

OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD

OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

The Ancient Myths
as Medicine for the Hardships
of Life in Children's
and Young Adults' Culture

Edited by
Katarzyna Marciniak



OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

“OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD” Series

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PART III

Holding Out for a Hero...
and a Heroine



JOE ALEX (MACIEJ SŁOMCZYŃSKI) AND HIS CZARNE OKRĘTY [BLACK SHIPS]: A HISTORY OF A TROJAN BOY IN TIMES OF THE MINOAN THALASSOCRACY

People reading world literature in Polish translations will probably agree that it was Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński (1874–1941) who acquainted Poles with French/Francophone literature. We owe to him, for example, the Polish version of *The Song of Roland*, Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, all the pieces by Molière and Pierre Corneille, and *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust, to name only a small part of his translatory oeuvre. A similar declaration with respect to English/Anglophone literature is not possible. This is probably because the geographic vastness of the British Empire can hardly find an analogy in the history of the world, and thus the role and knowledge of English in the world far exceeds the role and knowledge of French. Some may say it's a pity. It is nevertheless conceivable to draw up a list of Polish interpreters whose merits in familiarizing Poles with Anglophone literature are substantial. Among them most assuredly belongs Maciej Słomczyński (1922–1998).¹ As the son of Marjorie Słomczyńska (*née* Crosby), an Englishwoman who chose to live in the Russian Empire and then in the reborn Poland, and (verisimilarly) of Merian C. Cooper, an American aviator, both a US and Polish air force officer, director and producer of the film *King Kong* (1933), Maciej Słomczyński became a Pole by his own choice. He translated into Polish, for example, *Troilus and Criseyde* by Geoffrey Chaucer, *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie, and *Ulysses* by

¹ The exact year of his birth, either 1920 or 1922, is the subject of argument even among members of his closest family. In the present paper we follow the date postulated by Maciej Słomczyński's daughter.

James Joyce, but it is undoubtedly his translation of the entire corpus of William Shakespeare's works that gave him prominence among translators in the history of Polish culture. One should add that Słomczyński remains the only person in the world to have achieved such a goal. There are some doubts concerning his translations' faithfulness to the originals and – most of all – concerning their literary value,² but even so it is thanks to Słomczyński that Poles have a coherent and uniform Shakespearean corpus available in their mother tongue.

Although known today mainly as a translator, Słomczyński was also a writer, poet, and playwright. The entire list of his works (poems, plays, novels, feuilletons, reviews, etc.) exceeds 140 compositions.³ Not all of them, however, were published or presented under his proper name. A very important portion of his writings appeared under his various pen names: Joe Alex, Kazimierz Kwaśniewski, Agnes Soerssen, Male Turkey, Veronica O'Donnell, Sydney Stewart, Barbara Snow, Monica Higgins, and Nashur Gath Singh. Of special importance are those publications that we can label crime fiction. The most renowned of them belong to Joe Alex, Słomczyński's alter ego in his search for *ye olde England* he knew thanks to his mother's memory.

Under this pen name, Słomczyński published a cycle of crime-fiction works (I omit here short stories and mention only the first of numerous re-editions):

- *Powiem wam, jak zginął* [I Will Tell You How He Died; after Aesch., *Ag.* 1380; Warszawa: PIW, 1959];
- *Śmierć mówi w moim imieniu* [Death Speaks In My Behalf; after Eugène Ionesco, *The Chairs*, Scene 11: "the Orator will speak in my behalf"; Warszawa: Iskry, 1960];
- *Jesteś tylko diabłem* [What Art Thou, Devil; after William Rowley, *The Birth of Merlin, or, The Childe Hath Found His Father*, Act 5, Scene 1; Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1960];
- *Cichym ścigałam go lotem* [I Was Pursuing Him in Quiet Flight; after Aesch., *Eum.* 250–251; Warszawa: Iskry, 1962];
- *Zmącony spokój Pani Labiryntu* [The Disturbed Calm of the Lady of the Labyrinth; Warszawa: Iskry, 1965];

² See Anna Staniewska, "Maciej Słomczyński vs. William Shakespeare", *Serwis Tłumacza* [Translator's Service Centre], <http://serwistlumacza.com/lektury/maciej-slomczynski-vs-william-shakespeare/> (accessed 6 April 2020).

³ For the list, see Monika Kucharczyk-Kubacka, *Maciej Słomczyński (1922–1998). Bibliografia* [Maciej Słomczyński (1922–1998): Bibliography], Kraków: BiblioTheca, Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna w Krakowie, 2008, 9–147.

- *Gdzie przykazań brak dziesięciu* [Where There Aren't No Ten Commandments; after Rudyard Kipling, *Mandalay*; Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1968];
- *Piekiło jest we mnie* [Myself Am Hell; after John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 4.75; Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1975];
- *Cicha jak ostatnie tchnienie* [Silent as the Last Breath; after the motto to George Crosby's novel *My Meditations on Birth and Death*; Warszawa: Epoka, 1991].

Two of the titles come from the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus. I quote the relevant passages in the English translation by Herbert Weir Smyth: "Thus have I done the deed" (*Ag.* 1380: οὕτω δ' ἔπραξα) and "I have come [...] in wingless flight, pursuing him" (*Eum.* 250–251: ἀπτερόρις πωτήμασιν / ἦλθον διώκουσ').⁴ Another one refers to the Minoan Goddess, the Lady of the Labyrinth (in Mycenaean Greek: *da-pu₂-ri-to-jo, po-ti-ni-ja*).⁵

The Greek connotations do not appear by accident. Joe Alex, a character in this cycle of novels and Słomczyński's alter ego, is a man with whom we can identify: the memory of war, the praise of English literature, the fascination with demonology and Ancient Greece.⁶ He lives in wealth thanks to his popular detective stories, and his brilliant intellect gives him the unofficial status of an expert at Scotland Yard and allows him to solve the most difficult criminal puzzles. Joe Alex's partner and his future wife, Karolina Beacon, is an archaeologist who studies the remnants of Minoan culture.

It is none other than the island of Crete with which *Czarne okręty* [Black Ships], the best-known novel for youth by Słomczyński, is connected. Originally published in eleven parts as a pulp-fiction series for young readers (1972–1975, by Biuro Wydawnicze „Ruch” in Warsaw), it was immediately released in a four-volume edition (1978, by Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza in Warsaw), then in a two-volume edition (1992, by Wydawnictwo „Cassiopeia” in Cracow); finally, the novel was given a single-volume form (two editions: 2001 and 2003, by Wydawnictwo „Zielona Sowa” in Cracow), and then was released as an audiobook (again in four parts, in 2013, by Heraclon International).

The novel has not been translated into English, and therefore it is not widely known outside of Poland, so I will briefly present its plot. It concerns a boy living

⁴ Quoted after the Perseus Project, www.perseus.tufts.edu (accessed 2 April 2017), ad loc.

⁵ The tablet Kn Gg 702; see Francisco Aura Jorro, ed., *Diccionario Micénico*, vol. 1, Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1999 (ed. pr. 1985), 156–157.

⁶ Cf. Tomasz Bielak, *Proza Macieja Słomczyńskiego (Joe Alexa)* [The Prose of Maciej Słomczyński (Joe Alex)], Katowice: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Zarządzania Ochroną Pracy w Katowicach, 2008, 199.

in Troy's surroundings; he is too young to receive a mature name, so we know him as Białowłosy (Towhead). The son of a fisherman, he one day ventures out to sea for the first time without his father and succeeds in catching a huge fish, which should give him access to the adult world. Instead, he is surprised by a terrible storm and carried out to the open sea, where he is captured by Phoenician merchants. They decide that – because of the colour of his hair and skin tone – he should be expensively sold to the Egyptian priests of Sobek, the Crocodile-God, and offered to the god to be devoured as a sacrifice.

Towhead saves not only himself, but also another child. He kills the crocodile, and escapes, finding refuge in a tomb, presumably found in the Egyptian Valley of the Kings. Accidentally immured alive inside the tomb, he manages to get out and finds himself on the seashore from where – after many adventures – he goes to the Greek pirates from the islands. Imprisoned by the Minoans, who punish piracy with death, he again saves his life, this time by rescuing Perilawos, the nephew of the Minoan ruler and the heir to the throne of Knossos. Chased by an Egyptian priest, Towhead becomes embroiled in Cretan dynastic palace intrigues, before finally going, upon Minos' order, on a sea quest for the mythical land of amber in the North together with Widwojos, the brother of the Minoan King, who is the father of the rescued boy. Their sea lane leads the travellers to Troy, which reluctantly acknowledges, as do the Greek cities of the continent, Minoan sovereignty. *Angelos*, the ship aboard which they voyage, navigates into the Black Sea and then heads north up an East-European river (the Dnieper?). The sailors fight with nomads living on the steppe and arrive among the early Slavs – the description of marshes and forests suggests we find ourselves in what is now Belarus or perhaps eastern Poland. They winter there because the frozen rivers (presumably: the Pripyat, the Bug, and the Vistula) do not allow sailing. They also see – for the first time in their lives – temperate deciduous forests, so they call the country the Land of Dead Leaves. With the advent of spring, Towhead and his comrades continue the journey and finally reach the shores of the Baltic Sea, where amber – the purpose of the quest – literally lies under their feet. They sail west and pass through the Danish straits, then head north and see a whale, an aurora, and icebergs. Turning south-west they sail to Great Britain (Stonehenge), from where the Phoenicians export tin. Towhead is then caught by the islanders and is to be sacrificed at the Midsummer Day festivities, only to be liberated by his friend. He next joins the rest of the fellowship and they sail together towards the Pillars of Hercules. The Strait of Gibraltar, guarded by the Phoenicians, is not an easy point to pass, but the sailors of the *Angelos* with an audacious rowing manoeuvre sail deep into the

Mediterranean Sea. They pass Sicily and reach Crete with uncountable wealth – containers full of amber. They soon learn, however, that the island of Crete and the entire Minoan thalassocracy have been ruined by the rebellious Greek cities. Minos, the king, was killed, too. Widwojos, his brother and the commander of the ship, commits suicide. The long-awaited freedom turns out to be a tragic situation of choice.

Although the plot of the novel resembles the literary versions of the myth of the Argonauts (exotica, the question of succession, the geographic scale, the amazing adventures, the search for a precious material), it is quite easy to see that, considered as a whole, it nevertheless gives the impression of being a historical novel, recalling, for example, *The Egyptian* (in the original Finnish: *Sinuhe egyptiläinen*, 1945) by Mika Waltari, itself being an interpretation of an Ancient Egyptian story.

The story of a man's life allows Słomczyński to show a wide panorama of the Europe and Near East of the Bronze Age. However, it is difficult to determine the exact time frame of the novel. On the one hand, we have Crete already speaking Greek (which means, at the earliest, the fifteenth century BC), on the other, the city in Egypt in which the protagonist of the series is to be sacrificed suggests the ancient Shedet (Crocodilopolis) in the Faiyum Oasis that saw its largest boom during the reign of Amenemhat III (nineteenth century BC). Similarly, the large city of Troy in the novel speaks Greek, but we cannot find the slightest mention of the Hittite Empire, and the description of the fall of Crete would match the coming of the "Sea Peoples" (end of the thirteenth century BC). We cannot be sure, therefore, when the plot of the novel is unfolding – we can only roughly say it is in the second half of the second millennium BC.

It is not my intention to point out Słomczyński's factual errors – if one reads the novel closely, one should well note that the facts follow quite carefully what was known of the Bronze Age in the 1970s. But as we have few written sources for those times, we can document Słomczyński's accuracy in the creation of the world only partially: for example, Widwojos, Minos' brother, and Perilawos, his son, bear names that we know from the Linear B tablets (*wi-dwo-i-jo* PY Eb 1186.A;⁷ *pe-ri-ra-wo* PY An 654.13⁸); the Egyptian names sound Egyptian (for instance, Het-Ka-Sebek, that is, 'The House of the Spirit of Sobek'); the Greek sounds Greek; the Egyptian-Phoenician relations in the novel fit what we know from history; and even the early Slavic names may be treated as more-or-less

⁷ Francisco Aura Jorro, ed., *Diccionario Micénico*, vol. 2, Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1993, 428–429.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 111.

adequate (for example, Sulnc, the name of the Slavic ruler from the reconstructed early Slavic lexeme *сѣньце*, 'sun').⁹

The novel is not, of course, a history textbook, but rather a story of a boy growing up, of a child who becomes a young man. He listens to the wise, he learns the value of friendship and the value of the given word, and he becomes aware that the world is not black and white. Although Towhead knows love only from the mother–son relationship, his friend and mentor shows him the value of love in adult relations between man and woman. The protagonist of the novel has high hopes first of saving his own life, then of seeing his mother again, then – against all odds – of attaining the goal of the quest. The plot, however, is not steeped in didacticism – the rapid action effectively masks it. One may even notice that the novel's close cannot be defined otherwise than as praise for abusing good wine.

The novel *Black Ships* follows the *Bildungsroman* model in its own way. Let us cite the classical definition of the genre, composed by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) for *Hesperus, oder 45 Hundposttage* by Jean Paul (Johann Friedrich Richter, 1763–1825), and for *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832):

[S]tellen sie alle [Bildungsromane] den Jüngling jener Tage dar; wie er in glücklicher Dämmerung in das Leben eintritt, nach verwandten Seelen sucht, der Freundschaft begegnet und der Liebe, wie er nun aber mit den harten Realitäten der Welt in Kampf gerät und so unter mannigfachen Lebenserfahrungen heranreift, sich selber findet und seiner Aufgabe in der Welt gewiss wird.¹⁰

[A]ll portray a young man of their time: how he enters life in a happy state of naiveté seeking kindred souls, finds friendship and love, how he comes into conflict with the hard realities of the world, how he grows to maturity through diverse life-experiences, finds himself, and attains certainty about his purpose in the world.¹¹

We may conclude that the only derogation from the definition is the placing of the plot in a hardly determinable Antiquity.

⁹ Rick Derksen, *Etymological Dictionary of the Slavic Inherited Lexicon*, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2008, 479.

¹⁰ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung. Lessing – Goethe – Novalis – Hölderlin*, 8th ed., Leipzig and Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1922 (ed. pr. 1906), 393–394.

¹¹ English translation after Anniken Telnes Iversen, *Change and Continuity: The Bildungsroman in English*, PhD dissertation, University of Tromsø, 2009, 22.

We can and we should wonder to what extent the experiences of Słomczyński himself and of his parents are reflected in the novel; how much this vests it with a quasi-autobiographical character. It is hard to count how many times Słomczyński saves his own life during World War Two: the odyssey of the prisoner of the Pawiak – the biggest Nazi political prison in occupied Poland; being moved to Gęsiówka – the Waffen-SS concentration camp in Warsaw; the escape from the camp and struggling through to Switzerland; crossing the Rhine in January; the internment camp in Aarau; the escape to liberated France; the service in the American Army in France; and finally the return to Poland.¹² It is difficult to count the number of such cases in the life of his presumed biological father as well. During the Polish-Soviet War (1919–1921) Merian C. Cooper served in the Polish Air Force and organized the Eskadra Kościuszkowska (Kościuszko Squadron); then after being captured by the Soviets, he escaped from a prison near Moscow and reached the Latvian border on foot. Triumphant, he returned to Poland and met Marjorie Crosby: their story inspired the making of the most famous and most expensive movie in Poland during the interwar period – *Gwiazdzista eskadra* [The Starry Squadron] by Leonard Buczkowski. Some try to compare the movie (with the necessary exaggeration) to David O. Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

The Polish melodrama was released twice (first in 1930 as a silent film and then in 1933 with sound). It recounts the love story of a Polish girl (Lili) and an American pilot (Captain Bond), a volunteer in the Polish 7th Air Escadrille, the Kościuszko Squadron. After World War Two all the copies were destroyed (presumably by the NKVD). There are, alas, only several photos left,¹³ although one cannot exclude the possibility that a single copy of the melodrama was removed to the Soviet Union. We may thus hope it will be found one day.

And indeed, there is always hope – such a conclusion can be drawn from the novel *Black Ships* and the life experiences of its author, Maciej Słomczyński.

¹² Cf. Małgorzata Słomczyńska-Pierzchalska, *Nie mogłem być inny. Zagadka Macieja Słomczyńskiego* [I Could Not Be Different: The Enigma of Maciej Słomczyński], Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003.

¹³ See "Gwiazdzista eskadra", Fototeka [Internet archive of the National Film Archive – Audiovisual Institute], http://fototeka.fn.org.pl/pl/strona/wyszukiwarka.html?key=gwia%C5%BAdzista+eskadra&search_type_in=tytul&view_type=tile&sort=alfabetycznie&result%5B%5D=281&lastResult%5B%5D=281&pageNumber=1&howmany=50&view_id=&hash=1563303339 (accessed 16 July 2019).

The book is to be recommended for academics as well as graduate and post-graduate students working on the reception of Classical Antiquity and its transformations around the world.

David Movrin, University of Ljubljana
From the editorial review

Our Mythical Hope is the latest collection of articles by scholars participating in an ongoing collaboration to ensure that the beauty and profundity of Classical myth remain known, and (hopefully) remain part of our modern culture. The size of this compendium, the sweep of subjects considered, the involvement of leading experts from around the world, all testify to how important and extensive this initiative has become over the last decade. The project's continued commitment to engage all ages, especially the young, and to extend its outreach beyond the Academy merely, makes it a leading model for how research retains its relevance.

Mark O'Connor, Boston College
From the editorial review



Classical Antiquity is a particularly important field in terms of "Hope studies" [...]. For centuries, the ancient tradition, and classical mythology in particular, has been a common reference point for whole hosts of creators of culture, across many parts of the world, and with the new media and globalization only increasing its impact. Thus, in our research at this stage, we have decided to study how the authors of literary and audiovisual texts for youth make use of the ancient myths to support their young protagonists (and readers or viewers) in crucial moments of their existence, on their road into adulthood, and in those dark hours when it seems that life is about to shatter and fade away. However, if Hope is summoned in time, the crisis can be overcome and the protagonist grows stronger, with a powerful uplifting message for the public. [...] Owing to this, we get a chance to remain true to our ideas, to keep faith in our dreams, and, when the decisive moment comes, to choose not hatred but love, not darkness but light.

Katarzyna Marciniak, University of Warsaw
From the introductory chapter

