

## ŻMICHOWSKA VERSUS ORZESZKOWA: A FEMINIST PARALLEL

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This article aims to reconstruct feminist threads in the biography and output of the two most outstanding nineteenth-century Polish female writers: Narcyza Żmichowska (1819-1876) and Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841-1910). An attempt will also be made to answering the question: what does such a reconstruction tell us about Polish culture, history, as well as about the protagonists themselves?

There is much that differentiates these two writers and much they have in common. Let us begin by reconstructing the shared aspects.

Narcyza Żmichowska was born as the tenth child into a family of impoverished noblemen. Her father earned his living as an official in a salt-works. Nine of the siblings survived into adulthood. Their mother Wiktoria, née Kiedrzyńska, died immediately after she was delivered of Narcyza. The girl was brought up by her relatives, but contacts with her father and with her brothers and sisters were constantly maintained. Holidays and family celebrations offered opportunities for reunions held at their home in Nowe Miasto on the Pilica river, and after Narcyza's father died, the manors of her married sisters became her main haven. Narcyza's father's dislike of her, caused by his subconscious regret that their youngest daughter had caused the death of his beloved wife, intensified the daughter's solitude. This was alleviated by the close ties that existed between the siblings: many a time Narcyza expressed her gratitude to her brothers and sisters for their heartfelt care, support, and love. She considered her brother Janusz, who died prematurely, to have been the promoter of her literary interests. With another brother, Erazm, who had been living in exile in France since 1831 following the November Uprising, she was to exchange letters for many years: in the 1830s, she sometimes expressed her

feelings for Erazm so vehemently that her letters from that period sound puzzling, even in the context of the exalted style of nineteenth-century epistolography. It might seem that Narcyza even transgressed the borderline of sisterly love, as she verged upon—following Chateaubriand's characters—erotically charged confessions. Indeed, it was not very often that a sister would write to her brother like this: "Seeing you [...] was the nicest dream of all the years of my youth" (Żmichowska 1957-1967, 1:96); or, "You, Erazm, gave me heaven" (1957-1967, 1:94); "I say, I love you, for you might not be aware of it, my most beloved one, my soul" (1:94); or, again, "*Adieu*, dearest mine."

One thing is certain, however: that the family circle, as understood by Żmichowska, was a space of safety enabling a child to grow and mature. The major position was occupied by the mother who taught her child the most essential disposition—i.e. how to love. It is difficult to determine the prevailing factor in Narcyza's life: the sense of bereavement or the sense of family love. She cherished the latter throughout her lifetime, attempting in this way to heal the scar left by her mother's early death. I should however emphasize the element of love as omnipresent in her writings, letters, and novels. It is not identical with romantic erotic love and is not confined to the feeling between man and woman (Borkowska 2001; Phillips 2008). Instead, it assumes the fundamental form of the prime foundation of life, without which a human being cannot breathe.

Narcyza's home-based education was followed by her years at Zuzanna Wilczyńska's boarding school for girls; she later graduated from the Government Institute for the Education of Young Ladies (popularly known as the Governesses' Institute), which qualified her to establish a boarding school of her own. In the late 1830s, Żmichowska went to Paris as the tutor of the children of Konstanty Zamoyski, an aristocrat. Her stay there was tough and ended with her severing all connection with her employers, as she had fallen into conflict with them over a number of issues including politics, yet her stay in France was also very fruitful: she met her brother Erazm and undertook an intense self-education. She frequented the National Library

in Paris to read contemporary philosophers (Schlegel, Schelling, Pierre Leroux, Saint-Simon, Enfantin), became knowledgeable in a number of disciplines (sociology, history, philosophy, literature) and made attempts at writing in French. Once she returned home, via Greater Poland (Wielkopolska), the part of the former Polish lands then under Prussian rule and also her mother's native land, she became involved in plans for opening a boarding school but these came to nothing, partly because her views on women's education as well as on marriage and divorce were perceived as too radical for the time. Instead she settled in Warsaw and joined the editorial board of *The Scientific Review* (*Przegląd Naukowy*), the most ambitious Polish-language philosophical and literary periodical published at that time in the Russian Partition. *The Heathen Woman* (*Poganka*) Źmichowska's masterpiece, was published in this periodical in 1846.

Yet, literary work was not Narcyza's major concern: this is her other significant, anti-romantic trait. She considered "conversation" to be much more important than writing, which she understood as an action that required selling one's own, and other people's, experiences, something that was deemed unethical by her. Writing was opposed to contact, dialogue, meetings, joint ventures, letters, knowledge sharing, relationship with the Other Person: be it a friend, student, or sister.<sup>1</sup> One of the friends, Paulina Zbyszewska, entered into an association with Narcyza on the basis of a great passion at least on the latter's part, which was then broken off in dramatic circumstances. The circle of female friends with whom Źmichowska exchanged letters also held meetings that served, among other purposes, specific social needs, such as visiting political prisoners and assisting their families, or promoting the education of girls; much later, in 1875, she called this female milieu: the Enthusiasts (Polish *Entuzjastki*, see Źmichowska 1876, 284-294).

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<sup>1</sup> On 1<sup>st</sup> March 1844, Źmichowska wrote to Anna Kisielnicka, one of her pupils: "Two days ago, with one stroke of the pen, I sketched up a few sheets into thoughts bizarre, and yet I had to interrupt myself, for I do appreciate an hour of nice conversation more than whole days of inspiration" (Źmichowska 1957-1967, 1:337).

This circle is one of the least tangible and most difficult to define peer groups that has ever appeared in Polish culture. This is not because of their conspiratorial, i.e. underground, political secrecy, as is often assumed, but rather a discrepancy in the perception and opinion of them, which has never ceased to surround Żmichowska and her female friends. These women were eyed with suspicion: Narcyza refused categorically to marry; Zofia Węgierska decided to get divorced. This sufficed for public opinion to treat the women with reserve. More serious doubts concerned, however, the status and purpose of the group. Critics of culture have had divergent views about the phenomenon but in every case, their opinions followed conventional patterns: some wanted to perceive the group as plotters or underground activists devoted to secret political work against the partitioning powers, whilst others regarded them as women-of-letters who had fulfilled their potential to a greater or lesser degree. The Romantic ethos of the Conspirator alongside the ethos of the Poet more or less exhausted the list of socially expected behaviours in Poland at that time (Janion and Zielińska 1986).

Yet, as we know from Żmichowska's letters, conspiracy did not attract her: she deemed it foolish and believed it produced adverse effects both personally (a broken personality) and socially (it provoked the authorities to introduce more repressive measures). Even when she did become involved in illegal activities, these consisted in aiding people held in prison or in the distribution of banned books. She did participate in some political action during the Spring of Nations, but we do not know to what extent this was inspired by her enthusiasm for the revolution, or how much external circumstances contributed to it: she knew many outstanding activists in all the three Partitions and mediated in contacts between them. As to herself, she became more and more distanced year by year from the ethos of Conspirator, as is most clearly testified by her letter to Seweryn Elżanowski, an émigré then residing in Paris (Żmichowska 1957-1967, 2:378-392). Narcyza wrote this letter in 1859 during the build-up to the January Uprising of 1863-1864, but it also partly describes her earlier feelings as evidenced in letters she wrote in the 1840s (see letter to her brother

Erazm; Źmichowska 1957-1967, 1:153-154). Her opinions on men-of-letters were as critical as those on conspirators. The short story *Capriccio* (Źmichowska 1845), in which a writer sells intimate experiences that are not his sole property, makes this plain (Borkowska 2001, 133-134). As a novelist, she refrained from writing conventional forms of fiction, trying her hand instead at a form of her own: open-ended, dialogue- or conversation-based (Borkowska 2001, 93-128).

Who then were these Female Enthusiasts? They formed a group of women who were in search of themselves, of a fresh model of life, one that would be free of any clearly predetermined or prescribed obligation to the priorities established by the Polish Romantic paradigm, which privileged the creative power of poets and patriotic obligation to society (Borkowska 2001, 23-63; Phillips 2008, 214-266). The Enthusiasts' focus of interest was rather everyday life and its various episodes, friendship, love. Źmichowska wrote much about happiness—not so much as the privilege of human beings but in terms of their obligations. The task was namely to order one's individual life so that it might bring the maximum satisfaction that could possibly be found in the various aspects of reality: at work, in contacts with others, in intellectual adventures, in family life. This is what formed the Enthusiasts' own philosophy. If such an outlook were to be referred to as feminism, it would be an open feminism, not overwhelmed by ideology, offering freedom of action and listening intently to people's hearts.

The Female Enthusiasts ceased holding their meetings when the Spring of Nations collapsed (Źmichowska and her companions were imprisoned for various periods of time, herself for four years), yet the legacy of this exclusive movement was taken up again by the writer at a later date. In the 1850s, on Miodowa Street in Warsaw, together with her friend Julia Baranowska, she ran a small informal boarding school educating young girls. With time, the location became an important venue for meetings between local intellectuals in the period prior to the January Insurrection. It was Źmichowska herself who attracted them—with her inner freedom, liberty in

shaping her own life, as well as her unconventional pedagogical and political programme (Żmichowska 1902).

Eliza Orzeszkowa's childhood was apparently more secure, yet it was also difficult for different reasons. Born in the Lithuanian part of the pre-partition Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, into the affluent Pawłowski family, she had no need to be concerned about financial matters. She lost her father in her early years (she was two years old) and then mythicized him in her memoirs, writing of his great erudition, nobility, sensitivity to public affairs. Whether or not they present a true picture, Orzeszkowa's notion about her father set the circle of her aspirations and ideals. Her contacts with her mother, who was a beautiful yet conventional woman, were not so good. It was on her initiative that Eliza got married at such a very young age, seventeen; the marriage was ill-matched and broke down a few years later. She did not accompany her husband to Siberia, where he was deported for having allegedly sheltered insurgents in 1863, although it seems that the person really involved in the independence movement was his wife. She successfully sought a formal annulment of the marriage in 1869. Both moves were unparalleled and their perception by the contemporary milieu was adverse.

Once she had divorced and moved from the countryside Grodno (Hrodna in present-day Belarus), then in the Vilna Guberniia, Orzeszkowa began her career as a writer. Having discovered this vocation for herself, she decided to accomplish the task, irrespective of the opinions of her family and friends. Although her contacts with the intellectual milieu in Warsaw and its salons were initially sporadic, her systematic efforts eventually brought about the desired result: Orzeszkowa rose to become the most outstanding Polish female author of the latter half of the nineteenth century, a moral authority, a source of knowledge on the world, an oracle for young authors. She did not leave the provincial town of Grodno and began to attract famous Polish personages there. Pilgrimages were made to her home; people endeavoured to read her texts and opinions. Writing women felt particularly attached to her. They would travel to Grodno to ask to have their texts revised or reviewed by her, and to

request counsel (Józefa Sawicka, Lucyna Kotarbińska, Eugenia Żmijewska, Maria Konopnicka and others). Those who met her in person were impressed by her knowledge, erudition, moral qualities, skilful organization of her own life and social activities. She gave financial support to the poor, to fire victims, children of poor families, people she knew and those she did not. She organized semi-legal courses on Polish literature for girls. She claimed civil rights for Jews. She was more than just a writer: she created an institution in public life. Even Russian governors could not ignore her.

It might seem that having been so daring in her youth, she would become a promoter of liberal values. It turned out otherwise, however: Orzeszkowa realized very soon that the role of moral authority was reserved only for “middle-of-the-road” people, and only people who were inclined to compromise might count on being socially accepted and thus on being able to act effectively. She did not abandon her ideals but rather tailored them to suit the Polish realities. Although she made her debut as a follower of the so-called Positivist philosophy, an agnostic movement that rebelled against the clergy and the nobility's callousness, she turned in the 1880s to searching for a new formula for her creative work as well as for national consensus.

Her feminist views were also shaped by compromise. Writing on female issues, she emphasized that the rights of women had to go hand in hand with their obligations; that women had to partake in social work; that they had to become conscious mothers and citizens, capable of supporting their husbands and brothers. She claimed women's right to education but added that the acquisition of knowledge could not be based solely on an individual's striving for the fulfilment of his or her potential, but rather on their willingness to assume new obligations towards their family and society. She sought grounds for feminism not in Western thought but in the Polish noble democracy, which, to her mind, did not preclude women from public life (Borkowska 2005, 86-91). As she was well-versed in the feminist tradition, she could afford a severe evaluation of her forerunners:

The Enthusiasts, by their own example, expressed most clearly all the positive and negative influences of tradition, Romanticism, as well as the then still fresh idea of emancipation. [...] Bold to the point of audacity—as is normally the case with innovators, and especially female innovators, they sometimes went too far. Philosophizing to right and left [...] they drifted into absurdity (Borkowska 2005, 96-97).<sup>2</sup>

Twenty years later, she would probably have not repeated this opinion, as first expressed in the 1880s: her final utterances on women are full of bitterness and despondency and include the slogans of only moderate emancipation, as in her *Letter to German Women (List do kobiet niemieckich, 1896; Orzeszkowa 2005, 676-700)*. Having observed the aggression and heartlessness of the world around her, the ill-fated path that humankind had set itself, she had come to the conclusion that thinking about emancipation—in terms of its intention, as she understood it, to render females similar to males—would only accelerate the coming disaster. Although Orzeszkowa avoided dealing with temporary debates about the separate (exclusive) roles or war of the sexes, by the end of the nineteenth century she had come to perceive an opportunity for civilizational development in womanhood. She clearly defined womanhood or femininity in her own way: not in terms of sexuality or freedom but rather as a form of ethics, as an ethical attitude full of empathy, devotion, harmony with Nature, respect for tradition and for the nation's past. Her female characters were angels bringing goodness and peace to the world. These angels had their gender clearly defined, however, for example Seweryna in the novel *Two Opposite Poles (Dwa bieguny)*.

There are therefore clear similarities between the two authors: both worked in the shadow of ill-fated anti-Russian uprisings that expressed Polish aspirations for autonomy and self-determination (the November Insurrection of 1830 and the January Insurrection of 1863-1864). Both encountered a climate of repressive measures, yet were not indifferent to public causes, and both experienced the burden of censorship-imposed restrictions as well as social torpor. Despite the objections

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Borkowska 2005 from Orzeszkowa's essay *On Polish Woman (O kobiecie polskiej, 1888)* in Ursula Phillips's translation; for the full text in Polish see Orzeszkowa 2005, 598-636.

they might have had, both were drawn into conspiratorial activities—Żmichowska participated in the Spring of Nations while Orzeszkowa actively supported the January Insurrection. Both of them identified their lot with staying in their native country rather than leaving it as *émigrés*. And both built around themselves an exclusive social circle which in part functioned as a replacement or substitute for a broader social forum for public debate, which was otherwise not feasible at that time.

The differences are more interesting, however. First of all, these are apparent in their different strategies of action. Żmichowska was inclined to provoke and annoy public opinion. By undermining the ethos of the Romantic poet and Romantic conspirator, by living a life in accordance with rules she had set herself, and manifesting her interest in other women, she exposed herself to criticism and rejection. Her fame did not extend much beyond the boundaries of Warsaw and triggered an ambivalent response. There were some who saw in her a bizarre and pathological personality. Czesław Łatawiec, an interwar critic, ascribed to Żmichowska a “rejected whelp complex,” alluding rather unkindly to Narcyza’s complex relationship with her father (Łatawiec 1938, 84). The homosexual imputation was also scandalous. Apart from the claims made by Maurycy Mann (1916) and by Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński in his introductions to her works and correspondence (Żmichowska 1930; Żmichowska 1950), any discussion of this aspect was avoided or, if mentioned, remarked on ambiguously. A tacit assumption was made that a homosexual female author could not occupy a place on the Polish Parnassus. Żmichowska remained for years as an author too inconvenient for the Polish public, and for this reason she has remained “under-read,” to quote Nancy K. Miller (Miller 1988); less was perceived in her than might have been. It is no understatement to say that Żmichowska has been marginalized and neglected.

Unlike Żmichowska, Orzeszkowa climbed to the highest pinnacle. It is true that she gave more works to Polish literature than Żmichowska, but her reputation was not built without resistance. To this end Orzeszkowa was helped by her own strategy of action: modesty, even if pretended; readiness to compromise; avoidance of

extremes; the propagation of programmes that emphasized social solidarity and reconciliation. As to the female issue, she formulated a position that would be no threat to males whatsoever, stressing the cultural “youthfulness” (“młodość”) of females, their own imperfection and immaturity—all this until her latest texts, where the motif of women’s ethical superiority eventually appeared.

I refer to Orzeszkowa’s conduct as a “strategy of action” because it seems to me that what is at stake here is the conscious decision to embark on a chosen course of behaviour. Taught by the experience of her predecessors (the Enthusiasts, for instance), she applied a quiet and conciliatory style of action, which led to an at least partial achievement of her objectives.

Yet, the difference(s) between the two authors cannot possibly be reduced to a strategy. There is much more of an essential difference between them, something that remains beyond the scope of control and awareness: namely, the way in which they perceived love. For Żmichowska, love was the salt of the earth, the primary raw material with which family ties were shaped (an obvious thing nowadays but not in Żmichowska’s time); a great truth about human beings; a source of power; a binding agent for society; an incentive to act. In her perception, it is women who are the designers of love, it is they who evoke and cause love. Males find a feeling at their feet and pick it up like a lost necktie pin, as Żmichowska once wrote in a letter to Izabela Zbiegniewska (Żmichowska 1957-1967, 3:22). This is what, according to Żmichowska, the superiority of the female world consists in, and as such reflects the importance of women: it is grounded in their ability to build feelings, the skill of laying the foundations for life. As Żmichowska wrote repeatedly, love others *and* yourself; only then can you grow to be good.

To Orzeszkowa, love was a threat. It required being harnessed or abandoned to the benefit of duties (the Homeland, the family). Orzeszkowa’s characters commonly make this sacrifice and, according to their author, deserve only respect if they have rejected love (Seweryna in *Ad astra*; Seweryna in *Two Opposite Poles*; Justyna and Marta in *On the Banks of the Niemen*). Ethical sensitivity is a distinguishing mark in

women. In Orzeszkowa's novels, this boils down to the adage: deny yourself so that you can serve others.

Referring to Kristeva's differentiation, one might say that Orzeszkowa submits to the symbolic order and to the figure of the Father, whereas Żmichowska, to the semiotic level and the phantasm of the Mother (Kristeva 1974). Orzeszkowa seeks support for her female characters in ideas, religion, history and family memory. Żmichowska refers to the truth of one's own heart. These discrepancies reflect the writers' different notions about art and history, the different times in which they lived, their different philosophies—and childhood experiences.

Following these portraits of the two different authors, let us return, in conclusion, to the general questions posed at the beginning: what do their biographies have to tell us about Polish culture, history, mentality? It is not difficult to observe that to the Polish mind, the nineteenth century was dominated by the misfortune of the partitions (from 1795 Poland did not exist on the map of Europe). Żmichowska, quite independently of her own conspiratorial activities, did not draw any ultimate conclusions from this fact. She considered that matters of education, of striving for ethical perfection, of freedom in manners and behaviour, were just as important as political freedom. We could say that in her pedagogical mission (and indeed her human one) she did not feel constrained by external circumstances. She also did not believe that a non-sovereign society should be bound by any special models of behaviour. She was therefore able to proclaim (or simply to realize) her educational and philosophical programme with courage, a programme whose fundamental values were personal freedom, love (allowed to form itself freely), friendship, maturity and responsibility, and a sober assessment of reality. She was also not afraid to criticize social circles that resisted modernization: the aristocracy, the wider gentry or *szlachta*, as well as clerics (her conflict with the Zamoyski family, for whom she worked as a governess in Paris, is well known). The weight of these ideas was too much for her contemporaries; it is sufficient to note that the first edition of her letters was censored (Żmichowska 1885, 1906), and she became marginalized as an author.

Two very different, but equally untrue images of Żmichowska became preserved in the collective memory: that of a scandalizer, and that of a dull domestic teacher whose views on education simply followed the line of her predecessors.

Orzeszkowa shared, at least in part, the negative opinion of the Enthusiasts and of Żmichowska herself. She expressed this in her articles on the so-called women's question, condemning above all the radicalism of her predecessors (Orzeszkowa 2005, 477, 613-614). She therefore did not follow their path. She subordinated the issue of women's rights to more universal social questions (perhaps not with complete conviction, but entirely consciously). She acknowledged that the process of emancipation should in no circumstances be allowed to topple the *status quo*, and hence the domination of men, and their role in the family and in society. It is hard to say how much of this stemmed from real conviction and how much was strategic recognition. Nevertheless, Orzeszkowa cultivated a moderate form of emancipation tailored to suit the expectations of public opinion (Borkowska 2000). She recognized that only this model had any chance of success in a conservative society disposed towards preserving the past. The partial change in her position towards the end of her life did nothing to remove the fundamental difference between herself and Żmichowska.

The politics of "small steps" is not unknown to social activists in Poland today. But the direction indicated by the author of *The Heathen Woman* is also evident in Polish public life, especially in circles lobbying for equal rights for sexual minorities. We may therefore say that in Poland we have two emancipationist traditions, both of which have their roots in the nineteenth century and the thought of two great female writers: Żmichowska and Orzeszkowa.

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