

# A ‘judgement of the eye’? The way(s) the world is perceived in Bolesław Prus’s prose works\*

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*(...) altering the proportions of things seen, the concave mirror implicates that there is an infinite potential of worlds that are created through optical experiences or directly through thought.*

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The nineteenth century was an age of industrial development, triumphant technological concepts, inventions and discoveries that brought about a change in the way the world was perceived. For the Polish prose writer Bolesław Prus, it was the reality he lived in and pursued his creative work in, attentively observed with his chronicler’s eye; as a novelist, he processed it artistically in(to) the plots of his fiction works.

For Prus’s life and work, of particular importance proved three technological ‘novelties’, which – along with the phonograph, telephone, and cinematography – ‘somehow determined the life of the author of *Lalka* [*The Doll*] – namely, the velocipede, typewriter, and photographic camera: metaphysics, praxis, and aesthetics’, as Jakub A. Malik puts it.<sup>2</sup> One more appliance is worth of recalling at this point,

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1 Original quote: “[...] lustro wklęsłe, zmieniając proporcje rzeczy widzianych, nasuwa nam myśl o nieskończonej możliwości światów, tworzonych za pomocą doświadczeń optycznych lub też wprost drogą myślową.” J.S. Bystron, “Wyobraźnia artystyczna Bolesława Prusa” [Artistic imagination of Bolesław Prus], in: *Przegląd Warszawski* [The Warsaw Review] no. 11 (Warsaw: 1922) (offprint), p. 32.

2 J.A. Malik, “Cuda epoki. Bolesław Prus o wynalazkach, technice i nowoczesności. Przegląd” [The wonders of the age. Bolesław Prus on inventions, technology and modernity. Overview], in: *Bolesław Prus. Pisarz – publicysta – myśliciel* [Bolesław Prus. Writer – publicist – thinker], eds M. Woźniakiewicz-Dziadosz and S. Fita (Lublin: 2003), p. 401.

without which Prus's life would not have been completely determined – that is, his glasses, which he found so useful in his daily life.

Most of the known photographic portraits of this author, who 'did not like to be an object of photographing',<sup>3</sup> as well as medals, plaques or coins featuring his effigy, show him wearing glasses – save for two pictures from his school or student years: the then Aleksander Głowacki seems to be squinting, perhaps not only because of the dazzling lamps at the photographic studio.

The writer's ailing eyes were recollected by his friends, acquaintances, or even those he occasionally ran into (Gustaw Doliński, Jan Zgoda, Konrad Chmielewski, Oktawia Żeromska, Zuzanna Rabska, Adam Breza, and others). Descriptions of his appearance mention 'double eye-glasses' he would wear 'on his nose';<sup>4</sup> 'dark spectacles' ('*naocznicę*' ['upon-eyes'], as they are beautifully called in Lublin region);<sup>5</sup> onto which he would put 'another pair of strong pince-nez'<sup>6</sup> or 'blue spectacles'. Some would remark that, apparently, 'he almost uniquely short-sighted, since birth',<sup>7</sup> his eyesight being 'consumedly short'; 'in the winter of his life', we are told, 'he lost sight in one of his eyes'.<sup>8</sup>

3 H. Bukowska, *Portrety Bolesława Prusa* [Portraits of Bolesław Prus] (Nałęczów: 1987) [no pagination].

4 K. Chmielewski, "Mneme", in: *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* [The Illustrated Weekly], no. 5, 6, 7, 8, and 22 (1939); quoted after: *Wspomnienia o Bolesławie Prusie* [Memoirs of Bolesław Prus] collected and ed. by S. Fita (Warsaw: 1962), p. 157.

B. Prus's notes from 1904 (kept today at the Dział Starych Druków i Rękopisów [Old Prints and Manuscripts Section], Biblioteka Publiczna m. st. Warszawy, Biblioteka Główna Województwa Mazowieckiego [the Warsaw Public Library - Central Library of Masovian Voivodeship]; hereinafter abbreviated as 'BPW': *Notatnik V* [Notebook V], BPW 139 I (5), card 36), made before he left for Nałęczów, suggest that he wore sapphire glasses purchased from Jan Berent, an optician in Warsaw, at 87 Marszałkowska St. His to-do list features a crossed-out item: 'Spectacles, sapph. Beren.' That Prus wore double glasses, see: K. Chmielewski, "Ze wspomnień" [From the memories], in: *Wspomnienia o Bolesławie Prusie*, p. 157: 'With the double spectacles on his nose, and a great notebook in his hand, he would wander together with me down the tight lanes of this town of assemblers and hat-makers, carefully circumventing the Castle and the Museum, which he was afraid even to approach due to sunlight reflections on the lake's surface' (the latter phrase probably refers his photophobia, or oversensitivity to light, causing the aching of the eyes). A fragment from Stefan Żeromski's diary (S. Żeromski, "Z 'Dzienników'" [From "Diaries"], in: *Wspomnienia o Bolesławie Prusie*, p. 133: '(...) so I walk down the stairs and come across – guess whom – Mr. Prus, walking very slowly, holding his stick in both hands, and staring from behind his glasses. His eyes are somehow deep-set, as if they were somewhere inside his head. (...) We come across the author himself [i.e. Prus] a few times every day. An oaf, sort of, resembling Gogol, in a miserable ash-coloured frock-coat, with two pairs of glasses!')

5 K. Chmielewski, "Mneme", in: *Wspomnienia o Bolesławie Prusie*, p. 160.

6 A. Breza, "Wspomnienia o Bolesławie Prusie" [Memoirs of Bolesław Prus], in: *Wspomnienia o Bolesławie Prusie*, p. 95.

7 *Ibid.* This author remarks that Prus 'was fond of pettifogging observations, tiny and very small details, spotted as if through a magnifying glass – only afterwards would he transfer them into his novellas or novels' (p. 96).

8 *Ibid.*, p. 161.

Prus's fascination with the typewriter is also explainable by his problems with eyesight. He directly confessed it to a fictitious (never-sent) letter to a friend – namely, Julian Adolf Świącicki, a Warsaw-based author, critic, and literary historian – explaining why he had started 'playing' with typewriting on 13 December 1897,<sup>9</sup> the year he turned fifty: 'Do you know why am I learning how to use a typewriter? The reason is, I am afraid of losing my sight.'<sup>10</sup>

Let us add that the preserved first typescript he made bears traces of mnemotechnic exercises of sorts, which were probably meant to facilitate his memorisation of the arrangement of characters on the keyboard and, possibly, help him acquire the skill of blind typing, which was his dream: 'I would be truly happy if I could write with my eyes closed.'<sup>11</sup>

The first mention of Prus's troubles with eyesight appears when the sixteen-year-old Aleksander Głowacki, then a soldier in the January Insurrection of 1863–1864, took part in the battle of Białka<sup>12</sup> not far from Siedlce, on 1 September 1863: 'he had his eyes charred with gunpowder'.<sup>13</sup> When his aunt Domicela Olszewska, who raised him at the time, and found him imprisoned in the Lublin Castle, he had his eyes blindfolded with a shawl and 'looked as if blind'. The concern was he would never regain his sight. The years of visiting specialist physicians began.

- 9 Bolesław's first attempts at using a typewriter (written down as *Nauka Prusa pisania na maszynie* [Prus's learning how to typewrite] – the title probably coined by Kazimierz Kardaszewicz, who probably paginated the text, are kept at the BPW collection (BPW 128 IV). For more, see: A. Grabowska-Kuniczuk, "Bolesława Prusa 'zabawa' w pisanie na maszynie. Filologiczno-psychologiczna analiza i interpretacja tekstu zachowanego maszynopisu oraz dzieje maszyny pisarza" [Bolesław Prus 'playing' with the typewriter. Philological and psychological analysis and interpretation of the text of the preserved typescript and the history of the writer's machine] (paper delivered at a conference *Bolesław Prus's life and works from a hundred years' perspective*, 13–16 June 2012 in Nałęczów, Poland). See also: A. Grabowska-Kuniczuk, M. Parnowska, "Bolesława Prusa 'zabawa' w pisanie na maszynie – narzędzie, autor, tekst" [Bolesław Prus 'playing' with the typewriter – text, tool, author], in: *Napis* issue XXI (2015), pp. 235–249 with B. Prus, [Nauka Prusa pisania na maszynie] [Prus's learning how to typewrite], ed. A. Grabowska-Kuniczuk, in: *Napis* issue XXI (2015), pp. 250–261.
- 10 A. Głowacki (B. Prus) *Listy* [Letters], ed., with a commentary and afterword by K. Tokarzówna (Warsaw: 1959), p. 262 (letter no. 141). See also: B. Prus, *Pisma wszystkie. Korespondencja* [Writings all. Correspondence], vol. 1: *Listy Bolesława Prusa* [Letters by Bolesław Prus], ed., with an introduction by J. Nowak (Warsaw and Lublin: 2017), p. 717.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 To be precise, probably the reference is to the village and grange of Białki in the County of Siedlce, Commune of Wiszniów; the locality is mentioned in a guide to the Kingdom of Poland by Antoni Bobiński and Józef Michał Bazewicz (*Przewodnik po Królestwie Polskim* [Guide to the Kingdom of Poland] (Warsaw: 1901), p. 35).
- 13 T. Hiż, "Godzina u pani Oktawii" [An hour at Mrs. Octavia's], in: *Gazeta Polska* [Polish Newspaper] no. 116 (1936), quoted after: *Wspomnienia o Bolesławie Prusie*, p. 277. According to his acquaintance, Prus 'was a non-commissioned officer handling the powder; he would carry devices in the crate' (T. Łuniewski, *Z pamiętnika* [From the diary], in: *ibid.*, p. 22). Another reminiscence has it that: 'Głowacki received a strong injury and lost his consciousness' (W. Horodyński, *Prus w powstaniu styczniowym* [Prus in the January Uprising], in: *ibid.*, p. 18).

Aleksander had his eyesight saved; he was to suffer considerable short-sightedness, and thus wear glasses until his very last days. Among the ophthalmologists that took care of Aleksander/Bolesław was probably Adam Langie (1864–1907), a doctor and columnist (with industry periodicals *Przegląd Lekarski* [Medical Review] and *Nowiny Lekarskie* [Medical News], among others) based in Krakow; he also wrote poetry and novellas.<sup>14</sup> Regrettably, nothing specific is known today about the ophthalmological affliction Prus suffered, and what sort of therapy he underwent.

Apart from his short sight, Prus suffered from agoraphobia – fear of open spaces; these states might have adversely affected his vision problems. These afflictions were commonly known; this fact at times even served as an argument in the evaluation of Prus's works. This 'trend' was initiated by the writer and columnist Aleksander Świętochowski, who in his 1890 article "Aleksander Głowacki (Bolesław Prus)" wrote that 'Prus has a very short sight and, as they say, suffers from vertigo. This physical characteristic astonishingly affects his mind'.<sup>15</sup>

This piece of criticism is frequently quoted as *ad personam* argumentation and an example of unjustified use of a biographical information in evaluating the methods and value of a creative artist's work. It is however worth considering whether the writer's ailments actually influenced the way he perceived the world; and, whether his problems were physical only, reducible to ophthalmological disorders (short-sightedness, oversensitivity to light). Or, was there perhaps some psychical background to it, like an almost irresistible need to flee into darkness from the fears caused by agoraphobia? Stefan Borowiecki, a psychiatrist, author of an essay on Prus's situational fears, finds that 'the symptom of agoraphobia' consisting in 'looking for the dark of night or, as it were, artificial creation of such darkness by the closing of the eyes, represents clear traits of a compromising formation stemming from the will to oppose the sickness, to eradicate it whilst simultaneously yielding to it'.<sup>16</sup> Yet, Prus was afraid of obscurity, which can be felt in his account of the visit to the salt mine in Wieliczka: 'the lights are dying down (...) you are being surrounded by dreadful darkness. The thing that (...) becomes to entangle, strangle, and lastly press you. (...) you can feel that the darkness has already penetrated deep into your body, saturating your thought, and flushing out your feelings...'<sup>17</sup> So, a darkness that is frightening and fascinating at the same time.

14 Cf. A. Langie, *Z doświadczeń i spostrzeżeń lekarza* [From the experiences and observations of the doctor], (Cracow: 1904).

15 A. Świętochowski, "Aleksander Głowacki (Bolesław Prus)", in: *Prawda* [The Truth] no. 32–39 (1890).

16 S. Borowiecki, "Lęki sytuacyjne Prusa" [Prus's situational fears], in: *Rocznik Psychiatryczny* [Yearbook of Psychiatry], Fasc. XXXII (1938) (offprint), p. 19.

17 Quoted after: *ibid.*, p. 36.

Due to anxiety related to the perception of space and height during his 1895 travel across and beyond Poland (before then, he would have visited Krakow and Austrian Galicia in 1877, and stayed in Zakopane in 1881) he 'kept his eyes closed' ('I made my entire way from Ustroń to Wisła with my eyes closed');<sup>18</sup> the picturesque views of open spaces and the beauty of the landscapes were thus unavailable to him. This ailment might have contributed to the writer's problems with eyesight that proved incurable by nineteenth-century ophthalmology<sup>19</sup> and could not be corrected by wearing spectacles (known for ages).

Spectacles or glasses was indeed a very old invention; their prototype might have been known in ancient China. History is tacit about who the inventor was; Italy is pointed as their native country. 'Ground emeralds were used to improve eyesight',<sup>20</sup> one author remarks. Pliny mentions an emerald belonging to Emperor Nero; Henryk Sienkiewicz follows this thread in his Nobel-Prize winning novel *Quo vadis*. In the Middle Ages, any crystal would be called a beryl (from the German *beryl* or *brill*); hence the Polish borrowing *beryle* or *bryle*. The Italian *paraglia di occhiali* meant 'a pair of glasses', similarly to the English *goggles* (today, *glasses*); the Italian noun *occhiali* and the Polish *okulary* both come from the word 'eye'. Interestingly, a number of mentions of magnifying glasses appeared in the thirteenth century. It is known that glasses for the near-sighted first appeared only in the fifteenth century (Nicolas of Cusa is believed to have invented concave-lens spectacles). Coloured glasses protecting the eyes against glaring light were developed in the middle of the eighteenth century; their green colour was believed to be soothing and 'very hygienic for the eyesight'. Eighteenth-century France saw the use of glasses of different colours, mostly blue; the 'smoky preserves', as they were called, came into use only in the 1780's.

- 18 B. Prus's letter to Adolf Świącicki and Julian Ochorowicz, 22 June 1900; quoted after: *ibid.*, p. 4. That Prus was wont to be closing his eyes – to alleviate the symptoms of agoraphobia – is reminisced by a number of his acquaintances and friends. These recollections contain, among other things, accounts on Prus's on his way back home after a performance at the Wielki Theatre, emphasising the writer's severe problems with making his way across the open space in front of the theatre edifice, remarking that he was led through Saski Square, or outright carried down from a high storey. Prus admitting that he would close or shade his eyes when travelling on the train are also quoted; see, *inter alia*: A. Breza, *Wspomnienia o Bolesławie Prusie* [Memoirs of Bolesław Prus], K. Chłędowski, *Prus w Wiedniu* [Prus in Vienna], Z. Miłkowski, *Słowo o Prusie* [A word about Prus], L. Krzywicki, *Nieco wspomnień o B. Prusie* [Some memories about B. Prus], in: *Wspomnienia o Bolesławie Prusie*, pp. 95, 114, 175, 192.
- 19 The discoveries in the realm of physical and physiological optics made in the nineteenth century were of enormous importance to the scientific explanation of the application of glasses (ophthalmology gained a strictly scientific foundation only with the invention of the speculum in 1851), the development of physiological optics by Hermann von Helmholtz (1861), and the refinement by Frans Cornelius Donders of the eye refraction science (1866).
- 20 A. Langie, "Historia okularów", in: *Nowiny Lekarskie* [Medical News], Yr. XVII, Fasc. 7 (1905), p. 391.

As per Samuel Orgelbrand's *Encyklopedia powszechna* [A Universal Encyclopaedia] of 1865, Polish nineteenth-century compendium, spectacles was 'the simplest optical object used by the near-sighted and far-sighted, so that objects may be seen exactly at a convenient distance'.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, the author of the entry on 'human eye', Dr Wojciech Urbański, remarks:

Szkła, rozpraszające promienie światła, przybliżają obrazy przedmiotów do oka, jak gdyby ten przedmiot leżał bardzo blisko oka; są więc jako okulary bardzo pożądane dla krótkowidzących, którzy zapatrzwszy się nimi nie potrzebują trzymać przedmiotu, mającego być dokładnie widzianym, przed samymi oczyma, co jest bardzo niewygodnym, lecz mogą się mu przypatrywać z odległości wyraźnego widzenia, gdyż soczewki rozpraszające załatwiają takowe przybliżenie.<sup>22</sup>

The glasses that disperse the rays of light render the images of objects closer toward the eye, as if the object were situated very close to the eye; hence, spectacles are quite recommendable to the near-sighted, who, once furnished with the same, do not have any more to keep the object that needs to be precisely seen closely in front of their eyes, which is pretty inconvenient, but may glance at it from clear-seeing distance, for the dispersing lenses work to make such closeness real.<sup>22</sup>

'The simplest', comfortable, and 'much demanded', glasses became in Prus's day an object of everyday use. No wonder, so many of his novel characters are eyeglass-wearers, such as in *Lalka* and *Emancypantki* [*Emancipated Women*]. However, the optic glasses facilitating seeing are used by the characters for diverse reasons. They have to do with the age-related poorer eyesight, thus being a characteristic accessory of old ladies or gentlemen. One example is Szlangbaum, an old Jew, who places his glasses on the forehead or slides them down onto his tired eyes. Another one, also from *Lalka*, is the consistently 'oldened' salesman Rzecki, who reads his daily schedule through his pince-nez and squints his eyes in the duskiness of his room, or leads a visitor toward the window to recognise that it is Mr. Wokulski, his best friend. In the same novel, the chairman's wife, an old woman, uses her *lorgnon* (i.e. lorgnette, a pair of spectacles with a handle) while talking to Wokulski.

Otherwise, spectacles can be a comic accessory, making the character a funny bungler; one is Baron Krzeszowski, whose left eyelid is often quavering: he repeatedly adjusts the glasses sliding down his nose; in a firearm duel with Wokulski, he misses just because his pince-nez tipped a split-second before he fired his shot.<sup>23</sup> The glasses are also an en vogue accessory of a dandy who shields himself with the monocle to look down on the world at a distance. The glance 'through the glass' seemingly turns the interlocutor into a chilly analysed object or subject of a show,

21 *Encyklopedia powszechna*, issued, printed, and owned by S. Orgelbrand (Warsaw: 1865), vol. XIX, p. 830 (reprinted Warsaw: 1985).

22 *Ibid.*, p. 816.

23 B. Prus, *The Doll*, transl. by D. Welsh (rev. by D. Tołczyk and A. Zaranko), introduction by S. Barańczak (New York: 2017), vol. I, pp. 195-196. (For the original quote, see: *idem, Lalka*, ed. by J. Bachórz (Wrocław: 1998), Biblioteka Narodowa series I 262 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rev.), vol. I, *passim*).

rather than a partner in the communication act. The tradition of interpretation of the use of glasses in the sphere of social behaviour or manners is derivable from the previous century. According to Yuri Lotman, in the age of the Enlightenment,

okulary stały się modnym elementem stroju. Spojrzenie przez okulary porównywano do oglądania cudzej twarzy z bliskiej odległości, czyli do zuchwałego gestu. Reguły przyzwoitości XVIII wieku zabraniały młodszymi – wiekowo lub ze względu na piastowany urząd – osobom spoglądać przez okulary na starszych<sup>24</sup>.

spectacles became a kind of fashion item. Looking through the spectacles was compared to looking at someone else's face at a close range, i.e. to an audacious gesture. Rules of decency of the eighteenth century banned the younger in age or rank to look through the glasses at the senior: it was regarded as insolence.<sup>24</sup>

The two novels by Prus offer us examples of such behaviour: a customer at a Paris café stares 'impertinently' through his monocle at Wokulski, which the latter considers offensive. In *Emancypantki*, Mr. Pasternakiewicz talks to Madzia [Magda] whilst scrutinising her through the monocle, 'a practice which in his opinion made a strong impression on the fair sex'.<sup>25</sup> Ludwik Krukowski is another character portrayed with a monocle on his eye; his sister is an ex-paralytic who puts up her pince-nez to look at the others, and observes her brother in the garden through a golden spyglass. Opera glasses, for a change, is the beloved instrument of gossipers, who greedily follow the dramatic vicissitudes of their fellow beings. The noted and respected gentlemen, introduced to Madzia by Krukowski during an entr'acte, are moving around 'with boutonnières or with great lorgnettes in cases hanging from their arms'.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the young people equipped with 'lorgnettes they used at the horse races' go to a concert so that 'the greater share of these lorgnettes and glances were directed toward the fourth row of armchairs, where Dr. Brzeski was sitting with his daughter'.<sup>27</sup> Madzia comes across a similar impertinence somewhat later, when accompanying the Solski couple at a theatrical spectacle: 'Here and there light flashed on the glass of lorgnettes fixed on her face, looking her in the eye'.<sup>28</sup> These lorgnettes are a severe nuisance to Miss Brzeska as they equal the girl sitting in a box with the actresses on the stage, making her an object one can watch with impunity.

24 J. Lotman, *Rosja i znaki. Kultura szlachecka w wieku XVIII i na początku XIX* [Russia and signs. Noble culture in the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth century] transl. and afterword B. Żyłko (Gdańsk: 1999), p. 147.

25 B. Prus, *Emancipated Women*, transl. by S. Kraft, [self-published] 2015, Book 2, p. 258. (For the original quote, see: B. Prus, *Emancypantki*, vol. IV, in: *idem, Pisma* [Writings], ed. by Z. Szwejkowski, vol. XVII (Warsaw: 1949), p. 143 [Also, cf. <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/rak/publics/notrak/Prus-1.htm>].)

26 *Ibid.*, Book 1, p. 286 [Polish version: vol. II (XV), p. 97].

27 *Ibid.*, Book 1, p. 284 [Polish version: vol. II (XV), p. 95].

28 *Ibid.*, Book 2, p. 107 [Polish version: vol. III (XVI), p. 152].

The question of seeing is nevertheless approached much more broadly by Prus, exceeding the use of optical appliances. Many interesting observations regarding the perception of reality by the *Lalka* characters have been proposed by Wiesław Ratajczak.<sup>29</sup> His considerations concern visual impressions – from ‘the glance of a friend’ through to looking at oneself in the mirror, numerous more or less professional gazes, peeping or espial, description of the institution of watching/spectatorship, a view from the perspective of individual and crowd, ‘the art of unseeing’, to glancing through the glasses of bottles and spectacles. In *Lalka*, the sense of eyesight is fundamental to the seeing of the world – as is evidenced by Tadeusz Budrewicz though his description of a ‘group of sensual perception verbs’.<sup>30</sup> The statistics is apparently as follows: the verb ‘to see’ (‘widzieć’) appears in the novel a total of 402 times, taking primacy over ‘to sense’ (‘czuć’; 168) and ‘to hear’ (‘słyszeć’; 134).

The eye is a pretty important perception organ also in the novels *Emancypantki* and *Dzieci* [The Children]. As we can read in the former work, ‘you know that our eye is like a camera with a sensitive plate locked into it. Images of objects record themselves on that plate in such a way that we see each object only from one side. You see me from the front, not from the back and not from the side, and you do not see what is inside me at all’.<sup>31</sup> Here, the world depicted is largely founded, again, on sensual perception, with eyesight playing a paramount role; there is a mention of Professor Dębicki’s extraordinary gaze: when he ‘looks at a person, one feels that he sees everything, and forgives everything’.<sup>32</sup> As can be seen based on this single example, glance or gaze and seeing are literal and metaphorical, being a constituent of the plot and of the characterisation and assessment of the characters. The latter – Stefan Zgierski and Madzia Brzeska among them – oftentimes tend to lower their eyes, look at each other (Miss Howard looks at Joanna, a maiden, ‘with eyes pale as ice’),<sup>33</sup> take a peep on/into people or things, look into the others’ eyes (Solski into Professor Dębicki’s, Mrs. Latter into her daughter Helena’s, Madzia into Mr. Miętlewicz’s or Mr. Krukowski). They may do something ‘in the blink of an eye’ (Mr. Miętlewicz, Mrs. Latter), blink, ‘making some signs with their eyes’ (Madzia at Mr. Krukowski) or, simply, admire one’s eyes – like Mr. Krukowski those of Madzia, sighing, ‘Your eyes. Oh, those eyes!’<sup>34</sup> Some characters tend to

29 W. Ratajczak, “Jak w świecie ‘Lalki’ ludzie patrzą na siebie?” [How do people view each other in the world of ‘The Doll’?], in: *Bolesław Prus: pisarz nowoczesny* [Bolesław Prus: a modern writer], ed. J.A. Malik (Lublin: 2009), pp. 23-52.

30 T. Budrewicz, „*Lalka*”. *Konteksty stylu* [“The Doll”. Style contexts] (Cracow: 1990), p. 47.

31 B. Prus, *Emancipated Women*, Book 2, p. 360 [Polish version: vol. IV (XVII), p. 295].

32 *Ibid.*, Book 1, p. 37 [Polish version: vol. I (XIV), p. 52].

33 *Ibid.*, Book 1, p. 82 [Polish version: vol. I (XIV), p. 121].

34 *Ibid.*, Book 1, p. 277 [Polish version: vol. II (XV), p. 85].

scrutinise the others – almost all the invited guests to a concert are watching Madzia; Krukowski's sister watches her brother; some are the 'apples of someone's eye' – thus Madzia was perceived by her deceased grandmother Wiktoria; 'some ast down their eyes, which did not hinder them' – the fabricant and merchant daughters – 'from seeing everything';<sup>35</sup> or, 'cast their sombre sight' on the others – that's what fabricant and merchant fathers do; or, 'clock' – as Bronisław Korkowicz does. Their 'eyes feature astonishment' and 'cast sparkles' – to mention Stefan Solski; there are such who 'manoeuvre with their glances' – Solski, again; or, 'leer' – to mention Helena Norska leering at Bronisław Korkowicz. Some of those figures, Kazimierz Norski among them, would even declare: 'I believe what I see.'<sup>36</sup> During Madzia's visit, Gabriela, the aunt of the Solski family, who had 'got no wink of sleep', was now suffering from migraine; she 'was sitting with her eyes half-closed', some 'black petals rushing around' in front of her eyes; still, she would twire with one eye at the girl rubbing her temples. Several other moments in this novel offer us diverse 'optical' phrases, such as 'vigilant glance', 'sharp glance'; also, 'the eyes of her [i.e. Madzia's] soul saw, not Mrs. Latter's image, only her son's'; Mrs. Latter's boarding school 'can be (...) a thorn in the others' flesh' [the Polish equivalent idiom being 'salt in somebody's eye']; lastly, Miętlewicz, embarrassed, 'looked on with a fixed stare'.

Such dominance of the visual sphere is characteristic also of the later works by Prus, but an interesting turn stands out in this respect. In *Dzieci*, the verb 'to see' ('widzieć') appears forty-seven times (across 179 pages); Kazio Świrski, the central character, is quite often having hallucinations (four times, to be specific): 'He wanted to close his eyes but his eyelids grew transparent and he could see everything...'<sup>37</sup> A physical look or glance turns into seeing with 'the soul's eye'. How can this evolution be explained?

The progressive ophthalmological disease must have severely inhibited Prus's writing and journalistic activities. However, it did not eliminate his desires and strength of will. Losing his sight, the writer continued to work. He did not like to be observed but did like to watch other people. He described what he saw. At times, however, his eyes could not see while the author believed he could see things; his emotions were at work and imagination, drawing on the amassed knowledge and experience, was awakening. Hence, it at times happened that he described what

35 *Ibid.*, Book 2, p. 65 [Polish version: vol. III (XVI), p. 60].

36 *Ibid.*, Book 2, p. 43 [Polish version: vol. III (XVI), p. 91].

37 B. Prus, *Pisma wszystkie. Powieści: Dzieci* [Writings all. Novels: The Children], ed., with an introduction by A. Grabowska-Kuniczuk (Warsaw and Lublin: 2016), p. 254.

he knew and remembered, rather than what he saw. This, in turn, affected his creative techniques.

In his 1922 article on Prus's artistic imagination, Jan Stanisław Bystroń finds that

Opisom Prusa brak obrazowości. Prus nie jest malarzem; opisuje nam krajobraz, jak człowiek, patrzący nań z codziennego, utylitarnego punktu widzenia, z pominięciem bezinteresownego, ściśle artystycznego. Stąd też w opisie nie zwraca Prus wyjącej uwagi na wrażenia barwne czy słuchowe, lecz podaje bardzo często wiadomości o stosunku człowieka do opisywanej przyrody. Lub też wprost informacje z zakresu nauk przyrodniczych<sup>38</sup>.

Prus's descriptions lack imagery. Prus is not a painter; he describes landscapes to us as if he were looking at them from the everyday and utilitarian standpoint, ignoring a disinterested, strictly artistic one. Hence, rather than paying attention in his descriptions to colour-related or auricular impressions, Prus very often gives information on man's attitude toward the nature being described – if not, simply, pieces of information from natural sciences.<sup>38</sup>

He then adds, 'Rather than describing what he sees, Prus describes what he knows about'.<sup>39</sup> And, 'the scale of colours is very poor in Prus. He knows the basic colours and combines them, classifying them on an equal basis'.<sup>40</sup> The writer 'looks at the world basically from the standpoint of a scholar rather than a visual artist'.<sup>41</sup>

Prus carried out penetrating studies on the topics he addressed. He would thoroughly think over every text, prepare a plan, compile the glossary, note down his observations and fragments he would later use in his work on the piece (and, once processed, cross them out in his notes). As we know, as part of his preparations, Prus would amass the word-inventory based on names of colours, forming a kind of collections of selected descriptive words (adjectives). His notebooks were filled with lists or breakdowns of such examples, to be used in his literary work; for instance, 'Mosses': 'dark green – bright ashy – ashen – steel blue – yellowish';<sup>42</sup> 'Autumn colours': 'Gold – purple – burning copper – oxidised silver – emeralds – malachites. Gold [the latter word is crossed out by the author – A.G.-K]. All in tones and hues, large, and silent. A rainfall of leaves, or individual, desperate falling, The leaves have fallen: tawny and fuscous.'<sup>43</sup>

He would often use tables for the purpose, such as, for instance, the one regarding 'Colours' in notebook no. III from 1903, containing the names of basic and

38 J.S. Bystroń, "Wyobraźnia artystyczna Bolesława Prusa", p. 6.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

42 Dział Starych Druków i Rękopisów [Old Prints and Manuscripts Section], BPW 139 I (10): B. Prus, *Notatnik X z 1908 r.*, card 24.

43 B. Prus, *Notatnik XII z 1910 r.* (dated '13 June 1910'), BPW 139 I (12), p. 205/ card 109 (double pagination).

derivative colours arranged into columns: blue; light grey, olive green, green; red, and then, fuscous, violet, and yellow, and then, mottled grey, orange, with the option to use a '±' (grade added or deducted) to mark their brightness, lustre, and transparency.<sup>44</sup> In another notebook, he remarked, under subtitle 'Governing colour': the colour 'of an object or feeling may be white, grey, red, yellow, green, or violet...'<sup>45</sup>

This might perhaps be a proof that Prus's descriptions were of a practised nature: 'not many colours', Bystron observes, 'their count and method altogether resemble a childish palette of water-colours. Prus evidently lacks designations';<sup>46</sup> and, elsewhere, 'an intellectual in his descriptions, is not capable of evoking an artistic impression by means of colours or chiaroscuro'.<sup>47</sup>

Yellow is one of the most frequent colours in *Lalka*. Doctor Szuman, one of the characters, is 'yellow' – most probably, yellow-faced. Among the many yellow houses in Warsaw, which for Prus is 'probably the yellowest town under the sun', the Łęcki family's tenement house seemed to Wokulski 'more yellow than the others, and would certainly have won the first prize in an exhibition of yellow objects (such as we may expect to see, one day)'.<sup>48</sup> In *Dzieci*, yellow appears a total of seventeen times: 'billows of yellowish vapour' blasted with the explosion of a bomb planted by Regen; the prison Jędrzejczak was kept in was an edifice 'of a yellowish colour, in the form of a great case'; Mrs. Wątorska had a 'yellow face'; an area of 'dark yellow clay' was located near a trench; at the entrance to the prison building, a 'scribe with a yellowish mop-of-hair and much pink skin on his face'; and, 'yellowish lights glimmered' in a factory's windows. Red and grey are not less frequent, though: Jędrzejczak's white shirt had a red spot; a handmaid was 'reddened with frost'; there are 'groups of people with red standards'; moreover, we can see a 'blood pool scattered grey and black tatters'; Świrski has his eyes 'distinct and grey'.<sup>49</sup>

Characteristic of Prus the observer and Prus the short-sighted man is his attention to detail, whose images often tend to replace descriptions. In *Emancypantki*, the examples include the lace of a blue dressing-gown with which the bored Helena Norska is playing; the astounding view behind the sapphire screen that separates the place where the schoolgirls and their guardians sleep; Joasia's [Joanna's] mud-

44 *Idem*, *Notatnik III z 1903 r.*, BPW 139 I (3), card 45.

45 *Idem*, *Notatnik IX z 1906 r.*, BPW 139 I (9), card 39 v.

46 J.S. Bystron, "Wyobrażenia artystyczna Bolesława Prusa", p. 10.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

48 B. Prus, *The Doll*, transl. by D. Welsh, (Chap. XII – *Travels on Behalf of Someone Else*). (For the original quote, see: *idem*, *Lalka*, ed. by J. Bachórz, vol. I, p. 373). [Cf. [https://books.google.pl/books?id=Uhp0exWfp0C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=yellow&f=false](https://books.google.pl/books?id=Uhp0exWfp0C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=yellow&f=false).]

49 *Idem*, *Pisma wszystkie. Powieści: Dzieci, passim*.

dy cream robe and ‘her eyes (...) smouldering with a strange glare<sup>50</sup> – each of these testifies to what has happened. The chairs upholstered with green Utrecht velvet form, as it were, a stage for the mirrors that reflect reality; there are two tiny gold-plated chairs covered with amaranth silk offered to the visitors at Mr. and Mrs. Korkowicz’s house; and, there is Solski’s room with dark damask silk on the walls and an oak desk ‘furnished with buttons that rang electric bells<sup>51</sup> – all seem to emphasise the character and social position of those portrayed people. Madzia Brzeska, wearing a smoke-coloured frock, is observing all this; the author seems to be repeating after her, ‘(...) trifles. And yet they do have value...’<sup>52</sup>

Interestingly, seeing and vision does not look unambiguous in the writer’s fourteen notebooks (kept at the Warsaw Public Library collection),<sup>53</sup> which underlay the images and techniques of his creative work. Apart from the notes confirming the importance attached to the sense of sight, there are some that seem to undermine its dominance and objective cognitive value. In a 1906 notebook, we can find a remark that eyesight and the hand are ‘the supreme organs’ to which ‘everything needs to be referred’.<sup>54</sup> Under the entry ‘Soul’, these notes explain that the soul ‘may reflect the reality, like a *s p e c u l u m*, or decompose it into the colours of feelings, like a *p r i s m*’.<sup>55</sup>

In his considerations on the act of writing, Prus remarked in 1908 as follows: ‘Describing objects through impressions of different organs: the heart and the cardiovascular system – the lungs [the word ‘olfaction’ is added above the latter word – A.G.-K.] – digest.[ive] tract (...) – hearing – sight’.<sup>56</sup> As we can see, eyesight is mentioned at the very end, preceded by smell, taste, and hear. Yet, in his contemporaneous classification of types of suffering, Prus would afford primacy to ‘tiredness of the eye’.<sup>57</sup>

Imagination and acquired knowledge became dominant over Prus’s sensual perception as the writer’s impaired eyesight weakened. What is more, in his final

50 *Idem, Emancipated Women*, Book 1, p. 47 [Polish version: vol. I (XIV), p. 69].

51 *Ibid.*, Book 2, p. 85 [Polish version: vol. III (XVI), p. 120].

52 *Ibid.*, Book 2, p. 102 [Polish version: vol. II (XV), p. 145].

53 Under ref. no. BPW 139 I – *Bolesław Prus: Notatniki (1901–1912)*, 1510 sheets/cards, 14 volumes (manuscript).

54 B. Prus, *Notatnik IX z 1906 r.*, BPW 139 I (9), card 41.

55 *Ibid.* (emphasised by B. Prus).

56 *Idem, Notatnik X z 1908 r.*, BPW 139 I (10), card. 9 v.

57 The pains related to the writer’s ailing eyes must have been of extreme nuisance to him: in his Notebook no. X from 1908 (BPW 139 I (10), card 72 v.), of forty-three examples of diverse sufferings man struggles with, the ‘exhaustion of the eye’ is mentioned in the first place, along with ‘exhaustion of the ear, arms, legs, body, heart, brain; hunger, thirst, (...) hard work, walking uphill’, and other troubles. Prus was sixty-one at the time.

years the author of *Lalka* considered cognition through sensing the phenomena of the world more important than visual observation. Hence, it might be concluded that images of reality were no more registered by this author through his imperfect optical device – the tired, aching and ever less functional eyes, even if supported by double spectacles, but the 'soul'. As he noted in 1904 in his notebook, under the entry 'Metaphysics': 'The world is filled with a sensing and working soul; it is out of sensing that thought emerges'.<sup>58</sup> This marks a peculiar attempt of 'thought to transgress the limits of visible reality'. According to Richard Sennett, such 'research method' was employed by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century astronomers and physicians who made discoveries in the domains of physics, astronomy, medicine, and biology. Galileo, Newton, van Leeuwenhoek, or Hooke had quite imperfect instruments at their disposal, since their telescopes or microscopes used lenses that would not enable precise observations. Mathematics supported the astronomers as it enabled the making of theoretical discoveries by means of calculations; naturalists were supported by the artist, capable of making extraordinary drawings to illustrate the scholars' daring theories.<sup>59</sup> As Sennett notes, the 'repair' of those imperfect optical instruments produced a new kind of image, combining science and art, rather than employing a mathematical formula. The pen became a corrective tool to deal with defects in glass.<sup>60</sup>

Prus's spectacles could never make up for his deteriorating eyesight; consequently, with time, he began to prefer memory, thought, and emotion over observation. Without a good instrument 'at hand', his attempts at observing would have failed; hence, rather than describing what he saw, he would write about what he sensed or felt, experienced, knew – and, what he thought of his experiences.<sup>61</sup>

*Translated by Tristan Korecki,  
verified by Jerzy Giebułtowski*

58 B. Prus, *Notatnik VI z 1904 r.*, BPW 139 I (6), card 33.

59 Such practice is illustrated, for instance, by the extremely minute drawing of a fly's eye by Christopher Wren for Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665).

The flaws of old observation appliances, such as lenses and others, which enforced the use of other methods in scientific research, see: A. Bąbel, "Świat w powiększeniu: dziewiętnastowieczny mikroskop jako instrument i jako metafora (na przykładzie twórczości Bolesława Prusa)" [The world enlarged: 19<sup>th</sup> century microscope as an instrument and as a metaphor (based on the works of Bolesław Prus)], in: *Napis* issue XX (2014), p. 113.

60 R. Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London-New York: 2008), p. 201.

61 The general trend characteristic of the late Positivist period toward parting with verism or severely restricting it favoured the development of parabolic genres, psychological or fantasy prose, which was fed by the modernist strife for replacing mimetism with allegorical or symbolic imagery. This trend heavily marked Prus's perception of the world at the late stage of his activity as an author. Prus's escalating problems with his sight caused that apart from the apparent presence of the said trend in his works, it is deepened through the reflection based on his life laced with illness.

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## ABSTRACT

The article is an attempt to analyse and interpret the visual aspect of the work of Prus, and especially the impact of the writer's diseases (including a deepening vision defect, agoraphobia) on the ability to perceive reality and the creation of the world presented in the works (based on the novels: *Emancipated Women*, *The Doll*, *Dzieci* [The Children]) and on the construction of Prus's characters in order to find an answer to the question: how do they look and what do they see? The text presents a portrait of Prus short-sighted (experienced also by a hyperopia); how the writer perceives and uses the descriptions of the colours; how he creates an image of the omnipresent four eyes-protagonist in his works; and finally – how he prepares to work, gathering materials in his notebooks, which can be described as his writing workshop. There are the author's notes on the sight, its role and place among other senses. With time other sources of the world knowledge begin to dominate over the more and more imperfect observation: his experience, acquired knowledge, and above all – feeling.

**KEYWORDS:** Bolesław Prus (1847-1912), glasses, eyesight defect (deterioration), observation, 'sensing'

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