

## Foreign travels in “The Doll” by Bolesław Prus as a comment on the condition of 19th-century Poland

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The novel *Lalka* (1890, *The Doll* 1996) by Bolesław Prus is undoubtedly one of the most important works in the history of Polish literature. It links both the presentation of the Polish nation in the 19th century with its political, social and cultural aspects, but also shows the cause and effect relationships between the history of Europe and the creation of national identity and the fight for independence. Moreover, *The Doll* moves around the images of other countries, both European and distant ones, which constitute a crucial background for understanding the situation of Polish citizens in 19th-century Poland under the partitions (1795–1918). Prus does not directly portray the oppression of Poland by one of the invaders, the Russians, which was typical for 19th-century writers, because he did not want the preventive censorship of the time to cut out all the negative comments on Russian politics towards the Polish nation (Sobieraj 2011, 137).

The action of the novel takes place in the years 1878–1879. There are also retrospective scenes dating back to the year 1837 as well as comments on such events as the Revolution of 1848 or the January Uprising. The main character, Stanisław Wokulski, is the owner of a shop with different types of goods who is dedicated to his work. He is widowed and falls in love with a beautiful representative of the noble class, Izabela Łęcka. Prus depicts the clash between the progressive businessman Wokulski and the spoiled Izabela, the epitome of a typical impoverished representative of a noble class. Their relationship appears to be unsuccessful, but it becomes the background for the reader's observation of Polish society, the country and its history. Wokulski's adventures are interlaced with the diary of Ignacy Rzecki, Wokulski's employee, who perfectly and in a very detailed manner, portrays the difficult time for Poland as well as some historical events, putting them in an international context (travelling abroad and describing various figures and countries).

The idea of analysing the images of other countries in *The Doll* by Prus with the help of the concept of imagology is especially accurate here, due to the fact that the writer decided to present Poland oppressed by other countries (Russia, Austria, Prussia). The hetero-image (the image of other countries) together with the auto-image (the image of one's own country)<sup>1</sup> gives the reader the basis for creating his or her own concept of foreign places presented by the famous 19th-century novelist.

## THE ATTRACTION OF DISTANT COUNTRIES FOR THE POLES

One group of foreign places portrayed in *The Doll* is the group containing Asia, America and Africa. One of the reasons the characters travel to those remote countries is the fact that their image differs from that of everyday life of the inhabitants of the monotonous, grey and oppressed 19th-century Poland. In the 19th century, Polish culture was perceived as very conservative (Forajter 2017, 620) so distant countries were attractive. As Waldemar Zacharasiewicz accurately notes while analysing the images of distant countries in a literary work, “the imagologists must also consider the potential appeal of the foreign, the exotic, all those features in the ‘other’ which differ from the mundane, humdrum everyday experience” (2009, 26).

One of the distant countries mentioned by Prus’s characters, matching the above idea of the otherness and exoticism is India. Its image appears not as a place to which the characters travel, but as the presentation of its location and imported goods. Wokulski’s shop (earlier belonging to Mincel) is very well stocked and offers a wide range of colonial products. Rzecki, one of the oldest employees, mentions the way he used to gain his knowledge of India and other distant countries from his employer, Jan Mincel:

“*Sag mir* – tell me: *was ist das?* What is this? *Das ist Schublade* – this is a drawer. Look and see what is in the drawer. *Es ist Zimt* – it is cinnamon. What is cinnamon needed for? For soup, for dessert. What is cinnamon? It is bark from a certain tree. Where does the cinnamon tree grow? In India. Look at the globe – India is over there. Give me 10 groszy worth of cinnamon... *O, du Spitzub!* If I discipline you ten times, you will know how much cinnamon to sell for 10 groszy...”

We would go through each drawer in the shop and he would tell me the story of every article (Prus 1996, 20).<sup>2</sup>

The above quotation offers an unusual depiction of a distant country – from the perspective that can be called dislocation, or spatiotemporal compression.<sup>3</sup> The interlocutors move far away from Poland, to India, while staying in the same place at the same time. The exotic character of the country and its distance from Poland impressed young Rzecki and subsequently shaped his character, when he became the most trustworthy employee of the shop. Here appears one more crucial element referring to the perception of a distant country – food. Cinnamon appears here as the element of exoticism, something that lets the person imagine a colourful distant country, so different from the monotonous Polish cities. Through the auto-image of Poland, Rzecki creates his own idea of India and food helps him to notice the differences. This corresponds to the concept of Ármann Jakobsson, who claims food can play an important role in the construction of identity (2009, 69). Moreover, as Jakub A. Malik claims, the shop is portrayed in such a way in the novel that it becomes the very centre of the plot; it is the major point of reference in the spatiotemporal dimension. The shop constitutes a miniaturized model of the world, it is the axis mundi (2005, 25–26).<sup>4</sup>

Poland at this moment in history was a country waiting for a saviour as life became more and more difficult. The landscape of Warsaw was rather sad and depressing:

“Nothing, nothing...” [Wokulski] repeated, wandering through the alleys with their shacks sunk below street level, roofs overgrown with moss, buildings with shutters and

doors nailed shut, with tumbledown walls, windows patched with paper or stuffed with rags. He walked along looking through dirty window-panes into dwellings, and absorbed the sight of cupboards without doors, chairs with only three legs, sofas with torn seats, clocks with one hand and cracked faces [...].

“This is the microcosm of Poland,” he thought, “where everything tends to make people wretched and to extinguish them” (Prus 1996, 69).

Ignacy Rzecki also expresses his own opinion on the situation in the country, writing in his diary:

“The world is going to the dogs [...] Food’s getting more expensive, a man’s wages are gobbled up in rent and even absinthe isn’t what it was. [...] Even Napoleon himself wouldn’t live to see justice done!”

To this [Rzecki’s] father would reply: “Justice will be done even if Napoleon doesn’t come. But a Napoleon will be found all the same” (14).

This particular episode is one of many other mentions of the political situation that Rzecki included in his diary. The old clerk also recalls his father’s love towards Napoleon which took the shape of strong adoration; he used to collect portraits of Napoleon in different places of the world: in Egypt, at Wagram and in Moscow. The awareness of the fact that Napoleon travelled a lot helped Rzecki’s father to believe that someday “after the first Napoleon, a second would be found, and even if he came to a bad end, another would come along, until the world had been put to rights” (13). The way Ignacy Rzecki was brought up influenced his later perception of the world – he became an acute observer of social and political life.

An essential part of Polish society then was the group of noblemen, among them the Łęcki family. Tomasz Łęcki, father of beautiful Izabela with whom Wokulski fell in love, used to be a very wealthy man; his father had a fortune which was later devoured in part by political events, such as the January Uprising and the repressive measures of Russian government (Prus 1890, 1275). Being impoverished in the second half of the 19th century, Łęcki has tried to regain his lost position mainly by modelling his life in Warsaw on foreign places. His daughter is the best example of such an attitude: she is spoiled and does not work but at the same time she dreams of the beautiful world she used to visit:

If anyone had asked her point-blank what this world was, and what she herself was, she would certainly have replied that the world is an enchanted garden full of magical castles, and that she herself was a goddess or nymph imprisoned in a body. [...] There was no difference in geographical location, since in Paris, Vienna, Rome, Berlin or London she would find the same people, the same manners, the same objects and even the same food – soups from Pacific seaweed, oysters from the North Sea, fish from the Atlantic or Mediterranean, animals from every country, fruits from all parts of the globe (Prus 1996, 34).

The image of distant countries here is created based on particular references which are important for the whole concept of imagology. First of all, the attraction to the exotic, as well as the reference to food that is not known in Poland. Moreover, Izabela Łęcka’s image of a distant world takes the shape of a fairy-tale, magical place, and “no difference in geographical location” means the places she thinks of are remote and timeless, they can serve as an escape from the real world (Oslund 2009, 93). In the

case of Izabela, it may correspond to her noble origin and loss of fortune; she is trying to find comfort in imagining life in charming remote places full of attractions.

Izabela is also attracted by people who travel abroad. Her house becomes the place of spatiotemporal compression, as it is visited by different people, for instance:

[It] might be an engineer who had linked two oceans or drilled through mountains, or a captain who had lost his entire company in a battle with savages and, although gravely wounded, had himself been spared by the love of a Negro princess. He might be a traveller who was said to have discovered a new part of the globe, had been shipwrecked on a desert island and even tasted human flesh (Prus 1996, 35).

The images of distant countries in the above description are not typical, as the names of the places are not given. However, this makes the description even more mysterious as it offers more possibilities for the reader to interpret it. Here appear some contradictions between what is known by Izabela and what she has just learned from her guests. For instance, the contrast of the colours: pale versus dark complexion (Polish nobility versus an African princess), a captain's fight with savages, as well as the motif of food (tasting human flesh) may suggest extreme differences between a civilized country – Poland – and a distant place characterized by some barbaric elements (savage warriors, cannibalism). The distant places described here may be defined as wild, lawless and free,<sup>5</sup> in contrast to the well-ordered European country. Nevertheless, for Izabela and her father these locations are attractive, as they present a totally different life than theirs, and allow them to escape from their difficult position as impoverished nobles. The comparison is based here on a hetero-image (the characters' perception of far-off, exotic countries) and auto-image (the perception of Poland and the characters' social situation).

One of the people who visit Izabela's house is Rossi, a famous tragedian from Italy. Because he has travelled to America, for Izabela he becomes an ideal man, a representative of the world, a cosmopolitan. When she compares him to Wokulski, the Polish "tradesman seemed so ludicrous in comparison with Rossi, whom the whole world admired, that she was quite simply overcome with pity for him. Had Wokulski been on his knees to her at this moment, she might even have stroked his hair, played with him as she would with a big dog" (227–228).

The image of a person who travels abroad to distant countries becomes attractive and works like a magic spell for Izabela and her father. She lives in an illusion, in a parallel universe, which helps her survive in the grey reality of her own country. Another citizen of the world admired by Izabela is Kazimierz Starski, her cousin. When she hears that he has just returned from China, she blushes and cheers up. He is said to be "as handsome as ever" (291). When Starski arrives at Izabela's house, in which he meets Wokulski, both Starski and Izabela start speaking English, paying no attention to the tradesman. It is a manifestation of ignorance, as Izabela and her cousin look down on the representative of a lower class. During the conversation the reader learns about Starski's travels:

"Travellers don't pay compliments, for they know that compliments discredit a man in the eyes of a woman in no matter what latitude."

"Did you make that discovery in China?"

“In China and Japan, but mainly in Europe.”

“And you expect to apply this principle in Poland, cousin?”

“I’ll try and in your company, if you’ll allow me” (300).

The above discussion in which some remote countries are mentioned produces a distance between Wokulski, who stays in Warsaw, and Starski whose life is mainly based on travelling. The distance is symbolic, as they both are in the same place, but, as Diana Petkova claims (2009, 170), geographical distance can symbolize social distance. And in the case of the tradesman and Izabela’s cousin, their experience in travels is analogous to their social position: Starski is a nobleman and a man of the world, whereas Wokulski is a tradesman taking care of his business in Poland who is ignored by his interlocutors. Moreover, the image of places Starski has visited seems to be associated with freedom, which Poland of the 19th century lacks; when he makes advances to one of the Polish ladies, he is admonished that he should abandon his Japanese customs. Starski replied that “[t]hey are universal customs” (Prus 1996, 406), which confirms the openness of the people who travel a lot in comparison to those who usually stay at home. In this case staying at home also means being under foreign oppression. Later, one can notice that the figure of Starski has actually been rooted in Wokulski for a very long time: Izabela wanted to find Starski in Wokulski, to wake his potential and enable him to become the man of the world (Rutkowski 2010, 7).

Still, the image of such countries as America is characterized by allusions to its otherness. When Wokulski decides to travel to Paris, he meets numerous people there, among them Jumart – a man who describes America and other countries he visited. For him America is a place that teaches tolerance, and a real traveller for him means somebody who does not care about nationality (Prus 1996, 358). This remains in contrast to the Polish attitude towards nationality, as the novel by Prus depicts Poland under foreign partition and the desire of the Poles to regain full independence. This contrast influences the perception of remote places by the inhabitants of Warsaw and other Polish cities. America entices Polish people and appears to be paradise.

The difficult history of Poland in those days is accompanied by the life of Wokulski, who tries to win the hand of Izabela Łęcka. When he fails to do so, he becomes depressed and decides to escape from reality by reading books, which are particularly important, as they take the tradesman to distant countries. His symbolic journey starts with books from his childhood – to the period of life which is cheerful and carefree. He brings back memories connected with the travels of Robinson Crusoe and it seems that “his wounded soul had escaped from the earth to wander in magic lands where only noble hearts beat, where vice did not dress up in the mask of deceit, where eternal justice ruled, curing pain and rewarding injustices” (Prus 1996, 600). What is more, Wokulski understands that he could only find solace in foreign literature, noting that Poland may never become free, though its citizens would always be a nation of dreamers (Prus 1996, 600). Later, Wokulski starts reading about other journeys including the United States and China, and it appears that his personal failure (unfulfilled love) corresponds with the whole nation’s situation (being under the oppression of foreign countries). The mental escape to the desert island and to other civilized countries is a micro-image of the nation’s desire to escape from oppression

and to become free. Finally, Wokulski decides to realize his dreams of distant travels, and having understood in Poland he will never find a true love, he first goes to Odessa, then to India, China and Japan and eventually America (Prus 1996, 660). He does that as he dreams of gaining status similar to that of the noblemen. The reader hopes he will find happiness somewhere else, far from the social and political limitations. Wokulski, the only character in the novel to do so, travels to all possible countries both literally and mentally; he is not only a brave cosmopolitan, but also a person who is not afraid of crossing cultural and social limits. In this way, from a faraway and constantly changing perspective, he shows that what Polish people dream of is a very distant country, and this paradox will be true till his homeland regains its independence.

### OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE POLISH IMAGINATION

Apart from the places discussed above, Prus also portrays those which the characters were forced to visit, for instance, Siberia. Wokulski was sent there after the January Uprising and the place, surprisingly, brought him relief. He got frostbite on his hands there – something which made Izabela consider him a hero. Nevertheless, it was Siberia which offered him education and the possibility of becoming a scientist: “There he had been able to work, had gained the recognition and friendship of Czerski, Czekanowski, Dybowski. He returned to Poland almost a scholar, but when he sought employment in that field, he had been laughed at and scorned and sent into trade” (Prus 1996, 68–69).

This is another example of a country which offered a kind of personal development to the character; however, this was lost in Poland in which Wokulski had to fight to survive.

Prus also invites the reader to different countries which are connected with a particular plan of the character, for instance gaining a fortune. In contrast to the places people used to go to with the aim of living there, there existed countries people chose to go to in order to earn money. Such a distinction is noted by W. Tad Pfeffer, who states that the occupation of a particular place “is for habitation (people choosing to live and work in a landscape) or purely extractive” (2009, 83). Travelling to America, China or India was for Wokulski and for other characters an escape in the search for a better life or for consolation, whereas the tradesman’s visit to Turkey or Bulgaria was aimed at “extracting” wealth and subsequently bringing it to Poland. Wokulski made a fortune in those countries – while there he was considering going back to Poland, to prove that he was able to be an enterprising businessman and to find a beautiful noble lady. His business successes and his knowledge of the world seem to give hope to the Poles for their country to become more open to other countries, more attractive, and finally, more technologically developed. That could give it the chance to get rid of the complex of a subjected country, which, after the loss of independence, needed a shred of hope to change its status. However, once back in Poland, in conversation with Rzecki, he admits:

“You’ve no idea what I suffered, far away from everyone, never knowing whether I should ever see them again, so terribly alone. For, don’t you see, the worst loneliness is not the

one that surrounds a man, but the emptiness within himself, when he has not carried away with him even a warm look or a friendly word or spark of hope from his homeland” (Prus 1996, 27–28).

The fact that Wokulski treated his visits in Turkey and Bulgaria as a temporary situation influenced his mood; he was not happy there and hoped to go back to his homeland and start a new life. However, it was not easy; to gain respect he decided to help the poor and impoverished noblemen with the money he had earned abroad. As a consequence, the only thing he achieved was gaining fortune; he was never approved of as a candidate for a husband by the noble class and he finally leaves for an unknown destination.

## CONCLUSION

*The Doll* presents several images of remote countries created by the figures of the novel. The first group includes places such as America or Asia, which are perceived as exotic, attractive and ideal places to live in. Their image is shown either in the descriptions by the characters who travelled there, or in the form of dislocation – the discussion over a particular country with the movement both in time and space. Another group of distant countries constitute the places the characters are forced to visit either due to political or financial reasons. These are, among others, Siberia and Turkey. The general image of the distant countries in the novel by Prus seems to be constructed on the belief that they were perceived by 19th-century Polish citizens as better and wealthier places, rather like paradise, offering freedom and liberty, as an asylum for those who fought at war and were exiled in order to regain independence for their homeland.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Hugo Dyserinck distinguishes these two types of image of a country, characteristic for the concept of imagology: “every ‘image of the other land’ has ultimately an underlying basis in the image of one’s own country [...]. Hetero-image and auto-image belong together” (2007, 5).
- <sup>2</sup> All the quotations from *Lalka* by Bolesław Prus come from its English version translated by David Welsh.
- <sup>3</sup> Daren Massey claims dislocation refers to the movement and communication in time and space (1994, 147).
- <sup>4</sup> It should be pointed out that both India and America were equally attractive for the Poles, but their image was based on different factors; America was a land of freedom, while Asia attracted attention with its exoticism and its status as a colonized country in which exploited citizens produced goods not available for the inhabitants of Poland. 19th century colonialism was closely associated with orientalism, as Edward Said states, and orientalism for Europe was a domain with a continuous history of unchallenged Western dominance (1979, 2, 73).
- <sup>5</sup> Kirsten Hastrup distinguishes “wildness, merriness, lawlessness and freedom” as the elements of an image of a distant place (2009, 110).

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Imagology. 19th-century Poland. Travel. Distance. Bolesław Prus.

*The Doll* (*Lalka*) by Bolesław Prus is one of the most significant books known by every Polish person. It is not only a great example of a novel presenting the Poland of the 19th century, but it is also a work of a didactic character, full of romantic, political and social references. Furthermore, it is a novel concerning the condition of 19th-century Polish high society which perceived travel abroad as a way to regain their lost position or to improve their personal situation. In Poland, only the wealthiest people could travel. In *The Doll*, for instance it is Tomasz Łęcki who shines abroad till he goes bankrupt. The novel presents Paris as one of the most desirable destinations. Other places such as Bulgaria and Turkey were popular destinations for gaining one's fortune. The characters' travels to these places are both a way to escape from the grey reality of Polish towns and to find the promised land of prosperity. As the 19th century was also the age of distant journeys to Africa, Asia and America, Prus's characters travel there; Starski is perceived as a man of the world due to his numerous exotic journeys, Wokulski searches for happiness in Asia and America after being rejected by the woman he loves. The images of the remote countries are presented through the perspective of imagology. Travel was connected with the nation's own search for identity till the moment that Poland regained full independence in November 1918.

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