

The art of breaking up. Infelicitous engagements in Polish novels and memoirs from the turn of the 20th century*

AGNIESZKA BĄBEL

ORCID: 0000-0002-1821-9399

(The Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw)

Engagement once played a major role in the lives of young adults, particularly those of limited means. A young male – a university student – for example, rented a room in a house where the host family had a daughter, an unmarried girl remaining ‘with her family’. Dim evening hours, loneliness, and a lack of the female element in his life – one, two kinder words, a stolen kiss and in no time he was in a relationship, and the girl considered him her fiancé. Or during some minor ball a young lad full of dreams and softened with a few rounds could, while dancing with an unmarried girl whom he found attractive (though not always), utter a few words, recklessly – and bang! the bird got caged, becoming a fiancé.

Tadeusz Żeleński (Boy)¹

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1 Original quote: ‘Narzeczeństwo odgrywało niegdyś dużą rolę w życiu młodzieży, zwłaszcza niezamożnej. Młody człowiek – student – odnajmował np. pokój w domu, gdzie była córka, panna „przy rodzicach”. Szara godzina, osamotnienie, brak elementu kobiecego w życiu, jedno, drugie czulsze słówko, przelotny pocałunek – i ani się obejrzał, jak był związany, panna uważała go za narzeczonego. Albo na jakimś baliku młodzian rozmarzony paroma kieliszkami, tańcząc z panną, która mu się podobała (czasem nawet nie zanadto), powiedział parę słów, nieopatrznych – paf! ptaszek w klatce, narzeczony.’ (T. Żeleński (Boy), “Narzeczeni” [The engaged couple], in: *idem, Reflektorem w mrok. Wybór publicystyki* [A searchlight into the dark. Selected publications], selection, introduction and edited by A. Z. Makowiecki (Warsaw: 1984), p. 328).

[Unless indicated otherwise, English versions of quotations were translated from Polish.]

This slightly ironic statement, which Tadeusz Żeleński (Boy) made about the notion of engagement at the *fin-de-siècle* based on his experience of a thirty-year-old man and the moral changes of that time, was confirmed in late 19th century novels. Both grand and minor works reflected that particular vague nature of the moment since characters ‘considered themselves to be engaged’, even if the customary ritual of inquiry and response and of the exchange of symbolic rings did not occur.

When pleading Izabela to forgive him for his ‘suspicions’, Wokulski warned her not to rush into any words of forgiveness ‘because that might lift my hopes’. The maiden listened to the words in an intimate conversation, when she was not accompanied either by her father nor the chaperone, and answered in a way which was both evasive and (for Wokulski) clear: ‘By God, what can I do?... you can just as well have hope, if you need it so much... (...) That, apparently, was meant to be.’² The merchant gave her chosen one a gold locket with a symbolic gift, a talisman; afterwards he described himself to a friend as ‘miss Izabela’s fiancé’ while Izabela informed Mrs. Wąsowska that ‘Wokulski has been accepted’.³

Leon Płoszowski, who having to depart suddenly to visit his dying father failed to propose to Anielka in time, clearly felt an obligation towards the girl, an emotion from which he to repress by telling himself that the straightforward gesture of intimacy had rather been a sign of empathy or simple kindness, typical for relatives:

Rzeczywiście, aż mi samemu trudno sobie wyobrazić, jak daleki jestem od owego Płoszowskiego, który czuł się związanym wobec Anielki. Związanym? – czym? z jakiego powodu? – co między nami zaszło? Jedno przelotne, prawie niepochwytne dotknięcie ustami jej czoła – dotknięcie, które aż nadto dobrze może być między tak bliskimi krewnymi usprawiedliwione stosunkiem rodzinnym... To są śmieszne skrupuły⁴.

Indeed, even I cannot imagine how distant I am from that Płoszowski lad who felt a bond with Anielka. A bond? – bound with what? for what reason? – what did actually happen between us? One fleeting almost unnoticeable moment when my lips brushed her forehead – a contact which could have just as well been one between relatives... Those are some ridiculous scruples.⁴

In this context, Sienkiewicz’s other novel entitled *Rodzina Połanieckich* [*Children of the Soil*], where Miss Pławicka at promised aloud at Litka’s deathbed that she would marry Połaniecki, seems to offer an unconventional yet extremely transparent and explicit situation.⁵

2 B. Prus, *Lalka* (Warsaw: 1982), vol. 2, p. 242. The novel was translated into English as *The Doll* in 1972, and has a few editions, e.g. *The Doll*, transl. by David Welsh (rev. by D. Tołczyk and A. Zaranko), introduction by S. Barańczak (New York: 2017).

3 B. Prus, *Lalka*, vol. 2, pp. 242–244.

4 H. Sienkiewicz, *Bez dogmatu*, ed. T. Bujnicki (Wrocław: 2002), p. 107. The novel was translated into English by Iza Young as *Without dogma. A novel of Modern Poland* (Boston: 1893).

5 H. Sienkiewicz, *Rodzina Połanieckich* (Warsaw: 1978), p. 176. The novel was translated into English by Jeremiah Curtin as *Children of the Soil* (London: 1898).

The proper engagement ritual, be it among aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, intelligentsia or peasants, had entailed for a long time a request made by the parents of the suitor to the parents or legal guardians of the maiden. That highlighted the fact that a marriage was treated more as a union of families than of individuals. It was only in the 19th century that individuals gradually became emancipated in terms of their personal decisions.⁶ In more conservative circles the ritual survived so long that, e.g., as late as in 1910 a pronouncement by the suitor himself who asked for the hand of the fourth daughter ‘in the chancellery, not in the drawing room as the custom required’, and even more so did that himself, ‘not through his father, as our three older sons-in-law had done before’, was considered by Marianna Jasiecka, a member of landed gentry, extremely odd. ‘I saw all that with my own eyes yet it felt as if I were watching a play in a theatre or reading a love story’, concluded the confused mother of the maiden and commented in her diary that she was her first daughter to ‘marry for such unusual love’.⁷

Naturally, not all engagements ended in marriage. These socially sensitive situations must have been relatively common and important, since they were discussed in *savoir-vivre* handbooks, which offered suggestions on ‘how to behave among people’ in problematic situations. *Dobry ton* [Bon ton] by Mieczysław Rościszewski (1905) seems to have assumed that no maiden would willingly break engagement the fragment on how it ought to be done only included remarks for the suitor, who acted, as it were, under the pressure of ‘force majeure’, and for him the recommendation was to proceed extremely tactfully:

Gdyby jakie nadzwyczajne okoliczności zniewoliły młodzieńca do wycofania się z dotychczasowych zobowiązań, t.j. do dobrowolnego wyrzeczenia się tytułu konkurenta, to powinien uczynić to możliwie najdelikatniej, ażeby oszczędzić dobrej sławy dziewczęcia i nie obrazić jej miłości własnej⁸.

If some extraordinary circumstance had bound the lad to retract his commitment, i.e., to voluntarily surrender the title of suitor, he should do that in the most delicate manner, to spare the maiden's reputation and not to offend her love of self.⁸

- 6 For a long time it was generally considered that even if a suitor asked for the hand of a woman in person, it was not befitting for the young people to make any financial arrangements themselves. I discussed the evolution of the role of parents in arranging and concluding marriages in my text: “Narzeczeni i rodzice. Zaproszenia ślubne z końca XIX i początku XX wieku jako zwierciadło przemian obyczajowych” [The engaged and the parents. Wedding invitations from the turn of the 20th century as a reflection of the changing customs], in: *Prace Polonistyczne* [Studies in Polish Literature] series LXI, vol. II (2006); see also: D. Kałwa, *Polska doby rozbiorów i międzywojenna* [Poland at the time of the partitions of Poland and between the wars], in: *Obyczaje w Polsce. Od średniowiecza do czasów współczesnych* [Customs in Poland. From the Middle Ages to the present day], ed. A. Chwalba (Warsaw: 2004), p. 246.
- 7 J. Fedorowicz, J. Konopińska, *Marianna i róże. Życie codzienne w Wielkopolsce w latach 1890–1914 z tradycji rodzinnej* [Marianna and roses. Everyday life in Greater Poland between 1890 and 1914 from family tradition], 2nd edition, (Poznań: [no date]), p. 419.
- 8 M. Rościszewski, *Dobry ton. Szkoła pożycia z ludźmi wszelkich stanów w stosunkach poufnych i ceremonialnych. Umiejętność dystygnowanego zachowania się w salonie, w teatrze, w resursie, w sklepie, na ulicy*

Those recommendations seem enigmatic yet they do emphasise the need to maintain pretences and ensure discretion for the benefit of the maiden's reputation. Social convention was clearly intended to protect it, which is even more visible in a more specialised handbook, which focussed exclusively on romantic and marriage matters. The 1903 *Przewodnik zakochanych* [Lovers' guidebook] (principally intended for male readers), stated adamantly, regardless of whose decision it was to part:

W każdym przypadku, jakkolwiek by on był – dobrze wychowany a przede wszystkim honorowy młodzieniec drażliwą tę sprawę przeprowadzi w ten sposób, jakoby jedynie z jego zawinięcia i na życzenie panny zerwanie nastąpiło. Nie zaniecha ogółem niczego, by pannę w oczach świata i w jej własnym mniemaniu schować przed najłżejszym nawet pozorem kompromitacji. Nie zapominajmy, że słabszą i w każdym przypadku krokiem tym po krzywdzoną stroną jest panna, że zerwanie z narzeczonym rzuca ją na pastwę złośliwych domniemań i złych języków ludzkich⁹.

In any case, regardless of its nature, a well-raised and, most of all, respectable young lad shall proceed in such a matter as if it was only a fault of his own and at the request of the maiden that the break-up occurs. In general, he shall not stop short of anything that could protect the lass in the eyes of the world and her own mind from the minutest possibility of discredit.

Let us not forget that the maiden is the weaker party aggrieved by the decision, and that a break-up with a fiancé leaves her prey to malicious conjecture and people's ill-natured tongues.⁹

A maiden's good reputation, a major factor of her social position, as well as a kind of capital, introduced apart from the dowry to the partnership commonly referred to as 'marriage'¹⁰, in the case of literary engaged couples was easily sullied if the

i t.p. Zwyczaje i obyczaje życia towarzyskiego w różnych jego przejawach. Podręcznik praktyczny dla pań i panów opracowany według najświeższych źródeł obcych i osobistych spostrzeżeń autora na gruncie swojskim [Bon ton. School of living with people of all states in confidential and ceremonial relations. The ability to behave in a distinguished manner in a salon, theatre, restaurant, shop, on the street, etc. The customs and habits of social life in its various manifestations. A practical handbook for ladies and gentlemen, based on the latest foreign sources and the author's personal observations in his native land] (Warsaw-Lviv: 1905), p. 130. All quotations from functional texts from the period in Polish include original spelling.

- 9 *Przewodnik zakochanych, czyli Jak zdobyć szczęście w miłości i powodzenie u kobiet z dotychczas Rozmówek salonowych i towarzyskich i Zbioru listów miłosnych* [Lovers' guidebook, or how to win happiness in love and success with women, with the addition of Salon and society phrasebooks and a Collection of love letters] by M.A. Zawadzki (the author of *Polski sekretarz dla wszystkich* [Polish secretary for all]) ((Warsaw: 1903) reprinted: Iskry Publishing House, no place, no date), pp. 44-45.
- 10 Even though already in 1874 Bolesław Prus did mention the fact that as emancipation progressed 'in London, some mamma's boy sued a maiden for... seduction... and that he won the case, though he gained little because the court priced his youthful virtue at only one shilling...' (*Kolce* [Spikes] issue 31, dated 1 August 1874), he offered it more as an example of a rare sensation. Comments included in other contemporary periodicals (*Gazeta Polska* [Polish Newspaper] issue 154) were of a similar nature; they were quoted by Zygmunt Szweykowski in a note related to the fragment: 'It is known that in England where it is not forbidden to conduct paternity inquiry and where the law cares for young lasses, if a seducer promises to marry a girl, he may be requested to keep his commitment and if he resists, he may be liable to monetary compensation or imprisonment (...) However, no one has ever seen a young lad sue a young person who promised to marry him. Not until recently, that is, when on the 25th day of June in London that exact thing happened and a court of jurors, following the law, could not do anything other than agree with a rather indelicate young lad who sought rectification. It was a case of a broken promise (...) that was undeniable, though it had never been seen

maiden was abandoned by a fiancé who did not wish to take the blame or simply broke off the relationship without a word of explanation, which always caused a scandal. Such conduct on the part of Wokulski outraged Mrs. Wąsowska. When talking to him she talked with passionately about the 'poor girl', i.e. Miss Izabela: 'You have become biased about her... you wronged her... That is unjust... no respectable person would do that, seduce her and then discard her like a wilted bouquet...' ¹¹ Wokulski's bitter words after that scolding, i.e., about the role he played of a fool and a screen against the maiden's suitors and 'spiritual prostitution' conducted 'unnecessarily, coldly, while retaining the appearance of virtue', ¹² could trigger the question of who in that relationship was actually seduced.

Beautiful women (aware of their beauty) in *Emancypantki* [*Emancipated Women*], another novel by Prus, also played the role of shrewd huntresses looking for the best prey. Miss Eufemia and Miss Helena Norska did just that, picking and choosing wooers, with whom the women flirted or 'toyed' even, eventually leading to tragic events. ¹³ Helena's breaking her engagement was a deliberate strategy of a seasoned coquette conscious of her charm intended to spike up her price. In doing so the character displayed 'wisdom and tact' because Stefan Solski, who had already started to view his dream catch more critically, was thus forced to once again woo the maiden while convinced about her selflessness. Helena went too far in her scheme, though, openly stating in conversations with other people a cynical rule of the exchange of beauty for assets, to which her alarmed stepmother concluded: 'Such a break-up means nothing. Beautiful women can up their price; that does wonders to men. Mind you, you should never go too far'. ¹⁴

The situation was different in Żeleński's work. It was actually the woman who

before. The law says nothing about the sex of the party aggrieved by a breaking of promise. Therefore, the young man's case was legitimate. Nonetheless, considering the fact that it would be absolutely ridiculous to treat the young lad and the maiden who failed him equally, the court of jurors sentenced her to pay him one shilling (...) of compensation. Thus, the case could be considered a win for him in moral terms, as the other party was sentenced to cover the costs; however, he was granted no right to compensation.' (B. Prus, *Kroniki* [Chronicles], ed. Z. Szwejkowski (Warsaw: 1956), vol. 1, part 1, pp. 338-339).

11 B. Prus, *Lalka*, vol. 2, p. 338.

12 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 339.

13 The suicide of Cynadrowski, a postal clerk, in love with Eufemia, who discarded him to focus on Ludwik Krukowski, initially even elevated her worth in the eyes of the joyful fiancé, yet after a conversation in which she quoted that ill-fated rule, the shocked 'loving Ludwik' simply ran away from his fiancée and decided to immediately leave Iksinów shouting to his sister: 'I don't want Femia!... I don't want to know her anymore... I don't want to hear about her... This woman not only has the courage to say that she toyed, t-o-y-e-d, you hear me, with this wretched clerk, but she also doesn't realise what she said!' (B. Prus, *Emancypantki* (Warsaw: 1998), vol. I-II, pp. 452-453). The novel was translated into English by Stephanie Kraft as *Emancipated Women* (Amherst: 2008).

14 *Ibid.*, vol. III-IV pp. 166-167.

was the weaker party, as she saw in marriage an opportunity for gaining a stable life and economic security. Prolonged engagement, which was supposed to guarantee that, was

dla niej deska ratunku, dla niego kamień u szyi. Mąciła się równowaga wzajemnego konta: z biegiem lat, im bliżej on był kresu, jego szanse życiowe rosły, jej malały. [...] W końcu pozostawało jej tylko jedno: grać na „honorze” chłopca.

Często po latach, bliski celu – zrywał. Ot, poszukał sprzeczki, pozoru, odchodził i nie wracał. Parę osób powiedziało, że jest świnią, ale z czasem zacierało się to. Po latach owego narzeczeństwa żenił się, ale – z inną.

Tamta zostawała zrujnowana. Panny „obcałowanej”, „obmacanej” – jak wówczas pięknie się mówiło – nikt by nie wziął. Zresztą wiek, kwas...

Zostawały jej na resztę życia wstyd, samotność, wymówki matki, drwiny rodzeństwa, często zaburzenia umysłowe¹⁵.

a lifeboat for her and a pair of concrete boots for him. The equilibrium of their mutual balance became distorted: as the years passed, the closer the period got to the end, his life's opportunities grew and hers dwindled. (...) Eventually, she had only one thing to do: wager on the boy's 'honour'.

Often after years, though near the end of the period, the boy would break up. He would simply use a falling out, some pretence to leave and he would never come back. A few people could say he was a pig, but that faded with time. After the years of the engagement period he would get married, but... to another woman.

The previous one was left ruined. No one would take a 'kissed' and 'fondled' maiden, as people would ungraciously reference her. Besides, consider the age, the bitterness...

She was left for the rest of her life with shame, loneliness, her mother's reproaches, her siblings mocking her, and often mentally upset.¹⁵

It is worth remembering, though, that literary texts from the period offer diverse depictions, contrary to the strict and unequivocal evaluations included in normative handbooks. Those publications include an extensive array of comments and examples of diversely assessed conduct, starting with genuine relief felt by the interested parties themselves (as in *Bajecznie kolorowa* [Fabulously colourful] by Sewer) or their families (in *Emancypantki*¹⁶), through presenting the threat of breaking engagement as a social failure which questioned the status (and credit!) of not the maiden but the fiancé, an example of which was the perspective of the lawyer Maszko in *Rodzina Połanieckich*,¹⁷ to a breakdown of engagement which became the cause of personal tragedy, followed by madness or attempted suicide of an artist torn by emotions (the poet Zawilowski in *Rodzina Połanieckich*, or the sculptor Rdzawicz in *Anioł śmierci* [Angel of death] by Tetmajer).

So why were engagements broken in novels? The reasons varied. Often the actual cause was concealed under a clever pretext and by dint of the romantic plot it was mainly of an emotional/erotic nature. Anka's love for Borowiecki faded in Reymont's *Ziemia obiecana* [*The promised land*], unexpected feelings for the 'Prussian'

15 T. Żeleński (Boy), "Narzeczeni", in: *ibid.*, pp. 330-331.

16 Though suspicious of Helena Norska, Ada Solska and her aunt were grateful to the maiden for tactfully breaking her engagement with Stefan (B. Prus, *Emancypantki*, vol. III-IV, p. 222).

17 H. Sienkiewicz, *Rodzina Połanieckich*, pp. 202, 209.

[Wentzel Croy-Dulmen, a protagonist in Polish nicknamed 'Fritz', from the popular German first name Friedrich] captured Jadwiga Chrzastowska's heart in *Między ustami a brzegiem pucharu* [Between the lips and the rim of the goblet] by Rodziewiczówna, and maidens such as Izabela Łęcka in *Lalka* or Lineta Castelli in *Rodzina Połanieckich* disgraced themselves with their uninhibited behaviour, becoming susceptible to handsome and brassy admirers. Engagements could also be broken due to an illness of one party: the taboo of mental illness and fear of insanity were used by Wentzel (in love with Jadwiga) and his ally, i.e., his future brother-in-law Jan Chrzastowski, who told Mrs. Tekla, the 'Fritz's' grandmother (and the maiden's legal guardian) about the alleged signs of madness which they had noticed in the gloomy Głębocki, beautiful Jadwiga's 'fiancé by duty'.¹⁸ Their plot worked and they managed to scare the old lady off. She verified her concerns by consulting an old *in folio* volume entitled *Choroby mózgu i wynikające z tego*

18 The undeniably comical character of the 'bachelors' plot' is perfectly depicted in this fragment of a conversation among family members:

"For the love of God! What is this rubbish?! I, truly, cannot offer Jadzia to marry him. May this sickness go one way or the other. Who knows what this is. His granduncle was a hothead."

"Well now! There you go! It's hereditary. I even remember reading that insanity doesn't pass directly but it zigzags."

"I wouldn't know anything about that but I remember Mr. Głębocki well; he started with idiocy: he used to walk through the fields saying incessantly: my flute, my flute, my flute!"

"That doesn't bode well. Adam already has a craze, idiocy is just around the corner. He'll be going through the fields like his gramps moaning: my dominoes, my dominoes! What say you, Jadzia?"

"Pff, you're delirious!" she scoffed. "Mr. Adam is just as crazy as you are."

(...)

"Dear Jadzia, this is no joke!" Mrs. Tekla stated with all seriousness, clearly terrified. "Jaś is right to be worried about you. This requires proper consideration. How fortunate that he helped me recall that. Hereditary madness! Oh my! I shall bear that in mind! He has an evil gaze!"

"Quite evil," Jan confirmed earnestly. "His eyes are dark, and squinted."

"Oh give it a rest!" Jadzia mumbled angrily and Wentzel switched the topic feeling that any moment they would both burst out laughing because of the old lady's terrified expression.⁷

Original quote:

„– Jezus, Maria! Co ty pleciesz! Ja, doprawdy, Jadzi nie dam za niego. Niech się ta choroba jakoś wyklaruje. Kto wie, co to jest. Jego stryjeczny dziad był furiatem.

– A co? Widzi babcia! To dziedziczne. Ja nawet czytałem, że obłąkanie nie idzie w prostej linii, ale tak jakoś zygzakiem.

– Tego nie wiem, ale pana Pawła Głębockiego pamiętam dobrze; zaczął od idiotyzmu: chodził po polach i powtarzał bezustannie: mój flet, mój flet, mój flet!

– Coraz gorsze prognozyki. Już Adam ma bzika, do idiotyzmu krok został. Będzie chodził jak dziadunio po polach i jęczał: moje domino, moje domino! Uważasz, Jadziu?

– Et, bredzisz! – oburzyła się. – Pan Adam takiz wariat jak i ty.

[...]

– Moja Jadziu, to wcale nie żarty! – upomniała serio pani Tekla, istotnie przerażona. – Jaś ma rację, że lęka się o ciebie. Nad tym trzeba dobrze się namyślić. Szczęściem, że mi to przypomniał. Dziedziczna wariacja! Ho, ho! Ja to wezmę pod uwagę! On ma złe oczy!

– Bardzo złe – potakiwał Jan poważnie – jakieś bure, i zezuje.

– Dajże raz temu spokój! – mruknęła gniewnie panienka, a Wentzel zagadał kwestię, czując, że lada chwila obydwą wybuchną śmiechem z miny wystraszonej staruszki."

(M. Rodziewiczówna, *Między ustami a brzegiem pucharu* (Warsaw: 1987), p. 115).

rozrzedzenie, czyli obłąd [Maladies of the mind and the resulting dilution, i.e., madness] and she stated that considering the terrifying similarity of the symptoms she could not allow her ward to marry a madman,¹⁹ which Jan summarised with deep satisfaction: “Głębocki *ist kaput!*...”²⁰ In another novel by Rodziewiczówna, the parting was caused by a pretext of possible tuberculosis, skilfully used by a young doctor in love with his charming patient. The outraged maiden thus reported the cunning deceit to his mother:

– [...] Kiedy poznałam syna pani, byłam zaręczona. Chorowałam ciężko i pan Włodzimierz przekonał mnie i rodziców, że za wątpliwość, że mi grożą suchoty, że nie powinnam iść za męża. Narzeczonemu mojemu toż samo powtarzał – no, ja w to wierzę, więc wróciłam słowo. Pogodziłam się z moim losem, rodzice przecierpieli ze mną i jakoś spokój nam wrócił. Raptem pewnego dnia pan Włodzimierz mi się oświadczył.

Pani Taida podniosła wzrok na syna bez słowa, ale on poczuł mrówki na plecach. Potem obejrzała się na pannę Irenę i spytała ostro jak cięcie noża:

– I pani go przyjęła?

– Nie. Odmówiłam, naturalnie. I powiedziałam otwarcie, że wedle własnego jego zdania nie mogę iść za męża i nie pójdę. Wtedy zaczął się śmiać i wyznał, że mówił to tylko, by się pozbyć rywała, a mnie dla siebie zachować. To było okropne!

– Pani by więc wołała, że bym go zabił! – wtrącił Włodzio. – Jakże bym się od niego odczepił?²¹

“(...) When I met your son I was engaged. I was very ill and Mr. Włodzimierz convinced me and my parents that I was too frail, that I might contract consumption, that I should not get married. He said the same thing to my fiancé – I trusted him so I retracted my word. I came to terms with my fate, as did my parents and we regained peace. Suddenly one day Mr. Włodzimierz proposed to me.”

Mrs. Taida looked up to her son without a word but he felt a chill running down his spine. Then she shifted her gaze to Miss Irena and asked as sharply as a knife cuts:

“And you accepted him?”

“No. I refused, naturally. I said openly that he himself told me I could not get married and I wouldn’t. He then started to laugh and he confessed that he said all that only to fend off his rival and to keep me for himself. That was horrible!”

“So you would prefer it if I had killed him!” Włodzio interjected. “How else could I have got rid of him?”²¹

Both parties did agree, though, that the fiancé who withdrew so easily without even demanding a medical consultation to confirm the grim diagnosis apparently had not held great feelings for the maiden, so after a period of disfavour the doctor eventually managed to win her heart and hand.

Novels never mention of break-ups due to a venereal disease suffered by the fiancé, which seems obvious as it was a social taboo at that time. However, that cause was recorded in memoirs from the turn of the 20th century, particularly those written some time after the events. That was the cause of the breakdown of the first engagement of Magdalena Kossakówna (it was referred to as an ‘unpleasant story’ and mentioned that ‘it wasn’t clear who broke up with whom and why’),²² as well as the reason for postponing the wedding of Irena Krzywicka

19 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

21 M. Rodziewiczówna, *Kądziel* [Woman’s inheritance] (Cracow: 1988), p. 80.

22 M. Samozwaniec, *Maria i Magdalena* [Maria and Magdalena] (Szczecin: 1989), vol. 1, p. 224.

and her husband-to-be, a fact which was mentioned rather clearly in *Wyznania gorszycielki*.²³

Maidens in novels were usually disgraced by a clear erotic situation while suitors were much more worried that someone might discover their actual financial standing and social position (which is why Maszko in *Rodzina Połanieckich* treats the impending duel as a catastrophe that will reveal to the girl and her mother the true image of his 'life on credit' and that it will deprive him of an opportunity for gaining stability, which he hopes to gain through marriage).²⁴ Financial liability forced marriages to endure, even if love had been long gone. Thus in *Ziemia obiecana* Karol Borowiecki finds it increasingly difficult to endure his engagement to

23 I. Krzywicka, *Wyznania gorszycielki* [Confessions of a scandalist], ed. A. Tuszyńska (Warsaw: 1992), pp. 134-135. Speaking based on his extensive experience as a medical doctor, Boy-Zeleński commented in his already referenced text the engagement relations of that time: 'Besides, in 50-90% of cases, he had a venereal disease. (...) He had time to seek treatment as the engagement period lasted so long, but he didn't have the money or the patience to do it. So usually as a wedding gift he brought an untreated venereal disease into the marriage.' (T. Żeleński (Boy), "Narzeczeni", in: *ibid.*, p. 330).

24 In a conversation with Połaniecki, the lawyer offered a mercilessly sober assessment of his situation and the fiancée's motivation: 'The situation is this: if my marriage does not happen or even gets delayed for a few months, I'm doomed and I can kiss my position, my credit, my Krzemień and everything that I have goodbye. I told you that I'm running on fumes – and I need to stop. Miss Krasławska is not marrying me for love but because she is twenty-nine and she considers me if not the perfect match than at least a satisfactory one. If it turns out I'm not as good as she thinks I am, she'll break up with me. If the ladies realise today that I sold the wood in Krzemień because I had to – tomorrow I would get a rejection. (...) If I don't challenge Gątowski, they could break up with me 'cause I'm a scoundrel, if I do challenge him, remember they are bigots and women who care the most about appearances (like no one I have ever known) – so they will break up with me 'cause I'm a troublemaker. If I shoot Gątowski, they will break up 'cause I'm a killer; if he shoots me, they will break up with me 'cause I'm an oaf who lets himself be offended and beaten. It's a nine to ten chance that they will do just that. Now you understand why I told you that I'm doomed and that I can kiss my credit, my position and Krzemień even goodbye (...) Oh, good sir, you don't know these women. They settled for Mr. Maszko for lack of anything better because Mr. Maszko was successful... When the slightest shadow is cast on my property, my standing or my position, they will discard me without mercy and then they will toss mountains at me only to hide themselves from the world...'

Original quote: 'Położenie jest takie: jeśli moje małżeństwo nie dojdzie do skutku albo nawet odwlecze się na jakie kilka miesięcy, diabli wezmą mnie, moje stanowisko, mój kredyt, mój Krzemień i wszystko, co mam. Powiedziałem ci, że jadę resztką pary – i muszę stanąć. Panna Krasławska nie wychodzi za mnie z miłości, tylko dlatego, że ma dwadzieścia dziewięć lat i że wydaję się jej, jeśli nie wymarzoną, to przynajmniej dostateczną partią. Jeżeli się tylko pokaże, że nie jestem taką, jak myśli, to zerwie ze mną. Gdyby te panie dziś dowiedziały się, że sprzedałem dąbrowę na Krzemieniu z potrzeby – jutro miałbym rekuzę. [...] Gdybym nie wyzwał Gątowskiego, mogą ze mną zerwać jako z szują bez honoru, jeśli go wyzwę – pamiętaj, że to są dewotki, a prócz tego kobiety tak przestrzegające pozorów, jak drugich nie znam – więc zerwą ze mną, jako z awanturnikiem. Jeśli Gątowskiego postrzelę, zerwą ze mną jako z zabójcą; jeśli on mnie, zerwą, jako z niedołągą, który się pozwolił zelżyć i poturbować. Na sto danych jest dziewięćdziesiąt, że tak postąpią. Rozumiesz teraz, dlaczego ci powiedziałem, że diabli wezmą mnie, mój kredyt, moje stanowisko i w dodatku Krzemień [...] Mój kochany, nie znasz tych kobiet. One w braku czego lepszego zgodziły się na pana Maszkę, bo panu Maszce dobrze się wiodło... Gdyby cię padnie na mój majątek, moje położenie, moje stanowisko – porzucą mnie bez miłosierdzia, a potem góry będą na mnie waliły, by siebie osłonić przed światem...'

Anka, who has been turning a stranger to him by the week, yet he does not decide to break up with her not so much for social convention or his father's judgement, but rather the fact that 'by using Anka's dowry money he bound himself for ever'.²⁵ The ironic aspect of the problem in the circumstances of suitors with limited means was described perfectly by Żeleński:

Ale jeżeli chłopiec był honorny – zaciskał zęby i trwał do końca: żenił się. Traktował to w istocie jako dług honorowy. Nie tyle wobec kobiety, nad tym można by ostatecznie przejść do porządku dziennego, ale była jedna okoliczność, mocno angażująca honor mężczyzny: tych tysięcy i jedna kolacji, które zjadł gratis. Bo cała ta idylla odbywała się w domu – gdzież miała się odbywać? [...] Coraz częściej zatrzymywano go na kolację, wchodziło to w zwyczaj i urastał potworny „dług honorowy”, dług nie do spłacenia, bo jak zrywając z kobietą oddać za te kolacje?²⁶

But if a boy had a sense of honour, he would clench his teeth and endure to the end: he got married. He actually treated it as an honorary debt. Not so much towards the woman, he could eventually come to terms with that, but there was one circumstance which weighed in on a man's honour considerably: those one thousand and one dinners which he had eaten for free. Because the whole idyll occurred at home – where else was it supposed to occur? (...) He was ever so often asked to stay for dinner, it became a ritual and he incurred the terrible 'honorary debt', a debt he could never repay because how could he break up with the woman and reimburse the dinners?²⁶

Therefore, in the ideal world of social codes the fiancée should be the party that breaks up. According to handbooks, a break-up should occur via letters: 'You can thus avoid unpleasant reproaches, even more unpleasant attempts to explain everything, and sometimes scenes even'.²⁷ The fiancé's retraction of his commitment should be accompanied by the obligatory return of the ring and of the maiden's affectionate letters –

odesłanie pierścionka powinno stanowczo wykluczyć wszelkie próby pogodzenia, pojednania, wyjaśnienia, mogące w innym przypadku być podjętymi przez pannę lub jej rodziców. [...] Do listu dołączyć można prośbę o wzajemny zwrot pierścionka i swej korespondencji. Nie należy się jednak przy swem żądaniu zbyt upierać – niech w danym przypadku wystarczy oświadczenie panny, że listy nasze zniszczyła. Uczciwemu honorowemu człowiekowi nie wolno pod żadnym pozorem zawarunkować zwrotu listów panny (ewentualnie i fotografii) zwrotem listów do niej pisanych.²⁸

the sending back of the ring should definitely preclude any attempt at reconciliation or explanation, which could otherwise be undertaken by the maiden or her parents. (...) The letter can include a request to mutually return rings and each other's correspondence. However, you should not insist too much – if the maiden declares that she destroyed your letters, that should be enough. Under no circumstance an honourable man should condition the return of the maiden's letters (and, possibly, photographs) on the return of the letters she had received from him.²⁸

25 W. St. Reymont, *Ziemia obiecana* (Warsaw: 2000), p. 226. The novel was translated into English by Michał Henryk Dziewicki as *The promised land* (New York: 1927).

26 T. Żeleński (Boy), "Narzeczeni", in: *ibid.*, pp. 330-331.

27 *Przewodnik zakochanych*, p. 45.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

The dramatic gesture of sending back the ring, that major element of the engagement ritual (as Magdalena Samozwaniec admitted, many maidens in that period accepted a wedding proposal only for the ring),²⁹ became the most common symbol of a break-up in novels, but also in journalistic texts or memoirs. In her recollections about Warsaw of that period, Jadwiga Waydel-Dmochowska stated generally while discussing jewellery fashionable in the early 20th century: 'indeed, without a ring a maiden at that time would not feel she was "spoken for", besides, if the engagement were broken off, she would have nothing to send back as letters and photographs are not enough in such a dramatic moment'.³⁰ The 'sending back of the ring' was mentioned by Bolesław Prus in one of his weekly chronicles in 1887, in which he focussed on the 'recession in the realm of marriages'. As one of the reasons for a break-up he listed a maiden's disappointment with the man's lack of dance skills as he 'made a fool of himself' in a mazur figure.³¹ The return of a magnificent engagement ring with an opal and gifts ended the difficult engagement of Anna Skarbkówna and Professor Bolesław Ulanowski, which perished not simply due to the age and disposition difference between the paramours, but because of the incessant meddling by the mother-in-law-to-be. Anna's outrage about her being side-lined when it came to making major life decisions ('For months I couldn't believe or understand how the break-up could have occurred without my consent, without me being asked about it, without even a letter of notification. I was disposed of like an object')³² was accompanied by a sense of relief – the symbolic gesture of sending back gifts to the fiancé's mother also meant for the author of the diary her readiness to enter a new relationship, which soon afterwards ended in a happy marriage.³³

29 M. Samozwaniec, *Maria i Magdalena*, vol. 1, p. 248.

30 J. Waydel-Dmochowska, *Jeszcze o dawnej Warszawie* [More about the old Warsaw] (Warsaw: 1960), p. 336. If the author's recollections are to be trusted, those engagement rings differed considerably: 'Sometimes it was a family heirloom, often with some naive imagery: a heart or a forget-me-not decorated with turquoises, sometimes an extremely expensive and splendid gem; however, the most common type of engagement ring among the class of medium means was a sapphire surrounded by diamonds for the fiancée and a broad gold ring with smooth-surface sapphire for the fiancé' (*ibid.*). Magdalena Samozwaniec received such a ring with a smooth reconstructed sapphire, with much disappointment, from her frugal father-in-law-to-be, a fact which became the source of never-ending mockery among the entire Kossak family (M. Samozwaniec, *Maria i Magdalena*, vol. 1, p. 248).

31 The spiteful chronicler did not avoid making a comment: 'Apparently during the next meeting, the editorial board of the *Gazeta Sądowa* [Judicial Newspaper] is to extensively examine the issue of "what is more ridiculous": to choose people who can't dance for a dance figure, or to break up an engagement because someone cannot dance the mazur.' (*Kurier Warszawski* [Warsaw Courier] issue 23, dated 23 January 1887).

32 A. Skarbk-Sokołowska, *Wspomnienia 1882-1944* [Memories 1882-1944] (Warsaw: 1995), p. 84.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 88. Interestingly enough, due to a superstition valid at that time, the new engagement ring, a gift from Witold Sokołowski, was decorated not with an opal (considered a stone which caused misfortune) but with an emerald and diamonds.

The engagement ring constituted an almost comical motif in *Bajecznie kolorowa* by Ignacy Maciejowski (Sewer), which was not without reason read as a fictionalised version of the love, concluded with a wedding, of Włodzimierz Tetmajer and Anna Mikołajczykówna³⁴ – an event famous throughout 1890 Cracow by dint of its ‘scandalous’ nature of a marriage between an artist and a peasant. At the beginning of Sewer’s novel (sometimes considered an extended short story), the protagonist Wacek, a painter, who studies in Berlin, is engaged (by the will of the family) with a maiden who lives in Lithuania. His colleagues, aware of his financial destitution, advise him to pawn his engagement ring (‘A magnificent diamond and eight rubies, what a treasure’),³⁵ justifying that not so much with their care for the pocket of inconsiderate Waclaw but rather for his heart susceptible to the charms of seductive waitresses: ‘Lock the ring from the ravenous view of the German ladies!’³⁶ Waclaw does not appreciate the role of a nobleman settled in a manor, whose job is to milk cows, curse farmhands, play cards with the parson and ‘get drunk’ at the neighbour’s reception.³⁷ He rebels against the family’s appeals for him to return to the homeland where the girl is waiting, as he hasn’t got the slightest intention of marrying, given that his dream is to continue his art studies in Paris. He confesses to a friend: ‘It is necessary, first of all, to send back the engagement ring. The girl will easily find a broad-necked nobleman who is handsome and affluent. The ring has bound her fate, and the ring will unbind it. Alas, the ring’s in prison, in captivity’, to which Antek responds: ‘Even without the ring you cannot go to your fiancée, you idiot’.³⁸ The buying out of the item from the pawn shop will also determine the protagonist’s further fortunes, i.e. – the assessment of his talent by the ‘old man’, professor and curator of the painter colony, is going to take a quite concrete form of a loan which is to be paid up after the sale of a painting. The amused and kind ‘master’ loans him the money as an *a conto* advance and warns

34 See: T. Żeleński (Boy), “Plotka o ‘Weselu’ Wyspiańskiego” [Rumour about Wyspiański’s ‘The Wedding’], in: *ibid.*, p. 124. Sewer’s use of biographical facts in his works was discussed by Stanisław Frybes in *Przedmowa* [Foreword] to Sewer’s collection of works *Dzieła wybrane* [Selected works] (vol. I. *Szkie z Anglii (Wybór)* [Sketches from England (selection)] (Cracow: 1955), pp. VIII, XXI, XXXI, XLVI). In the afterword (*Postowie*) to *Bajecznie kolorowa* Frybes has argued that the protagonist’s prototype also studied ‘in Munich at Alexander Wagner School, and later at the Colarossi School in Paris’, and the text offers ‘actual fortunes of the Tetmajer’s and the relations at Cracow’s School of Fine Arts prior to reorganisation by Fałat in 1895’ (Sewer (Ignacy Maciejowski), *Dzieła wybrane*, vol. VII. *Matka. Bajecznie kolorowa* [Mother. Fabulously colourful] (Cracow: 1955), pp. 339, 341.

35 Sewer (Ignacy Maciejowski), *Dzieła wybrane*, vol. VII. *Bajecznie kolorowa. Nowela* [Fabulously colourful. Novella], p. 168.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*, p. 172.

38 *Ibid.*

him 'not to accept expensive rings'; the delighted characters rush to celebrate the success:

– A teraz biba!

– Nie, nie, naprzód pierścionek wykupić, napisać list, że niegodzien jestem krów doić, chciałem powiedzieć: rzemyka rozwiązać³⁹.

“And now time to party!”

“No, no, first I buy out the ring, write the letter that I'm not worthy of milking cows, err, I mean: untying her shoelace.”³⁹

The rules promoted in *savoir-vivre* handbooks also suggest breaking up using letters. A 'fabulous' and 'loving' letter filled with 'yearnings' that might soothe the maiden's 'offended love of self' is, in fact, produced by his learned colleague who argues: 'You know, it's best when the letter from the fiancé who is sending back the ring is written by another man'. The artist, delighted with his regained freedom, only manages to comment: 'Antoś, aren't you painting a too dark a picture of me?' and afterwards the engagement period is summarised in the following exchange:

– Ty egoisto, fanfaronie, mówiłeś, że dziewczyna cię kocha. Ty jej pierścionek oddajesz, a chcesz, żeby ona wiecznie cię kochała, chodziła przy księżycu, wzdychała, śchła jak szczapa... A ty?!

– Nie, nie, przysięgam, czuję, że wart jestem jeszcze ciemniejszego czernidła, tylko być może, że nie uwierzy i chybisz celu.

– To ciotki uwierzą, rodzina uwierzy i jak zaczną bębnić jej do uszu, wybębnią cię i w tydzień nie będzie z ciebie w sercu panny śladu...

– Jeżeli taki ma być rezultat, zgoda!

– Przepisz nieco drżącą ręką, a ja skoczę po lak, szpagat, płótno, zapakuję pierścionek i na pocztę. Potem mała bibka na cześć twej wolności... Kontent jesteś?

– Czuję, żem się drugi raz urodził – zawołał Wacek.⁴⁰

“You egoist, you braggart, you said the girl loved you. You're returning the ring but you want her to love you forever, to stroll in the moonlight, yearn, dry out like wood... And what about you?”

“No, no, I promise you, I feel I deserve an even blacker ink, I'm only worried she might not believe this and you'll miss.”

“But the aunts will, as will the family, and once they start pounding that into her ear they will strike you out and in a week's time there won't be a trace of you in the lass' heart...”

“If that's your goal, then all right!”

“Copy it in slightly trembling handwriting and I'll go get some sealing wax, string and canvas, I'll pack up the ring and off to the post office. And then a party to celebrate your new-found freedom... Does that seem agreeable?”

“I feel reborn,” Wacek exclaimed.⁴⁰

Literary texts which utilise authentic biographical material or even personal experiences are particularly interesting when considering the topic of breaking off

39 *Ibid.*, p. 26. In fact, the letter was written per all the rules of letter-writing between enamours, which recommend the breaking-up party to use the following arguments (or excuses rather): 'A fiancé writing in this sense to a maiden should express his grief that he is forced to do this and sufficiently justify his decision. There are sufficient pretexts for that. The young man could, e.g., become convinced that the maiden did not love him, so he would return her word to her instead of brutally abusing it, etc. He can find an excuse that he feels not strong enough to ensure the happiness such a noble creature deserves; finally, he can confess that his character is undeniably lacking when compared to her virtues and in that sorrowful self-reflection he can see that she would not be happy with him, etc.' (*Przewodnik zakochanych*, p. 45).

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

engagement as a social taboo. Those texts written *in the moment*, often considered by contemporary readers as a form of inelegant yet efficient revenge, often owed their popularity to exactly that scandalising halo. That was the case of the already-mentioned Sewer's 'extended short story' (or short novel), and *Rodzina Połanieckich*, in the case of which it was no secret at the time of publication that it was based on autobiographical events⁴¹, and it was a common motif in Sienkiewicz's works⁴². Without engaging in a discussion about the accuracy of the reproduction of the author's own experiences in the relations he created in his novels, one should remember that his failed marriage with 'Marynuszka' Wołodkowiczówna, which they entered into in November 1893 and which was terminated six weeks later by the husband leaving young missus Sienkiewicz, was preceded in May of the same year by a breaking off of their engagement.⁴³

Megalomania, mendacity, and egoism of female characters incapable of assuming responsibility for their actions, driven by whims and impulses and not conscious decisions, lead to a tragedy, i.e., broken engagement (Lineta was actually forced to do it by Osnowski, a friend of her fiancé and the owner of the house in which she flirted with another man while visiting as a guest, who was outraged by her frivolous conduct), causes shock and a 'collapse of [the enamoured Zawilek's] world' and eventually an attempted suicide and a loss of poetic talent.

A similar tragic reaction of a discarded fiancé who is unable to logically or emotionally comprehend the reasons behind the sudden decision constitutes the basis of *Anioł śmierci* [Angel of death] by Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer. This novel (released in instalments in the Cracow-based *Czas* [Time] in 1897) was released in a book form a year later. It was commonly read as a *roman à clef* or a libel even, as it described real people and the story of the short engagement of Tetmajer himself and Miss Laura Rakowska. Similarly to the 'dual portrait of Marynuszka' indicated by researchers in Sienkiewicz's text (the fiancée depicted as Marynia Pławicka and the

41 Referencing close relations between the Kossaks and the Sienkiewiczzes, Magdalena Samozwaniec even wrote that Miss Castelli was a carbon copy of the writer's second wife, while Mrs. Broniczowa of her mother. 'In short, he used them to the extreme in his novel. (...) [The young wife's escape – A. B.] It was a huge scandal which for a long time amused their acquaintances. Taking revenge with your pen may not be a noble deed, but it is effective, when it comes to reproducing in novels characters that are truly vivid and original.' (M. Samozwaniec, *Maria i Magdalena*, vol. 1, p. 117).

42 M. Dziugiel-Eaguna, "'Siebie skrywam na dnie...' Aksjologiczno-biograficzny kontekst 'Rodziny Połanieckich' Henryka Sienkiewicza" ['Hiding myself at the bottom...' Axiological-biographical context for 'Rodzina Połanieckich' by Henryk Sienkiewicz], in: *Napis* issue XVII, (2011). The author noted that the novel's duration was synchronised with its release in instalments in the *Biblioteka Warszawska* [Warsaw Library] and the *Gazeta Polska* (starting in July 1893), and the trap of 'veristic fiction' while blurring the lines between reality and literature for which Sienkiewicz fell as he continued to object to readers associating Miss Castelli with Maria Wołodkowiczówna, aunt Broniczowa with her mother, and Ignacy Zawilowski with him (*ibid.*, pp. 41-42).

43 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

wife immortalised in the character of Lineta Castelli),⁴⁴ Tetmajer also used an interesting idea to split the actual story and real people between two couples, a 'light' and a 'dark' version. Przerwic, a poet, and Laura Arkowska, with names which required little deciphering, after some time of engagement referenced as a period before the actual story, become a happy married couple while Miss Maria Tyżwiecka ruthlessly rejects her fiancé, Rdzawicz, a sculptor, a fact which leads to his obsession and madness. The disgrace to the maiden, whom the sculptor immortalised in an improper pose in the title sculpture of the angel of death (*Anioł śmierci*), had, according to Ferdynand Hoesick, a near mirror reflection in real life; Tetmajer used in his text actual letters and notes from his fiancée,⁴⁵ which could constitute both a challenge to the convention and a form of artistic revenge. If their content was real, as the common gossip would have it, maybe it was not discrediting for the maiden for breaking some erotic taboo, yet the decision to release them to the public was clearly a violation of the limits of the author's intimacy, publicly revealing the emotional relations which existed between people who were once close.⁴⁶ In fact, Przerwa-Tetmajer never denied the rumours that his text could be linked to actual events and people. 'He would only state from time to time: I wrote *Anioł* in fervour, I wrote many unnecessary things in it and that gave me enemies.'⁴⁷

44 *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

45 Hoesick went as far as to state: 'the entire *Anioł śmierci* was the story of the author's infelicitous engagement in Zakopane and in Warsaw; some letters and notes that Miss Rakowska actually wrote to him ended up in the original edition of *Anioł śmierci*' (*idem, Powieść mojego życia (Dom rodzicielski). Pamiętnik [A Novel of my life (Parental home). Diary]* (Wrocław: 1959), vol. 2, p. 154).

Krystyna Jabłońska, somewhat ironically commenting on 'Hoesick's omniscience', reduced his statements to mere gossip or even 'imputation' (*eadem, Kazimierz Tetmajer. Próba biografii [Kazimierz Tetmajer. An attempt at a biography]* (Cracow: 1969), p. 87). However, a statement by Irena Szadurska (married surname Navratilova), Laura Rakowska's daughter, referenced almost as a document, hardly refuted that possibility. She argued that her mother got engaged unofficially, not so much for love but rather because she felt pity about the financial situation of her favourite poet: 'The engagement was broken by my Mother's brother-in-law and Myszka's, her only sister's, husband – Mr. Kazimierz Rodkiewicz, a member of landed gentry from near Warsaw. The main reason for the break-up was the news that Tetmajer had a son out of wedlock. What Mother did with her correspondence from the engagement period – I don't know' (*ibid.*, p. 113). It is possible, then, that against the rules of *savoir-vivre* Laura had never received her notes back.

Antoni Krawczyński, Irena Navratilova's nephew, added that it was suspected that the infelicitous fiancé was hiding a venereal disease: 'This piece of information was the reason why Mr. Rodkiewicz categorically and extremely quickly demanded that Laura departed (...) for Italy, which she did and where she stayed for an extended time' (*ibid.*, p. 113).

46 That could be indicated by the use of affectionate infantilising diminutives ('bobo', 'ti', etc. – K. Przerwa-Tetmajer, *Anioł śmierci. Romans [Angel of death. Romance]* (Warsaw: 2004), p. 41) or the illogical and moving text about cookies ('This cookie in the middle, the one rather failed, with raspberry sauce on top, I baked for you. I'm sorry it's ugly but it was only in the pan that it got bent like that; before then it was very pleasing and it had a ribbed edge. Please eat it first but stop eating if it tastes wrong. In fact, most certainly don't eat it because it's probably slack-baked. But I would feel very pleased if you ate the first one. Or at least the sauce on top' – *ibid.*, p. 162).

47 K. Jabłońska, *Kazimierz Tetmajer. Próba biografii*, p. 88. The author also indicated that the general

Interestingly enough, the novel displays an acute awareness of the conventional limits between people once engaged to marry, as if their prior closeness forced them to terminate their acquaintance completely. Unable to escape his obsessive fascination with his fiancée, Rdzawicz had the distressful realisation that:

Nie może zrobić nic, jest odcięty od niej murem jej woli i społecznego konwenansu i może pod tym murem zginąć, a przekroczyć go nie może. Wszystko mu wolno – przyłożył sobie w tej chwili rewolwer do skroni i pociągnął cyngiel, roztrzaskał głowę o ścianę, rzucił wszystko i wyjechał na zawsze, wolno mu szukać rozkoszy czy miłości, gdzie chce, tylko nie wolno mu spytać Marii: nie przestałem cię kochać – czy nie chcesz wrócić?... I to nie tyle jej wola między nimi stoi, ile społeczny konwenans, społeczny układ, który człowieka w podobnym położeniu, jak on, wykreśla z pamięci kobiety i wpisuje w poczet dla niej umarłych ludzi. [...]

Gdyby był się Marii po dwóch lub trzech tygodniach znajomości oświadczył i dostał odmowną odpowiedź, mógłby być na przykład po dwóch lub trzech miesiącach, po roku, czy kiedykolwiek, próbę powtórzyć – tymczasem teraz, po stu wyznaniach, stu przysięgach i stu uściskach, jest dla niej jakby umarłym człowiekiem i ma nim pozostać na zawsze, chyba by jakiś naprawdę cud go wskrzesił...⁴⁸

He cannot do anything, he is cut off from her with a wall of her will and social convention, and he can perish under that wall, but never cross it. He can do anything – put a gun to his head and pull the trigger, smash his head on the wall, discard everything and leave forever, he can search for pleasure or love wherever he wishes, but he can never ask Maria: I have never stopped loving you – would you like to come back to me?... And it's not so much her will that stands between them, but rather social convention, social patterns which remove people in his situation from the woman's memory and put them into a list of people dead to her. (...)

Had he proposed to Maria after two or three weeks since they met and he got rejected, he could have made another attempt in two or three months, in a year or some other time – but now, after a hundred confessions, a hundred vows and a hundred embraces he is as if a dead person and is supposed to remain that way forever, lest some real miracle resurrects him...⁴⁸

Even considering the freedom of poetic licence, the description of the terrible embarrassment and the paralysing for the entire company atmosphere of a gaffe which accompanied the chance meeting of former engagement people at a ball⁴⁹ could be an indication of a sharp tightening of the social norm in this respect. When at the beginning of that century Aleksandra Tarczewska née Tańska recollected various broken engagements (including her own), she described how one of her relatives was irritated with his daughter's hesitant suitor who was compelled to marry under the threat of breaking up the engagement. For the maiden's father 'the whole affair was hard to swallow (I kid you not, it was broken up four times and just as many times restored.)'⁵⁰ In fact, the unstable relationship ended in a split-up a day before the secular wedding due to the fiancé's panic attack. 'Having

premise of *Anioł śmierci* was inspired by the dramatic gesture of Antoni Kurzawa, a sculptor, who in 1890 destroyed his model of a statue of Mickiewicz (*ibid.*, p. 89) – the smashing of the unfortunate though undeniably beautiful sculpture by Rdzawicz drove him to insanity (K. Przerwa-Tetmajer, *Anioł śmierci*, pp. 269–270).

48 K. Przerwa-Tetmajer, *Anioł śmierci*, pp. 112–113.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

50 A. Tarczewska, née Tańska, *Historia mego życia. Wspomnienia warszawianki* [The story of my life. Memories of a Varsovian], editing and introduction I. Kaniowska-Lewańska (Wrocław: 1967), p. 229.

wished him better health, uncle left immediately and once back home wrote him the severest of letters and broke the relationship forever. They de-invited the guests, Terenia sent back the presents and thus ended that famous affair like no other.⁵¹ It was referenced by the author as a family anecdote and she treated it as a unique occurrence, yet in the moral reality of the late 19th century such a situation would have been hardly possible. The 1903 *Przewodnik zakochanych*, which discussed how to properly behave after a break-up, saw it absolutely natural to refrain from any spiteful or disrespectful statements being made about the would-be engaged; it did, however, recommend 'removing the name, surname and the whole person from your memory and past completely'. Appropriate reactions in such a case required (surprisingly) the interested parties to completely ignore the other person:

Zerwanie ostateczne zwalnia zupełnie z obowiązku kłaniania się na ulicy, ukłon nawet w tym przypadku byłby wyrazem drwin czy lekceważenia – na każdy sposób niewłaściwym i obrażającym. Powinno się również unikać towarzystw, do których, o ile wiemy, była nasza narzeczona uczęszcza. Jeżeli możliwe – to powinien nawet młody człowiek opuścić zupełnie miasto, w którym była narzeczona przebywa i w ten radykalny sposób ludziom, a przede wszystkim jej samej dać zapomnieć o sobie.⁵²

A definitive break-up completely lifts the obligation greet the other person in the street; a nod in this case would be even considered derisive or contemptuous – in either case improper and offensive.

One should also avoid circles which, as far as we know, our former fiancée frequented.

If possible, the young lad should even leave the town in which his former fiancée was living and through that radical measure allow people, and most of all her, to forget about him.⁵³

Such strict recommendations, enabling one to negate the very fact of existence of any relationship between the engaged parties, and to conventionally wipe any recollection of the would-be relationship from the memories of both parties (with the approval of the entire surrounding), reflected most probably rather a desirable and not the actual state of things, especially in small and not exceptionally mobile circles. However, that strive for utmost discretion and for covering a mistake with a veil of silence could have paradoxically caused the exceptional popularity in that period of novels considered biographical or autobiographical.⁵³ The restrictive norm had another side to it: the natural human inclination to gossip and fascination with scandal. It was certainly an act of breaking moral taboo for an author to draw from personal experiences; it could have been punished with social ostracism but it was

51 *Ibid.*, p. 231.

52 *Przewodnik zakochanych*, pp. 44-47.

53 It is worth noting that the popularity among the contemporaries was often not a result of a text's artistic value. Modern researchers who study the discussed in this article novels by Sewer and Tetmajer do not consider them as the authors' greatest works, yet they were sought after at the time of their publication. For example, the quite obscure today *Anioł śmierci* since its publication in 1898 to 1918 received 6 editions, and presumably by dint of its popularity among Polish readers it was translated into German, French, Hebrew, Russian, Ukrainian, and possibly into Italian and English (K. Jabłońska, *Kazimierz Tetmajer. Próba biografii*, p. 90).

rewarded with extreme popularity of the text among excited readers who read it as a *roman à clef* and tried to identify the real-life prototypes for the infelicitous engaged couple.

Translated by Jakub Wosik,

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to a morally sensitive topic, created by situations which did not lead to marriage, but ended with a discrediting separation. It analyses socially

accepted, although often false, reasons for splitting up, treated as shameful and without approval, frequently hidden under excuses provided by *savoir-vivre* handbooks. It also compares, in this case, the positions of women and men, reflecting on the attempt to protect the reputation of a young lady with a fixed social convention. Texts that refer to authentic biographical material, which were read by the contemporary readers as *romans à clef* violating moral taboos seem particularly interesting.

Novels of manners are the basis for reflection, such as the works by Bolesław Prus *Lalka* [*The Doll*] and *Emancypantki* [*Emancipated Women*], Maria Rodziewiczówna *Między ustami a brzegiem pucharu* [Between the lips and the rim of the goblet] and *Kądziel* [Woman's inheritance], Henryk Sienkiewicz *Bez dogmatu* [*Without dogma*] and *Rodzina Połanieckich* [*Children of the Soil*], Sewer *Bajecznie kolorowa* [Fabulously colourful], and Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer *Anioł śmierci* [Angel of death], but also the contents of memoirs of the period (by Anna Skarбек-Sokołowska, Magdalena Samozwaniec, Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński and more).

KEYWORDS: engagement, breaking up, Polish novel 19-20 c., memoirs 19-20 c.