

# Andrzej Goreń

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## "W kręgu Skamandra", Janusz Stradecki, Warszawa 1977 : [recenzja]

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Poland, which might be considered as a hybrid form resulting from the interrelations between the novel and the prose poem, and combining elements of both.

Finally, with the last chapter: "Powieść młodopolska – miejsce w historii" (The Novel of Young Poland—Its Place in History) the approach changes from the synchronic to the diachronic one: the novel of the period is located in the evolution of literature, in relation to both the 19th-century traditions of the novel and its forms in other national literatures of the time, as well as in relation to the later, 20th-century novel, which in its most valuable achievements owes a great deal to the tradition of Young Poland.

Sum. by *Ryszard Nycz*

Transl. by *Maria-Bożenna Fedewicz*

Janusz Stradecki, **W kręgu Skamandra (The Skamander Group)**, PIW, Warszawa 1977, pp. 384.

Systematic research into literary culture was taken up quite recently in Poland, but its traditions go back to the middle of the 19th century. For a few years now in various university research centres, and especially in the Department of Studies on Literary Culture at the Institute of Literary Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, research workers have been collecting documentation and discussing methodology.

This research does not concern isolated literary works but the functioning of literature in social consciousness, and this depends on many factors: on the writer, the role he plays in culture, his various activities (literary groups, authors' unions), on the public institutions which influence the development of literature, and also on the media (publishing houses, the press, literary soirées). Another important factor is the reader who is at the receiving end, his social status and his literary and political background. This reader is a real person, he is part of some culture, which influences the way he interprets the message of any literary work. And so we can say that the object of researches into literary culture is the actual functioning of literature which is dependent on the processes of communication characteristic of a given culture.

This approach inspired Janusz Stradecki's book, an outstanding work among the critical publications of the last few years. It contains a great deal of valuable information on the literary culture of the inter-war period. It is original from the methodological point of view and very well documented. The author traces the history of one of the most important literary groups of that time, the group called Skamander, and examines its cultural role. This question is of considerable significance for the literature of the 20th century, for the literary groups which were formed in the first half of the century were based on completely different principles and had other aims than previously—they were now either centred round a programme or they were situational groups. The latter, and that includes Skamander, were set on appealing to the general public, and in fact their whole activity had this end in view.

In the first chapter of the book, entitled "Collective Biography of a Literary Group," the author points to the general methodological directions which should be followed when studying the history of a group and its transformations, and he also discusses the principles of selecting documents. He distinguishes three phases and four functions in the development of a literary group. The second chapter, entitled "Collective Biography of the Skamander Group," is devoted to the transformations and functions of Skamander.

The introductory phase, which precedes the formation of a group, in this case covers the years 1911–1918. The members of the future Skamander group are not yet aware of their common ideas, and at first they do not even know one another. At this time they start publishing their poetry in literary periodicals, and in the 1920's some of these poems will be taken to represent the poetics of the group. At this stage consolidation takes place round an integrating centre, namely the students' magazine "Pro Arte et Studio." There the group starts to form, with a common attitude towards the work of other poets. Their attitude is basically a negative one—they are against the main existing trends. This is best seen in Lechoń's poem *Herostrates* and Tuwim's *Wiosna* (*The Spring*). The discussion provoked by these poems concerned not only poetry, but also social and political issues. It formed the views of future members of Skamander. Stradecki provides a great deal of documentation on this subject.

The second, integrative phase covers the years 1918–1926/27.

This is the period when the poets come together in a group and the group becomes an established institution. Four of its members publish their first volumes of poetry. The group is finally formed round the "Pro Arte et Studio" periodical, and Stradecki points out that at this stage the poets work out a system of values which integrates the group.

At the beginning of this period the café Picador is a meeting-place of the poets and a new means of communicating with the public. There the poets are able to come into direct contact with their readers. The fact that they appeared together and manifested the same views helped make their listeners realize that the group had become integrated, had common aims and held similar views on poetry and politics. Their political views were particularly well defined. The poets of the Picador were backed by the political camp of Piłsudski. They glorified its members, combatted its adversaries, and began implementing the cultural policy which was to be continued when Piłsudski's camp assumed the reins of government.

Their literary programme, however, was somewhat vague: advocates of democracy and populism, they were against moralizing and patriotic involvement, and were thus breaking away from tradition. That is why initially it was possible for the Picador poets to have close relations with modernist movements, and in particular with futurism.

Stradecki tells us that this association was a result not only of the fact that they had similar views, but also of the tactics employed by the Picador poets, who aimed at attracting the greatest possible number of readers. This is the reason why they approved of the way the futurists provoked scandals and shocked the public. This led to joint appearances as literary soirées, joint demonstrations, protest letters directed to the authorities. Later, when the Skamander group had secured a position for itself, the two groups parted company. The futurists were too modernistic and too radical for the Skamander poets and their readers—the bourgeois élite allied to the ruling camp.

The group's short partnership with the expressionists was also only a matter of tactics, for there were great differences between them, and they stood for two different models of poetry. The poets of the Picador for a time did not have their own magazine

("Pro Arte" had ceased to appear) and so they tried to extend their influence onto the expressionists' periodical "Zdrój."

When the group was formally established in 1919 and the following year started publishing its monthly "Skamander," its members pursued a common policy: they chose the poets who would contribute to their periodical, their books were published by one publishing-house (Ignis), they had a definite say in the translation of foreign works. Also the press was under their influence, especially those periodicals which were connected with Piłsudski's camp ("Kurier Polski," "Naród"); they launched popular magazines ("Pani," "To To"), worked for various cabarets, and published their own literary weekly ("Wiadomości Literackie"). This weekly was edited by Grydzewski, whose talent for organizing enabled the Skamander poets to conquer the publishing market and influence the media.

The third, disintegrative phase covers the period from 1926/27 to 1942. At first the poets still function as a group, and in fact they exercise an even greater influence over the media; they now publish a second weekly, "Cyrulik Warszawski." They consolidate their position of leading poetical group in Poland, and thus have a decisive say in the formation of literary opinion. They no longer appear before the public at literary soirées, as they did in the Picador, but form an exclusive circle of poets who meet at their table in the Ziemiańska café. The literary group soon becomes a literary coterie.

In the 1930's the group begins to break up. This is caused by the growing ideological differences between its members, as the political climate in the country becomes more turbulent. The National Radicals Camp organizes a campaign against the poets, and there are clashes and conflicts within the group. In the end Lechoń and Wierzyński leave "Wiadomości Literackie" and Skamander. Stradecki considers this to be the unofficial break-up of the group—the official break-up was to take place in exile during the second world war, also for political reasons.

This chronological outline of the group's activities is followed by considerations on the functioning of the group. Stradecki discusses four of its aspects; their poetry, their activity in extending their sphere of influence, defending their position, and establishing a social circle.

As far as their poetry is concerned, the fact that they belonged to a group was of little consequence, for they did not ever formulate a programme. They were able to promote their common interests by appearing together at literary soirées, by organizing demonstrations, keeping in touch with foreign writers, influencing the repertoire of Warsaw's theatres, standing up for discriminated writers, combatting censorship, etc. Defending their position, the poets fought their political opponents: nationalists, left-wingers, and radicals.

The collective biography of the Skamander group is complemented by a pioneer study of the group's particular activities. In the chapter "The Social Role of the Literary Soirée," Stradecki stresses the importance of the public appearances for the formation of literary opinion. He analyzes the texts of unpublished lectures which were up till now always overlooked in critical studies, but which are an important element of literary propaganda. He also provides a complete list of the Skamander's soirées.

Stradecki distinguishes two periods in the activity of the Skamander poets on stage. The first period covers their appearances up to 1924. On the whole the members of the group did not ever appear outside Warsaw, where they could be seen in the hall of the Warsaw Hygienic Society. They made their appearances both as a group and individually, but never together with poets from other groups. In the years 1924–1927 the soirées were organized sporadically and for a selected audience only (Sala Pompejańska of Euro-pejski Hotel).

In the chapter entitled "The Social Role of Satire," Stradecki studies the group's ties with the political life in Poland and the gradual evolution of their poetry from an apology of the political ideas of the ruling camp to a satirical poetry devoid of political and social overtones when they severed their relations with the ruling camp.

Stradecki's book, whose contents have only been briefly outlined here, is innovatory from the point of view of methodology and is richly documented. It will surely inspire further research into the sociology of the literary groups of the inter-war period.

Sum. by *Andrzej Goreń*  
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