

CRITICISM IN TRANSLATION

Uncanny Slavdom

MARIA JANION

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION
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Introduction

How does national pride shade into racism? Is national pride *necessarily* racialized? Maria Janion (1926–2020) spent her life examining these questions, while watching her surrounding Eastern European societies wrestle with them. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Polish nation—like the Czech nation, the Serbian nation, and most other Slavic nations west of Russia—were merely imagined communities. This was true not only in Benedict Anderson’s sense of the term but also in a more literal one: as Eastern Europe’s ethnic groups strove to define themselves, they also struggled for political autonomy from their more powerful eastern and western neighbors. Born in 1926, shortly after Poland’s regaining of independence in 1918, Janion lived through her country’s turn to extreme nationalism in the 1930s, its German occupation between 1939 and 1945, its inclusion in the so-called Second World of the Soviet Bloc after 1945, and then—after 1989—its fraught attempts to integrate itself into Western Europe, attempts that at her death in 2020 had once again bred a budding nationalist backlash.

The sense of national and cultural belonging that Eastern Europeans developed amid these upheavals forms a confusing hybrid of self-assertion and self-abnegation, an identification with Western Europe but also a vehement pull against it. Following their dramatic shifts in sovereignty, allegiance, and identification, Eastern European communities have remained plagued by a racialized sense of inferiority to the West. As a result, contemporary right-wing grievances are often framed in postcolonial terms. Nationalist citizens of Poland or Slovakia describe themselves as patronized by western neighbors who hold them to culturally alien standards of social and individual behavior in exchange for the European Union’s economic support. And these Eastern European radicals see Western Europe as having inflicted a much deeper quasi-colonial wound: when the region was Christianized during the Middle Ages, most of its original, pagan cultures were obliterated. Thus, when Eastern Europeans try to define their cultures against the West, they have little but speculation to go

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on. At most, Eastern European right-wing groups can claim themselves—as many do—to have accepted Catholicism willingly, as a gift from their western neighbors, and to have preserved its legacy with greater purity than these neighbors. Amid this thinly veiled sense of historical disempowerment and self-ignorance, Eastern Europe's nationalisms often take on a white supremacist vein. Whiteness becomes, for Eastern European right-wing groups, an ahistorical substitute category of value: a mark of superiority, if not to the West, then to nonwhite colonized communities whose cultural self-knowledge has retained firmer, better-documented ground.

One might merely dismiss these bifurcated, racialized nationalisms as incoherent. Throughout her work, Janion does otherwise: she takes Eastern Europe as a crucial case study for thinking about national self-assertion and community building. She considers how Eastern Europeans search for their identities in the face of glaring archival gaps and histories of marginalization. She also argues that only by acknowledging and embracing their desire for a historically grounded national identity—a complicated, partly blinding, but also *inalienable* affective attachment—can her local communities defend themselves from seeking solace in racism. Introducing Janion's work into the English-speaking world's conversations about racialization can help us appreciate the intertwinement, etymological as well as conceptual, between the concepts of race and of the nation. It also helps us think more flexibly and open-endedly about the benefits and pitfalls of speculating about lost cultural archives.

Janion reflects on cultural belonging from a multiply exceptional social position. She was one of the very few queer Polish intellectuals of her generation, a female scholar who fought her way through an academic environment entrenched in misogyny, and a devoted leftist who chose to stay in Poland, and to remain a Marxist, amid her growing and fearlessly voiced distaste for Soviet rule. Throughout her life, she publicly protested against authoritarian governance, as well as against Polish anti-Semitism, homophobia, racism, and a variety of anti-European xenophobias (*Bohater, spisek, śmierć; Do Europy tak; Kobiety i duch inności*).

In *Uncanny Slavdom* (*Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna* [2006]), Janion reminds her readers why thinking one's way back to a version of Slavdom that precedes Eastern Europe's Christianization is traumatic and intellectually dangerous. It plunges Eastern Europeans into an uncanny valley, forcing them to recognize how little they know of their pagan past and, also, how insistently their literature and culture attempt to conjure this past back into being.

At its publication, the book was lauded as well as hotly debated, both for Janion's bold hypothesis about Slavs' pagan unconscious and for her refusal to dismiss this unconscious neo-paganism wholesale. Janion sees the literary conjuring of Slavs' lost cultural origins as a potentially productive exercise. It confronts Slavs with some of the ways in which their cultural origins and affiliations remain speculative and incompletely articulable, while helping them see these origins as irreducible to the Western norms by which they were superseded. Rejecting cosmopolitanism as a too-easy means of escaping feelings of national attachment, Janion imagines how such impossible desires for lost cultural knowledge can become fodder for thought and not, as most of her fellow Polish leftists fear, inevitably inspire neofascist pseudo-histories.¹

Janion's writing provides a bridge between the emphasis placed on histories of race and racialization by American critics such as Saidiya Hartman (*Lose and Wayward Lives*) and the long history of European national prejudice. *Uncanny Slavdom* reminds one that, as Maurice Olender points out, for Europeans race is an ahistorical category, a substitute for thinking about cultural and geographic identity in temporal terms. Like many prior European thinkers, including Jacques Derrida, Janion describes the subjects of her writing as haunted by a past they cannot quite repress. At the same time, like Hartman, she considers why her subjects might *want* to be haunted by this past and actively pursue its specters. Most importantly, Hartman and Janion both believe that speculative history can paradoxically act as a bulwark against the extremes of racism and nationalism. They show that a fine-grained sense of communal deep time—even one produced through stereoscopic

literary experiments—loosens the categories through which communities define themselves without discounting the affective needs that inspire these categories' creation.

NOTE

1. For recent objects of such fears, see Wójcik.

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Uncanny Slavdom

What Story Should the Humanities Tell Poland?

Polish intellectuals began to debate the universal and local value of our national culture in the eighteenth century. These debates briefly intensified in the wake of the Cold War; today, they are at a standstill, one that stems from our general public's inability to read and interpret Poland's cultural past. The Polish public reaches back into its heritage, if at all, as a trove of propagandistically useful quotations. But even that does not happen very often. In the aptly named "Szachownica bez szachów" ["Chessboard without Pieces"], Stanisław Lem stated quite accurately, if with great bitterness, that our contemporary culture has become "maddeningly flattened." Present-day Poland displays "complete amnesia" about the past; it has also pushed literature to the margins. In the past, when aspiring writers visited Lem, he would counsel them to flee toward business school or computer science. "Today," he confesses, "I would no longer be so radical." No one is left to take up "the heaviest of topics," as he calls them. It's as if all of Poland's forty million citizens have become spellbound by fear and listlessness.

The humanities as a discipline are frequently the object and addressee of grievances such as Lem's. We would, therefore, do well to reflect on our discipline's current condition. *Transformation, modernization*: these words have dominated Poles' vocabularies in the past fifteen years. They describe the economy, of course, but they refer to culture as well. As postcommunist countries such as Poland shifted toward democracy and capitalism, the working class, as well as other social classes, lost much economic but also symbolic capital. At the same time, another facet of our modernization—the so-called media revolution—has transformed Polish politics into mass politics; pop culture has come to dominate the public sphere. High culture has fallen into crisis. In the eyes of many, culture as such has fallen into crisis as well. Older ideals of community, many of which were grounded in an unspoken but widely shared popular commitment to independence and freedom, have not survived Poland's actual transition out of communism. Amid the rise of globalization, Poland's technocratic elites have also lost interest in national culture, and traditional notions of identity have come to feel obsolescent.

Contemporary Polish prose bears witness to all these processes, through what our writers say as well as through what they do not say. “The intelligentsia has fallen silent,” writes the professor Barbara Skarga. She makes this diagnosis while refusing to name any still-existing bastions of critical high culture, “lest I should thus expose them to attacks, or inspire someone to destroy them.” . . . Indeed, the Polish intelligentsia has fallen into silence and its influence has diminished; meanwhile, the quality of readership has eroded as well. Janusz Sławiński describes its erosion in grim terms: “the reader who demands something of literature, or hopes for, or expects something from it—that reader no longer exists. All that reaches audiences seems equally uninteresting to them.” . . .

Finally, one should name the third and most important consequence of Poland’s modernizing process: mass communication has become its culture’s main medium and point of reference. Przemysław Czapliński writes passionately about this cultural shift as a return to standardization and to banal, ready-made formulas. Being un Revelatory has become our cultural norm and desideratum. Whatever social consensus we might form in such a public sphere is necessarily superficial; indeed, it might be merely the appearance of a consensus. Without deeper humanistic knowledge and exchange about the diversity of the social world, Polish democracy lacks a foundation. Czapliński describes the marks these new norms leave on contemporary Polish literature as “the passivity effect”: “an ideological aversion to further change has stilled social communication” (*Efekt bierności* 130). We drown in the idiom of mass media, to which writers have forfeited “the field on which battles are fought for social attention, by means of newly discovered mimetic forms” (“Powrót centrali?” 31). Literature ought to forge new ways of speaking. Instead, it has apprenticed itself to journalistic realism and seeks to imitate the language of the news.

How can literature and the humanities renew themselves? I believe that humanistic knowledge is at its most meaningful in the act of *recounting*. It does not suffice to observe human experience, live through it, or even comprehend it. One must also

know how to tell stories about it. Whether aesthetic or not in intent, these stories inevitably tend toward some formal structure. Without a form, they would become incomprehensible. A humanistic story can follow one of a few basic genres. Hayden White lists them as Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, and Satire, adding that these four genres frequently mix and combine into subgenres. . . . By telling stories, we orient ourselves within the world. The humanities are supposed to do some of this work for us. Storytelling draws its power from a sensitivity to the Other. This Other is the one to whom our story is told and to whom we must afterward listen, in a circle of empathy and compassion that constitutes a special mode of understanding. Whenever we tell a story, we enter into a compact within which stories can be exchanged both ways.

So, what new forms or genres should our stories take? Perhaps those of postcolonial critique, for which I look to Edward W. Said. In *Orientalism*, Said analyzes the half-mythical “Orient” conjured up by Westerners as they tried to subjugate the non-Western nonhistory of the East to their own genres and schemas. Norman Davies rightly notes that Western studies of Eastern Europe often replicate similar Orientalist prejudices and distortions. Does that mean we should use the terms of postcolonial critique in the stories we tell about Slavdom and Poland? I want to consider this question here.

Said described the two principles of his groundbreaking work as humanism and “humanistic critique” (xxii). Humanism is a mode of understanding grounded in rationality but also in history. It sustains and is sustained by a sense of community with other commentators, societies, and periods. Following Vico, Said argues against cultural and biological essentialisms. As he puts it, “the secular world is the world of history as created by human beings” and “human beings must create their own history” (xxix). The critical method Said embraces for following these principles is comparative literature as practiced by Goethe, Humboldt, Dilthey, Nietzsche, Gadamer, Erich Auerbach, Spitzer, and Curtius. Said describes these comparatists’ shared method, philology, as “the most basic and creative of the interpretative arts” (xiv). Through

philological practice, comparative literature interprets its sources concretely but also sensitively and intuitively; it delves deep into these sources' contexts at the time of their composition and in their subsequent reception. Said invokes Dilthey's term *einfühlen* to describe this attitude. Thus understood, a humanistic education is not "a sentimental piety enjoining us to return to traditional values or the classics but . . . the active practice of worldly secular rational discourse" (xxix). Contemporary technologies might be diminishing this humanistic education's effects. "Instead of reading in the real sense of the word, our students today are often distracted by the fragmented knowledge available on the internet and in the mass media" (xxvi). We must, therefore, revisit the tradition of philology and turn our attention back toward cultural texts of a more old-fashioned sort.

A thousand years ago, a religious and cultural boundary began to form between the Latinate West and the Greek East, between Rome and Byzantium; this boundary is now often seen as "Europe's most lasting cultural rift" (Kłoczkowski 12). What does this East-West division look like from the vantage point of Poland? We find ourselves, as Sławomir Mrożek ironically puts it, east of the West and west of the East. We also often find ourselves—as intellectuals and as members of the general public—in the position of trying to tip this balance toward the West, to make ourselves seem more Western than Eastern.

Can the Polish humanities take it upon themselves to *retell these stories*? The task is imperative. The old stories we need to replace, and which remain in circulation, repeat familiar themes of Poland as a martyred, chosen nation. They continue to resonate with many Poles by force of habit, stereotype, and intellectual inertia. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Poland was partitioned among Russia, Germany, and Austria and effectively colonized by them. In response, Poles developed counterfantasies of themselves becoming colonizers of other peoples and lands. The historical reality of being conquered and the dreams of conquest that this reality generated forged a double bind that makes Poland's version of postcolonial consciousness

particularly fraught and paradoxical. This consciousness expresses itself, on the one hand, in feelings of helplessness and failure. Poland as a country and the stories its people tell seem inadequate and peripheral. On the other hand, in lockstep with these feelings of inferiority, Poles express a messianic pride in their country's unique suffering and exceptional cultural contributions. They claim themselves to be greater than and superior to an "immoral" West; they also see themselves as cultural missionaries to the uncultivated East. This closed circle of felt inferiority and superiority ultimately results in a sense of helplessness—and in a constant tug-of-war between "Europe's false appearances" (which, one fears, might not be completely false, or completely superficial) and "Poland's own truth" (which one strongly suspects of not being absolutely true after all).

What Happened to Slavic Mythology?

An online exchange made a big impression on me recently. The exchange took place in a forum hosted by *Gazeta Wyborcza*, entitled "Dlaczego w szkole nie ucza mitologii słowian?" ["Why Don't Our Children Learn about Slavic Mythology?"]. Readers debated whether a genuinely Slavic mythology or creed had ever existed. Greek, Roman, Scandinavian, or Celtic mythologies did not invite similar doubts: the forum users saw them as authentic, rich in content, great inspirations of European art. Slavic mythology, by contrast, seemed to them like a collage of nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific fantasies and well-intentioned speculations. To cite one of the online comments: "There is so little we can say about Slavic mythology that it's just not worth talking about."

. . . This online discussion laid bare a major cultural trauma. Having probably just seen [*The Lord of the Rings*,] a wildly successful film adaptation of Celtic mythology as retold by Tolkien, the writers of these comments must have asked themselves the inevitable, painful question: Do they have an equivalent mythology of their own? . . . And then, they rapidly suppressed this question by vehemently affirming that Mediterranean culture is superior to all others.

Such traumatic reactions should bring to mind the way in which Poland adopted Christianity and the attitudes that the Roman Catholic missionaries bore toward the pagan myths and beliefs of the Slavs. These missionaries disdained Slavic myths and beliefs and systematically worked to eradicate them. Their success in doing so is marked by the absence from the historical record of any written sources mentioning pre-Christian Slavic religious practices. This absence is so complete that, for a time, it led scholars to hypothesize that Slavs did not have any religion of their own. “Christian missionaries to the region and their medieval chroniclers lacked any deeper interest in, sensitivity to, or curiosity about the spiritual lives of the peoples they had been sent to convert” (Szyjewski 9). Thus was the region’s past erased, leaving behind a gap in the archive and an only recently overturned conviction that the Slavs did not believe in any gods and did not tell any stories about these gods’ lives, deeds, or familial relations. If this were indeed the case, it would make Slavs what one major religious historian of the region has called “a deeply bizarre and singular exception to global patterns of human culture.” That such a “bizarre” hypothesis persisted for so long says much about the unwarranted but real, nationally and internationally widespread conviction about the Slavs’ overwhelming “primitiveness” (Szyjewski 11).

Consider, by way of counterexample, the cultural condition of early medieval Ireland. Converted to Christianity in the fifth century but never incorporated into the Roman Empire, Ireland adopted Latin while managing to maintain much of its own cultural distinctiveness. As Thomas Cahill puts it, “[T]he survival of an Irish psychological identity is one of the marvels of the Irish story” (148). The Irish did not work very hard to eradicate pagan customs; Halloween, for one, remains with us to this day. When Irish monks mastered Greek and Latin, they used it to preserve Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian works that, at the time, were actively endangered elsewhere; they also used these same skills to set down in writing the products of Celtic culture. “It is thanks to [the Irish] scribes,” Cahill points out, “that we

now have the rich trove of early Irish literature, the earliest vernacular literature of Europe to survive” (160). Pre-Christian, Slavic Poland was not nearly so fortunate.

Pagan Polish culture was less fortunate than Celtic culture during the Middle Ages, but also thereafter; efforts at its belated reconstruction have been plagued by ill luck. In 1818 Zorian Dołęga Chodakowski dreamed of composing “a major treatise on Slavic mythology that would enhance our poetry and give it an unusual, singular quality” (41). But this treatise, which Chodakowski hoped would inspire Polish poets and redirect them away from classical myths, never took shape. Between 1847 and 1848, Bronisław Trentowski worked on a copious manuscript entitled *Slavic Beliefs: An Ethic of Universal Care*. This manuscript remained unpublished until 1998, when it came out in a highly abridged version. Trentowski’s work was indebted to the outline of Slavic mythology that Adam Naruszewicz laid out in the still-available second volume of his *History of the Polish Nation*; but many of Trentowski’s other sources, including oral ones, have now been lost. Trentowski’s present-day editor, Tadeusz Linkner, claims that some of his research did trickle out into the general nineteenth-century public when parts of his manuscript, as well as sections of his *Dictionary of the Polish Language*, were plagiarized by Joachim A. Szyc in *Slavic Gods* (1865). Nevertheless, Linkner sees the greatly delayed publication of Trentowski’s study as a huge missed cultural opportunity:

[H]ad Trentowski managed to publish *Slavic Beliefs* in his time, it would have been the first such compendium of knowledge about pre-Christian religions available to the Polish Romantics. It bears comparison only to *Die Wissenschaft des slawischen Mythus* (*The Study of Slavic Myths* [1842]), by Trentowski’s contemporary Ignaz Johann Hanusch; and even as the two scholars’ aims and perspectives were similar, Trentowski’s work promised to be much richer and more resonant in its attentiveness to gaps in the historical archive. (9)

Around the recent premiere of Marek Koterski’s *Wszyscy jesteśmy Chrystusami* [*We Are All Christs*],

the star of this film, Marek Kondrat, gave several important interviews. In all these interviews, he reflected on the following question: how did Poles come to acquire their particular cultural “genetic code,” predicated on a strong sense of superiority (“We’re obsessed with ourselves!”) but also on a painful sense of inferiority toward “the West of which we dream”? To this question, Kondrat responds as follows: “I am persuaded by the following hypothesis, though I will state it with some apprehension: Poland remains a relatively new part of the Old World. The tenth century is a late starting point for a European nation, especially since we bear no relation to what came before then.”

But perhaps Poles *do* bear some relation to a cultural past prior to the tenth century, even if we do not realize it. Many signs point in that direction. A certain strand of Polish Romanticism speculates whether Slavs’ conversion to Christianity was a “bad” one, marked by cultural as well as physical violence by means of which Slavs were forcefully torn away from their old beliefs. Such a violent cultural transformation would have sparked in Slavs a sense of fragmentation and inferiority, a feeling of diminishment that might have persisted over centuries.

Consider the dramatic events surrounding the conversion of the Slavs of the Polabi region [in present-day Germany]. Bruno of Kwerfurt, who led the Christianizing mission to the Polabi Slavs, described the twofold principle of his task as *compelle intrare*. That is, he was to *compel* the Polabi peoples *willingly* to accept their new faith. As Henryk Łowmiański clarifies, the term *compelle intrare* refers to a legal act, a public declaration that the collectives into which the Slavs organized themselves had to make for Bruno’s task to be complete. German scholarship on this subject emphasizes the voluntary aspect of this declaration. However, Łowmiański pushes back against this interpretation: “We can only speculate about the feelings with which tenth- and eleventh-century Polabi Slavs took on their new faith; but what we do know for sure are facts, and in this case these are the facts of military conquest” (260). We also know that missionaries from the West insisted on

the superiority of Christianity and the contemptible nature of paganism. Hasty and superficial in their conversion efforts, they were more interested in eradicating pagan rites and in destroying pagan temples and idols than in teaching their converts about the Christian faith (Łowmiański 260–63; 273–81).

The fall of Cape Arkon, known as “the Troy of the North,” closed the final chapter of the Polabi Slavs’ independence from their Saxon and Danish invaders. Much has been written about the new, Christian order these invaders created. But one should also “see the conversion of Eastern Europe’s barbarian peoples as a destructive act.” As Karol Modzelewski writes, “the missionaries insisted that sacred pagan idols and places of worship had to be demolished before collective baptisms could take place; these acts of destruction were to take place in public, before the eyes of the believers, in purposefully shocking fashion” (455). In *Barbarzyńska Europa* [*Barbarian Europe*], Modzelewski quotes medieval Christian chroniclers who describe the fear and dread with which the pagans witnessed the ruin and defilement of their ancient cults:

After Arkon was conquered by the Danes, crowds of pagan believers watched their armed conquerors violate successive circles of local religious taboos. They saw the Danes take down the fences built around their temples and rip the veils covering their sacred sculptures; they saw the Danes order their henchmen to cut off a holy idol’s legs, put a noose around its neck and drag it to the victors’ encampment, where the kitchen help cut it up for firewood.

The chroniclers add that the pagans assembled to witness these spectacles of desecration often cried in despair at the hurt done to their idols by the horses that dragged them and the soldiers who struck them (458). This pagan despair would have resonated across the centuries; a powerful historical trauma, it must have left some traces in the cultures of the Slavic peoples.

Historians further remind us that, had pagan Poles refused to adopt this new Christian, European, monarchical social system, we would have been

reduced to a small, deeply peripheral ethnic minority within Western European states—not unlike the Luzitsi tribes [Łużycanie] crushed by and absorbed into Germany, whom historians now see as the “last living witnesses” of Polabi Slavdom (Strzelczyk 80). In a chapter entitled “Jak mogło nas nie być” [“How We Might Not Have Existed”], Zdzisław Skok dramatically asserts that “the emergence of the Polish state was by no means an inevitable consequence of its surrounding historical processes” (104). Mieszko I [the founder of Poland’s first royal dynasty] actively created a Polish state and worked to incorporate it into Europe. This transformation “came at the cost of immense bloodshed, and of violence done to pagan tribal leaders, gods, and priests; pursuing this violent politics against its own people was the only means by which Poland could assert itself as an independent state” (Skok 109). By contrast, Poland’s Polabi neighbors perished because of their fierce loyalty to their pagan deities and to their principles of cooperative, group-based decision-making.

In the course of their defeat and brutal conversion to Christianity and Latinate culture, Slavs, especially Western Slavs like the Polabi, lost their indigenous mythologies and the communal imaginaries these mythologies subtended. . . . Modzelewski stresses that the converted Slavs “did not fear baptism itself. What they did fear was the radical, demonstrative destruction of the old cults that grounded the world in which they lived” (458). “These traditional cultures did not make distinctions between the sacred and the profane that might have allowed its members to redescribe themselves in secular terms. With the death of their gods, their whole cosmos perished as well” (460). The world as they knew it had been defiled and overturned, even as they were never quite integrated into the world of their conquerors.

A sense of contempt toward the supposed inferiority and ignorance of Slavic pagans established itself firmly and persistently in non-Slavic Central Europe:

In 1108 the archbishop of Aldegoza in the Magdeburg province wrote a letter that called on

his community to invade the lands of the pagan Slavs; he described these lands as inhabited by “the worst kinds of peoples” and their conquest as bearing a double advantage: “Saxons, Franks, Lothringians, Flandrians—all you glorious victors—this task will bring you eternal salvation, and, if you like, it will also yield excellent lands for you to settle in.” (Samsonowicz 44)

Christianization went hand in hand with colonization, as it did in the Teutonic Knights’ “civilizing” mission “to the East.” This process of subjugating Slavs through and within European culture continued for centuries. Granted, in the course of these centuries, Poland enjoyed some periods of political and socioeconomic success. But for the most part, Europeans saw Slavdom as “a reservoir of slave labor to be exploited” (Rudaś-Grodzka, “Słowiańszczyzna zniewolona” 222); they described Slavs as slavish, passive, and submissive in character, and as therefore deserving conquest and enslavement.

Nineteenth-century German nationalism was nourished by such stereotypes; indeed, German nationalists gave these stereotypes even more aggressive, expansionist meanings and aims. . . . Twentieth-century anti-Slav German propaganda, whose aim was to increase German *Lebensraum* in the East, also made use of the preexisting image of the Slav as innately a slave. In the middle of December 1941, Hitler justified the invasion of Eastern Europe as follows: “Slavs are a mass of slaves by birth; they invariably follow their master and ask themselves only who this master is. . . . Slavic nations were not meant to lead an independent life of their own. Slavs know as much and we should not try to convince them otherwise” (qtd. in Borejsza 32). These oppositions of masters and slaves, racial superiority and inferiority, had murderous consequences.

In a book called *L’ingratitude*—the word refers to the ingratitude of Western Europe toward Eastern Europe—Alain Finkielkraut writes that the agreement Western European nations signed with Hitler in Munich in 1938 [which allowed Germany to invade Czechia] was rendered possible not only by the West’s cowardice but also by the contempt all these states shared toward Eastern Europe’s

“unimportant nations.” In Germans, this contempt was motivated by racial aggression; other Westerners looked down on Eastern Europeans because, unlike themselves, they did not belong to “the civilized part of humanity” (25). One hears echoes of this contempt, Finkielkraut remarks, in a recent French intellectual’s insulting response to the reintegration of Eastern European countries into cooperative European institutions, from which they had been separated since 1945. The intellectual in question described this reintegration as the “balkanization” of Europe (15).

Balkanization: what a terrible word, with its undertones of chaos, fragmentation, and war! So much lies hidden beneath it. Georges Corm describes the Balkans and the Near East as victims of the same historical transformation that gave rise to Western Europe as we now know it. The dissolution of the multiethnic Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires of which the Balkans and the Near East were major constituents coincided with the strengthening of Western Europe’s power-hungry nation-states. The former regions’ “Balkanization” and “becoming-Lebanon,” as Corm also calls it, were processes to which these latter states’ predominance and mutual rivalries strongly contributed. However, the “culturally narcissistic” West insists on its natural and not just historically contingent superiority to these other civilizations from whose political decline it benefited. This narcissism led Western nation-states to express contempt toward the so-called East and see themselves as the East’s educators. It also simplified Western views of political conflicts into “a Manichean system: with rationalism and democracy on one side, irrationalism, fanaticism, archaism, ethnocentrism, and tribalism on the other” (Corm xviii). Such simplifications persist even today.

Let us return to the question of Slavic mythology. Western Europe’s cultural disdain for “all these small Eastern nations” makes us feel furious, bitter, and sad (Bibo). I would not advocate that we overcome these feelings by teaching schoolchildren about Slavic mythology, praising pagan Slavic deities or glorifying neopagan nationalists such as Jan Stachniuk [1905–63]. However, to improve our

mental balance, we do need to become better aware of the long history from which stem both our helpless sense of marginality and our fantasies of being a special, chosen nation. If we take more historical distance from ourselves, we will appreciate more fully the harmfulness of our habitual oppositions between “better” and “worse” cultures. From this transhistorical standpoint, the humanities can properly begin the work of retelling our cultural narrative to ourselves.

What Do We Fear about Slavdom?

Such a retelling could, indeed, begin with the concept of Slavdom, even while adorning this concept with many dramatic question marks. I know that many of us would rather not discuss our imagined notions of Slavdom and focus, instead, on a revised notion of Central Europe. In one such evasion, “Angelus,” the literary award cosponsored by the city of Wrocław and the national daily newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, introduces

a new understanding of Central Europe. For us, this term does not, as would be more traditional, designate the territories of the former Hapsburg Empire. Nor does it follow a range of other definitions developed in the numerous literary and political debates that have surrounded this subject since the nineteen-eighties. Instead, for the purposes of this award, the term encompasses the following twenty countries: Austria, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Macedonia, Moldova, Germany, Poland, Russia [as far as the Ural Mountains], Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, and Hungary. Including all the countries of the former Soviet bloc as well as their neighbors, this designation reminds us of the shared, profound imprint that the two totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century have had on all of them. [“Wydarzenia roku 2006”]

Such contemporary reconstructions of Central Europe refer back to, and then step away from, a political and cultural myth that was first established and debated twenty years earlier. Formulated by Milan Kundera in a 1984 essay, this myth sparked

much discussion before becoming a means of regional self-definition. For Kundera and his followers, to speak of “Central Europe” was to protest the despotism of Russia and the Soviet Union’s totalitarian domination over the Second World. It suggested that Soviet Russia tore away from Western Europe countries that properly belonged to the cultural West, to which they had made unique contributions through their literature, architecture, and music. Kazimierz Brakoniecki has subjected this myth of Central Europe to devastating critique. He describes Kundera’s Central Europe as a “hybrid entity impossible to locate in time and space” (24), which was, moreover, rendered anachronistic in 1989 by the fall of communism and by the contradictory national interests postcommunism awakened amid the Soviet Union’s former vassals. “The history and heritage of countries such as Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Slovenia, Austria, etc.,” writes Brakoniecki, “have no shared origins that the term Central Europe could designate” (24–25).

The notion of Central Europe embraced by the “Angelus” prize committee is capacious by comparison. Indeed, it is perhaps *too* capacious, since the constellation of states it creates is so diverse as to seem arbitrary. Spanning “the countries of the former Soviet bloc as well as their neighbors”—Austria and Germany, that is—it forges their connective tissue out of a shared totalitarian [i.e., Nazi as well as Soviet] past. I am not interested in evaluating the aptness of this connection. I think, however, that the notion of Slavdom ought also to be available to us as a tool of thinking. Moreover, it ought to be possible to use this term to designate the community of Slavs in a nonessentialist way.

Brakoniecki sees Slavdom as a mythologized idea of “our East.” It fascinates but also frightens him as “a myth that threatens our collective moral and social health even more than the Corpse of the Weimar Triangle” (25). I understand his reservations, which stem from a particularly Polish fear: the fear that embracing Slavdom might make one a “slavophile” or a “pan-Slav.” Both labels—as well as calls for “Slavic unity” and “Slavic brotherhood”—are well-worn masks donned

by Russian imperialism. As soon as one mentions them, the history of Polish-Russian relations rears its ugly head. But here, I will try to sidestep its specter: I want to approach the issue of Slavdom less spasmodically than usual, and with less concern for boundary demarcations.

To speak of Slavdom also brings up a second fear: like any myth of ethnic or tribal belonging, Slavdom can easily fuel nationalist and even fascist ideation. . . . Even today, nationalist radicals are drawn to the ideas of the prewar theorist Jan Stachniuk, for whom Slavic nationhood evolved from and should revert to *zadruga*, the putative social unit of ancient proto-Slavic tribal communities. Stachniuk wanted the Polish nation to self-liberate by rejecting Catholicism as “a faith imposed on Poles from the outside, by a foreign agent,” and reembracing paganism. This fantasy of a neo-pagan national collectivity that might recover its ancient Slavic roots bred further backward-looking cultural utopias. Stachniuk was “haunted by the need to reconstruct Poles’ self-understanding around their culture’s as yet poorly understood and under-described, original proto-Slavic paradigms” (Skoczyński 17). Today, Stachniuk’s racist and nationalist inheritors tell us that “on one level, we embrace national socialism; on another level, we embrace Slavdom. We want to fuse them into one powerful social movement”; and that “faced with the multiracial decadence of the West, only a united Slavia can fulfill the hopes of the White Race; a Westerner who does not support the Slavs betrays the White Race and himself” (Pankowski). To hitch their movement to imperial Russia’s Eurasianism: that is the Polish neofascists’ ultimate goal.

“I have taken myth away from the fascists,” Thomas Mann once proudly announced. Perhaps that is the challenge we should undertake: when necessary, can we—and *how* can we—take Slavdom away from the fascists? Slavoj Žižek sees this as an impossible task: for him, national and ethnic identity are inseparable from fundamentalism. To be sustained, these identities require an Other who can be hated, accused, and persecuted for appropriating, poisoning, and depleting some most precious, if inarticulable, “spirit of the nation.” Such

fundamentalism feeds on violence and hatred. For Žižek, one cannot meaningfully distinguish between a “‘healthy’ national identity” or a “‘healthy’ nationalism” built around a circumscribed national self-awareness and an “‘excessive’ nationalism” that becomes “xenophobic” and “aggressive” (62). Still, such a distinction is precisely what I will try to establish and reflect on here. I want to assume that it is possible, in principle, to speak of and maintain a national identity that is neither aggressive nor xenophobic. Wolfgang Sofsky observes that “the dream of the absolute gives rise to absolute violence” [“Der Traum vom Absoluten gebiert absolute Gewalt” (226)]. When a nation is conceived of as an absolute value, it gives rise to such violence as well. But can that process of absolutization somehow be avoided?

“We Slavs Love an Idyll”

Over two hundred years ago, Europe’s elites found out that Slavs were destined to lead their continent on a mission of cultural and social renewal. The man who delivered this news was one of the Enlightenment’s great thinkers, Johann Gottfried Herder. The ancient Slavs Herder imagined “manufactured salt, fabricated linen, brewed mead, planted fruit trees, and led, after their fashion, a gay, musical life.” These cheerful lovers of rural freedom were hospitable to the point of extravagance. They enjoyed farming, hated wars, and wanted to spend their lives by the family hearth. These supposed Slavic progenitors came close to epitomizing Herder’s notion of a pure human society. But they carried one crucial flaw: their gentleness made them easy targets of conquest and enslavement. “Many nations, chiefly of German origin, injuriously oppressed them. . . . [I]n whole provinces the Slavians were extirpated, or made bondsmen, and their lands divided among bishops and nobles.” Herder compared this process to colonization; he underlined that the fate of Slavs within Europe invites analogies to the conquest of South America: “their remains in Germany were reduced to that state, to which the Peruvians were subjected by the Spaniards.” In both cases, Christianity served as a pretext for European

invasion. Herder believed that this forced conversion temporarily transformed the character of the Slavic people: the softness with which they initially responded to their Christian masters and raiders turned into “the artful, cruel indolence of a slave.” In assessments such as these, Herder did not mince words about the condition of his Slavic contemporaries; still, he did not see their condition as irreparable. After all, as he believed, “the wheel of changing time . . . revolves without ceasing.” With its future revolutions, Slavs would go back to peaceful, exemplary practices of farming and trade within what Herder saw as “the finest lands of Europe” (483). His ideas about this innate, rediscoverable superiority of the Slavs gave fodder for several incarnations of Slavic nationalisms and myths of ethnic chosenness.

As a utopian thinker, Herder did not care about the actual political and religious differences that divided his contemporaneous Slavs. Instead, he saw Slavdom as a homogenous territory within which his vision of an ideal society could realize itself. Slavs’ perceived “nonhistoric” quality, as Hegel later termed it, made them a prime canvas for utopian thinking. The so-called “Slavian chapter” of Herder’s *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* thus crucially contributed to spreading idyllic visions of the Slavs both within Slavic territories and beyond them. Even Adam Mickiewicz, Poland’s greatest Romantic poet, would thus say, though not without irony, that “we Slavs love an idyll” [“Sławianie, my lubimy sielanki”].

The Spellings of Slavery

Should the word *Slavs* be spelled *Słowianie* or *Sławianie*? Mickiewicz’s choice of the latter, in the passage just quoted, contributes to a broader Romantic debate about this old tribal name. *Sławianie* could derive from *śława*, glory; as the eighteenth-century archbishop Jan Paweł Woronicz put it, it makes Slavs “sons of glory.” *Słowianie*, on the other hand, invokes *słowo*, “the word,” thus perhaps also “the one who is called the Word” (John 1.1). Mickiewicz made the latter point in a series of lectures he delivered in Paris: “*Słowianie* means people of the word, the Word of God.” For Slavs,

he argued, *ślowo* “invokes piety and creative power” (11: 76). Meanwhile, behind these glorious etymologies there lurked a third one: *der Slawe* or *der Sklave* [both from the medieval Latin *sclavus*]. The Slav is the subject, the captive, the slave. Slavic territories were objects of conquest as well as sources of human bodies for the slave trade. Enslaved Slavs were often bought by Scandinavian merchants, who saw them as “a product to be traded on the markets of the Islamic world, where it carried much value” (Samsonowicz 17).

Herder writes that “the figure made by the Slavian nations in history is far from proportionate to the extent of country they occupied” (482). Why would that be? Fifty years after Herder, Mickiewicz set out to solve this riddle in front of audiences assembled for his lectures at the Collège de France. In these lectures, he put forth two definitions of history: “that which is built and written” and “that which accretes to the Spirit.” By the first definition, the spoils of history belong to the West; but by the second, he argued, they belong to the Slavs. It is the latter’s destiny to fulfill the spirit of history and finally make it manifest. In geographic terms, Slavdom “occupies a vast global territory” (10: 176). The vastness of the space the Slavs occupy does not find a proportionate reflection in their Western-style historical achievements. But the submissiveness that has prevented them from exercising more historical agency is God-given. It is not a sign of their weakness, but of their anticipated future fate. From birth, they intuit and await a divine calling. For Mickiewicz, Slavs’ seemingly passive attitude of hopeful waiting marks a defining feature of their implicit philosophy of history. He transforms Herder’s utopian Slavic idylls into a full-blown messianic vision of Slavs as the world’s spiritual saviors (though, as Mickiewicz also hastens to tell the assembled Parisians, the Slavs cannot accomplish this mission without help from France).

Utopias, legends, mystical visions, myths, ideological and literary phantasms: those are the warp on which our modern images of Slavdom were woven. As the Romantics wove these images, they did so in open conflict with the West’s prejudices about the “organic inadequacy of nonwestern peoples”

(Thompson 5). Through this conflict, a group of Polish Romantics forged for themselves a new myth of origin. They did so by revindicating the hidden, the forgotten, the repressed, the marginal, the superstitious, the strange, and the unhinged. The cultural forms they thereby sought to ennoble formed their period’s unofficial counterculture. From an initial focus on local folklore, their reparative work went on to embrace all that was pagan, anti-Latinate, Slavic, and Northern. These Romantic efforts met with considerable resistance from proponents of classical Greco-Roman culture, some of whom also saw themselves as members of Polish Romanticism’s sub-branches. These other Romantics insistently identified their culture with the cultures of the Mediterranean; by going back to the Renaissance, they wanted to restore cultural harmony between Poland and the Greco-Roman South and South-West.

Against these counterarguments, the main branch of Polish Romanticism refused to hope for cultural harmony and reconciliation. They rejected all things Latinate because they were convinced that their surrounding folk culture had preserved an older, pagan network of pre-Christian beliefs and customs from which they could draw their inspiration instead. These Romantics insisted that these folk sources were not merely different from Greco-Roman ones, but intellectually and aesthetically on par with them. They believed that, as Gieysztor wrote two centuries later, “even today, Slavic folklore preserves a core pre-Christian view of the world and of the sacred” (259).

The Polish Romantics had thus intuited a phenomenon that would come to preoccupy twentieth-century microhistorians such as Norbert Schindler and Carlo Ginzburg: the possibility that “popular culture [is] a social formation distinct from elite culture that possesses a practice of autonomous symbolic actions of its own” (Schindler 94). “The ecclesiastical and theological influence on popular life, which is largely conceived of as a totality,” is easily overestimated by historians (95). By contrast, members of Poland’s Romantic movement saw Polish folk culture and official Church culture as dramatically opposed to each other, at times even

as each other's antinomies. In *The Cheese and the Worms* [1976], a fascinating work, Ginzburg describes the "savage" religiosity of the common people, an orally transmitted "peasant religion." Ginzburg's protagonist, a "simple" miller named Menocchio, developed out of these traditions his own philosophical view about the nature of the cosmos. His pronouncements seemed so dangerous that the Catholic Inquisition investigated them and sentenced Menocchio to death. By studying the transcripts of this trial, which include the accused's own statements, Ginzburg shed new light on the deep rift between folk beliefs and Church orthodoxy. This is a rift that the Romantics already knew a lot about.

As Polish Romantics explored their cultural past through its folkloric traces, they recognized how mysterious and secret-laden it was. Monika Rudaś-Grodzka writes that "from our contemporary point of view, we recognize these Romantic figures as discovering a previously undiagnosed collective cultural amnesia. They named this amnesia, because of which Poles have no past in which to recognize themselves, as one of our constitutive identity markers" ("Słowiańszczyzna. Pamięć i zapomnienie" 217). Later Romantic and post-Romantic writers continued to revisit and deepen this sense of painful oblivion and misrecognition. They also drew attention to the many symptoms of this cultural trauma. It manifests itself in feelings of identification with the weak and the oppressed, with the enslaved and the humiliated, with the dispossessed and the unfairly forgotten, with those who were cast aside or crushed in the gears of so-called historical progress.

Within their murky cultural past, the Romantics sensed the vestigial presence of some huge communal catastrophe. The aftershocks of this event reached them in billows of explosive, frenetic imagery of destruction and dread. The uncanny Slavdom they discovered was properly *unheimlich*, at once strange and familiar, marked by a sense of rupture, pregnant with a repressed non-Latin, maternal, autochthonous unconscious. This repressed Slavdom would at times manifest itself in a secret rite of speaking with the dead that the common folk hid from their lords and from

their priests (and which Mickiewicz represents in *Dziady*). At other times, it would resurge as a semi-utopian vision of the past as both idyllic and intensely violent, inspired both by Herder's view of Slavdom and by Nikolai Karamazin's *Istoriya gosudarstva rossiyskogo* [*History of Russia* (1816)], in which "the ruler's charisma stems from his cruelty," as in Juliusz Słowacki's unfinished, speculatively historical epic poem *Król-Duch* (Uspienski and Żywow 22). It sometimes inspired the Romantics to write quasi-historical tales of how Christianity and feudalism were forcefully imposed on a previously free Slavic people (such as Ryszard Wincenty Berwiński's *Bogunka na Gopie* [*Bogunka on Lake Gopło* (1840)]). At other times, Romantic writers gestured toward this Slavic uncanny through narratives that were at once very local and intensely foreign—as does the young Krasiński in his tale of a vampiric, Transylvanian-esque but Slavic princess who lives under the village of Opinogóra. In his many novels, especially *Masław*, Kraszewski depicts it through vague images of unspecified defeats, destructions, and ruins. Well into modernism, Stanisław Wyspiański resurrects these visions of Slavdom as equal parts homely and demonic in a series of stage plays.

Józef Kraszewski and Isaac Bashevis Singer

Polish Romanticism's most obvious piece of writing in this vein is Józef Kraszewski's *Stara Baśń* (*An Ancient Tale* [1876]). Amid its idyllic, fairy tale-like ancient Slavic landscape, this novel contains many scenes of concentrated violence. Kraszewski releases this violence into his represented world as if to acknowledge the catastrophic cultural rift that is to come after the period whose realities he imagines. But he ultimately smooths out these turbulences by means of rather simplistic ideological schemata taken from the Roman Catholic playbook. Rudaś-Grodzka argues that, ultimately, Kraszewski cannot conceive of actually going back to Poland's pre-Christian Slavic roots or of constructing a present-day identity around them; the tale he spins, he insists, is only a tale. Indeed, in his eyes, it is only with Christianity that the *real* story of

Slavdom begins. Poles need Christianity to enlighten their world and to set their society on the right path. As Rudaś-Grodzka puts it, “Kraszewski repeats the old narrative that the conversion of Poland marked a necessary step in its refinement as a nation. This is the official narrative handed down by Polish history’s political and military victors” (“Słowiańszczyzna. Pamięć i zapomnienie” 222).

Against this backdrop, consider Isaac Bashevis Singer’s *King of the Fields* (1988), which creatively rewrites Kraszewski’s novel. This work, the last one Singer published before his death, imagines a mythical Polish prehistory in which Polish agrarian communities—the tribes of the fields—alternately fight and cooperate with the Lesniks, hunter-gatherer tribes of the surrounding forests. Singer finds inspiration in old Jewish legends, according to which

Jews used to live in Polish territories even before their conversion to Christianity. One such legend embroiders on a very well-known Polish folk tale about an evil pre-Christian ninth- or eighth-century prince named Popiel. [In the latter, better-known legend, Popiel and his Germanic wife are eaten alive by rats and mice as divine punishment for their acts of cruelty and are immediately succeeded by Piast the Wheelwright, the semi-legendary founder of the first Polish royal dynasty.] The Jewish legend on which Singer draws adds one more prince between Popiel and Piast. It imagines, as Popiel’s immediate successor, a Jewish man named Abraham who eventually, peacefully, hands Poland over to Piast. (Adamczyk-Garbowska 57–58)

In the spirit of this legend, Singer’s fictional panorama of prehistoric Poland includes Ben Dosa, a Jewish cobbler who writes down the Polish language in Hebrew letters and preaches to the pagan Poles about the monotheistic God. But a blond, Christian stranger arrives on the scene, Bishop Mieczysław. “He was tall, young, erect; he had a blond beard, a long cloak, a feathered hat, and spurs on his boots. He rode a white horse on a saddle trimmed with dangling tassels. His face was thin and pale, his eyes were blue” (Singer 170). Mieczysław denounces Ben Dosa as a descendant of the One God’s killers.

The Jewish cobbler whom the pagan community had accepted into itself is forced to flee “the land called Poland” (1). A new, conquering king arrives; named Yodla, he also rides a white horse: “on a white horse with an ornamented saddle, rode a man with a long mustache and a hat from which a feather dangled. His coat was richly embroidered with red and white threads. There were spurs on his boots” (211). His feathered cap and fancy heel spurs presage the fashions of the Christian oligarchs and nobles of early modern Poland. King Yodla speaks of the need to “become one large nation, to speak one language, to live in one land” (213). In the course of the tale, a fabricated conflict separates Judaism and Christianity, even though they share the same point of origin; this conflict is then entangled with Poland’s embrace of Christianity. This is how Singer portrays the emergence of Polish anti-Semitism and its inextricability from the history and identity of the Polish nation.

Herder’s Hour?

In an instance of great historical irony, Hans Georg Gadamer claimed in the 1980s that Herder’s philosophy of history would soon need to be revisited and reappraised. “Herder’s hour,” as he called it, did come, but in horrific guise. As Joanna Rapacka powerfully argues in her study of the cultural and historical context of the war in Yugoslavia, Herder’s idea of history came back to life in the course of the conflict in the Balkans. In the process, utopian hopes that Slavdom might be the source of Europe’s political deliverance were cruelly dashed. The holiness of the nation, and the nation’s divine right to sustain its being by fomenting war, contempt, and hatred, were also definitively called into question (32–33). The “patriarchal-heroic Romanticism” of Slavic identity formation had revealed its nationalistic visage. In her celebrated book of essays *The Culture of Lies*, the Croatian-born writer Dubravka Ugrešić takes inspiration from Paweł Pawlikowski’s *Serbian Epics* (1992) to paint a vicious portrait of the Serbian leader Radovan Karadžić, “the psychiatrist, a doctor of science, a poet and a murderer” (137). Grotesque but

also dangerous, this “king of the gusle-playing bards” and his murderous supporters coalesce into a “brotherhood of emphatic rhythms” (137–38). As the ring they form around the besieged Sarajevo tightens, their attacks also become ring dances; they are confident that “the hypnotic ‘gusle’ will be there to sing of Serbian heroism and heroes for the n-th time on the smoking ruins” (138–39). Criminals become national heroes to the beat of the ancient musical-mythical genre of “the Serbian epic,” a genre that the Slavic Romantics also loved. Ugrešić writes how Karadžić’s bardic “gusle storytelling” is reinforced by “gusle journalism,” which “sings of contemporary events, summoning the memory of glorious forebears, with whom the new men stand in an unbroken necrophiliac connection” (139). In his reading of Emir Kusturica’s *Underground*, Žižek similarly highlights this heady, intoxicating soundtrack of the Serbian genocides. The film, he argues, “unknowingly provides the libidinal economy of the Serbian ethnic slaughter in Bosnia: the pseudo-Batailleian trance of excessive expenditure, the continuous mad rhythm of drinking-eating-singing-fornicating.” Karadžić’s being a poet is, for Žižek, anything but accidental: “ethnic cleansing in Bosnia was the continuation of a (kind of) *poetry* with the admixture of other means” (64). The war in Yugoslavia thus definitively discredited prior attempts at a racial idealization of the Slavs.

A Bond We Cannot Sever

We are headed back into Europe—but we must bring our dead along with us. The pre-Christian Slavic ritual of *dziady* insists on the connectedness between the living and the dead. Mickiewicz saw this belief as our culture’s most foundational, and most invigorating, principle. The chain of being that *dziady* imagines transcends national, ethnic, and religious boundaries. Death does not sever the bonds that tie our lives together; nor can history sever them, though the process of history making often involves less remembering than forgetting. Repeating the rites of *dziady* places one in a life-giving state of mourning. Here in Poland, these

rituals might make us think, most of all, of those who died while fighting for our country’s independence or who were persecuted by its foreign occupants and conquerors.

But we have much more to mourn for. Speaking at the Collège de France in 1844, Mickiewicz described the destinies of Poland and of Israel as mystically intertwined. “Our land has come to also belong to that oldest and most mysterious of nations: the Jewish nation.” On Polish soil, “destiny entangled with each other these two peoples who would seem so mutually alien” (11: 138). Mickiewicz was convinced that, through their mystical union, the Poles and the Jews were bound toward a joint, messianic fate, that Poland served as a replacement for the lost territory of the Promised Land.

In 1957 Maria Czapka returns to this theme of Jewish-Polish entanglement in very different circumstances that Mickiewicz could not have anticipated: in the aftermath of the Holocaust. She writes:

The globally unprecedented genocide of several million Jewish people took place in Poland, whose territory Hitler chose for the site of their execution. Their blood and ashes have become absorbed into our soil. It is not in our power to sever the bond this creates between Poland and the Jewish people. We may not be directly responsible for these crimes; but we are co-responsible for offering reparations for the damage they caused.

How are we to understand this statement? What reparations can a culture defined by *dziady* offer? . . . We must live in an excess of pain, in an awareness of irretrievable damage. We are not talking, here, of a yearlong or two-year mourning period, but of an unending one. The ethical awareness it builds, and the statement it makes, should be shared by all of Europe. Poland, in particular, must not seek to avoid this mourning process. In *Żydowska wojna* [*The Jewish War*], Henryk Grynberg powerfully conveys what it means to live on land marked by the reality as well as the specters of genocide. The protagonist of the novel, a young boy, comes to Warsaw as the Holocaust is underway. The sheer number of people he sees there shocks him. “I

hadn't thought there were so many people left alive in the world. How was I to suspect it? After my town had disappeared, I had assumed that all other towns and cities had also been destroyed; that the fields and forests where we hid were all that was left" (46). The Slavic rites of *dziady* commune with these lost lives as well.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Janion's original essay features long discursive and bibliographic footnotes. I have reduced them here and have also chosen to elide a small number of paragraphs from the body of the text in which Janion engages in more local scholarly debates. My reductions of her footnotes are unmarked, but my elisions in the body of the text are marked by ellipses. I have placed in square brackets my occasional explanatory comments and elaborations on

Janion's writing. Where Janion quotes from works originally published in English or ones that have a standard English translation, my translation goes back to these original or standard sources and I cite them in the list of works cited. Where Janion quotes from works published in Polish or from works untranslated into English, I provide my own translations and cite Janion's original source. Janion does not always provide in-text page-number citations or page ranges in the works-cited list for the sources she cites; I sought them out and added them wherever possible.