Of course it is not surprising that Balzac's novels, from which Zola's new realism originated, and which were always thought to be immoral and lack ideological fervour, could not be a model to Orzeszkowa, for her prose was clearly didactic. However, it would be a mistake to consider that her views on composition expounded in the essay on Jeż derived from Hugo's novels even though Orzeszkowa thought highly of them. Furthermore, this divergence was in no way accidental. When referring to Polish and foreign literary traditions the Positivists were most concerned with the ideological and secondly with the intellectual values of a given work, and they formulated their aesthetic postulates unaware of the historical sources of these conventions. In fact what they esteemed most were realistic forms of narrative. This was what permitted Orzeszkowa to write with emotion about the patriotic and intellectual values of the works of Jeż or Kraszewski and to extol the typical and realistic character sketches, even though she would certainly not approve of Jeż's confession that he "purposefully follows a chronological order and it is very convenient because you don't have to rack your brains about the construction of the novel."⁷

The important role assigned by Orzeszkowa to the principles disregarded by Jeż was a way of consciously upgrading this underestimated genre. In the introductory paragraphs of her essay we find the following embittered words:

"From among all intellectuals, the novelist is perhaps best known to the public, most loved and best able to impress both hearts and minds, but aesthetic and scholarly criticism has allotted to him the lowest grade in the intellectual hierarchy."⁸

⁶ An exhaustive analysis of this essay is to be found in M. Żmigrodzka's *Orzeszkowa*, vol. 1: *Młodość pozytywizmu (Positivism in Its Youth)*, Warszawa 1965, p. 289 seq.

⁷ Quoted from: M. Ostrowska, *T. T. Jeż (Zygmunt Milkowski). Życie i twórczość (His Life and His Work)*, Kraków 1936, p. 256.

⁸ E. Orzeszkowa, *O powieściach T. T. Jeża z rzutem oka na powieść w ogóle. Studium (On Jeż's Novels with Some Remarks on the Novel in General)*, [in:] *Polska krytyka literacka (1880-1918). Materiały (Polish Literary Criticism. Texts)*, vol. 3, Warszawa 1959, p. 122.

This is why Orzeszkowa is firmly opposed to all spontaneity which makes light of rational and thoughtful work. According to her specific understanding of the indirect nature of narrative prose, the novelist should combine the efforts of a scholar and an artist; he ought to interpret facts and shape them into a work of art. In the rules which she proposes, Orzeszkowa unites both intellectual and aesthetic elements on the level of the rational logic of causality and correlated problems:

“In a word, the novel must not only imitate but also create. It imitates that which everyone can see, but in order to express beauty and truth, which are not perceived by all, it orders and unites them so that they achieve aesthetic and philosophical harmony of tones and shapes, of resemblances and contrasts, of causes and effects.”⁹

Orzeszkowa elaborates these general lines by explaining the two key ideas of her theory: concept and composition. Both of them illustrate well the already mentioned tendency of Positivist aesthetics to imitate drama, considered to be a perfect model of disciplined composition and the best transmitter of the ideological and intellectual message. Furthermore, the ideal novel must combine causality and aesthetic regularity with the principle of realistic observation in a harmonious way. Therefore the concept of the novel will consist of a dramatic conflict taken from life, though we are told that the writer has to notice and choose meaningful situations which illustrate more general trends, and must transform this into a rational and harmonious whole. This observation has to be carried out by a well-educated person who is aware of certain patterns in life and who knows what to look for and how to associate facts. Orzeszkowa believes that a rational attitude towards life will “cause the substance and the form to emerge together,” and the author will avoid the dangers of abstract moralizing on the one hand, and on the other – pretty pictures with no philosophical depth, which only “tickle the imagination” and “arouse the senses.”

If we tried to find Orzeszkowa's place in the symptomatic antinomy of the traditional realistic novel, oscillating between a mimetic observation of life and its rationalized image, submitted to certain principles of interpretation or to ideological postulates, then

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 125.

Orzeszkowa would represent the second tendency. The first, if applied consistently, had to lead to a non-selective narrative and meant abandoning logical selection to include a complex whole, along with its contradictions and chance elements, but all this was quite contrary to the model suggested by Orzeszkowa: "A keen perception will be of no or of little help if we do not understand what we perceive and cannot choose or combine."¹⁰

From this point of view, the role attributed to composition is also symptomatic. The way it is supposed to give the concept an artistic form shows quite plainly that philosophical and aesthetic principles are considered more important than a faithful picture of the world:

"Composition consists in arranging the elements of the concept, in abandoning those which might disrupt the harmony of the work, and harmonizing the others."¹¹

Another more specific requirement formulated by Orzeszkowa is that the value of the novel should depend on the "gradation of effects" and the realism of the presentation, on the conflict being typical (Taine's principle of the "importance of a chosen feature"), and on the fact that the idea may be concluded from the drama. In effect this is the typical compromise within the classic form of the novel: the starting-point of the concept is the observation of life, controlled by the presupposed hierarchy of the importance of particular elements, and the composition traces the natural course of events, but it must follow the rules of causality and take into account the conventional laws concerning its reception by the readers (rising action). In short, Orzeszkowa's aim was to instruct and educate while providing an agreeable pastime. An advocate of the "well-composed" novel, which was to respect the classic rules of choice, harmony and proportion, she remained faithful to the thesis novel but retained the language of artistic prose.

The Apparent Non-Interference

When setting out to write *Nad Niemnem*, Orzeszkowa was fully aware of her artistic aims, and what is more, she assumed that her

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 127.

work would be outstanding.¹² And indeed this was how contemporary and future critics saw the novel. Even the exacting Stanisław Brzozowski, wary of highly reputed works, has remarked that *Nad Niemnem* was “one of the most beautiful Polish books”.¹³ The novel gained even more splendour when it was compared to Mickiewicz’s epic *Pan Tadeusz* and was called a masterpiece, and even today it is considered to be Orzeszkowa’s greatest achievement. When one recalls the controversial reception of Prus’ novel *Lalka* and of many other prominent works, it is natural to question why *Nad Niemnem* was at once said to be a masterpiece. And so it is worthwhile taking a closer look at the artistic craftsmanship of its author.

Let us begin with the narration. Chmielowski thus expressed his enthusiasm:

“The author, following the principle of the realistic approach, does not present a traditional, subjective analysis of the characters, and does not say herself what goes on in the minds of her heroes, but having chosen the right moment she makes use of the dialogue and of the relations between her characters to show their personality.”¹⁴

This method of writing was then called “objective” and was considered to be one of the main features of realistic art. But what are the nature and the limits of this much commended non-interference?

The story opens with the account of a quasi-observer, who appears to be watching from a chosen point the surrounding area and the approaching figures of Marta and Justyna. This way of introducing a story was by no means new: Orzeszkowa had employed it in her earlier works, and it was often used by novelists after 1830.¹⁵ The point was not to limit the omniscience of the narrator, but to create the illusion of a direct contact with the characters and the world to which they belonged. Therefore any induction

¹² See her letter to Leopold Méyet dated 19 XI 1866 in: E. Orzeszkowa, *Listy zebrane* (Collected Letters), vol. 2, Warszawa 1955, p. 31.

¹³ S. Brzozowski, *Współczesna powieść i krytyka literacka* (The Contemporary Novel and Literary Criticism), Warszawa 1971, p. 99.

¹⁴ P. Chmielowski, *Powieści społeczne Elizy Orzeszkowej* (E. Orzeszkowa's Social Novels), [in:] *Pisma krytycznoliterackie*, vol. 1, p. 405.

¹⁵ See A. Martuszevska, *Pozycja narratora w powieściach tendencyjnych Elizy Orzeszkowej* (The Position of the Narrator in Orzeszkowa's Thesis Novels), Gdańsk 1970, p. 113 seq.

was only a matter of appearance, since not only did the conclusions often go beyond the implications of the premisses, but they were assumed to be absolute truths, in no way qualified by the somewhat unusual position of the observer. Orzeszkowa's way of looking at this matter was based on the conviction that only a person with a thorough knowledge of the world can make proper use of his observations.

The author's control over the story is clearly visible in the introductory dialogue between the two women, which plays the role of the exposition. It contains no incidental or chance material—most of the information is significant; it defines the social standing of the two women and provides an indication as to the main issue of the story in so far as it is connected with the confrontation of Marta's and Justyna's destinies.

This interplay of controlled observation and discreet generalizations, which complete or sum up what has been remarked, is a feature of the narrative strategy of the first two chapters, where the main characters of the novel are introduced. Of course in this way the descriptions, which are static by nature, can be made more lively, especially since they tend to be very long towards the beginning of the novel, as was usually the case at that time; and besides, this has a way of increasing the suspense. Nevertheless, with the exception of secondary figures, the author is not content with only pointing to the right line of reasoning, for in chapter 3 Benedykt's character sketch is direct, detailed, and exceeds the capacity of the observer. Therefore the method of the indirect presentation of features commended by Chmielowski is only a kind of introduction, after which the narrator lays the foundations of a progressive line of reasoning. She begins in the traditional way by making Benedykt represent the social group of which he is a member (the significant expression: "he belonged to...") and giving him a share in the vicissitudes of the 1863 generation, with a view to shed light on his present situation by means of a short outline of his life story. However, it must be said that even here the author makes sure that while characterizing and referring to the past she not only makes a display of reasoning but also illustrates her generalizations with a visual presentation.

The narration is basically a classic example of a story told by an

omniscient narrator, who proceeds from general laws to particular cases. This scientific tendency is at times supplemented by the desire to make the observation more credible: this is done by limiting the number of *a priori* statements and making room for conjectures and suggestions, though these do not give the reader much freedom of interpretation.

Motivating the retrospection by reporting the actual thoughts of the characters is yet another proof of the fact that the author is not consequent in limiting the omniscience of the narrator. However, even though these thoughts are at times recorded as a stream of consciousness, she clearly subjects them to the predominant method of generalization and reasoning.

In general terms, the entire narrative of *Nad Niemnem* is balanced between keeping up the appearances of observation and the ever-present desire to explain its meaning. So on the one hand the author has a predilection for indirect characterization by describing movements, gestures, and ways of behaving, and on the other hand her narration is iterative, this allowing her to associate all the events which have a common subject and motivation, and to alternate objective information with interpretation. Orzeszkowa is not concerned with fleeting emotions but with steady feelings, typical of a given person or in a given situation.

The supremacy of the narrator in supplying a meaning can be seen in the verification of the information contained in a behaviourist description such as the following:

Her hands were trembling as she leant against the table and you could almost hear her heart beating faster than usual. She was not pretending: she *really* was very weak and upset.

The narrator also speaks up when he considers the opinions of the characters in the story to be wrong, using a counter-argument to stress the difference between what they believe to be true and "objective" reality. If necessary, he may also pass a direct judgment. Finally, his aphorisms serve as an explanation for individual experiences.

This same inclination to control and subject facts to more important ends can be traced in the dialogues. As Chmielowski pointed

out, they form the basis of implied, indirect generalizations, and, being numerous, they play an important part in the narrative strategy as a whole. The way in which the dialogue is worked into the story as well as its structure are both chosen deliberately.

As a general rule, each dialogue is a series of contrasting true statements and fallacies, and the author makes it quite clear which side is right. Although only a few of the characters have the constant privilege of moralizing, in every discussion one of the sides has views which are similar to or identical with those of the author. In addition to the preparatory function of the narration, an important role is played by both the construction of each utterance and the relation between the two contexts.

In the first case, the sanctioned views are characterized by a factual, inductive line of reasoning, whose logic prevails over the expressive and self-presentation elements. The rejected views, on the contrary, are based on arguments which prove worthless when confronted with the philosophical and moral norms of the novel and with the reader's assumed set of values.

Secondly, following the rules of the traditional novel, the general principle of the semantics of the dialogue, based on a criss-cross of several contexts, has been applied in a superficial way. While only that which is said by one of the speakers is important, the rest serves as a means of presenting the characters, and its role in the construction of the discussion basically consists in provoking counter-arguments and maintaining the principal line of reasoning, which is in fact a monologue.

Manipulating the dialogues and making them play an important part in the general semantic structure of the novel, provides favourable conditions for moralizing and for using the characters to comment on what is happening. Even though the realistic method of individualization prevents over-simplifications, one cannot help but remark that one of the main characters, Witold Korczyński, assumes too often the role of the author's *porte-parole* and becomes a stereotyped "positive hero." Even when parting with the girl he loves, he prefers to demonstrate public spirit rather than express his personal feelings, and this of course is in keeping with the objectives of the novel.

Finally, the story-telling is characterized by a studied distribution

of emotive elements, such as the sanctification of work in the fields¹⁶ and the poetic conception of nature and of the people of the Niemen country, or, on the other hand, the use of suitable disparaging expressions when there is cause for disapproval.

The Logical Structure of the Novel

We began by characterizing the way the story is told, in order to show that already in this aspect the non-interference so much acclaimed by Orzeszkowa's contemporaries was in fact seldom observed. However, the real proof of the author having full control over the ideological and intellectual message of her novel is above all the way in which the world of the novel has been constructed. From this point of view, *Nad Niemnem* is a perfect realization of the author's theoretical views concerning the logic of causality and the harmonious correlation of all the elements of the world presented in the novel. Orzeszkowa puts into practice both efficiently and consistently the postulated principle of dramatizing the main plot, which here is the story of the love between Justyna and Jan. An analysis of her constructing devices shows the author's concern that the unfolding plot should arouse the reader's interest, and also her eagerness to adapt the distribution of roles and the development of the conflict to her ideology.

The structure of *Nad Niemnem* is marked by several tendencies which are characteristic of the period. Apart from the logically motivated concatenation of events and their correlation on the level of synchronous occurrence, the symmetrical structure of each of the three volumes and the preference given to illustrative scenes both deserve a mention. Even though the novel was an ambitious attempt at creating a social panorama, Orzeszkowa spaced the events of the novel over a period of only two months and out of this not more than ten days (2–4 in each volume) are presented in detail. Consequently a dramatized description of the present, where necessary completed by character sketches and retrospection, definitely prevails over the narrator's account whose role is to interpret these facts.

¹⁶ See J. Cieślowski, "Nad Niemnem" Elży Orzeszkowej. *Rozważania nad semiotyką mitów religijnych* (Orzeszkowa's "The Niemen Country." *On the Semiotics of Religious Myths*). "Pamiętnik Literacki", 1969, fasc. 2.

Symptomatic also in this essentially panoramic novel is the lack of episodes not connected with the main story or with the underplots. The word "epic," used to describe Orzeszkowa's novel, must therefore be looked upon as a metaphor. Despite the epic descriptions in the novel, which are to make the people of the Niemen country an integral part of their surroundings, the principles according to which it is constructed have been subjected to the dramatic progression of the plot and to Taine's principle of the unity of action, although the correlation between the main plot and the underplots is above all based on the unity of theme. In this way Orzeszkowa realizes both the aesthetic ideal of the "well-composed" novel and the ideological ambitions of the Positivists, by dramatizing the idea, just as she herself had postulated.

In the same way the characters form a closed and compact group. It has already been noticed that the main principle in their construction is the recurrence of movements, gestures and words, which cause the characters to become imprinted on our minds, and this is in conformity with the rules of the classic novel.¹⁷ However, Orzeszkowa has a specific way of merging the characters to form a whole where each element throws light on the others. This tendency, already present in the traditional novel, is clearly visible here because of the technique of parallels and contrasts. There are, however, correlations not only between sequences of events, but also between certain sets of features of the characters. Correspondences between these features are stressed far more than relations between the characters, whose existence depends upon being contrasted with one another. In this way their qualities become more distinct, and thanks to the evaluating nature of these confrontations they can be judged in the light of the set of values proposed by the novelist.

This method of introducing contrasts is also a favourite way of handling group scenes, where two sets of characters are placed side by side. And just as the contrasts serve to make certain features stand out, so the resemblances help to create "typical" characters.

The world of *Nad Niemnem* is therefore a structure with clearly marked contours and an unequivocal distribution of values. The

¹⁷ See J. Krzyżanowski, *Epos Orzeszkowej (Orzeszkowa's Epic)*, [in:] *W kręgu wielkich realistów (On Great Realist Writers)*, Kraków 1962, p. 189.

author's awareness of her aims can be traced not only in the way the story is told and in the superimposed symbolic commentary, but it also determines the whole structure of the world presented in the novel and assures that it is well-ordered and harmonious. An arbitrary ideological attitude was therefore prerequisite for the novel to be considered a masterpiece. *Nad Niemnem* has remained faithful to the classic form of the genre.

Transl. by *Agnieszka Kukulska*