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## “We Are the State”. *Pharaoh* by Bolesław Prus

Aleksander Głowacki, known as an author under the pseudonym Bolesław Prus (1847–1912), is, along with Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916) and Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841–1910), a key representative of Polish realist novels or the literary period known as positivism.<sup>1</sup>

In the time of Prus’s literary creativity, Poland was divided between three superpowers – Austria, Russia and Prussia – and between 1795 and 1918 it did not exist as an independent political entity. Gradual industrialisation took place at different rates in the individual occupied regions, and socioeconomic progress led to the development of the bourgeoisie, in which the German and Jewish communities were also strongly represented. Disputes between landlords and peasants dating back to feudal times were joined by disagreements between the developing working class and the bourgeoisie, as well as between different nationalities. In the Russian-occupied zone, where Prus lived, political pressure

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1 In addition to understanding the concept of ‘positivism’ in a broader sense – as a worldview based on trust in reason and the scientific method, the rejection of metaphysics, and an understanding of history as a natural process and evolution, as well as advocating the postulates of utility, freedom and equality – the term ‘positivism’ also took root in Polish literary history in a narrower sense. It refers to a period of realism that, in Polish literature, is demarcated by the years 1864 (the end of the January Uprising against the Russian Empire) and 1890. The leading authors of the period – in addition to Prus, Sienkiewicz and Orzeszkowa, also Maria Konopnicka (1842–1910), who devoted herself mainly to shorter prose forms and poetry – nonetheless continued their creative work in the subsequent two decades (until 1910), while the younger generations were already developing a new poetics, today indicated by the literary-historical label ‘Young Poland’.

intensified after the failed January Uprising, which took place from 1863 to 1864: censorship and Russification increased, the establishment of Polish societies was prohibited, etc. (Markiewicz 2015: 13–16). Nevertheless, it was in this occupied zone that new artistic currents developed most intensively, especially in Warsaw. Although literature after 1864 largely turned away from the Romantic glorification of the role of writers as national leaders towards the postulates of utility, rationality and the social role of the writer, due to Poland's lack of independence, writers still had the task of encouraging readers to take a patriotic stance and consider national issues.

In journalism, younger authors spread positivist postulates that were largely influenced by English and French models, especially geographical determinism (Henry Thomas Buckle), empiricism, utilitarianism and liberalism (John Stuart Mill), Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Herbert Spencer's concept of society as an organism and its evolution, and the deterministic conception of cultural history (Buckle and Hippolyte Taine). They highlighted the necessity of raising the level of education and enabling the lower classes to attend school, promoting and disseminating scientific findings, work as a key value, tolerance, and the fight for equality between the sexes, nations and social classes. It was thought that all of this would lead to the democratisation of society. In doing so, they were aware of the difference between the more developed Western European countries and the conditions in Poland at the time. Due to differences and slow progress, however, the optimism of the Polish positivists faded from the end of the 1870s and shifted towards a more pessimistic outlook.

Within the framework of the generally accepted 'organic' action 'from the ground up', the activities of the younger intellectual elite, which were oriented towards the economic progress of the nation in the given conditions, even if this necessitated cooperation with the occupiers, not only replaced but also critically condemned the illegal conspiratorial rebellion typical of the previous period of Romanticism.

From the 1870s onwards, Bolesław Prus actively collaborated with Warsaw newspapers, in which he shaped his socio-political, philosophical and aesthetic views, which were a balanced synthesis of positivist ideals with certain conservative ones (Markiewicz 2015: 48). In cycles of feuilletons, e.g., *Weekly Chronicles* (*Kroniki Tygodniowe*), published in the newspaper *Kurier Warszawski* in the years 1875–1887, he dealt with current social issues related especially to the Warsaw area, including reflections on the improvement of working and living conditions (disease, hygiene, sewage), demonstration of the coexistence of different nationalities, presentation of cultural events, etc. Among positivist postulates,

he particularly highlighted the importance of work as a value and, consequently, the overall economic and cultural development of society, which he ideally saw as a harmoniously functioning organism (Markiewicz 2015: 69).

Prus's literary programme is especially evident from his literary criticism and his responses to criticism of his own works. Following the lead of Taine, in the article "*With Fire and Sword*" – *A Novel from Ancient Times by Henryk Sienkiewicz* ("*Ogniem i mieczem*" – *powieść z dawnych lat Henryka Sienkiewicza*),<sup>2</sup> Prus highlighted science and art as the key achievements of man, who otherwise resembles animals in many ways. It is art that has the ability to show what is 'highest' in an understandable and attractive way:

We now understand what the essence of great art is; it is showing the most general causes and the most enduring laws that govern the world, especially the human world, as well as – the most general and enduring characteristics of phenomena notwithstanding – showing this in an explicit way that is universally understandable. (Prus 1954)

Prus saw the main task of literature, especially novels, in depicting social change. The writer must be an attentive observer of reality and in the novel, through realistically conceived literary characters, speak of important sociological processes that are based on facts and reflect the essential issues of the time. The most important dimension of literature is therefore cognitive. At the same time, in an orientation towards critical realism from the 1880s onwards, Prus began to doubt positivist ideals.

Prus's most important works, in which he realised his literary programme, were published as feuilletons in newspapers, which were an important medium for the dissemination of literature during this period. The novel *The Doll* (*Lalka*, 1887–1888, *Kurier Codzienny*; book edition 1890) offers a panorama of social classes and life in Warsaw in the second half of the nineteenth century, an image of the disintegration of the former social order and of a man who finds himself in a transitional age; *The New Woman* (*Emancypantki*, 1890, *Kurier Codzienny*; book edition 1894) is a discussion with positivist ideals, especially the emancipation of women; while *Pharaoh* (*Faraon*, 1895–1896, *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*; book edition 1897) deals with the issue of power and the mechanisms of government.

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2 Weekly *Kraj*, 20 July 1884.

## The Feuilleton Novel and Book Versions

The novel *Pharaoh* was published as a literary feuilleton in the newspaper *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* from 5 October 1895 to 26 December 1896.<sup>3</sup> The author did not write the novel as it was being published but had already completed it in May 1895.<sup>4</sup> The first book edition followed in 1897, and the novel was reprinted twice during Prus's lifetime. An additional, final chapter of the novel, which had not been published in either the newspaper or the book edition, was discovered among the manuscripts in Prus's estate. The non-publication of this chapter has not been explained definitively; it may have been either due to the influence of censorship or simply the author's decision. Literary historian Zygmunt Szweykowski (1894–1978) placed the unpublished chapter, to which he added the title *Epilogue*, in the 1935 edition of *Pharaoh*, and this practice was followed in subsequent reprints.

In the version without the epilogue, there is more emphasis on the disagreement between the two powerful central figures, who have opposing views on the issue of saving the country and different strategies in the struggle for power. The defeat of Ramses XIII is the result of a combination of his immaturity and a series of chance events that his opponent used to his advantage. After marrying Queen Nikotris, Herhor becomes pharaoh, and the further fate of the dynasty and the Egyptian state is unclear.

Rather than being a continuation of the plot, the epilogue is a commentary in the form of a dialogue between the priests and sages Pentuer and Menes. The latter understands historical processes in the context of evolutionary theory, that is, the natural development and disintegration of individual ruling dynasties. According to this view, the failure of Ramses is due to the fact that he was born at the wrong time, when the country was doomed to collapse, while at the same time, the plans for a new order were already taking shape. The structure of the novel, in which the reader learns about the pharaoh's inevitable tragic end at the very beginning, can be interpreted in terms of the composition of a Greek tragedy, requiring a final catharsis. In *Pharaoh*, this catharsis appears in the epilogue. From the point of view of the external structure, the epilogue represents a symmetrical element to the introduction and thus the story frame. However, it annuls the otherwise open ending and changes the idea of the novel. Interpreters

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3 In almost the same period (from March 1895), the conservative newspaper *Gazeta Polska* published the historical novel *Quo vadis* by Henryk Sienkiewicz, which drew from the history of the Roman Empire and the reign of Emperor Nero in the first century AD.

4 Note at the end of the book: “[Finished] 2 May 1895 at 3 p.m.”.

of the novel are therefore more inclined to the thesis that the author himself decided not to publish the epilogue (cf. Warzenica-Zalewska 1985: 21–34; Łukaszewicz 2017: 52).

## Egypt in the Polish Literary Tradition and among Readers

At the end of the nineteenth century, during the period of Prus's creative work, material from Egyptian history had already been treated several times in literature. Due to the gradual development of Egyptology and the availability of sources, authors who based their works on this period had various degrees of knowledge about the history of ancient Egypt (cf., e.g., Kaczmarek 2014: 609–625).

Even before Napoleon's campaign in Egypt and his establishment of the Egyptian Institute in Cairo (1798), Jan Potocki (1761–1815) described his travels to the Middle East and North Africa in French in the collection *Voyage to Turkey and Egypt* (*Voyage en Turquie et en Égypte*, 1788). Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849) visited Egypt during the heyday of Egyptology and Egyptian mythology and incorporated motifs into his works, e.g., *Conversation with the Pyramids* (*Rozmowa z piramidami*), *On Top of the Pyramids* (*Na szczycie piramid*) and *Song on the Nile* (*Pieśń na Nilu*).

Information about the discoveries of Egyptologists was available in scientific and professional discussions and journalistic articles, and exhibitions about Egypt were on display in European museums.<sup>5</sup> Interest in this field was further stimulated by the construction and, in 1869, the opening of the Suez Canal between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea (Łukaszewicz 2017: 44). The discoveries of Egyptologists gained popularity among the general public due to literary adaptations, e.g., the so-called professorial novels of the German Egyptologist Georg Ebers (1837–1898), *The Romance of a Mummy* (*Le Roman de la Momie*, 1858) by Théophile Gautier (1811–1872), trivial novels, as well as satirical adaptations, e.g., Edgar Allan Poe's (1809–1849) short story *Some Words with a Mummy* (1845) or Sienkiewicz's later humorous work *The Judgment of Osiris* (*Sąd Ozyrysa*, 1908) (Kulczycka-Saloni 1952: 93–128).

The rich literary tradition of drawing from the historical material of ancient Egypt and other ancient cultures also had an influence on Prus's novel *Pharaoh*. The latter was especially marked by the novel *Salammbô* (1862) by Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880), which included material from the history of Carthage,

5 For example, at the International Exposition in Paris, which opened in 1867, one of the exhibition pavilions was in the form of an Egyptian shrine from the city of Edfu (Łukaszewicz 2017: 44).

and the cycle of novels about ancient Egypt by Ebers. It was apparently Ebers's novels, with their crime-detective motifs, that led to the inclusion of the murder motif in the novel *Pharaoh*. Among the differences that distinguish Prus's novel from its predecessors are the marginality of love motifs; the realistic scepticism, as evident in the 'miracles' for which the narrator provides rational explanations (e.g., a solar eclipse); the distant view of history, which in places portrays the Egyptians humorously (naivety, ignorance of natural laws); and the unfortunate end of a literary character with whom the reader sympathises (Kulczycka-Saloni 1952: 114–118).

The Egyptian chronotope was therefore known, at least in its general outlines, among well-informed Polish readers, but it was nonetheless surprising that Prus tackled historical material; until the novel *Pharaoh*, he had located events in his contemporary time and space, in which he addressed current social issues, such as in the novels *The Doll* and *The New Woman*.<sup>6</sup> One anecdote reports that, upon the news that Prus was writing a work entitled *Pharaoh*, word spread that it was another novel about Polish society at the end of the nineteenth century and its title was related to a popular card game at the time (Pieścikowski 1998: 93).<sup>7</sup>

## The Narrator and the Image of Egypt

Taking a historically and culturally distant perspective, the third-person narrator in the novel *Pharaoh* adopts different points of view when revealing the plot. In the introduction, he is a kind of informer who briefly summarises the geographical, climatic and socio-political characteristics of Egypt and locates the narrative in a specific place and time. He looks from a distance, as if observing the land along the Nile from a bird's-eye view or with the aid of a geography textbook. The emphasis is on the orderly social structure and organisation, as well as the achievements in science and construction, while foreign influences are also mentioned. From the comparisons mentioned (e.g., "Three, four and even five thousand years ago, while rawhide-clad barbarians huddled in Central European caves, Egypt already possessed an advanced social structure, an agriculture, crafts and a literature" [Prus 1991: 7];<sup>8</sup> "sometimes the heat reaches a hundred twenty degrees, the temperature of a Turkish bath" [8]; "Today it is well-nigh

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6 One of the reasons for the shift to historical material may have been censorship, with which Prus had already encountered problems in the novel *The Doll* (Koblar 1967: 631).

7 A French game with forty cards.

8 All of the quotations from the novel *Pharaoh* in English are from Christopher Kasperek's translation (1991), so only page numbers are indicated in brackets in subsequent quotations.

impossible to conceive the extraordinary role played by the priesthood in Egypt" [10]), it is clear that it is the perspective of a person from nineteenth-century Central Europe.

With the first chapter of the first book, the omniscient narrator begins the narrative "In the thirty-third year of the happy reign of Ramses XII" (13), when the pharaoh named his fourth son, Ham-sem-merer-amen-Ramses, as successor to the throne. At the same time, he introduces authentic elements into the narrative on a verbal and descriptive level, such as the names of months or functions, which he explains as he proceeds (the month of Payni – March, April;<sup>9</sup> *erpatr* or the successor to the throne),<sup>10</sup> or provides explanations or comparisons that reveal the narrator's (Eurocentric) perspective ("from every hill sprouted a dark grove of acacias, sycamores and tamarinds, the latter from a distance reminiscent of our lindens" [15]; "Thus sang the brave Ennana, and his tearful song has outlived the Egyptian Kingdom" [41]). Textual inserts from ancient Egyptian sources are pointed out in the author's notes and footnotes (e.g., the fellah's chatter is authentic; authentic hymn; authentic; ancient Egyptian maxims; authentic tomb inscription; one mina was 3.3 pounds).

The narrator often adopts the point of view of Ramses XIII. Thus, while reporting on the gradual acquaintance of the successor to the throne with the functioning of the state apparatus, he also reveals the pharaoh's inner self, subjective perceptions and character traits.

Prus prepared for writing a novel based on Egyptian history by studying the available literature, but he had never actually seen Egypt with his own eyes. In her analysis of the novelistic construction of the Egyptian chronotope, Janina Kulczycka-Saloni (1947: 8–23) notes that the narrator rarely describes the natural environment, and when he does, it is a schematic description from a distant perspective without going into detail. Nor is there any detail in the descriptions of buildings – pyramids, sanctuaries, the Pharaoh's palace, the palaces of the dignitaries – and other construction achievements. Instead, the narrator especially emphasises the monumentality of the buildings, which he paints with information and comparisons of measurements.<sup>11</sup> There are even

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9 Łukaszewicz (2017: 30) points out that this is an anachronism since the names of the months given by Prus were only used later.

10 In Kasperek's English translation, the word *erpatr* is not used; instead the translator uses "successor to the throne".

11 For example, "The dam was as high as a two-story house, about a hundred paces wide at the base, and over twenty-five miles long" (542).

fewer descriptions of detail in the images of interiors, which serve merely as a backdrop.<sup>12</sup> The narrator focuses more specifically on descriptions of the everyday life of the Egyptians – their clothes, objects for everyday use, works of art, customs, religious ceremonies (the embalming and burial of Pharaoh Ramses XII) – as well as on dialogues. The Egyptian chronotope and the atmosphere of the time are thus most clearly recreated in the descriptions of individual people and their behaviour, as well as in the elaborate dialogues, which introduce authenticity through quotation of original pronouncements, parts of poems and inscriptions (e.g., the exclamation at every mention of the pharaoh: “Live forever, our commander!”; “Egypt’s sun!”; “O lord of the two worlds”). On the other hand, the spiritual-historical state of man at that time is depicted in the dialogues by the way of thinking of the characters in the novel, which is characterised by naivety, simplicity and a literal understanding of statements. Only educated priests, who have access to scientific knowledge, are capable of complex reflection. The narrator employs sages from the ranks of the priests to give explanations about the workings of the world, natural phenomena (e.g., a solar eclipse, volcanoes) and presentations to the Egyptian people of the time and even to the pharaoh, as well as to less educated priests, regarding incomprehensible inventions (e.g., the compass, the steam engine), knowledge about the world (life in East Asia, the fact that the Earth is not flat, calculation of the circumference of the Earth) and potential projects (a canal between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea).

## A Historiosophical Novel

Prus referred to *Pharaoh* with the literary genre label ‘novel’ but did not define it more specifically in terms of genre. Due to the work’s material, which the author drew from the distant Egyptian past, it is often characterised as a historical novel. In a study from 1897, however, literary critic Ignacy Matuszewski (1858–1919) emphasised that a more appropriate label would be historiosophical novel (which is not otherwise an established genre label) since the author was not concerned with historical accuracy but rather with universality (Matuszewska 2003b: 152–154). It is true that Prus drew material from Egyptian history, which he had learned about from the available sources, but for the central literary character he chose a mysterious and dramatic figure, Ramses XIII, about whom little was known. Modern studies actually reveal that Ramses XIII

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12 Unlike in *Pharaoh*, the contemporary novels of Sienkiewicz or Orzeszkowa pay a great deal of attention to the realistic description of both interiors and exteriors.

most likely did not even exist, and that Dynasty XX ended with Pharaoh Ramses XI.<sup>13</sup>

Experts on Egypt and Egyptian history (cf., e.g., Łukaszewicz 2017: 27–53; Niwiński 2014: 643–658) have analysed the novel in the light of historical facts and scrutinised the historically relevant descriptions and data provided by the narrator. Their analyses reveal numerous anachronisms, errors and inaccuracies: for example, during the reign of Dynasty XX in Egypt, the position of peasants was not as critical as the narrator portrays in descriptions that are reminiscent of the position of the oppressed in European feudalism; the talent was not a monetary unit in Egypt; and the capital of the pharaohs of Dynasty XX was not in the city of Memphis. Although it is true that the priesthood gained power during the reign of Dynasty XX and there was an accumulation of wealth in temples, the pharaoh was not dependent on the priests because of this and still maintained absolute power. Furthermore, there are inaccuracies in the descriptions of clothing, food habits, construction, rituals, the natural environment, etc.

The novel does not, however, focus on (allegedly) specific persons from the eleventh century BC and the Egyptian chronotope, but rather centres on the struggle of two sides for power. In the background of this struggle is the life of the masses, who, although greatly affected by the decisions of rulers, continue to live their lives regardless of the behaviour of the authorities: children are born and people rejoice, suffer, mourn and die. Attention is devoted to the ethical diversity of the state, emerging disagreements between individual nations, the issue of indebtedness, the luxury of the rich and the exploitation of the poor.

The plot outgrows the historical framework in which it is set, as the author universalises it and highlights two central themes of the novel: the mechanisms of the functioning of the state and government, and the issue of the maturing of a ruler towards fulfilling his functions.

## A *Bildungsroman* Novel

The central conflict of the novel takes place between the successor to the throne, later to be Pharaoh Ramses XIII, and the High Priest of Amon, Herhor. The aged and weakened Pharaoh Ramses XII adopted a form of government in which he performed a representative function, while the most important state decisions

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13 The narrator points out this possibility, or offers it as an explanation for the lack of information, in the introduction: "Many pharaohs, however, reigned briefly, and not only the deeds but the very names of some have disappeared" (11).

were dictated by the highest representatives of the priesthood, including the priest and Minister of War, Herhor. However, the successor to the throne decided that he wanted to rule independently even before assuming power. This resulted in an initially silent conflict between the priesthood and the successor to the throne, which soon grew into a personal power struggle between Ramses XIII and Herhor. The inexperienced successor to the throne was at a disadvantage in this struggle, as he could not compete with the determined Herhor, who had strong support from the priesthood. The narrator reveals the outcome of the conflict to the reader in the introduction:

The following narrative refers to the eleventh century before Christ, when the Twentieth Dynasty fell and when, after the demise of the Son of the Sun the eternally living Ramses XIII, the throne was seized by, and the uraeus came to adorn the brow of, the eternally living Son of the Sun Sem-amen-Herhor, High Priest of Amon. (11)

Ramses XIII entered the world of politics without experience, as a fearless and well-trained soldier and military commander with an idealistic view of governance. Even during his initiation test, in which he had to prove that he was capable of leading troops in battle, Herhor interfered using one of the principal weapons of the priesthood: the influence of religion on the people. Two scarabs caused the troops commanded by the successor to the throne to stop, as their religious beliefs prohibited them from crossing the path of the holy beetles. The diversion of the army led to the death of a desperate peasant, whose canal was filled in. The opening chapters of the first book thus highlight the key characteristics of both sides: on the one hand, Ramses's military view of government, stubbornness, ignorance of the real life of the people and idealistic view of improving their living conditions; on the other hand, Herhor's influence, wealth and experience, as well as his knowledge of the life of all strata of Egyptian society, of natural phenomena, of discoveries and of how to control the masses and manipulate them under the pretext of religion.

Ramses's initial military test had a positive outcome. At the same time, he began to gradually learn about the organisation of the Egyptian state, which the narrator (following Spencer) compares to an organism: "As a result, the Egyptian nation in its times of greatness formed as it were a single person, in which the priesthood was the mind, the pharaoh was the will, the people the body, and obedience the cement" (9). As long as the established social hierarchy dominated and the pharaoh did not interfere, the state functioned well. Ramses soon became convinced that introducing changes to the arrangement, even if they contributed to greater equality, was almost impossible. Attempts to make life