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The Interwar Period That Wasn't: Alternative Histories of the Twentieth Century in the Prose of Jacek Dukaj

Dwudziestolecie międzywojenne, którego nie było – alternatywne historie XX wieku w prozie Jacka Dukaja

Abstract: The article analyzes the creation of alternative histories using the examples of *Xavras Wyżryn* [Xavras Wyżryn] and *Lód* [Ice]. The focus of the interpretations will be on the question of why this particular period was subjected to counterfactual processes. In *Xavras*, the first half of the twentieth century is presented as a sequence of events resulting from the still ongoing war of 1920, that is, as an effect of human actions; in *Ice*, on the other hand, the events are caused by a meteorite impact, that is, they result from natural factors. In both works, 1918–1939 is not a period marked by war and is not decisive for the development of the Polish state. In this article, I will discuss the methods of constructing fictional worlds and answer the fundamental questions about the relationship between chance and the supreme law built into history, especially the juxtaposition of ideas of modernity and the growing totalitarianism. First, however, I will focus on the new ways of interpreting culturally mythologized spaces, logical and philosophical theories, and interpersonal relations through fictional alternative worlds.

Keywords: modern literature, alternative histories, interwar period, Jacek Dukaj, fantasy literature, modernity

Abstrakt: W artykule postawiono pytanie, dlaczego Jacek Dukaj w fantastyce literackiej poddał zabiegom kontrfaktycznym okres dwudziestolecia międzywojennego. W powieści *Xavras Wyżryn* Dukaj przedstawia pierwszą połowę XX wieku jako ciąg wydarzeń wynikający z toczącej się wciąż wojny 1920 roku, a więc jako efekt działań człowieka, z kolei w powieści *Lód* – świata po katastrofie tunguskiej, czyli zderzeniu meteorytu z Ziemią, a zatem jako efekt działań natury. W żadnym z utworów dwudziestolecie nie istnieje jako osobna epoka. W artykule szczególną uwagę poświęcono nowym możliwościom interpretacji kulturowo zmitologizowanych dziejów i przemian nowoczesności, możliwościom uzyskanym m.in. dzięki konwergencji historii, która w powieści niezaistniała (wydarzeń takich jak rewolucja październikowa, dwie wojny światowe) i wersji wydarzeń historycznych ukazanej w ramach świata fikcji. Skoncentrowano się na istotnych dla Dukaja pytaniach o relację między przypadkowością a nadrzędnymi prawami historii, w pierwszym rzędzie na – uzyskanych dzięki opisaniu fikcyjnych, alternatywnych światów – nowych możliwościach interpretacji

teorii filozoficznych, a także relacji międzyludzkich. W rozważaniach istotny okazał się konflikt między ideami nowoczesności a przybierającym na sile totalitaryzmem. Podjęto też próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie, dlaczego pierwsza połowa XX wieku, a zwłaszcza dwudziestolecie międzywojenne, pozostaje w centrum zainteresowania zarówno literatury i sztuki, jak i refleksji humanistycznej.

Słowa klucze: literatura współczesna, historie alternatywne, dwudziestolecie międzywojenne, Jacek Dukaj, nowoczesność

The creation of alternative history is a phenomenon that can be observed not only in modern literature, but in fact has a history of its own. This is true in particular for the twentieth century, especially in many variations of historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon, 1988), but also in novels that fall within the scope of political fiction, science fiction, or the generally understood category of literary fantasy fiction.

Two of Jacek Dukaj's novels: *Xavras Wyżryn* (Dukaj, 1997) and *Ice* [*Lód*] (Dukaj, 2007),[1] which shall be discussed hereafter – with particular focus on the latter – are counterfactual, and both are constructed according to the principles of building alternative worlds with the freedom typical of fantasy literature. The historical outline of this prose variety would certainly exceed the space of an academic article, so I will only refer to a few valuable publications: Collins (1990), Hellekson (2001), Gallagher (2018), and Lemann (2019). What is most important: neither of the Dukaj's novels provides any hints in the preface, explicit comments to the reader to uncover the rules of the creative process, as it sometimes happens. Therefore, contrary to historiographic metafiction that, to the contrary, reveals the discursive, structure-based, and volatile nature of our cognition, Dukaj's world is built, let me underscore this again, according to the convention of fantasy literature and utilizing methods of narrative fiction, such as the past tense and indicative mood. What is more: in *Ice*, basic issues

[1] All quotations from Jacek Dukaj's *Ice* are from the forthcoming translation by Ursula Phillips (Head of Zeus, London, November 2025); the page numbers, however, refer to the Polish edition of *Lód* (2007). I would like to acknowledge the translator for providing me with the passages from her upcoming English translation.

related to logic, including the logic of history, but also to politics, existence, and ontology are set inside fiction.

Interestingly, which is also at the core of my considerations, the time presented in both of Dukaj's novels in question covers the period of 1918–1939, but the interwar period cannot be constituted there for the simple reason that the time frame delimiting this short but important period simply does not exist in the fictional reality: there is no World War II in *Xavras*, and there is no world war at all in *Ice*. At this point, a question arises as to why the author chooses this specific time period and refers to it, even though fiction allows him to conceive of the temporal course of counterfactual worlds as entirely independent of the binding calendar, not to mention historical events. Therefore, why is the first half of the twentieth century (in *Xavras Wyżryn*, the covered period is longer) subjected to counterfactual experiments? First of all, for Poland the interwar period was the time of sudden and complex social and national transformation related to regaining independence, but speaking more broadly, the time of technology development, and explosion of new trends in literature, art, and architecture. It was also a time of new theories in philosophy and logic, new concepts of the individual, and also of prevailing historiosophical concepts, particularly including catastrophic ones, as well as nationalist ideas in the 1930s. Finally, we know that it was the First World War that more profoundly than ever made the contemporary philosophers realize the existence and the role of the negative side of human nature, thus ushering new ways of thinking, characteristic of the interwar period.

It is also of great importance that the worlds of the two of Dukaj's novels are located in the not-so-distant past, which is manageable for communicative memory through the available intergenerational and communal experience of the past. I understand communicative memory according to Aleida Assmann as memory that is available for the next three–four generations for communities in mutual contact (Assmann, 2013). At the same time, the period in question is inevitably perceived in hindsight, especially by the older generation, with an awareness of the propaganda schemes imposed by the governments of the PRL (People's Republic of Poland). In such system the October Revolution was

presented exclusively as a positive breakthrough in history, while the Polish–Soviet War of 1920 had been all but erased from the official community memory and history books. In the generational memory, however, references to those times were usually the antithesis. The official cultural memory has been undoubtedly changing, especially after the transformation of 1989. Nevertheless, even form the contemporary perspective, the period is characterized by cultural constructs, mythologizations, as well as palimpsest nature and fragmentation of various overlapping images.

The story of *Xavras Wyżryn*, published in 1997, begins in 1996. This novel is therefore contemporary, but the turn of events is of great importance, as it causes a complete transformation of history as we know it. Here, the Polish–Soviet War of 1920 ends with three atomic bombs dropped on Kyiv, Warsaw and Leningrad. As a result, Poland is defeated and becomes a Soviet Republic utterly dependent on Russian power. The Soviet Union (also called Russia in the novel, although the Red Army takes part in the battles) expands to the German border. As a result of irreversible changes, the inhabitants of the bombed areas become mutants, and Stalin dies only in 1982, followed by "an apocalypse in installments" (Dukaj, 1997: 36). In 1996, Europe had already been at war for eight years, a war that takes place in the territory of Poland and, in general, all Slavic nations. Naturally, the Second World War had not happened. Neither are there any technological transformations characteristic of the period after the First World War in this world. If they appear, they are selective so that the reader is convinced about the randomness that governs technology and industry development. Hence, the 1990s in the Polish regions are characterized by an obsolete economy, with horse-drawn tractors and carts dominating the roads, as well as cars designed by Stalin. However, there is television, a network service, and auto-tracking. Interestingly, the American journalist Ian Smith proves to be the best equipped with technological developments, owning a computer, a night-vision device, a satellite connection, and other devices at his disposal. Unlike the Eastern power, the United States is the power and beneficiary of technological progress.

The narrative is told mainly from the perspective of Smith, a pacifist and the only positive protagonist in the novel, for whom the war represents pure evil. The same cannot be said of the main protagonist, Xavras Wyżryn, who fights for Poland's independence, but does so as an advocate of terrorism and brutality through vile methods. At the novel's end, he is the victim of an atomic bomb contributing to catastrophic devastation. Even though his death bears itraces of suicidal sacrifice, he is far from being a Winkelried or a *kamikaze* because he does not save anything but only increases the damage of the war.

The issues raised in *Xavras Wyżryn* may have acted as an inspiration for *Ice* (2007), which is main reference theme of my paper. What is worth noting: first, in both novels, counterfactuality mainly refers to the first half of the twentieth century. Second, both the novels problematize the concepts of modernity progress and totalitarian rule.[2] Third, the novel's background reveals an elaborate sphere of specific details of everyday life in the alternative world. Fourth, geopolitical divisions play an important role in the novel. Fifth, the individual's problems and their role in history is revealed.

Ice's complex narrative is set during the years 1924–1930, thus beginning sixteen years after the Tunguska event that blocked history. As can be concluded from the statements in the novel, the course of history up to the said meteor airburst was generally accepted: Poland remains divided; the Sigismund Column stands in Warsaw… However, after the catastrophe, everything changed, the reality in Russia froze, and the ice gradually spread to other areas, including Warsaw, which remained dependent on Russia. The frozen areas are traversed by "Gleissen" [in Polish *lute*], mysterious creatures, probably intelligent, bringing destruction, icing, and death, but are rich in "tungetitum," an element offering a chance for industrial development.

[2] *Język modernizmu* (Nycz, 1997). Without going into details, I would like to point out that I place modernity in the period from the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries up to the 1960s. Here, I follow R. Nycz and his conclusions as presented in his books.

As if it were not enough, the catastrophe freezes history in its various meanings: progress, revolution, or generally understood transformation. As a result, the First World War does not happen, and the Habsburg Empire is ruled by Archduke Franz Ferdinand, who has not died in Sarajevo because there was no assassination attempt. Above all, the October Revolution does not transpire, no Soviet Union is established, so – logically enough – no Polish–Soviet War of 1920 takes place, with Warsaw belonging to the Russian Empire and the result of Poland's partitions continuing. Civilization does not develop; there are no traces of progress or transformations characteristic of the period. There is no modernity (in its many meanings), with the reality stuck at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The story begins on July 14, 1924, when the main protagonist, Benedykt Gierosławski, is approached by officers from the Ministry of Winter and urgently sent by the Trans-Siberian Railway to his exiled father, who has become the revered Father Frost in Siberia. The only information given is some mysterious details about the father's ability to communicate with the "Gleissen," which proves to be a priceless ability to help save the region from their rule. One can see that the father and son figures trigger the clichés of the Romantic hero, the lonely exile, and the liberator.

The main protagonist, Benedykt, is a mathematician, a logician (though also a gambler and not necessarily a morally pure person), who collaborates with Jan Łukasiewicz and Tadeusz Kotarbiński, known to have founded the famous Lviv and Warsaw School of Mathematics (in real world of course). The character of Kotarbiński, a philosopher and, in Dukaj's novel, also an inventor, plays a vital role. According to his authentic hypotheses, bivalent logic cannot be reconciled with the concept of freedom and must therefore be rejected in the name of freedom. According to his theory, judgments about future predicates are neither true nor false; consequently, they are possible (possibility acts here as the third value). In icy Russia, not only history but also logic freezes and takes on a bivalent form, not only in the sense of an idea but also as a matter of the world, where there is only one truth. The reality of permafrost is metaphysical and epistemological in nature, based not

only on events frozen in truth (Dukaj, 2007: 27). Multi-valued logic, on the other hand, is present in Summer in the West of Europe. Summer corresponds to many views, historical transformations, progress, ideological pluralism, and a multitude of truths. There, the world is based on the principle of "perhaps" and many possible histories far from any form of necessity. The title *Ice* thus has a spatial, geographical, logical, and material meaning.

Modernity, if present at all in the territory covered by the Ice, takes a different form from the one we have become accustomed to in the twentieth century. What prevails is rather the negation of modernity's central assumption based on the "opposition between the mechanical causality of natural phenomena and the (supposed) 'logical rationality' of human action" (Toulmin, 2005: 185). In Dukaj's Russia, there are no prospects for electrification, inventions are met with resistance, there is no modern music, and no one will buy radios.

It is well known that in the real world, it was in the mid-1920s that modern art gained a voice, especially in its Art Deco variety. The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts was hosted in Paris in 1925, where the Soviet Union presented its exceptionally innovative pavilion. In Dukaj's icy Russia, however, the tendencies that led to an extreme version of the already developed style, which continued Art Nouveau, prevailed, as can be seen from the example of the paintings on the walls of the Ministry of War in Warsaw. Moreover, fashion is still imposed by the Romanovs. On the other hand, the Western fashion of the Summer is treated as scandalous, which refers both to hairstyles, evenly cut, boyish, as well as loose, and – above all – to short dresses worn without corsets, which prevailed in the contemporary Parisian fashion. Modern art does not exist at all. The architectural style is still that of the turn of the century. This is how the artificially heated garden in Irkutsk, which creates an illusion of summer, is presented in the style of extreme Art Nouveau. The stability and immutability of style here are equivalent to social oppression, of which at least a part of Russian society is aware Berman's (1983) analysis of Modernism in Russia should prove to be inspiring here.

Readers are reminded that they are dealing with a construct of fantasy literature and a counterfactual experiment. In the alternative world, there are phantoms of the actual interwar period: there are Polish literature and Polish writers, not only the earlier ones and highly praised at the time (such as Sienkiewicz), but also contemporary to the period: Ferdynand Ossendowski, Helena Mniszkówna, and others, although with already counterfactual book titles, for example:

> five novels by Wacław Sieroszewski printed here in Irkutsk, including his famous *Hoarfrost* (…) the reactivated *Homeland* published in Saint Petersburg, which included fragments of Stefan Żeromski's *That Will be the Day* as well as *Folks from Summer and Winter* by a certain Dąbrowska. (Dukaj, 2007: 44)

It is easy to conclude this is about portmanteau of *Ludzie stamtąd* [Folks from Over Yonder] and *Noce i dnie* [Nights and Days] stories and the novel written by Maria Dąbrowska in the interwar period, we have also a clear play on the meanings regarding *Przedwiośnie* [The Coming Spring] published in 1924 and dated 1925.

The impression of mutual infiltration of the actual and the counterfactual worlds is powerful, especially when it comes to casually mentioned assumptions about the chances of regaining Poland's independence:

> How many believe at all that Poland is something we can build, create, gain by force of arms, attain with our own hands and not thanks to the favorable dispensations of fate, to an auspicious configuration of the stars, to some fluky war between the Triple Alliance and the Entente, or thanks to the caprice of foreign powers into whose good graces we have to insinuate ourselves at any cost – or thanks simply to some magical force of History? (Dukaj, 2007: 544)

The central part of the narrative is about Benedykt Gierosławski's journey on the Trans-Siberian Railway to the Land of Ice. The goal is not only to find his exiled father but also, as it can be assumed, to free

the people of this part of the world from Winter. Finally Benedykt arrives in Irkutsk and finds his father. After the son's successful mission: resurrecting the father and unfreezing him, but also after his proper death, the thaw begins. The greatest triumph, however, does not belong to Benedykt, but to the inventor Nikola Tesla (the choice of name is undoubtedly deliberate) who, with the help of Kotarbiński's pump (just a quick reminder: the inspirer of multi-valued logic and thus the defender of the pluralistic summer), can destroy the Ice and bring spring.

However, contrary to expectations, the spring of 1928 and 1929 did not bring the changes, Poland did not regain its independence. Making matters worse, the multiplicity of truths contributes to the constant entropy and mixing of good and evil, truth and lies. In April of 1930, the war continued with the conquest of Europe by Imperial Russia. General chaos and lack of will give way to unending terror and hatred. Everything points to the conclusion that Summer cannot fully unfold in this part of the world; most likely, the Ice has grown too deep into the social consciousness, so the thaw brings no hope.

After the thaw – indeed, it is now the alternative world of the novel – Polish entrepreneurs established the independent United States of Siberia modeled on the United States of America, but one can also detect references to the United States of Europe which appeared in many both political and literary proposals at the time, with Warsaw often mentioned as the capital. (I agree here with the interesting statements made by T. Mizerkiewicz (2013)). Altered Siberia in Dukaj's *Ice* is also discussed by P. Czapliński (2016).

At the novel's end, there is an increasingly apparent attempt to change history: to freeze is the best way to guarantee its permanence. The United States of Siberia is being considered, but the predominant idea of Benedykt is to liberate Poland and then freeze it. Despite warnings, despite being cautioned against tyranny, he strives to pursue his own idea based on seemingly noble assumptions, the Gnostic-Romantic belief in the power of the individual capable of saving humanity. The only solution he sees is to freeze history again, but in a form he considers perfect. On the one hand, this project of freezing in time of the best version

of the world resembles Leibniz's theory of God creating the best of all possible worlds. On the other hand, such an imposed ideology is clearly reminiscent of totalitarianism.

Here, too, the role of the specific period in which the story takes place is revealed. It should be remembered that the period 1924–1930 was particularly intense and rich in events of great importance for the history of Poland (the May Coup of 1926, followed by the government of Piłsudski, who also appears as an important figure in Dukaj's novel). This was the time of constant disputes about the course of history, progress, the role of the nation, and the importance of the individual. At the turn of the twentieth century, there were still vital threats (catastrophism, fear of a cooling climate; here, indeed, as precursors to Dukaj's novel); in Poland: fear of the East, in its various meanings, but also a time of growing conviction about the untapped but still potentially existing great power of Poland. Needless to say, in the interwar period, especially in 1924–1925, the trend of historiosophical fantasy and the metaphysical-fantastic movement developed, strongly exposing individuals to their causal power. (I rely here on the typology proposed by Jerzy Kwiatkowski (1990)). Novels falling into these categories also eagerly combined the developed fantastic story with elements of philosophical treatise, as well as ethical and social problems (e.g., in Słonimski's *Torpeda czasu*, 1924). In Antoni Lange's *Miranda*, 1924, the main character also travels to Irkutsk. Later, he travels further and, unlike Gierosławski, not to the Land of Ice but to the City of the Sun, hoping still to bring independence to Poland. In addition, Lange's novel contains a clear concept of the Übermensch (Overhuman), which is also problematized in Dukaj's novels. The prose of the mid-1920s is mainly strongly characterized by catastrophism, structured in grotesque fantasy, and the struggle with the principles of modernity. The motif of history being changed by outstanding individuals appears in *Wesele hrabiego Orgaza* [The Wedding of Count Orgaz] 1925 by Roman Jaworski. As in Dukaj's novel, mental immobility, stagnation, and aversion to everything modern, are also perceived here as the main dangers to humanity. In Jaworski's work,

modernity, combined with the will to live and invent, becomes the driving force of history. The short stories of Aleksander Wat from the volume *Bezrobotny Lucyfer* [Unemployed Lucifer], 1927, have a similar approach. Last but not least, this was the period in which Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy) published his *Pożegnanie jesieni* [Farewell to Autumn] (1927) and *Nienasycenie* [Insatiability] (1930), thus contributing to the visionary-catastrophic trend. In fact, the historiosophical-catastrophic aspect is an important bridge here, and the Witkacy-style model of the novel is particularly close to Dukaj. Another comparison strikes the mind: the interwar period was the time when the trend of alternative histories developed in popular literature (e.g., *Czandu* [Czandu] by Stefan Barszczewski, also in 1925!). It was recalled for the particularly valuable anthology by A. Haska and J. Stachowicz 2012. The authors note that in the fantastic and alternative prose of the interwar period: "the Poles became the leaders of united Europe, or even of the world, to which they were predestined by the tragic fate of their homeland and their great love of freedom" (Haska, Stachowicz, 2012: 159). This prose clearly shows how intense the yearning for Poland as a power with a solid international position was and how people imagined a Pole as the one that could overcome all the problems of the contemporary world. Finally, and perhaps the most importantly, in the novels of the interwar period, the role of improving the world is entrusted to individuals, usually of Polish origin. This can be seen in both *Xavras Wyżryn* and *Ice*. This exaggerated role of the individual, who believes in the power to change history by their own will, is marked by the word "I" that ends the latter of the two novels.

It is worth recalling that the story in *Ice* ends in 1930. This is clearly not a coincidence because the first decade of the 1930s brought about significant changes in the real world: the affirmation of the individual became associated not so much with freedom and individualism but sometimes with clear fascist tendencies and, above all (in literature) with warnings against terror and tyranny. In those years, modernity began to reveal its dark side, destructive potential, or, as Toulmin would say, to be blocked in its positive characteristics (Toulmin, 2005).

The question, then, arises: is the alternative world of Dukaj's novel created to show the relationship between modern ideas and the growing totalitarianism? And therefore, is the novel ultimately just an analysis of advancing totalitarianism and the risks associated with excessive individual power? One could wonder if, apart from the caution, there is a pessimistic view on the inevitable determinism, on the imperative of history, which, even in its alternative version showing abstract modernity, is just as dangerous and frightening. Interpreted in this way, *Ice* would have a distinctly pessimistic tone.

Let us remember, however, that in creating an alternative history, Dukaj deliberately builds a world that, although based on the principles of literary fiction, is still reminiscent of the world that existed in the not-so-distant past. Jerzy Jarzębski also notes this type of similarity in his book (Jarzębski, 2016). The counterfactual reality is organized in such a way that the turn of the 1920s and the 1930s would constantly push through what is counterfactual. Paradoxically, in creating such a narrative, the writer also activates the actual era, giving it the character of an apparent absence. This is because the reader is constantly reminded of the history known from historical records and culturally accessible memory. The perception of the counterfactual history thus causes a double suspension: on the one hand, there is the inclusion in the world of fiction, and on the other hand, there is a constant awareness of the past, of the specific actual history that keeps coming back from outside the world presented in the novel. Through these tricks, the past becomes both similar and dissimilar to the official record: the same and completely different. Such a narrative leads the reader to apply the *comparatio* principle: the juxtaposition of actual and fictional/counterfactual events, thus emphasizing the role of clichés, cultural discourses, political messages, and the methods of cultural memory formation. The author is concerned that the alternative world permeates the real world, with the two constantly interacting. This is an important solution that prevents the reader from closing off this interaction through a straightforward interpretation because it forces continuous stepping while reading, becoming aware of the discursive significance of modernity and the relative role of an individual.

Most important, however, is the interaction between the two worlds and the stepping resulting from the principle of counterfactual narration, which, in turn, follows the rules of modal logic, which is close to multi-valued logic (more about these phenomena in literature can be found in A. Łebkowska (2001)). Therefore, it can be assumed that the same method of constructing a counterfactual narrative brings the reader closer to the philosophy of Summer. However, it is different from the dangerous apathy and entropy that characterize the Ice-dependent areas, where the thaw does not bring the fulfillment of hopes. In other words, counterfactuality serves as a warning but is unnecessary to keep us in the pessimistic conviction of the inevitability of historical transformations or of dangerous domination of subject. It leaves an open space for creating and describing the world anew and functions as a warning against unambiguous interpretation of the past – typical of some sort of political and ideological discourse.

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