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Invented Traditions: Primitivist Narrative and Design in the Polish *Fin de Siècle*

Edward Manouelian

Around 1900, Poland saw the outgrowth of a nativist primitivism, one that consciously redefined the periphery as a site of cultural resistance. Primitivism, as Colin Rhodes points out, “does not designate an organized group of artists, or even an identifiable style arising at a particular historical moment, but rather brings together artists’ various reactions to ideas of the primitive.”¹ Within the subject ethnicities of central Europe at the turn of the century, “ideas of the primitive” that were taking shape in the then still-emerging discipline of anthropology were influencing various constructions of national and regional identity. The nationalist imperative of the new discipline was emphasized by Jan Karłowicz, who, writing in 1906, argued that “a people certain of its own existence may calmly study its own folklore from a purely scientific point of view. Tribes deprived of their independence and living in endless fear of suppression and decay, however, must, while reflecting upon the nature and conditions of folkloric tradition, consider practical questions as part of such inquiries. For whenever reference is made to national peculiarities and attributes, there constantly arises the question: to be or not to be.”² Karłowicz’s remarks point toward a deeply subjective primitivist discourse whose articulations, in critical writing about the applied arts as well as literary representations of rural popular culture, form part of what Eric Hobsbawm terms the “invention of tradition.”³

The present study examines a particular episode in this larger process: the appropriation of a regional culture as part of a search for national identity that underlay the wave of interest, around 1900, in the applied arts and design of the Tatra highlands (Podhale), as well as other voices within this trend who emphasized the more concrete and specifically local significance of the region’s culture. Among these dissenting voices we find the remarkable short fiction of Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer, an important figure of the symbolist *Młoda Polska* (Young Poland) group who was also a native of the Tatra highlands. His collection of stories, *Na Skalnych Podhalu* (In stony Podhale, 1914), lays claim to a direct authenticity in its representation of the region’s traditions, a claim vital to the discursive strategies we will later examine in two stories from this collection. Nevertheless, there is much that unites Tetmajer with his contemporaries: the project of ap-

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1. Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London, 1994), 7.

2. Karłowicz as cited in Helena Kapełus and Julian Krzyżanowski, eds., *Dzieje folklorystyki polskiej 1864–1918* (Warsaw, 1982), 256.

3. See Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, Eng., 1983), 1–14.

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appropriation that they undertake relies upon the notion of the primitive as a kind of archaic cultural survival. It is precisely this notion that made anthropology such a rich source of materials from which a past could be constructed.

In this respect, the Polish experience parallels developments in other imperial peripheries throughout Europe, where the cross-currents between applied ethnology and contested nationalism intensified in this period. In Ireland, for example, 1893 marked both the publication of W. B. Yeats's folkloric anthology *The Celtic Twilight* as well as the foundation of the Gaelic League, an influential linguistic revival movement, several of whose members subsequently played a prominent role in the Easter Rising of 1916.⁴ In Lwów (present-day L'viv), then a predominantly Polish urban center of the largely rural Ukrainian province of Galicia on the eastern edge of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the Ethnographic Commission of the Shevchenko Scientific Society was founded in 1898 at the behest of Mykhailo Hrushevsky, a professor of history at the local university.⁵ At the same time, Hrushevsky was influential in the creation of the (Ukrainian) National Democratic Party, a populist movement that became the dominant voice of Ukrainian nationalism in the years leading up to World War I. This last example points up the often uncomfortable proximity of competing nationalisms; here it is worth recalling Homi Bhabha's instructive formulation of national identity as cultural artifice:

It is precisely in reading between these borderlines of the nation-space that we can see how the concept of the "people" emerges within a range of discourses as a double narrative movement. The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference: their claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address. . . . The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects.⁶

A primitivist reinvention of national tradition in Poland took place as much as anywhere else on the pages of the journal *Lud* (The people), a monthly publication of the (Polish) Ethnological Society in Lwów that first appeared in 1895 and quickly became the periodical of record in its field throughout the Polish partitions. The title alone suggests the generalizing sweep of the journal's larger ideological agenda, a rhetorical strategy that constitutes regional ethnographic items as part of a national ethnicity. For a prime example of this metonymic frame of reference we turn

4. See James Knapp, "Irish Primitivism and Imperial Discourse: Lady Gregory's Peasantry," in Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo, eds., *Macropolitics of Nineteenth-Century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism* (Philadelphia, 1991), and "Gaelic League," in Robert Welch, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford, 1996), 208–9.

5. P. Odarchenko, "Ethnography," in Volodymyr Kubijovič, ed., *Encyclopedia of Ukraine* (Toronto, 1984), 838–41.

6. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994), 145.

first to an essay that appeared on the journal's pages in 1900: a lecture by Stanisław Eljasz-Radzikowski entitled "Zakopane Style" read in February of that year at the Society's monthly meeting and published soon thereafter in *Lud*.

The phrase *styl zakopiański* already had a considerable prehistory by the time of Eljasz-Radzikowski's lecture. Zakopane, a small village spa in the Podhale region of the Tatra Mountains, had over the last quarter century become the site of an extraordinarily productive encounter, from a collector's point of view, between the Polish intelligentsia and the traditional culture of a relatively isolated section of the country. A subgenre of travel literature reaching back to Seweryn Goszczyński's *Diary of a Voyage to the Tatras* (1833) records the interest of nature enthusiasts and amateur folklorists in the area. The special position of Zakopane itself, however, lies at least partially in the fact that several sanatoria for tuberculosis patients were located there toward the end of the century.⁷ Konstanty Stecki relates how a handful of wealthier patients amassed large collections of local domestic crafts including intricately carved washboards, spoonracks, ladles, buckets, cheese molds, and spinning wheels.⁸ These collections ("the scraps, patches, and rags of daily life") formed the basis of a regional history museum (Muzeum Tatrzańskie), the only one of its kind in Poland when it opened in Zakopane in 1889. By that time, one of Zakopane's most influential visitors was already formulating the notion of a Zakopane style: Stanisław Witkiewicz, the father of the dramatist and an essayist, art historian, and controversial amateur architect, found in the wooden peasant huts of the Podhale region the traces of an indigenously Polish *ur-style*: "perhaps the mountain people, locked in the depths of the valleys, cut off from the world, have preserved longer than anywhere else the most ancient general form specific to the mountainous regions of Poland?"⁹ By the end of the century, Witkiewicz had designed a handful of buildings in the vicinity of Zakopane, examples of an eclectic neo-vernacular trend in east European architecture, inspired by the Arts and Crafts Movement but drawing as well on local ethnographic research.¹⁰ The first, and perhaps most literal in its relation to regional sources among them, the villa "Koliba" (Shepherd's hut, 1893), served as a self-conscious attempt at shaping a national style.¹¹ Witkiewicz designed the villa's interiors (including stoves, utensils, metal fittings, door handles, and keyhole attachments) on patterns documented from among the region's mountain folk. Although subsequent owners substantially altered Koliba's decor, recently, with the opening of the Museum of Zakopane Style, which has been housed in the villa since 1993, there

7. Konstanty Stecki, "Początki kolekcjonerstwa na Podhalu," *Lud* 53 (1969): 235–36.

8. *Ibid.*

9. As quoted in Zbigniew Moździerz, "Koncepcja stylu narodowego Stanisława Witkiewicza i jej realizacja," in Zbigniew Moździerz, ed., *Stanisław Witkiewicz: Człowiek—Artysta—Myśliciel* (Zakopane, 1997), 310.

10. Adam Miłobędzki, "Architecture in Wood: Technology, Symbolic Content, Art," *Artibus et Historiae* 10, no. 19 (1989): 200–204.

11. Zbigniew Moździerz, "Styl zakopiański w architekturze," in Jerzy Roszkowski, ed., *Regionalizm—Regiony—Podhale* (Zakopane, 1995), 31–33.

has been an approximate restoration of period furnishings designed by Witkiewicz and his circle, together with exhibits of roughly contemporary peasant crafts from the Podhale region.

The actual makers of those crafts remain rather indistinctly in the background of Eljasz-Radzikowski's article, a work whose overriding aim is to inscribe the region's culture within a larger nationalist myth of origin. For Eljasz-Radzikowski, Podhale's significance is not only architectural but also philological: he describes the local inhabitants as having "preserved the language of the forefathers, maintaining the memory of years long past in living tradition."¹² This reading transforms the Tatra foothills, often considered a borderland, into the site of an archaic precursor of a national Polish culture. Moreover, the problem of ethnic identity serves as a point of departure: Eljasz-Radzikowski begins the piece by defensively rejecting earlier theories of Mongol influences in the region dating from the incursions of the thirteenth century (and passing over in silence the centuries-long presence of nomadic Gypsy encampments in the region as well as traces of Slovak and Romanian emigration from the southern Carpathians from the seventeenth century and earlier). Instead, he presents an image of ethnic homogeneity as well as cultural isolation, describing the area as a "microcosm of the ancient Polish people" (*mikrokosmos dawnego ludu polskiego*), one that is "enclosed by forests and secluded from the leveling effect of civilization."¹³ Yet, the inroads of civilization had made themselves felt even here, as Eljasz-Radzikowski goes on to admit, perhaps having in mind the first railway connection between Zakopane and Kraków that had just opened in 1899. In the face of this, he raises the specter of cultural devastation that had recently taken place among the indigenous peoples of the North American plains, in Africa, and elsewhere as a prelude to his account of the diverse mixture of conservation work and creative invention that had developed over the past decade under the term *styl zakopiański*. This project assumes for him the outlines of what has since come to be known as salvage ethnography, and as such a national imperative for a nation whose political boundaries had yet to be recovered. As a supposedly pristine repository of vernacular style, the Podhale region acquires a powerful metonymic significance in the new redaction of national myth, a fact underlined by the folklorisms Eljasz-Radzikowski employs in summing up the area's importance: "a culture of long standing, preserved in a treasury, locked by seven magic keys, beyond the mountains, beyond the forests—has become the patrimony of the entire people" (*—kultura dawna, przechowana w skarbnicy zamkniętej na siedem kluczy, za górami, za lasami—stała się dorobkiem narodu całego*).¹⁴

Eljasz-Radzikowski's essay is interesting precisely for the way in which it gives voice to the atavistic yearnings of nationalist culture, an anxious search for temporally distant antecedents that validate the narrative of the modern nation. That Witkiewicz, Eljasz-Radzikowski, and others found

12. Stanisław Eljasz-Radzikowski, "Styl zakopiański," *Lud* 6, no. 6 (1900): 174.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 175.

what they were looking for around Zakopane has much to do with the ethnographic prism through which they approached the culture of the region. The influence of British anthropologist Edward Tylor's "survival" theory, the notion that past customs of "civilized" peoples can be reconstructed from the current practices of the less civilized, is evident here, particularly in its conflation of the archaic and the primitive. To quote from Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871 and translated into Polish in the late 1890s:

By comparing the various stages of civilization among races known to history, with the aid of archaeological inference from the remains of prehistoric tribes, it seems possible to judge in a rough way of an early condition of man, which from our point of view is to be regarded as a primitive condition, whatever yet earlier state may in reality have lain behind it. This hypothetical primitive condition corresponds in a considerable degree to that of certain elements of civilization, which seem remains of an early state of the human race at large. . . . Survival in culture, placing all along the course of advancing civilization way-marks full of meaning to those who can decipher their signs, even now sets up in our midst primaevial monuments of barbaric thought and life. Its investigation tells strongly in the view that the European may find among the Greenlanders or Maoris many a trait or reconstructing the picture of his own primitive ancestors.¹⁵

The purveyors of *styl zakopiański* hardly needed to look so far afield; both observer and object of inquiry are indigenous from the point of view of nationalist discourse, a fact that allows the former to claim the latter as part of an invented national tradition. And as we will see, Tylor's theory informs a specifically primitivist appropriation of vernacular culture taking place in Poland (in fact, throughout central Europe) at the same time *Primitive Culture* was being translated, reviewed, and popularized there at the turn of the century.

Tylor's influence comes to the fore in the final section of Eljasz-Radzikowski's essay, where the latter formulates the importance of ornament and the significance of primitive design. For him, vernacular forms reach back into the depths of prehistory almost by definition. He argues that

the elements of original motifs are not the result of an instant, they are for the most part inheritances of primeval times [*oddziedziczone nabytki z czasów prastarych*]; let us but look at the wealth of ornamentation, which can be found as early as the epoch of the caveman. At the dawn of humanity there already appears a tendency toward adornment, toward searching for an outlet for the internal impulses of the soul, toward the satisfaction of aesthetic needs. That which we then see, those various arrangements of lines, the combination of ornament, must have had certain rules, certain paths, by means of which they took shape. This is yet another aspect of folk art, this philosophy of line and form, why it took these and not other directions, why these and not other decorative motifs.¹⁶

15. Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London, 1920), 21.

16. Eljasz-Radzikowski, "Styl zakopiański," 186–87.

Eljasz-Radzikowski's speculations range freely back and forth in time, unself-consciously eliding prehistoric forms with the work of contemporary craftsmen. The evolutionary thinking underlying this passage also owes something to the school that developed around the ideas of Gottfried Semper, author of *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts* (1861), whose followers, as Robert Goldwater points out, "basing themselves in large part on the earliest ornamental motifs they knew, which were geometric . . . assumed that the most stylized, non-naturalistic period of any art, its most 'geometric' phases, was necessarily the oldest, since it lay nearest to its original determination by the purely technical necessity of the craft."¹⁷ But whereas Semper's approach assumes a bias against abstraction, considering such technique primitive in the most literal and pejorative sense of the word, Eljasz-Radzikowski and his circle appropriate the primitive as a means of access to the archaic.

But what of the objects themselves? We need to place Eljasz-Radzikowski's remarks on ornament as cultural survival in the context of the local crafts tradition he intended to popularize and preserve. The Podhale region, indeed the entire Tatra foothills, developed as an especially rich source of wood carving due to the variety of the surrounding forests as well as, at least up until recent times, widespread pastoralism. Shepherds had ample time to refine their skills as carvers, turning simple branches into ingeniously anthropomorphized walking sticks or staffs and eventually abstracting patterns of ornament applicable to all manner of domestic tools and implements. A wooden beehive from the Podhale region (see figure 1), inscribed with the year 1899, displays engraved geometric and plant-derived designs common to the region. The stylized sprout motifs are known as *ostrewki* (spruce seedlings). Władysław Matlakowski systematically illustrated the variety of the area's popular ornament in his *Zdobienie i sprzęt ludu polskiego na Podhalu* (Ornamentation and implements of the Polish people in Podhale). Published posthumously in 1901, the volume contains numerous photographs, as well as illustrative sketches by Witkiewicz *père* as well as others. In introducing the section on plant motifs, Matlakowski notes that they tend to develop as certain frequently repeated forms that, having been adopted as part of the vocabulary of a region's ornament, become frozen into stereotypes. According to Matlakowski, these motifs "give the impression that they were not copied from local plants, but rather inherited and relayed from generation to generation; these traits, plus a certain awkwardness, impart an antique, archaic character."¹⁸ Matlakowski includes in his book a photograph of an engraved wooden beehive similar to the one illustrated here. Viewing it in light of the accompanying critical text dramatizes how much at odds Matlakowski is with both Semper and Eljasz-Radzikowski in his view of the historical development of vernacular tradition. For Matlakowski abstraction is not so much cultural survival as the accumulated result of a process

17. Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 18.

18. Władysław Matlakowski, *Zdobienie i sprzęt ludu polskiego na Podhalu* (Warsaw, 1901), 32.



Figure 1. Wooden beehive from the Podhale region (part of the collection of the Tatra Museum in Zakopane).

Photo from Józef Grabowski, *Sztuka Ludowa: Formy i regiony w Polsce* (Warsaw, 1967), 302.

of condensation and simplification of what may have originally been more nearly naturalistic sources. His remark above to the effect that the primitive “imparts” a sense of the archaic betrays a considerable awareness of how the urban intellectual observer reads the objects of ethnology, a critical distance from the position of his contemporaries such as Eljasz-Radzikowski who hurriedly conflated the artistic production of the *górale* (mountain peasant) with a hypothetical microcosm of primeval Polish culture.

Matlakowski's book is, for the most part, a densely factual account of the technical aspects of carving, design, and ornament, concluding with an encyclopedic series of drawings that catalogue various patterns of ornament and the domestic objects with which they are associated. At the same time, the influence of contemporary ethnological theory makes itself felt here as well. The work breaks ornament down into three basic types: geometric, plant, and animal/human. In the applied art of the mountain people, animal and human motifs play an important role: Matlakowski notes in particular the use of animal and human heads as decorative elements for a variety of implements. As if in reference to the staffs mentioned above, he describes "remarkable . . . archaic heads, in peculiar hats, with distinctive facial expressions" and speculates that at an earlier time they must have been widespread.¹⁹ He fails to specify why this should be so, simply because the Tylorian assumption is clear: the "archaic" heads are a cultural survival, an embodiment of the latent animism that, according to late nineteenth-century ethnological theory, shaped the worldview of the primitive.

In *Primitive Culture*, Tylor posits animism, the belief that everything is endowed with a soul, as a fundamental and universal stage that, in the embryonic development of religious thought, precedes not only the conceptualization of gods, but also the cult of ancestors. If we return again to the pages of *Lud*, we find in the issues for 1900 a lengthy four-part essay devoted in large part to Tylor's recently translated work under the title "Primitive Philosophy—Animism," by Jan Witort. The article not only indicates the scope of Tylor's influence at the time, it also provides an example of the kind of popularization of ethnological theory that grounds primitivism in both design and literature. Witort begins with the etymology of the term itself (from the Latin *anima* [soul]) and then moves to a discussion of how various ethnic groups have defined the nature of the soul. Animism, as envisioned by Tylor and others, implies, from the point of view of the "civilized" observer, a radical redefinition of the boundaries of the Self and the Other, a point that Witort emphasizes in the following passage:

Undoubtedly—the eating of souls confers upon their consumers those qualities that the one eaten possessed; for the primitive mentality did not in any way distinguish man from animals, plants, and inanimate objects, since everything lives and possesses its own soul; consequently primitive man would eat a part of his enemy's body in order to possess his courage, prowess, and agility, in the same way he would eat the heart of a bison, in order to acquire the strength of that animal.²⁰

This extraordinary displacement and diffusion of the human subject underlies primitivism's animist teleology.

A particularly striking literary appropriation of animism occurs in a short story by Kazimierz Tetmajer entitled "On" (He). An episode conveyed largely from the perspective of the bear, the work relates the depredations visited upon mountain flocks by a bear, whom the herdsmen

19. *Ibid.*, 40.

20. Jan Witort, "Filozofia pierwotna. (Animizm.)," *Lud* 6, no. 1 (1900): 17–18.

eventually trap and fell. First published in 1906, the story forms part of a diverse collection of fictional narratives (tales, anecdotes, naturalistic sketches) known as *In Stony Podhale*. From 1903 to 1910 Tetmajer published five installments in this series, finally compiling an integral edition that appeared in 1914. This single volume included further material written since 1910, as well as color reproductions of impressionistic Tatra landscapes by Leon Wyczółkowski and ornamental motifs abstracted from local design by Włodzimierz Konieczny. Similar to those documented by Matlakowski, these motifs appear, scroll-like, at the beginning and end of each text. Regional applied art thus frames the narrative in a way that graphically suggests the proximity of these tales to another rural craft tradition: storytelling. Significantly, the initial publication of the *Podhale* cycle provoked at least one charge of plagiarism, to the effect that the stories were in fact ethnographic transcriptions passed off as original literary work.²¹ In the introduction to the 1914 edition, Tetmajer vehemently insisted on the originality of *In Stony Podhale*, asserting moreover that his writing had nothing to do with present-day mountaineers. Rather, his interest lay in their ancestors:

Those not among the merely intelligent but rather the supremely intelligent highlanders, who think and say that “this is written about them,” are thoroughly mistaken. This is written from the imagination and as a representation of their ancestors, forefathers, and grandfathers, perhaps even of their fathers here and there, but not of them. There is nothing here in common with today’s vogue for the mountains and Zakopane.²²

In fact contemporary critics had already drawn attention to the originality of Tetmajer’s project: two years before, in 1912, Jan Lorentowicz, writing in the Warsaw monthly *Sfinks* (Sphinx) emphasized precisely this archaic quality of the collection as a whole. Most of the pieces are in fact set in an indefinite past, often as much as a century before even an indirect reference to historical time. Tetmajer’s accomplishment, according to Lorentowicz, lies not in the documentation of folklore, but rather in the appropriation of both regional dialect and the conventions of an oral narrative tradition, which he has then used as the basis of what we might retrospectively recognize as a kind of primitivist fiction. Lorentowicz very suggestively relates the archaizing tendencies of Tetmajer’s writing to the naturalistic metaphor of man as wild beast:

That which has most deeply occupied Tetmajer in the highland past is also that which determines the secret of his artistic success: *elementarity* [*żywiotość*]. He has imagined a life very close to nature, scattered among the mountains, independent to the point of folly, brave and impudent, like that of solitary animals [*jak u zwierząt-samotników*].²³

Moreover, Lorentowicz’s remarks throw into relief what Lesław Tatarowski refers to as the “anthropological argumentation” inherent throughout *In*

21. See Jacek Kolbuszewski, “*Na Skalnych Podhalu* Kazimierza Tetmajera: Próba nowego odczytania,” in Jacek Kolbuszewski, ed., *Góry — literatura — kultura* (Wrocław, 1996), 105–6.

22. Kazimierz Tetmajer, *Na Skalnych Podhalu* (Kraków, 1914), vi.

23. Jan Lorentowicz, “Kazimierz Tetmajer (W dwudziestopięciolate twórczości poetyckiej),” *Sfinks* 5, no. 17 (1912): 12–13. Emphasis in the original.

Stony Podhale, the underlying assumptions of evolutionary ethnology, particularly Tylor's theory of cultural survival.²⁴ The work to which we now turn suggests above all how far removed Tetmajer's writing could be from anything resembling folkloric transcription, and how much his representation of the traditional local culture of the Tatra region draws upon contemporary ethnological notions of the primitive.

In Tetmajer's "He," narrative structure enacts the essential premise of animism: an omniscient narrator limns the sensory impressions of a bear in the highland forest, particularly its awareness of the gradual encroachments of local herders. As the title suggests, Tetmajer renders the bear as a mythic being, one who remains constantly in the foreground of the sketch. The bear, and, by extension, nature itself, take on a form of consciousness, while it is the human characters, the unnamed hunters, who loom in the far distance until the story's end.

In the glistening moon in the vicinity of Bare Peaks he stood, resembling a black eye, and looked down upon the empty ravine. And felt himself mighty and invincible, like the strong warm Tatra wind or like thunder which nothing could level. And in the late autumn sun he toppled over among the hyacinths, among the grassy knolls; along the enormous gleaming grasses he resembled a spruce log, he himself most powerful, like a muffled winter night or an early frost that cuts everything to ice. And the quiet empty forests were again his undivided domain.²⁵

This pantheistic meditation on the bear's mastery over its environment follows a scene of graphic violence, where the bear runs amok among sheep brought to graze in highland pasture, killing several before the herdsmen manage to drive off the intruding predator. Yet in a larger sense it is the herdsmen who are the intruders in a savage landscape of which the bear is an intrinsic part; in the passage above, Tetmajer, imitating the rhetoric of the storyteller, repeatedly resorts to expansive similes whose accumulation dramatizes the animistic notion of the bear as an ineluctable force of an anthropomorphized nature. Moreover, their specific content suggests the animal's mythic resonance. Comparing the bear to thunder (*piorun*) inevitably recalls local pagan mythology: the head of the pre-Christian Slavic pantheon, Perun, performed the role of thunder god, in control of weather and the sky.

The image of the bear itself is rendered in arrestingly stylized visual abstractions: the animal transforms itself from a "black eye" set against the mountain to a "spruce log" in the fields. This abstraction is central to the primitivism of the work as a whole: Tetmajer's "He" can at one level be read as an imaginative recreation of the bear cult, which, as Boris Rybakov notes, was perhaps the first of such proto-totemic phenomena in mid-paleolithic Europe, a period when the bear was among the main objects of the hunt as well as an inhabitant of the same kinds of caves in which men lived.²⁶ Furthermore the bear cult, whether or not the first, turned out to be one

24. Lesław Tatarowski, *Ludowość w literaturze Młodej Polski* (Wrocław, 1991), 211.

25. Tetmajer, *Na Skalnym Podhalu*, 245.

26. B. A. Rybakov, *Iazychestva drevnikh slavian* (Moscow, 1994), 108.

of the most enduring and widespread of its kind throughout the forested regions of the Eurasian landmass, widely attested among the various indigenous hunter-gatherer peoples of Siberia at the turn of the century.²⁷ Ludwik Krzywicki, drawing for the most part on English-language sources (accounts of fieldwork in North America, Australia, and Melanesia) prefaced his 1893 essay on the role of animals in the formation of the “primitive mentality” with the following remarks emphasizing the relevance of such far-flung examples to local traditional culture: “and that the various zoothestic views of our people are in fact dispersed and fading links of an ancient cosmic philosophy, we can easily convince ourselves by taking in hand any factual material concerning the customs of the lowest-standing tribes of present-day humanity.”²⁸ The same Tylorian assumption underlies Tetmajer’s “He” in its rendering of the bear’s consciousness, which is in fact the projected animism of the hunters in the far distance. The bear’s memory seems almost to reach back to include that of past generations: “The sweet memory of disasters he had inflicted, of victory, of slaughter, filled his wanderings. His kingdom, passed down to him from time immemorial from his ancestors, was again his exclusive domain.”²⁹

The presence of the herdsmen, once peripheral, intensifies as the tale moves toward its climax. The change of season leads to winter, and with it to the bear’s sleep; the narrator briefly shifts perspective to comment on the local peasantry and list the weapons they gather:

“He” slept under a windfallen tree somewhere in the Hlińska Valley; meanwhile the people held council about “him.” They would be sorry not to return to the grassy-leaved dark-spruce clearing, and a desire for bloody revenge rankled their hearts. And when spring set in, about a dozen men, well armed with bows, knives, and axes, with shovels in hand and iron traps fitted with thick chains, set off into the mountains by a path cut in the rocks.³⁰

Here, as elsewhere, the herdsmen remain an undifferentiated collectivity, whereas the repeated use of the pronoun in quotation marks to refer to the bear suggests how he has become a subject of legend among them. Equally important is Tetmajer’s ethnographicized technique: terse, affectless, yet careful to enumerate at length the material objects of the mountain people’s daily life. In this context, the device of the catalogue implicitly tends to animate the objects that surround the highlander. Further on, for example, the list of musical instruments the herdsmen carry with them suggestively renders the quality of each instrument’s tone through

27. See, for example, James Frazer’s discussion of bear sacrifice among the Ainu of Sakhalin and the Gilyak of the Amur River valley: *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York, 1922), 585–600. E. A. Alekseenko cites prerevolutionary Russian accounts of the bear cult among the Ket (vicinity of the Enisei River): “Kul’t medvedia u Ketov,” in A. K. Baiburin, N. M. Girenko, and K. V. Chistov, eds., *Kunstkamera (Muzei antropologii i etnografii im. Petra Velikogo): Izbrannye stat’i* (St. Petersburg, 1995), 60–62.

28. Ludwik Krzywicki, “Rola zwierząt w pojęciu pierwotnej umysłości,” *Wista*, 1893, no. 7:246.

29. Tetmajer, *Na Skalnym Podhaju*, 245.

30. *Ibid.*, 246.

alliteration. "And they went forth with clamor, song, and music, filling the mountains with the strains of the fiddle, the bleating bellow of the bagpipe, the far-running whistle of the reed pipe, and the wide wail of the alpenhorn."³¹ "He" thus turns out to be not merely the study of an animal, but also a record of the traces his pursuers have left in the mountain landscape, the products of their crafts and labor (weapons, musical instruments, paths hewn along rocky slopes) as well as traditional custom. Caught by one of the traps mentioned above and eventually felled after lengthy pursuit and struggle, the bear is transformed: from the subject of popular legend he becomes an object of material culture. Tetmajer abruptly ends the story with the image of the bear's skin bolted down and stretched out in the sun to dry.

An earlier work in the *Podhale* cycle anticipates the animistic perspective of "He." Entitled "Dziki Juhas" (The savage shepherd), the story follows a similar narrative trajectory: the shepherd, a solitary figure of legendary strength and brutality (once, in a fit of rage, he throws a flock of sheep down a precipice) dies a violent death in the forest. Yet, whereas "He" focuses on the image of an anthropomorphized animal, "The Savage Shepherd" presents a human figure whose alienation from society takes the form of deranged wildness. Rejected by a maiden, the shepherd considers crushing her mountain abode with a boulder; lacking the will to do so, he rushes to the forest and there begins to hurl himself at the trees, eventually uprooting several spruces before collapsing, exhausted and covered in blood. The resulting din carries far enough that huntsmen elsewhere in the valley assume a bear has been caught in a trap. They arrive to find a welter of destruction: a jagged clearing where once there had been a thick growth of spruce trees, and under one of their trunks the dying shepherd. Each voice conjectures to explain the scene before them. Finally one of the huntsmen recognizes the dying man as the "savage" shepherd from Jurgów, and recounts an anecdote about his strength: once the shepherd had managed to stop a mill wheel with his own bare hands, forcing the terrified miller to give up two twenty-crown pieces (*dwa cwacygiery*; *cwacygier*, an Austro-Hungarian coin, is a Polonization of the German *zwanzig* [twenty]). At this point one of the other huntsmen notices the shepherd stirring; the shepherd's final words describe what overcame him: "a wench and the forest" (*dziewka i las*).³²

Tetmajer's *Podhale* tales often demonstrate what Walter Benjamin, in an essay on the nature of storytelling, termed "that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis."³³ While the narrative technique of "The Savage Shepherd" is similarly laconic, the story's implications become clearer when set against the contexts of ethnology and nationalism. With these in mind we can engage the work's two major enigmas: the shepherd's relation to nature, specifically the cause of his madness in the forest, and the historical situation in which the tale unfolds.

The shepherd's "wildness" grows out of an intense identification with

31. *Ibid.*, 247.

32. *Ibid.*, 123.

33. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," *Illuminations* (New York, 1968), 91.

nature in a way that dramatizes Tylorian assumptions about the survival of animist belief. The shepherd is savage (*dziki*) precisely because he preserves traces of a primitive state, here rendered as a heroic, if self-destructive, pathology. The description of the old forest, leading up to the crucial moment when the unhinged shepherd calls out to it, recalls Krzywicki's remarks cited earlier about the vestigial "ancient cosmic philosophy" underlying the outlook of Polish peasantry at the turn of the century:

There the spruces were stout like the pillars in a wooden church, their boughs entwined so thickly the sky was barely visible . . . everywhere green moss, moss heavy with moisture, olive-green and hanging from boughs, [moss] as long as beards. . . . And between the trees tall yellow flowers grew that shone brightly through the branches, in such a way that you would have said something evil was looking at you, till you shuddered. And so quiet was it that there was no wind, not a sound. Not even the ripple of water in the stream from below. A forest as silent as a dead man.³⁴

Tetmajer vividly evokes the landscape of the shepherd's hysteria, a synesthetic vision of an anthropomorphized nature: the beardlike growths of moss, the sinister gaze of yellow blossoms, and most of all the heavy silence of the forest as a whole. Moreover, the reference to sacred architecture carries with it the suggestion of the cultic significance of the spruce in *pre-Christian* belief. Recent studies on pagan Slavic myth and ritual have cited seventeenth-century missionary accounts of offerings made to a giant spruce in the vicinity of Zakopane, with supplicants circling the tree on their knees as a sign of veneration.³⁵ The challenge the shepherd issues to the forest ("Hey forest! Forest! Either you or me!" [*Hej lesie! lesie! Abo ja, abo ty!*])³⁶ and the subsequent self-destructive frenzy in which he attempts to fell the spruces both dramatize the notion of the forest as a sentient, if not sacred, being. Significantly, the spruce cult is considered to be of non-Slavic origin, a borrowing from Romanian pastoralists who migrated northward through the Carpathians between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries,³⁷ and thus another example of the diverse multiethnic influences at work in the culture of the Tatra highlands.

Whether or not Tetmajer was aware of the significance of the spruce tree, the point leads us back to the historicity of the *Podhale* tales. As we saw earlier, Tetmajer's project claims to represent an already vanishing regional tradition by reaching back into an indefinite, mythicized past. At the same time, traces of a recent and specific past appear in the margins of such stories as "The Savage Shepherd." Seemingly incidental motifs, such as the two twenty-crown pieces (*cwanacygiery*) mentioned at the tale's end, form part of a larger web of reference to institutions of imperial power. Especially noteworthy in this respect is the issue of military recruitment. The young woman who becomes the object of the shepherd's attention turns him away, she explains, because she is already betrothed to a

34. Tetmajer, *Na Skalnym Podhalu*, 121.

35. Teresa Karwicka, "The Possibilities of Reconstruction of the Beliefs of Ancient Slavs on the Basis of Ethnographic Data," *Ethnologia Polona* 12 (1986): 146. See also K. Dobrowski, "Studia nad teorią kultury ludowej," *Ethnografia Polska* 4 (1961): 15–92.

36. Tetmajer, *Na Skalnym Podhalu*, 122.

37. Karwicka, "The Possibilities of Reconstruction," 146.

herdsmen presently off serving in the cuirassiers (*co przy kilysyerak służą*).³⁸ Then, when the shepherd, in fury over his rejection, takes to the forest, the local highlanders at first account for his absence by assuming he had enlisted (“for indeed imperial cavalry had traveled to Lewocza for the purpose of recruitment” [*bo właśnie przyjechali do Lewoczy rajtarzy cesarscy z werbunkiem*]).³⁹ Most suggestively of all, the story opens with a description of the damage the shepherd had inflicted on his cell when he was once held in the local jail,⁴⁰ although the reason for his imprisonment is never specified. Tetmajer does not, however, flesh out any overtly nationalist allegory here or elsewhere in the *Podhale* cycle. He departs from the highlander vogue of his time (*góralszczyzna i zakopiańszczyzna*) in his focus on the autonomy and specificity of regional culture per se rather than as a symbolic repository of national myth.

Yet the primitivist aesthetic that inheres in such works as “The Savage Shepherd” and “He” articulates a pervasive fin-de-siècle anxiety over untraceable origins and unbridgeable distances. In this respect Tetmajer’s writing exemplifies the remarkable cross-fertilization of literary influences in this period. Both stories implicitly respond to the primitivist construction of nature that takes place in Knut Hamsun’s widely translated fiction of the 1890s, particularly in the novel *Pan: Af Løjtnant Thomas Glahn’s papirer* (Pan: From Lieutenant Thomas Glahn’s papers, 1894).⁴¹ The protagonist of that work writes a memoir-like account of a romantic obsession that overcame him during a summer spent at the edge of the forest in a hunter’s lodge on the Norwegian coast. His entries relate an alienation from society that grows in tandem with an intensely lyrical identification with the northern landscape. Late in the novel, the first signs of the fall’s approach set off the culminating phase of the hero’s development, a time of sleepless nocturnal brooding he refers to as his “iron nights.”⁴² Interspersed among these night-wanderings are passages that convey an ecstatic sense of fusion of the self with the surrounding environment: “Listen in the east and listen in the west, but listen! That is the everlasting God! This stillness murmuring in my ear is the blood of all nature seething, is God weaving through the world and through me. I see a gossamer thread glistening in the fire’s light, I hear the rowing of a boat in the harbor, the Northern lights rise against the northern sky.”⁴³ Hamsun’s Nietzschean hunter and Tetmajer’s “savage” characters (the bear *and* his pursuers as well as the shepherd) have in common an experience of nature that imag-

38. Tetmajer, *Na Skalnym Podhalu*, 120.

39. *Ibid.*, 121.

40. *Ibid.*, 117.

41. *Pan* first appeared in Polish on the pages of the journal *Czas* (Time) in 1900. It was published in book form in 1902 and republished frequently thereafter (in 1903, 1911, and 1912 in the prewar period alone). See Marian Lewko, “Zgruchotana wielkość: Wokół teatru Knuta Hamsuna,” *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 29, no. 5 (1981): 5–9.

42. Knut Hamsun, *Pan: From Lieutenant Thomas Glahn’s papers*, trans. James W. McFarlane (London, 1955), 121.

43. *Ibid.*, 123. And slightly further on, the following passage: “Again some minutes pass. I turn my head, the strangely heavy air ebbs away and I see something like the back of a spirit who wanders soundlessly through the forest” (128).

inatively represents the perspective of animist belief. They also inhabit, at least for a time, a landscape of pristine isolation from the modern social order. The foregoing affinities should not obscure a crucial difference between the two writers, however. Whereas the violent end of Hamsun's hero signals the death of the individual, the respective fates of Tetmajer's highlanders (in the stories we have seen as well as elsewhere in the *Podhale* cycle) signify the dying-out of an entire culture.

The 1914 edition of *In Stony Podhale* ends with an essay devoted to the memory of Szymek Krzyś (his actual name was Szymon Gaśienica), an itinerant storyteller and friend of Tetmajer's who died in 1907. A shepherd who had for some while worked in a factory in Budapest, one of the imperial capitals, Krzyś remained, according to Tetmajer, the least acculturated of all his native informants despite his exposure to the world beyond the Tatras. Tetmajer especially valued him as a rare repository of local pagan beliefs:

Neither the religion he was taught, nor any document of civilization he saw in Zakopane even slightly weakened in him that most primitive belief; for him goblins really lived somewhere in the scree above the Bielsky Caves . . . animals had intuition and sight . . . Krzyś was the unwitting poet of dead chivalry and dying heathenism in Podhale and as such was its unrewarded and invaluable treasure.⁴⁴

Completely absent here is Eljasz-Radzikowski's notion of Podhale as a "microcosm of the ancient Polish people." *In Stony Podhale*, does not, on the whole, anticipate 1918 (the inception of an independent Poland). Rather, Tetmajer's work conceives of ethnic identity in exclusively regional terms that tend increasingly toward the past tense. The tales, and particularly the essays that frame them, record a process that Walter Benjamin would a few decades later describe as the dying-out of storytelling, a symptom of the decline of craftsmanship in an era of industrialization: "The role of the hand in production has become more modest, and the place it filled in storytelling lies waste."⁴⁵ Tetmajer's project, like Matlakowski's encyclopedic description of local woodworking technique and design, is a peculiarly fin-de-siècle attempt to appropriate the elements of what was perceived as a disappearing vernacular tradition.

44. Tetmajer, *Na Skalnym Podhalu*, 441.

45. Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 87.