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PIERS PAUL READ AS A NOVELIST: VARIETY IN UNITY

Piers Paul Read, a British writer – novelist, biographer, essayist and author of documentary prose, is not widely known in Poland, although one of his novels (*The Married Man*, 1979) and one non-fiction work (*The Templars*, 1999) have been translated into Polish.¹ Read himself has also visited Poland twice: he was in Warsaw in 1970s and in Cracow in 1996, as a plenary speaker at a conference organized by the Institute of English Philology of the Jagiellonian University. Since his name rarely sounds familiar to Polish readers and Polish anglicists, it seems appropriate – even in a short article dealing with just a few aspects of his fiction – to include some information about his life and his work in general.

Born in 1941, Piers Paul Read was the third son of a poet and art critic Sir Herbert Read and Margaret Read (Ludwig). He attended Catholic schools in York (a school at Gilling Castle, then Ampleforth College), spent a year at the Institut Catholique at the Sorbonne in 1958, studied at the Goethe University in Bavaria and then read history at St. John's College, Cambridge. There is no doubt that – as a future writer – he received very good and versatile education, not only of the academic type, but also getting knowledge and practical experience of living in several places in Europe, USA and the Far East, where he travelled during or after his studies. What can be called his “practical” education (which may be considered a kind of equivalent of the Grand Tour that followed the studies of gentlemen in the 17th–18th centuries), involved working in other countries (e.g., with publishers in Munich, with the Ford Foundation in West Berlin), travelling with his father to the Far East, getting experience in literary matters as a sub-editor of *The Times Literary Supplement*, and learning foreign languages, particularly German and French. (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 1983: 622–623)

In the early 1960s Piers Paul Read spent two years in Germany. With German blood on his mother's side, his interest in Germany was apparently natural,

¹ *Człowiek żonaty*, tłum. A. Szymanowski, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1988; *Templariusze*, tłum. Z. Gieniewski, Zysk i S-ka, Poznań 2003.

but it also stemmed from something else that was so important for him then, but has never really left him: his passion for history and political thought. As he himself explained in one of the reviews, “he had chosen to come to Germany to try and digest their ‘undigested past’” (*Dictionary of National Biography* 1983: 623). His stay in Germany undoubtedly provided him with material for his later study of nazism in his novel *The Junkers* (1968), but this was not an isolated, if natural, case of interest in matters political and historical. An understanding of the place and its culture and of the historical events in a given country has always been important for Piers Paul Read the novelist: in most of his books the vicissitudes of history not only provide the background for the story, but are present in a more “palpable” way as they influence the moral choices his characters make and illustrate the truth that human beings are, to a great extent, *hominines historici*: whether they want it or not, they always find themselves in the clutches of history (Stobierska 2002: 69).

Another thing that seems worth-mentioning in the context of his thorough and many-sided education is Read’s early contact with another kind of versatility leading to what could be called “practical tolerance” and related to a complex and complicated religious situation of his own family, of which he writes in his essay “Upon this Rock”. His mother was an ardent Catholic, his father was an agnostic; their marriage was a consequence of a passionate love-affair which led his father to leaving his first wife and their ten-year-old son (“Upon this Rock” 1983: 61–62). Piers Paul and his three siblings were brought up as Catholics by their mother and have remained faithful to this religion. However, as Read sadly remarks on what he considers a painful *signum temporis* in one of his reviews, neither his children nor his nephews and nieces, who were also raised as Catholics, practise the faith (“Interview with Paul Gray” 1989). Still, whatever Read’s personal feelings are concerning the situation of Catholicism in modern Britain, there is no doubt that he has been accustomed to and always genuinely tolerant of the plurality of religious and non-religious positions, within his family, in his country and in the modern world in general.

Although Piers Paul Read has travelled a lot and worked abroad (e.g. in the USA), his home since the 1980s has been London, where he lives with his wife (their grown-up children have now all left home). Again, the attractions of living in beautiful Yorkshire, where his young children were so happy, were eventually outweighed by the opportunities offered to the novelist and his family by the metropolis. (“Back to London” 2002)

Read is the author of fourteen novels (several of which won book awards), of a few plays and screen plays, which he wrote for the German television and the BBC; he is also a talented essayist, a short-story writer as well as the author of five works of non-fiction, including the international best-seller *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors* (1974), which was made into a film directed by Frank Marshal. His recent major work (2003) has been the authorized biography of Alec Guinness, the famous film and theatre actor (and privately Read’s friend), and a collection of essays and reviews, some of them re-printed from the earlier sources and some new ones, the whole significantly entitled *Hell and Other Destinations: A Novelists’s Reflections on This World and the Next* (2006).

In spite of the fact that Piers Paul Read is quite a prolific author and for many years has been a contributor of essays and reviews to several papers and periodicals, e.g., *The Spectator*, *The Observer*, *The Tablet*, *The Catholic Herald*, *The Independent Magazine*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and that his novels have earned awards at home and abroad, his name is not often mentioned in literary reference books. He seldom earns a separate entry, and it often happens that his name appears only at the end of a note about his father, Sir Herbert Read, as is the case, for instance, in the fifth edition of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* edited by Margaret Drabble. Why is it so? Why does Read's reputation as a writer "skulk in the curious no man's land which exists between an enthusiastic review and sustained critical attention"? (Taylor 1990: 33) The quotation above comes from an essay on Read written in *The Spectator* in 1990, but although several gripping books by P.P. Read have been published since that time, the question that D.J. Taylor asked in this essay is still topical: "Why are his [Read's] merits consistently underrated?" (Taylor 1990: 34) The present paper will try to address this question attempting to present the most important characteristic features of his fiction as well as the most frequent "labels" that have been stuck to him, that have influenced his readership and proved harmful to his critical and popular reception.

The first and very important characteristic of Piers Paul Read's novels that his readers quickly discover is the versatility of his fiction, which can be perceived as his strength as a writer, but can also be seen as a difficulty in classifying his novels and defining his position as their author. Ralph McNerny in his article on Piers Paul Read names the problem simply and adequately: "His oeuvre is odd, which means that he follows his own line, choosing not to repeat himself. One is struck by how different his books are from one another." It is not easy, therefore, to adequately and justly characterize Read the novelist who seems to be so changeable in his themes, settings and types of novels. His thematic versatility is impressively purposeful: as the author of historical novels, novels of manners, romans fleuves and political thrillers, he has tried to convincingly present "characters from places and cultures very different from his own." (McNerny).

From his debut in 1966 with the experimental fantasy *Game in Heaven with Tussy Marx* through novels addressing historical and political problems (*The Junkers*, 1966; *Polonaise*, 1976), bitter novels of manners dealing with issues of celibacy, religious and secular vocation (e.g. *Monk Dawson*, 1969), generation-gap problems in the America of the sixties (*The Professor's Daughter*, 1971), contemporary crisis of marriage (*A Married Man*, 1979) and dangers of democratic materialism (*A Season in the West*, 1988), through religious and political thrillers (e.g. *On the Third Day*, 1990; *A Patriot in Berlin*, 1995; *Knights of the Cross*, 1997) to historical epics (*The Free Frenchman*, 1986; *Alice in Exile*, 2001) Piers Paul Read, chameleon-like, has been covering a wide range of topical matters of modern society as well as problems of modern ethics. One might ask: "What does the story of Hereward, an English revolutionary-to-be, whose progress in life is commented on in Heaven by Karl Marx's youngest daughter, Tussy, to a dowager Duchess and a young modern Englishman, have in common with *Monk Dawson*, a story of a defrocked and unhappy modern monk, or *The*

Free Frenchman, dealing with the lives of the French, Catholic and non-Catholic families in the first half of the 20th century”? The first seems to be a frivolous experimental narrative, carried out on two planes, the earthly and the heavenly, which testifies, among others, to the young Piers Paul’s attraction to and then sobering reflection upon Marxism.² The other novels are, respectively, a sad story of a man in search of his vocation, confused by modern challenges of individualism and self-fulfilment, and a complex family saga of two generations of the French land-owning dynasty, with particular attention paid to the period before and during the Second World War. They all seem poles apart, although observant and witty character sketches and satirical moments are occasionally found in *Monk Dawson* and *The Free Frenchman*, but what connects them – in addition to the interesting, well-built plots – is the real concern with moral values in the context of political and social problems of the twentieth century world. Even the humour and apparent frivolity of *Game in Heaven*, resulting mostly from the clashes in understanding of the modern times by the Duchess and Marx’s daughter, turns out to be superficial, and the seemingly light-hearted story is a cover for a discussion about the serious social, political, ethical as well as religious matters.

Read’s thematic versatility, although leading McIney to call his oeuvre “odd”, does not really put him at a disadvantage with the reading public. More harm to his reception has been done by a number of labels given to him since his debut in the 1960s. The most important, and the strongest of these, is “Catholicism”.

Although the same label had been given to many other writers earlier in the century (e.g. to Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh) and did not seem to reduce the number of their readers, since the early 1970s the growing religious indifference and a fear of religious orthodoxy in the multi-ethnic British society have given this term a distinctly negative colouring, suggesting a limited range of topics and a specific approach to moral matters, which are perceived as being of little interest to the majority of liberally-minded British readers. Read does not deny his religious convictions and reveals them in his articles and interviews, but, as he argues in his essay “Screwtape Returns”, he does not think of his novels as “works of Catholic propaganda”. His witty self-defensive confession, in the same essay, that he has always felt that “in fiction the Devil must be given his due” (*Hell...* 2006: 77) rings absolutely true to those who are familiar with his novels. For instance, human sexuality, regarded in the past by some Catholics as a taboo subject, is perceived by Piers Paul Read as an essential ingredient of a novel. What is more, as he says in the essay “Upon this Rock”, “erotic liaisons seem one of the chief joys of God’s creations” (74). Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that Read the novelist is not prudish, nor is he a preacher on Catholic morality, his openness about his Catholic position in real life diminishes – in the opinion of D.J. Taylor and other critics – his potential for greater popularity and increased readership (Taylor 1990: 33). The other Catholic writers (i.e., the writers who admit to being Catholics, or “lapse” Catholics) are treated in a dif-

² “The only faith other than Catholicism which has ever attracted me was Marxism.” (“Upon this Rock” 1983: 67).

ferent way since what they have written are either funny satires (like those of David Lodge) containing polemics with, or denigrating criticism of, the Catholic positions.

David Lodge, considered to be the most successful Catholic novelist, is an especially good example to compare with Piers Paul Read. They are near contemporaries: Lodge published his first novel, *The Picturegoers*, in 1960, six years before Read's first book, and in the course of the sexual revolution of the 1960s had become "both the foremost chronicler and apologist for this reversal of attitudes among the Catholics towards morality". (*The Dilemma...* 1997: 382) Although Read was also a close observer of the changes among the Catholics in the post-Second Vatican Council "swinging sixties" (e.g. his third book *Monk Dawson* is here a good case in point), there is no doubt that he considered what was happening then in quite a different light from other writers, who – like Lodge – often resorted to satire or even farce in the presentation of the contemporary reality. Sexual permissiveness, moral relativism, characteristic of the then exhilarating plurality of views, devaluation of the institution of marriage and family in the name of self-fulfilment and fashionable individualism, were, in Read's case, the causes for deep and sad reflection that often takes place in the lives of his liberated characters. It can be said, then, that Read's more serious involvement in the moral matters, addressed by the Second Vatican Council, was both more disturbing and less entertaining than the basically satirical record of moral and sociological changes among the Catholics over the two or three decades after the War, connected with such issues as e.g. sexual ethics, or contraception in particular, as in Lodge's *How Far Can You Go?* (1980).

Although, adopting a particular angle and a biographical method, it is not impossible to argue that Piers Paul Read is primarily a profoundly Catholic novelist,³ on closer inspection, what the critics label as "the Catholicism of Read's fiction" does not consist in the fact that his characters are Catholics who face the moral problems related to their faith and its inadequacy in the modern world, or in the world of the past. Of course, among Read's novels there are some in which Catholics are the main characters and their fortunes or misfortunes are related to the fact that they are faithful or unfaithful to the tenets of their religion. Such is the case, for instance, in the already mentioned *Monk Dawson* (1969), which brought its author the Somerset Maugham award and was probably the most conspicuous and profound response to the confusion resulting from the problem of celibacy, expected by some Catholics to be dealt with, in a modern way, by the Second Vatican Council. Among the protagonists of later novels who are Catholic one should mention Claire – the unhappy wife and adulteress in *A Married Man* (1979), or Bertrand Roujay – the eponymous hero of *The Free Frenchman* (1986), coming from an old aristocratic French family. There are many novels in which Catholics as Catholics do not appear at all. For instance, such is the case of his last novel *Alice in Exile* (2001) in which religion that appears at the background is Russian Orthodox Christianity, and the main heroine is an English agnostic. There are also novels in which the characters'

³ This is the case, for instance, in several critical reviews and dissertations, e.g. S. Stobierska's unpublished M.A. thesis "Piers Paul Read as a Catholic Novelist", Kraków 2003.

religious or non-religious convictions are not matters related to the main themes of the novels (e.g. *A Season in the West*, 1988, about a Czech dissident's stay in England). The presence of Catholic characters is most often justified by the requirements of realism: Read's frequent choice of the setting of his novels outside Britain and the presentation of the lives of his characters as affected by the wars and historical changes in the twentieth century: make it impossible to leave out Catholicism from his perspective. For instance, *The Free Frenchman* – a book about France before and during the Second World War – could not do without characters who were Catholics; *Polonaise* (1976) – a book about the impoverished Polish gentry and their fortunes after the First World War, also had to have the Catholic colouring of the background, even if the main hero renounced the faith of his family. *The Junkers* (1968), Read's second novel, deals with the lot – after World War II – of the German aristocracy from East Prussia, where religion – which was often Catholicism – played an important role in the characters' lives.

Another label, stuck to Read and, in fact, related to his “Catholicism”, is mentioned by him in his essay “Screwtape Returns”. This is the title of “a stern moralist” that has been given to him as a succinct description of his work as novelist in the brochure for the Cheltenham Festival of Literature in 1997 (*Hell* 2006: 76). Read himself protests against this label in the quoted essay:

This is not how I see myself, nor how I want to be seen. The moralist in our society is at best a busy body and at worst a threat. We dislike feeling guilty and so turn against those who trouble our conscience. Also, a stern moralist is expected to practise what he preaches, and I do not want my life put under scrutiny of any kind. (“Screwtape Returns”, *Hell* 2006: 76)

To the reader of his novels, Read's reputation as a “stern moralist” (with a particular stress on the adjective) is certainly undeserved. Some of the arguments listed earlier against the label of the profoundly Catholic character of his fiction can be repeated here to prove the point that Read cannot be accused of moral sternness. In his world there is a lot of space and tolerance for various human characters who are weak, deceitful, over-confident, sometimes irritating, even criminal; they are, however, never censored by the narrator, or the narratorial voice closest to them. As is perceptively observed by the author of an essay on Read in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, his main characters are usually the figures “whose lights have failed” (625), whose idealism, potential or real, has been spent and frustration or various forms of meaninglessness and sometimes even despair have taken its place. Such is the case, for instance, with Monk Dawson, or with John Strickland from *A Married Man*, Stefan Kornowski from *Polonaise*, and even, at some points of the story, with the young Englishman narrating the story of *The Junkers*, or with the otherwise exemplary hero Bertram de Roujaj of *The Free Frenchman*. Whatever the failings, trespasses or even crimes of these characters are presented, they come to the reader in a “cool, wry, tough” and intelligently detached voice of the narrator (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 1983: 631). There is no censure there, but it has to be admitted that neither is there any appeal to the reader's compassion. The characters themselves eventually “sort their things out”, accept and live (or die) with the guilt or punishment or the feeling of discomfort that follows the chaos they introduced

into their lives giving in to their own passions, desires, snobbery, political ideologies. Thus, although Read admits that his novels may often have a “moral denouement” (*Hell* 2006: 77), and the reader feels a depth behind the anxiety about the condition of the modern man in his books, it is difficult to call his fiction “explicitly didactic”, as some critics have done (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 1983: 631). So, if the description “moralist” is justified in his case, certainly the label “stern moralist”, suggestive of rigidity and lack of understanding of human nature, is not applicable to Piers Paul Read the novelist.

From among other labels that some critics use in their rather hostile characterization of Read’s fiction, such descriptive terms as “old-fashioned” and “melodramatic” require more attention. The first one refers to the technique of telling the story, which – apart from his first book (*Game in Heaven, with Tussy Marx*) – is traditional, mostly with the third person, omniscient narrator, or – like in *The Junkers*, *Monk Dawson* or *The Upstart* – is the first person narrative. It is true that Read does not use spectacular experiments in his narratives, does not include interior monologues or ambiguous and unreliable narrators and puzzling time-shifts. Even when he introduces variations in the narrative technique, or writes a thriller, the novel is still “straight”, the story understandable, with mysteries and riddles interesting, surprising, even shocking but such as eventually can be solved, not the open-ended, multi-meaning stories. For instance, in *The Junkers* the sophistication of the narrative technique consists, as it were, in telling two stories at the same time: the narrator – a young British diplomat/agent – uses the format of the reconstructed and expended “intelligence record” when telling or imaginatively reviving the past of the von Rummelsbergs, and the first-person form when dealing with the present situation of the Junkers, his own relationship with Susi and her contacts with the family. The story is far from simple, the theme of deceit and betrayal operates on both planes, investigators become victims and the discovery that “evil is real and pervasive” as it is often interwoven with men’s noblest aspirations and ambitions (like in nazism in the past and in communism in the present-day East Germany) is carried out like in a horror story. (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 1983: 625). The plots of the thrillers (e.g. *The Patriot in Berlin*, *On the Third Day*) are also well constructed, with suspense well planned and the climax unexpected and shocking. In longer epic-like novels (e.g. *The Free Frenchmen*, *Alice in Exile*), where the reader is taken over the great areas of European history, the narrative has a different pace, the story is told in a third-person form, with several sub-plots, but the whole is both complex and clear, and the reader feels its compelling power. Old-fashioned or not, there is no doubt that Piers Paul Read knows how to tell a story. To use, after one of the reviewers, the pun on the author’s own name, one can say: his book is always a good read. (Thompson 1997: 53)

One should also add a few related features of his narratives, which even Read’s critical reviewers admit are outstanding attributes of this novelist, for instance, his ability of creating characters and settings, as well as conducting plausible dialogue, which is informative and frequently a strong instrument of social satire, or his power of observing significant detail, his historical truthfulness and objectiveness. Also, Read’s typical narrator is always in command of cool, elegant style, makes use of a special kind of dry humour and always keeps

a healthy distance to what he is writing about. D.J. Taylor's perceptive comment on the difference in the narrative manner (or the character of the narrator) between Piers Paul Read and other "more modish writers", such as Martin Amis or James Kelman, is worth quoting here: "He is formal, detached, realistic. They are informal, lapel-grabbing, eclectic." (34) The modern fashion, among the critics and many readers, is probably for the latter type, but there are also numerous readers who prefer the less modish style (if not the matter) of Piers Paul Read.

The charge of melodramatic effects in Read's fiction is more serious and more difficult to be treated as a label to be easily discarded. (*Contemporary Literary Criticism* 1983: 375) As most reference books and dictionaries of literary terms say, "melodramatic elements in fiction" carries a pejorative meaning, signifying the use of sensational action without adequate motivation, appearance of violent appeals to the emotions and a frequently unexpected happy ending. This description does not fit the attributes of Read's novels mentioned above: the historical and social realism of Read's stories, the plausibility of his plots and characters, a cool, detached way of his narrations. On the other hand, it is true that some of his novels, which are not thrillers, do make use of unexpected turns of action, surprising change of character, which some critics and readers may find inadequately motivated. The novel most often quoted as sinning on the side of melodrama is *The Upstart*, in which the critics recognize "an adaptation of two traditional prose forms, the rogue/criminal autobiography and the account of spiritual conversion" (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 1983: 627). The inadequately motivated and surprising, to some critics, is the final conversion of the hero/narrator – Hilary Fletcher, who after many horrible crimes he committed in the name of the hatred of the class system and personal revenge, "strolls into a confession box" (Taylor 1990: 34). Taylor's comment is simplistic and reductive as the act of Hilary's conversion, although described as radical and violent, has really been prepared by several incidents in the plot, among them Fletcher's father's death and the hero's imprisonment in very educational company (he shares the cell with an Irish Catholic and an English atheist). On the other hand, although within the context and the main themes of the novel, Fletcher's conversion is realistically justified, it is true that the conversion "is consciously designed to affront the modern secular reader" (*Dictionary of National Biography* 1983: 628). To those who share Read's ontology and seriously treat the epigraph to the novel taken from Julien Green's *Diary* about a sinner and a saint living side by side in each man, *The Upstart* is not a tale that fails through its melodramatic turns, but a grim story of crime and redemption.

An apologetics of similar kind can be carried out with reference to *A Married Man*, also often accused of melodramatic effects, or *Polonaise*. Once the reader knows that those effects are there on purpose, not because Read cannot write in another way, their meaning and role in the story become clear. In a number of his books, particularly in those that remind some critics of the early Graham Greene, Read has chosen to work in the tradition that "recognizes the metaphysical reality of sin, grace, and redemption" (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 1983: 628). In those books conversions may be sudden: even diabolical characters (e.g. like Stefan Kornowski in *Polonaise*) may be unexpectedly, or some-

times under the influence of those who love them unconditionally, struck by the idea of goodness and its metaphysical dimension. Although such books are not “Catholic propaganda”, they may be appreciated and the label of melodrama can be taken off – only if the reader is sympathetic to the view of the world and man implied or represented by the author (but not necessarily by the narrator, as is the case in *Monk Dawson* whose story is told by the hero’s agnostic friend Winterman).

The last label that will be addressed here is important, although not often spelt out by the critics explicitly. It refers to Read’s critical attitude to feminism as an ideology in real life (expressed, for instance, in his essay “Man” , *Hell...* 2006: 108), which, in the opinion of some critics, influences the presentation of women characters in his novels. In other words, it is implied that Read the novelist tends to be a misogynist, not very sympathetic towards women. It has been observed that most of the central characters in his novels are male and his women are most often shown in an unfavourable light, as too weak and passive, or too strong and blindly self-confident, which leads them into emotional traps and relationships with wrong men. As one of the critics stresses, “[w]omen in Read’s novels [...] lose their lustre early” and “fall into adultery out of strange, determinist impulses which they cannot evade” (Taylor 1990: 33).

The whole matter is not so simple since Read’s novels are so different from one another and any kind of generalization does not seem to bring us closer to an adequate answer. There is some truth in the opinion that Read’s early novels, e.g. *The Junkers*, *Monk Dowson* and even *A Married Man*, show women as not very likeable: they are attractive but passive, easily led by others and capable of deceit (e.g. Susi Stepper in *The Junkers*, Clare in *A Married Man*), or strong and dangerous (e.g. Katerina in *The Junkers*, Clare’s friend in *A Married Man*, Krystyna Kornowska in *Polonaise*, also, to some extent, Madeleine in *The Free Frenchman*). Partly because of the coolness and detachment of the narrators, it is difficult to sympathise with the women characters in their frequently hard lives as the reader hardly ever shares their feeling; besides, they do not seem to be the victims as they choose their fate themselves. So, for instance, Madeleine from *The Free Frenchman*, so intelligent and clever, and yet so contemptuous towards her unhappy mother, is surprisingly easily duped by the communist ideology and its degenerate leader; Katerina from *The Junkers* going into a loveless marriage and enjoying violence, both verbal and physical, may be quite entertaining in her ruthless comments on her Nazi husband’s behaviour and nazism in general, but, unfortunately, through her “toughness” the reader does not see any signs of sympathy with those who suffer. Some of the women characters are irritating in their thoughtlessness and snobbery, which seem to be intentional satirical tools in the hands of the author. So, for instance, Laura Morton in *A Season in the West* has an affair with the Czech dissident because all women around her seem to sleep with other women’s husbands. Similarly, Edward Cobb’s ruthless wife in *Alice in Exile* cares for her husband only as for someone who secures their social position and wealth. It is possible to provide more examples of such women types from most of Read’s novels, but this does not prove the case of antifeminism in his novels. His male characters may be the narrators of his stories, but they are not given a better treatment than women:

most of them are either frustrated idealists or greedy, ambitious climbers who are not capable of embracing any ideology and live in a void in which they bring suffering upon themselves and others around them. Read does not cherish many illusions about human nature and most of his novels illustrate this pessimism quite well.

Having dealt in general with the label “antifeminism” in Piers Paul Read’s fiction, it is still important to say that the last novel, *Alice in Exile*, does introduce a different kind of heroine and seems to involve the reader more in her life than it was the case with the earlier female characters. Alice possesses all the best features of the previous heroines: she is not only physically attractive, but is knowledgeable and has a lot of common sense, is independent in her thinking, loyal, brave and affectionate. There is warmth around her person which was lacking in her predecessors from earlier novels, shown in her attitude towards her parents, as well as pride and a great sense of responsibility shown in her decision to get a job as a governess abroad to have her child there.

Earlier in this article *Alice in Exile* has been mentioned as a novel, in which religion – Russian Orthodox Christianity – has a marginal role, constituting part of the background for the main story of Alice’s life, which takes place in Russia before and during the revolution. Alice is an agnostic and Baron von Rottenberg, the womaniser whom she meets in London, has a reputation of a cynical and slightly diabolical figure. Still, the transformation of these main characters, whose relationship constitutes the main theme of the novel, has the features of a religious process: it comes gradually through suffering, sacrifice and love for other human beings, and is shown in a sublimated passion of one person for another. The end of the story, which to some readers may convey an amoral message (Alice, married to Edward Cobb, visits the Baron, who has left Russia and lives in Paris, once a month), yet this is consistent with the heroine’s true feelings and the sacrifice she makes marrying Edward at the Baron’s request (Rottenberg, who is prevented by Alice from committing suicide, is secretly going to kill himself to make her accept Edward’s proposal, which he thinks is beneficial for the family). The end of the novel is also consistent with its main theme: the growth to love in a mature way is the growth to being ready to give up not only one’s egoism, but also true and deep desires of both parties involved (in the case of Alice and the Baron it is the sacrifice in the name of family values and prosperity of the children). This last novel of Piers Paul Read, hailed on the cover of St. Martin’s Press as his “triumphant return to fiction”, seems to me the most successful of his romantic, epic-like historical novels, also thanks to the figure of the main heroine. Unlike the other feminine figures from earlier novels, she manages to retain, and even develop, in the world ruled by men, the most attractive features of her femininity: warm emotionality, strength and honesty of her belief in human solidarity and in need to help those who suffer. The end of the novel may also be seen as a discreet, unpronounced comment on the well-known truth that in the sphere of morality there are rarely clear-cut solutions and sometimes to “sin” on the side of love is not only more human but also more commendable than to stick mercilessly to the letter of the law.

Although *Alice in Exile* has been selling well, it is difficult to say whether the reputation of Piers Paul Read as a novelist will rise among the critics. The labels

that have been stuck to him are certainly not helpful in recognizing him for what he is. The historical romance, well researched and attractively told, rich with educational detail, may help to increase his readership. Like in the case of all his historical narratives, dealing with the early to mid-twentieth century, there are strong links with England: the main heroine is English, a significant part of the story takes place in England and the problems of English society, at least in some of their aspects (e.g. snobbery of the upper classes, their prudery on the one hand and licentiousness on the other), are pretty modern. Also, the discussions about war, suffering, ideologies, which take place in the novel, sound quite topical. Therefore, although *Alice in Exile* is a novel set nine decades ago, it testifies not only to Piers Paul Read's undiminished powers as a story-teller and creator of realistic characters, but also to his interests in the topical moral and political problems of our times. It testifies to the fact that, although his versatility is again confirmed, his concern with moral values tested against various settings and various life-stories, remains unchanged. The question remains: "Is Read's »variety in unity« a liability to his position as a novelist, or a sign of distinction?" The present article has attempted to argue the latter. However, this small contribution to the discussion on Read as a novelist does not change the situation in which the remark concluding D.J. Taylor's 1990 essay on Read's fiction, part of which was quoted at the beginning of the present paper, is probably still valid: "He [Piers Paul Read] is a profoundly serious contemporary writer whose merits, in an age of instant reputations and mass critical rallying around dubious flags, are consistently underrated."(34)

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Streszczenie

Piers Paul Read jako powieściopisarz: różnorodność w jedności

Piers Paul Read (ur. 1941) jest współczesnym brytyjskim pisarzem, synem znanego i cenionego niegdyś krytyka artystycznego, eseisty i poety Sir Herberta Reada (1893–1968). Z wykształcenia historyk i politolog (studiował w St. John's College, Cambridge), zadebiutował jako powieściopisarz w 1966 roku. Jest autorem 14 powieści, wielu sztuk telewizyjnych i filmowych, kilku niebeletrystycznych utworów prozatorskich, w tym sławnego dokumentalnego opisu tragedii grupy osób z Urugwaju, które przeżyły katastrofę lotniczą w Andach w 1972 roku (na podstawie tej książki nakręcono film pt. *Dramat w Andach*). Jego powieści cechuje duże zróżnicowanie tematyczne (m.in. współczesne powieści obyczajowe, sagi rodzinne, sensacyjne powieści polityczne, romanse historyczne), wartka akcja, realizm obyczajowy i psychologiczny, piękny język, a także problematyka moralna, związana z kondycją współczesnego człowieka, która nadaje wszystkim jego utworom beletrystycznym dodatkowo, poważny wymiar, bez względu na różnice w tematyce powieści, scenerii ich akcji, czy rodzaju postaci.

Celem artykułu, oprócz ogólnej charakterystyki twórczości powieściopisarskiej Piersa Paula Reada, jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie, dlaczego tak dobry i ciekawy pisarz współczesny jest niedoceniany przez krytykę i szerokie grono czytelników brytyjskich. Autorka widzi zasadnicze przyczyny tego stanu rzeczy w tradycyjnej formie utworów Reada, mało interesującej dla krytyków, a także w kilku obiegowych etykietkach, które odstręczają współczesnego brytyjskiego czytelnika, np. „katolicyzm”, „moralizatorstwo”, „melodramatyczność”, „antyfeminizm”. Autorka stara się wykazać nieadekwatność czy wręcz niesprawiedliwość takich uproszczonych sformułowań, które w zróżnicowanym etnicznie, liberalnym społeczeństwie brytyjskim, niezainteresowanym tematyką moralną, szczególnie w kontekście wartości religijnych (niekoniecznie katolickich), działają na niekorzyść poważnych i wartościowych autorów, jakim z pewnością jest Piers Paul Read.