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She lectures at the postgraduate gender studies and the

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a collection of essays on literature entitled

*Kopciuszek, Frankenstein i Inne: Feminizm wobec mitu* [Cinderella,

Frankenstein, and Others: Feminism and Myth],

*Milczenie owieczek:*

*Rzecz o aborcji*

[The Silence of the Little Lambs: On Abortion], and

a book-length interview with Prof. Maria Janion

entitled *Transe,*

*traumy i transgresje*

[Trances, Traumas,

and Transgressions].

She has coauthored and coedited collective

publications,

most recently

the volume entitled

*"...gluchy drwiący śmiech pokoleń"? Współczesna szkoła wobec faszyzmu*

["...the Hollow, Mocking Laughter of Generations?"]

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# CROSSING BOUNDARIES IN CULTURE

**K**azimiera Szczuka talks about the late **Prof. Maria Janion** – a humanistic visionary, a revolutionary scholar of Romanticism, and a modest "*maestra*" in the eyes of her students.

**Many humanists are fascinated with the work of the late Maria Janion. What made her so charismatic?**

KAZIMIERA SZCZUKA: There's no doubt that Prof. Janion was charismatic both as a person and as an preeminent scholar. She was very meticulous, and she saw herself as a learned craftswoman, not as an artist. This type of modesty was typical of entire generations of Polish scholars of Romanticism, to which Maria Janion belonged. This was related to a certain approach to scholarship in general, but also to the special importance attached to the Romantic era in Poland because of the prominence of its poetry and its patriotic impact. Scholars studying Polish literature were expected to serve the cause of Polish Romantic authors – both the great ones, off in exile, as well as the "minor" ones, who stuck it out in Poland. The young Maria Janion indeed helped reinstate memories of the latter into the history of literature.

I mention this because Prof. Janion was full of contradictions, like all charismatic personalities. On the one hand, she had the professionalism, conscientiousness, and humility of an academic scholar. She became a full member of the Polish Academy of Sciences, back at a time when there were few women in such a position. On the other hand, she was a revolutionary, a "refurbisher of meanings," to paraphrase the title of one of her books. Some even described her as a shaman or a high priestess of untamed thinking. Her first students quickly started to describe her as their *mistrzynie* ("matron" or "maestra") and this habit spontaneously passed on to later generations.

Her book known as the *Gdańsk Colloquia* (Gdańsk 1972) arose out of her teaching work at the University of Gdańsk. In it, she exhibited what was then an innovative, previously unpracticed way of thinking and teaching, which we now call interdisciplinary. She presented philosophical and anthropological ideas, illustrating them with examples from film and the arts, such archetypal characters as Oedipus, Prometheus, and Sisyphus, and finally with European literature, surrealism, and psychoanalysis. By the standards of 1972, that was something revolutionary.

Indeed it still is, and the book continues to galvanize readers. In her *Gdańsk Colloquia*, Janion also discussed various forms of iconography – paintings by William Blake and Francisco Goya, photos from the movies "Nosferatu" (directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau) and "Belle de Jour" (directed by Luis Buñuel), portraits of Sigmund Freud, Thomas Mann, André Breton, and even Adolf Hitler as the embodiment of a hypnotizing demonic force. The book instantly gained iconic status and attracted many people to Janion's seminars in Gdańsk, and later in Warsaw, at the PAS Institute of Literary Research. In the introduction to the book, Prof. Janion wrote: "For 14 years, I have been teaching philologists of the Polish language, initially at the Higher School of Pedagogy and now at the University of Gdańsk. (...) I owe them incredibly much, for they have reinforced me in my conviction that teaching is one of the best parts of life. They are the witnesses and protagonists of the *Gdańsk Colloquia*, they inspired the book. For 14 years, I have been thinking not only about them, but also for their sake." Strong emotional



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and spiritual undertones of Janion's teaching style are an extremely important aspect of her charisma. Her open seminar "Transgressions" came to be documented in a famous series in 1981–1988 (Morskie, Gdańsk). Together with her students, Prof. Janion created an anthology of texts that were then barely known in Poland and concerned the most important topics in anthropology, as is reflected in the titles of consecutive volumes: "Galley Slaves of Sensitivity," "Persons," "Masks," "Queers," and "Children."

In general, the method or methodology of her thinking falls within the scope of hermeneutics, to which she remained faithful in various versions and in various periods of her work. This was followed by a teaching method based on the empowerment of students, eventually giving rise to a hermeneutic circle and a shared way of thinking. She expressed this not only during classes, exams, or thesis defenses. In her books, she made references to unpublished student texts, master's theses, and even speeches delivered in class. When someone spoke, she took notes, and then cited them, giving authors due credit, and often praising "outstanding" and "excellent" young people, as well as other scholars. She published their discussions held during academic meetings, also in her book on

a symposium dealing with the Romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki (PIW, Warsaw 1981).

Prof. Maria Janion

#### **How do Janion's approach to Romanticism and understanding of the Polish identity manifest themselves in today's social and political reality?**

For sure, the characteristic Polish and Catholic dimension of Romanticism is exhibited by the political authorities now in power. Prof. Janion was very explicit about this in her letter to the Congress of Culture in 2017, in which she essentially condemned the Polish Romantic messianism. What she wrote has already been quoted on numerous occasions:

*How inefficient and harmful the martyrological model is that prevails in Poland! I will say it openly – messianism, especially its state and clerical version, is a curse for Poland, its undoing. I honestly hate our messianism (...). A nation that cannot exist without suffering must inflict it upon itself. This is the source of the shocking sadistic fantasies about forcing women to give birth to half-dead children, the reopening of the graves of the victims of an air crash, the attack on the monuments of nature, and even – don't be*

*surprised – the stubborn promotion of coal-based energy, which causes cities to fill with smoke and creates the danger of an imminent collapse of civilization.*

All the points she listed in that letter four years ago are still apt today. The only difference is that what were earlier “sadistic fantasies” have now gained the force of law, they have materialized. However, I am sure that Prof. Janion would be happy that we can now see to some extent that Romanticism is being ripped out of the hands of the right-wingers. The protests of the young generation in defense of the rights of women and the LGBT+ community bring to mind not only Janion’s famous essay on “The Goddess of Freedom (Why Is Revolution a Woman?)”, published in 1996, but also her entire romantic interpretation of the youth revolution in France in May 1968 and the events of March 1968 in Poland, with the third part of *Dziady* [Forefathers’ Eve] in the background. The repressions affecting the young people protesting on the streets suddenly shed light on the figure of Senator Novo-

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siltsov, an executioner of children in Mickiewicz’s play. But today’s Novosiltsov is not a “Muscovite.” In the name of public safety and, by implication, Christian values, the police use truncheons and gas against young people who chant curses on the streets, beat drums, and hold banners with puns and quotes from culture texts while dancing the polonaise, incidentally in the version taken from Andrzej Wajda’s film adaptation of the Romantic classic “Pan Tadeusz.” It could be said the tragedy has returned as a farce. But the matter is very serious, it is of paramount importance.

Prof. Janion would see what is now happening on Polish streets [November and December 2020 – editor’s note] as the reviving, culture-creating role of the rebellion of the rising generation. The “Romantic moment” can give this generation a sense of having roots, provided that its members want to draw upon these reference points. Of course, this is Romanticism in Janion’s understanding: freedom-oriented, transgressive, and spiritualistic, but also ironic, consistent with European ideas, and existential. Despite being strongly present in the period of the first Solidarity movement

and in the teachings of Pope John Paul II, messianism has vanished into thin air. When confronted with a generation that is now fighting for freedom and dignity, the Catholic Church positioned itself as an enemy of society. Together with Maria Żmigrodzka, Maria Janion authored a book on “Romanticism and Existence” – these two areas mentioned in the title are now closely intertwined in Poland. A battle is being waged not only over the rule of law and the Constitution, but also over specific human rights, related to the body, sexuality, and reproductive health and safety. In this context, Prof. Janion’s words indeed sound like a grim prophecy: “A nation that cannot exist without suffering must inflict it upon itself.”

But these mass protests reveal a more general trend, one that affects not only Poland. A battle against tyranny is also ongoing in Belarus. There, there’s no doubt that the revolution as an allegory and as a symbol is a woman; a goddess of freedom and peace that the regime is trying to crush. The territories closest to Janion’s heart, the Novogrudok region in today’s Belarus, are now a place that confirms a point she once made – “I would not want anyone to get the impression that revolutionary culture has survived only in Poland,” she wrote in “The Goddess of Freedom.” Prof. Janion was always fascinated by figures present in the collective imagination, by the transformation of symbolic history into politics. She also always argued that the Romantic power of imagination gave rise to victorious ideas. She concluded “The Goddess of Freedom” with an image of Tiananmen Square in Beijing on 30 May 1989, when “students used plaster and polystyrene foam to build a nine-meter-high replica of the American Statue of Liberty,” and on 4 June the military began the massacre and immediately destroyed this “shameful” image of freedom. In this way, she wanted to hearten her readers. “The Chinese Goddess of Democracy firmly held the torch enlightening the world. She has a long road ahead of her,” Janion wrote in the final sentence.

But let’s get back to what is happening in Poland. Prof. Janion would certainly be moved by the performance of *Dziady* that people staged in their homes on All Souls’ Day in 2020, after the countries’ cemeteries had been closed overnight during the pandemic. In Żoliborz, near ruling party leader Jarosław Kaczyński’s house, a performance of *Dziady* could be watched through windows. It was wonderful. If she were alive, I would love to show her the video on Facebook.

**Outstanding intellectuals from various epochs often manifest a certain great sensitivity that allows them, in a sense, to foresee the future. Are there any examples of such foresight in Maria Janion’s speeches and work?**

Indeed, it could be said that Maria Janion had a sixth sense that turned her into a pioneer of many pro-



gressive ideas and phenomena – in fact, all of them, perhaps except digital technology, which she understood as an idea and accepted yet steered clear of it. By following the long existence of symbols, images, metaphors, styles, and forms of culture, she was able to predict upcoming political events, such as the first Solidarity movement, the martyrdom culture of martial law, the waves of feminism, and the rise of the LGBT+ emancipation movement. When I was a student, she raised two major topics, which she eventually covered in two of her more recent books.

In one (*Bohater – Spisek – Śmierć: Wykłady żydowskie* [Hero – Conspiracy – Death: Jewish Lectures], WAB, Warsaw 2009), she posed the following question: Could a Jew be a Polish national hero and become part of the Polish canon of heroism and Romanticism? Examples of such heroes could include Berek Yoselevich, a Jewish colonel from the period of the Kościuszko Uprising and later the Napoleonic Wars, but also by the Warsaw Ghetto insurgents of WWII. Janion shows how the guardians of the canon rejected any broader awareness or memories about such people. Of course, hers was neither the first nor the only book about Polish Jewish heroes or anti-heroes, as they wanted to be after the Holocaust. Nonetheless, Janion performed a pioneering intellectual operation – she reinvented the national heroic myth. She had already done this before, in her essay on “War and Form,” but this time she introduced Jews into the Romantic motherland of Polish identity and asked why their legend was not there, if they had been fighting for Poland just as the ethnic-Polish Poles had. This is a considerable simplification of the topic, but perhaps it will enable me to show Janion’s practice of deconstructing the canon at its historical and literary roots. To again paraphrase the title of one of her books, the purpose is to “refurbish meanings” in their ethical dimension. In what may be seen as a paradoxical way, she attempts to rescue the notion of patriotism by separating it from those of its aspects that fall within the domain of contempt, anti-Semitism, platitudes, and stereotypes.

In the other of her more recent books (*Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna* [Incredible Slavdom], Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2007), she discusses pre-Christian Slavdom, as rehashed or imagined by the Polish Romanticists. The pagan, degraded genealogy of the Slavs as dark, unconscious cultural matter co-creates, as Janion shows, contemporary Polish identity, balancing between superiority towards the culture termed “Eastern” and inferiority towards “Western” culture.

Yet another of her more recent works (*Wampir: Biografia symboliczna* [Vampire: A Symbolic Biography], Słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2008) is an anthology of texts about vampirism together with an extensive historical and interpretative analysis of the



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topic. In Janion’s analysis, vampirism invokes sexual, ethnic, and pagan themes.

In earlier books, Janion had introduced into Polish humanities the concept of the unconscious derived from Freud’s thinking, immersed, as she shows, in the work of the German Romanticists. In this way, Prof. Janion continued in her work something that was best described by the topic of another of her books, “Humanities: Cognition and Therapy” (PIW, Warsaw 1982). Her visionary anticipation of social needs and phenomena also had its opposite aspect – a deep dive into textual sources and the collective unconscious. In the texts of Polish Romanticism, Janion identified the structures of the national phantasms, which held the key to knowledge about the future. Perhaps there is something shamanic to this, but for the sake of balance Janion was always guided in her intellectual work by secular ethics close to the thinking of Virginia Woolf, Zofia Nałkowska, Albert Camus, and Samuel Beckett.

Another example of Janion’s sixth sense can be found in her interest in feminism. It began back in the 1970s, when echoes of feminism were reaching Poland, but they were treated as pathetic because “the people over there don’t have real problems, prosperity has gone to their heads.” But in the famous “Transgressions” series of books, constituting a unique record of a seminar of the same title, published in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Prof. Janion introduced marginalized and excluded subjects and characters, including feminist heroines, such as the writer Emma Santos. When the belated wave of feminism reached Poland in the 1990s, Janion had ready texts that had been published in various publications or existed in the form of notes, which were then gathered together and published in book form. The “Transgressions” series was also the

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with Prof. Maria Janion

progenitor of queer studies in Poland, with its treatment of Piotr Odmieniec Włast, a promising poet who lived in the 19th and 20th centuries who had earlier been known as Maria Komornicka. Prof. Janion described him and portrayed his gender transformation as a heroic battle over his identity, a great spiritual effort aimed at the fulfillment of “self” in the fullest sense, ingeniously invoking the book *Sex and Gender* by gender identity theorist Robert Stoller – amazingly, all this took place at the seemingly quite conservative Polish Studies Department. Of course, researchers studying the period of Young Poland had been familiar with the unfortunate figure of Maria Komornicka, whose talent was ruined by mental illness, but it would never occur to anyone to turn her into an iconic heroine/hero, a figure that performed an act of transgression to cross the borders of false existence in favor of authentic existence. Prof. Janion described in a similar way the homosexuality of the French playwright Jean Genet. At the time, she was influenced by anti-psychiatry, a radical branch of humanistic psychiatry whose proponents believed that the concept of a “mental ill-

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ness” only serves to thwart individuals who refuse to follow the generally accepted norms. Thanks to her work with the Romantics, she understood that what we called a mental illness could, apart from suffering, bring new ways of perceiving the world, insight into other states of consciousness, which were as much part of being a human as full rationality.

**When talking about Maria Janion, Prof. Ryszard Koziółek, the rector of the University of Silesia said that in her opinion, “after the political transformation of 1989, the usefulness of Romantic thinking came to an end because we had a free country, and it was time to get down to work.” Do you agree with this understanding of Janion’s activity? If so, what should this “work” involve?**

In that statement, Koziółek referred to one of Janion’s most famous texts, an essay on “The Twilight of the Romantic Paradigm,” written in 1990. It was often said later that by publishing that essay, she declared the end of Romanticism, but that was not true. She did declare the end of Romantic stereotypes, the

culture of national songs, God-fearing rhymes, and joint singing at crosses. She associated all those things with Romanticism. She believed that such a system of culture accompanied us Poles not only in the 19th century, but also, unlike in the rest of Europe, throughout the 20th century. According to Janion, this was a period of three culminating points. The first two were marked by the World Wars, the third by the Solidarity movement. She later added a fourth culminating point, namely the Smolensk air crash. Back then, the Polish culture was dominated by emotions and stereotypes, primarily those associated with patriotism, martyrdom, and messianism. She argued that those features of the prolonged Romantic paradigm had become exhausted – they were worthless, or even ridiculous. For that matter, she was not the only person who believed so.

“A homogeneous culture that has so far had primarily compensatory and therapeutic functions cannot, just as it could not before, function in a society that is to become democratic, which means diversified and decentralized, manifesting a variety of needs, including cultural ones,” she wrote. In Janion’s understanding, the work that was to be done would involve intellectual effort, something that would cause people to gain a deeper political and ethical consciousness. She specialized in the humanities and she was passionate about teaching, so she had a clear plan of what she should do next, and she did just that. She started to show students German and French Romanticism and its consequences for 20th century culture, so that we could find our place in Europe. Of course, she always studied contemporary Polish literature. She supported the debuts of such writers as Andrzej Stasiuk, Izabela Filipiak, and Olga Tokarczuk. She expressed her solidarity with Václav Havel, who announced at the time that he dreamed of an “existential revolution” to emancipate post-Soviet societies.

**Based on your conversations with Maria Janion and your interpretation of her work, what would you say are the biggest challenges facing Poland today?**

I think it would be to throw off the yoke of the Catholic Church and limit its political influence and ubiquity in the institutions of the secular state. This existential revolution has already started, also thanks to Prof. Janion, and now it has a chance to reach its culminating point. Separating the Church from politics and cutting off its access to taxpayers’ money will make the Church revert to the love of one’s neighbor, to serving instead of ruling, and to learn from Pope Francis and steer clear of education, science, and healthcare. Of course, this will require a major shift on the political scene.

INTERVIEW BY JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA, PHD

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