

# OLANDA



Rafał Wojasiński

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GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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by Rafał Wojasiński

Translated from the Polish and introduced by  
Charles S. Kraszewski

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RAFAŁ WOJASIŃSKI



# SCATTERED BONES BENEATH THE JUNIPER TREE

BY CHARLES S. KRASZEWSKI

## THE METAPHYSICAL REALISM OF RAFAŁ WOJASIŃSKI

At one point in his story, Rafał Wojasiński's surprisingly ruminative gravedigger, Stanisław Hiacynt, describes himself thus: 'Who am I? I am a witness to the progressive extinction of our species. And after me there will be other witnesses.' Considering the general tenor of the loosely-linked short stories that make up *Olanda*, it is fair to wonder whether this phrase might not apply to the author himself, or at the very least, be used as a motto for the entire book. Marcin Kube has noted the organic manner in which some of the situations and experiences of Wojasiński's heroes parallel the author's own background, growing up in a small village near the north-central Polish city of Włocławek.<sup>1</sup> While the narratives that play out in *Olanda* are far from autobiographical, Wojasiński has stated (echoing one of his narrators, by the way), that '*Olanda* is an expression of my approach to life. Am I supposed to die without writing what I think? At least there's that.'<sup>2</sup> For what is the author's purpose in bringing us these seemingly banal stories of unimportant people? Is it not the desire to bear witness to even the smallest existence, which, both in the large scale of the cosmos, and the particular, frequently so cruel, history of Poland, is so painfully ephemeral? As the one and only narrator of the title-cycle *Olanda* puts it:

I had no idea what all the thoughts, both written down and unrecorded, of all the people since the beginning of man's

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1 Marcin Kube, 'Rafał Wojasiński: Przestrzeń na smutek,' *Rzeczpospolita* 03.04.2019.

2 Letter to the writer, 17.09.2019.

creation might be. Today I know that it is they that created the world, but I also know that they are not worth a jot more than the tiniest, most insignificant life. The world is worth only as much as the smallest pulse of life in the grass or beneath the soil. All of the wisdom, theology, science, poetry and music of the world cannot be more significant than that living and dead being, unnoticed among other beings.

This attitude is what leads Wojasiński's narrators to a careful consideration of the world and people that surround them, such as Baška, the developmentally challenged girl who comes into the Chinese bar day after day:

In the Chinese bar near our shop I saw this girl. She's been coming there maybe every other day for the last two or three years. She's getting fatter and fatter, but she's still young. She's ill — developmentally retarded. She goes about in tight sweats collecting fag-ends. She even smiles. She doesn't pronounce her words very clearly. Once she sat down on a wet bench in the garden that's in front of the bar. Then she got up and walked around the benches, came into the bar and asked for a cola, saying that Marek would pay for it. Her rear-end was all wet.

This almost obsessive need to record, to understand, the most seemingly insignificant phenomenon of (human) life is behind the 'archaeological' passions of Wojasiński's protagonists. For Stanisław Hiacynt, his work in the graveyard leads to discoveries that mirror those of Shakespeare's clowns, spading up the skull of Yorick, for Hamlet to muse upon:

Sometimes when I'm getting a grave ready I come across a skull. A skull which once housed the memory of a beloved person's name, the amount stashed away in a savings account, or hatred. Dreams of trips to be taken, dreams of the curls of a young neighbour girl, or the torso of a film star. Skulls are empty things when I dig them up. There's nothing in them. There was, but it's evaporated.

Even more pointed in this regard are the comments of the narrator of *Olanda*: who once, literally, delved beneath the surface himself:

I worked at the time in a brigade that cleaned out sumps. The kind that couldn't be cleaned with vacuum hoses. My friends — boys and girls — went out on dates, rolled around naked on the sand of the beach between the trees, and I was lowered down into sumps by a rope, just like a miner. I shovelled out human excrement, petrified by the passage of time. I'd fill buckets of it with a sand shovel, buckets that my boss would winch up to the surface and toss onto a flatbed pulled by a tractor. I don't know why I liked this job more than I did girls, but that's me.

After four hours on the bottom of a sump, my body was strong, but it ceased being a body. I was entirely transformed into a spirit by human excrement — some of which was forty years old. After a month on the job I became able to tell its age. And I came to understand its striations, which split apart whole cosmic years — maybe even ages. In the same way that homo sapiens split apart from the vitalised matter of carbon, protein, water, and all those elements.

A more poignant argument for the dignity of the most elemental labourer has perhaps never been made. Now, what these musings will lead to is something that we will discuss in just a bit. What is most important here is the unswerving focus of the author, who fixes our attention upon the most common and (on the face of things) unremarkable members of our kind, and holds it there. As Dariusz Jaworski insightfully puts it, 'Wojasiński [...] brings us to the world of the provinces, which, so often, we contact only through the window of a train, or during walks beyond the city centre. These are dynamic pictures of today's Poland, ambiguous, fascinating.'<sup>3</sup> This is the first thing that strikes one upon reading Wojasiński: his fascination with the simple, the overlooked. Echoing Jaworski, Kube says:

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3 Dariusz Jaworski, *New Books from Poland* (Warsaw: The Book Institute, 2019), p. 3A.

We find in [these works] a gallery of figures which, on the face of it, are not very attractive — drunks, village idiots, shopkeepers and retirees. The doubting and the humble, who fill their time alternately with garrulity and attention to the words of others. They are immersed in sadness, but not in despair.

Are we wrong to pass by, without a thought, the various villages like Słomniki, Krze and Jerzmanowice as we speed on our way from Częstochowa to Kraków? Of course not. The human mind is simply incapable of concentrating, fully and with respect, on every human story. There are at least 38,000,000 such stories in Poland alone. The great service of Wojasiński's *Olanda* is to grab us by the lapels and fix our eyes upon some of those that we would ordinarily pass by, forcing us to at least pose the question: How is the story of Romek, for example, from *Old Man Kalina*, any less worthy of our notice than that of a DeGaulle? Is it, in the eyes of God? There is a humility to the poetics and method of *Olanda* that is very engaging. If it seems like there is a subtly religious basis to these stories — what Olga Kowalska<sup>4</sup> calls Wojasiński's 'metaphysical realism' — this is to be found in the respectful, patient and sympathetic manner in which the writer allows his protagonists to express themselves. As Wojasiński revealed to Kube:

From early childhood on, I liked to listen to people. It was easy to get the older neighbours in the village talking. They'd come to me and tell me things, and I liked their stories [...] What's interesting is that when they began to exaggerate, their stories seemed all the more attractive and believable. Maybe that's how myths are born, and the many faiths which are rooted in the written word. Without the word, I reckon, people would never be able to deal with common daily life.

We obsess over the lives and foibles of the well-known because they *are* well known. Even the infamous villains of humankind are constant 'heroes' of newsprint and the two (three?) screens that confront us daily. (A simple search of Netflix for movies dealing with Adolf Hitler

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4 Olga Kowalska, "Olanda" Rafała Wojasińskiego, czyli o Nagrodzie Literackiej im. Marka Nowakowskiego, *Wielki buk*.

will provide ample proof of that). But in his voracious attention to the voiceless masses, Wojasiński is much more than a Balzacian mirror set on a muddy village crossroads. He is a champion of tolerance, for ‘it is this very attitude, this determination not to judge another man, or at least not to judge him for the purpose of feeling better about himself, that unites Wojasiński to the patron of the prize, with which he was awarded.’<sup>5</sup>

### THE QUOTIDIAN METAPHYSICAL

Now, when Hiacynt asks ‘What was God thinking, when they were gassing children in the death camps? What?’ this is less of an accusation of the Almighty, than an honest question. It’s not necessarily ‘why did God allow this to happen?’ as it is, ‘what must He have thought about the way man perverts, and continues to pervert, His creation, which was good and intended to remain so?’ In his work, Rafał Wojasiński rarely, if ever, offers an answer to such questions. But, like Tadeusz Różewicz in the insightful poem “*Unde malum?*” he knows right where to place the blame for evil: at man’s feet, and only at man’s feet. This is the basis of his humanism, his interest in, and his affection for, all those marginalised ones who are far from being true believers:

As long as they doubt, despite all odds they have an opportunity to develop, and, sometimes, accurately evaluate reality. And through this, maybe they can succeed, sometimes, in not judging another person, because when one begins radically judging another, the next step might well be the application of violence against him. And there’s a huge mistake for you indeed! Sometimes, in history, it’s led to mistakes on a nearly continental

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5 Kube. Wojasiński’s *Olanda* was awarded the prestigious Marek Nowakowski Literary Award in 2019. Marek Nowakowski (1935–2014) is one of the most noteworthy writers of fiction of contemporary Poland. His short forms are characterised by attention to the poignant everyday detail and champion the individual in the face of the oppression of the masses — an attitude that was especially valuable during the years of the Communist régime. Kube finds in both authors a kindred ‘perception of the little ones; an interest in the lame and infirm, the dislocated, and marginalised.’

scale. But man must get lost endlessly, for only the lost can find themselves.

In the citation from the Kube interview just quoted, the allusion to the horrors perpetrated by the Germans and Russians in Poland during the Second World War is unmistakable. We will have time to speak of this later. Right now, it's important to stress the difference between 'getting lost' and 'making a [bad] mistake.' In Wojasiński's idiom, the first is a fundamental characteristic of humanity — to err is indeed human — and a salubrious one at that. For as long as one recognises the fact of one's errant nature, of one's imperfect and subjective powers of comprehension, one stands a good chance of avoiding the other: bad mistakes, which are the result of freely willed actions and often lead to the oppression of others.

The two types of people who inhabit the literary works of Rafał Wojasiński are set before us in the radio play *Old Man Kalina*. The Politician is a true believer. As well meaning as he may be, he is still one of the tribe that 'makes wars' through their too trusting confidence in their assessment of things. Such a man of action can't help but wonder at the unambitious lives led by the residents of the small town, amongst whom he has been thrust by an automobile breakdown. The Shopkeeper replies:

SHOPKEEPER

*To Politician.*

It's nice here. Pleasant among us, cosy. And we all like one another.

ROMEK

We can take care of you, sir. We'll take you in. I know what it's like, a fellow knocking about the world like a stray dog. Believing maybe in this thing, or that person... And that's torture. But we, we all fit together here...

SHOPKEEPER

Romek, you might say, is the head; I'm the other half, and Alinka is our little spark. Like an overgrown child. And we're happy here.

Perhaps it's not all about creating something, striving — as in the case of Goethe's basically tragic hero Faust — but about loving, being content, and doing no harm, as Dante suggests at the end of his journey. Faustus 'means well'; his story is that of a man with a clear goal in mind — such as wresting more living space (*Lebensraum!*) from the sea in order to construct an ideal habitation for mankind. But in doing so, he willfully, even angrily, sacrifices the old loving couple Baucis and Philemon, who had been standing in the way of his 'progress.' As Wojasiński once put it, 'the more perfect the goal and the more precise the truth, the greater the Fascism.'<sup>6</sup> The feeble-minded Alinka wouldn't have lasted long in Hitler's Europe. But in Romek's she is as welcome as anyone: 'It's just splendid when people come together nicely. You could even be stupid. Untalented. You can even be a zero. But when people fit together nicely, even a zero can feel like he's in Heaven.'

#### WOJASIŃSKI AND THE UNIVERSAL

If it's true that one is either an Aristotelian or a Platonist, as a writer, Rafał Wojasiński must be reckoned amongst the latter. All of the stories collected in *Olanda* constitute a reduction, or perhaps an expansion outwards, to the essential universal. Somewhat paradoxically, Olga Kowalska sees in him

a writer [...] for whom time stopped long ago. The contemporary world has evaporated somewhere, washed away, leaving nothing behind but that which is most important in life. The root. The essence of existence. The fountainhead of our humanity.

Wojasiński's characters are simply named; often, they are indicated only by their first names — Ela, Włodek, Baśka, Marek — some of which repeat through the stories, but, are they the same people? These names are such common Polish names, that it is difficult to say. Reading Wojasiński is like eavesdropping on the conversation of strangers, in which names that define concrete, unique personalities to the interlocutors mean nothing to us, as they provide us with little more information at times than the gender of the person referred to. In those cases when a character is

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6 Letter to the author, 17. 09. 2019.

rounded out with concrete details — the absurd death of Świerszczyk, the abruptly interrupted seminary studies of Old Man Kalina — the character so rounded *drops out* of view almost immediately.

It is Rafał Wojasiński's unique authorial strategy to develop engaging tales about the most ordinary people; so ordinary that we cannot even picture them to ourselves, unless they reveal to us, offhand-like, this or that physical trait. In *Olanda*, for example, we come to know that Marek (whose name we don't learn until the final pages of his story) is disgusted with his middle-age flab. But that's all. And the shopkeeper with whom he is fascinated — the eponymous Olanda — is, we learn, sensually attractive, though somewhat up in her years. But that's all we get. Whether the average man's head would be turned as she passes along the pavement, or whether his is a quirky attraction that would leave the rest of us shrugging as to his erotic taste, is unknowable from the stories themselves. Thus, Wojasiński conducts a game of paradoxes before the eyes of his readers. At one point in *Olanda*, the narrator muses:

I'm joking here? Bamboozling? No, Olanda, I'm not. Don't say such a thing. Everyone bamboozles, but there are also those who bamboozle better... There are also those who bamboozle wisely, those who are so good at deception that they become truth incarnate, the very voice of truth, in which so many people believe. Many, my dear. Because everybody believes in some lie. Each and every person in the world believes in one thing at least, which is a lie. Otherwise, there'd be no way for man to endure. To go on.

We are reminded here of Wojasiński's earlier cited reminiscence about greedily listening to the stories of his older neighbours, which, 'when they began to exaggerate, their stories seemed all the more attractive and believable.' Is this not the root and purpose of all fiction, which is, at bottom, lies and exaggerated truths, which yet lead us, powerfully, to an authentic appreciation of reality?

The Marek Nowakowski Prize is awarded each year by the National Library for a narrative or cycle of narratives 'characterised by the unconventionality of their views, by their courage and precision of thought, as well as their formal, verbal beauty.' As we noted earlier, Wojasiński is the 2019 laureate of the prize, because of *Olanda*. Whether



or not the deep, tolerant humanism that forms the simple (yet how powerful!) purpose of Wojasiński's writing is 'unconventional'— one certainly hopes not, though, given the state of today's world, perhaps kindness and tolerance have become unconventional virtues — the formal, verbal beauty of the collection arises from the poetics described above. Wojasiński concentrates on the sharp detail, avoiding all explanatory *emballage* to such an extent that his speakers seem to assume that we are 'in on the joke'. The result is a strange palpability of present details which paradoxically lose their individuality in favour of a wider, universal application. This is perhaps why Przemysław Poznański says:

There's no sense in penetrating to the wellspring of this narrative, its 'truthfulness' or its symbolism. That doesn't matter. For the prose contained in the mini-novels and stories of the writer is far from unequivocal. It resists easy interpretation, even if, from time to time, it tempts one to ferret out of it metaphors and submerged meanings.<sup>7</sup>

There is a tension in such writing, such as one might not even notice until one sets the book down and contemplates, actively, what one has just read. On the one hand, Wojasiński's narrators provide us with an intimate perspective on the lives of his characters. On the other, we are held at arm's length from knowing them as individuals in their own right. As we put it above, it is just as if we were (like it or not) forced to listen to half of a telephone conversation being conducted by the stranger sitting next to us on the park bench. All the details that make up the individuals behind the excruciatingly open narrative are kept from us by the sort of shorthand and assumed prior knowledge that exists between two people intimately familiar with the individuals and situations spoken of, yet with whom we are totally unfamiliar. The phrase 'I can't believe she's left him,' as suggestive as it may be, is indecipherable to those of us out of that particular loop. Besides the fact that we have no idea who 'he' and 'she' are, what are we to make of the speaker's disbelief? Is he pleasantly surprised, relieved even, at the fact of a long-suffering woman finally setting out towards a better future after cutting free of a man who, as

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<sup>7</sup> Przemysław Poznański, 'Śmierć to nic: Rafał Wojasiński, *Olanda*.' *Zupełna inna opowieść*, 2018.

everyone but she seemed to know, was absolutely no good for her? Or is his remark of disbelief one of shocked disapproval? He was such a fabulous person, such a total package, and she left him for something or someone much worse? Finally, there is the problem of the speaker himself. As unfamiliar as we are with the situation he is describing, we have no way of properly assessing his subjective opinion on the subject. Is he a credible character? Perhaps if we knew 'her,' we ourselves would not be surprised at her actions at all...

Even the milieu in which these stories take place might be set anywhere. The period is only generally noted: sometime after the Second World War, after the expulsion of the Germans from the Recovered Territories (since the characters of *Olanda* are, for the most part, descendants of those known as 'pioneers' in Wrocław — Poles displaced by the theft of the eastern reaches of the prewar Polish Commonwealth by Joseph Stalin, then resettled on northern and western territories 'recovered' for Poland as compensation for those losses in the East, or, like Wojasiński himself, natives of the place which had once been cultivated by German settlers). The narrator of *Olanda* is obviously an adult. How old is he? According to his own testimony, he was born — stillborn — when Edward Gierek was first secretary of the Polish Communist Party. This places his birth somewhere between 1970 and 1980 — which doesn't help us much. Later on, if we are to trust his dream about his burial as a child, the year was 1973. But even so, the all-embracing generality of these narratives is such that the action could be taking place any time from, say, 1990 until the present moment, on the cusp of the 2020s.

Welcome to the world of *Olanda*. This authorial strategy is as compelling as it is teasing. For what Wojasiński is doing is taking faceless human characters — any human will do — and placing them in situations in which their actions, both praise- and blameworthy, arise not from their unique motivations, but from the fact of their basic humanity. Anybody *might* act a certain way in a given situation; in this way, Rafał Wojasiński superimposes our own faces on those of his ghostly characters.

### I DON'T BELONG HERE

So Ryan McLaughlin of the sadly defunct grunge band Typefighter wails in the refrain to 'Happy.' Referencing our words above concerning the credibility of Wojasiński's narrators, it would not be surprising if the

reader of *Olanda* should concur. *I am human, and nothing human is foreign to me is fine as far as that goes. But I definitely do not identify with these fellows; I refuse to 'see my own face' on the necks of those ghostly — maybe creepy is the better word? — characters of his.*

And they are creepy, that's for sure. Whether she is interested in his tales or not, does Olanda listen to Marek's perorations of her own free will? Consider the following monologue from the early chapters of her (his?) story:

Your eyes no longer smoulder when I'm talking to you. That's not good. Not good at all. If you're not going to listen to me with those smouldering eyes, well, it's all up for me. Six feet under. Or maybe I'll levitate like a balloon and float away through the sky. Look at me. I'll tell you something else. Wait and see — I'll keep talking and talking until I see your eyes flame again. It's those flames in your eyes that make me want to go on living, that arouse my appetite. I have so many stories, so many things to tell you, that you simply won't survive it all. Or at the very least you'll faint dead away, and I'll have to unbutton your blouse and take off your bra so as to bring you around again from the shocking beauty of my words. And just look — how many years has it been now, that your body so tempts me! And it grows, year by year. All of those enlargements and deformations, which occur with each passing day, each passing month and year, suit me just fine. You get more beautiful with each passing year. And there's nothing you can do about it. There's ever more desire in me for you. It's because of you that I'll never get anywhere in life. I go over to my aunt's — I wind up with you; I go to the doctor's, and find myself with you again; to the village administration — there you are! To the bus stop — you. To you, to you. I have just so much life, as much as I have of you.

Can it be that Olanda is a captive audience, literally? Does the above not read like the words of a successful stalker, speaking to the hostage he's imprisoned in the basement? Even his unwillingness to take her by force — stated later in the story — is less an expression of chivalry as it is a revelation of his own sexual neuroses. With words like these occurring so early in the story, Wojasiński moves us past questions of the

objective credibility of the narrator, to more troubling ones concerning his motives, and his very state of mind.

More than one of Wojasiński's characters is cut from this same morally ambiguous cloth. Andrzej (again, only a first name), the protagonist of the story entitled 'The New Man,' excites our sympathy at the beginning of his tale... perhaps. But what is it all about, this attraction of his to strangers, 'his people,' as he calls them, which moves him to intrude upon the private tête-à-tête of a young couple in a bar, despite the understandable reluctance, not to say aversion, of the male of the pair to his advances? And then there is his reaction at the end: "Pretty girl," he thought. "I'll be remembered by a pretty girl like that." This is certainly the most disturbing aspect of a disturbing short story. Having indelibly insinuated himself into her consciousness via a violently unusual irruption into her daily routine, he has *collected* her. This is a kind of rape; he 'unites' himself with her, whether she wants it or not.

Even a positive character like the Shopkeeper of the radio play *Old Man Kalina* (Olanda, again?) 'collects' the Politician who is charmed into abandoning a once promising career (he had hopes of even becoming PM some day) to become a janitor-cum-nightwatchman, living in the dusty backroom of her provincial general store. Whether or not the narrative curve of the drama is from true-belief to openness, from action to love, the attitude of the Shopkeeper seems predatory, unhealthily possessive: 'He also ought to have some better gloves, and a cap,' she says, beginning to dress him up for his new reality, as if he were a new doll she'd just received:

I've got this old papakha from Dad, and some warm blue padded coats — the kind that navvies wear. And fleece-filled rubber galoshes. They'll fit him right well. He's got small feet, but a couple of rags'll take care of that. But the hat — that's for sure. He'll go outside and catch his death and end up like Old Man Kalina. Gotta dress him up warm! I'm not gonna let him outside in just anything when it's as cold as it is now. I'll take better care of him than I did the last one.

Brrr! 'Not let him outside...?' 'I'll take better care of him than I did the last one?' What, one trembles to ask, might have become of him, that 'last one?'

As subtle, one might even say gentle, as it is, this predatory streak colours the personalities of several of Wojasiński's characters. Michał, the main protagonist of the short story 'The Visit,' is a good example of this:

Michał sat in the armchair, drinking the beer and looking at Stefan. Who smiled. Immobile. He had to wait like that until his strength returned. That helpless man was no longer needed by Michał. Michał knew that for sure. 'Anybody else would be better for me,' he thought. 'Anybody at all. Anybody other than him.' He called to mind that neighbour of his who was always chasing strangers away from the front stairwell of the building. He only talked about food and what he saw on TV. And he smelt funny too. 'But that's a man for you, you bet,' Michał said quietly to himself. He glanced at the white skin on Stefan's calf. And smiled, too.

Another 'collector,' Michał visits the basically homebound cripple Stefan from no altruistic motive. After all, earlier in the story, we are told that he once despised him. No, he *uses* Stefan; how, and for what reason, we may never be sure, but this is parasitism, pure and simple. The exploitative theme of the story is reinforced in the very last line, where Michał glances 'at the white skin on Stefan's calf,' and smiles. Why does he smile? It is almost cannibalistic in tone. But is this not just one more example of the striking realism of Wojasiński's writing? Each and every human being has a story to tell, but not every story has a happy end. Each and every human being is worthy of our careful respect and evaluation. But not everybody is likeable, or good.

One of the more enigmatic of his characters is the female protagonist of the story 'The Void.' We are introduced to her as a suffering soul. The narrator of the story is unusually empathetic to her plight; a stranger, he agrees to accompany her home just in order to learn why she was weeping behind the counter of the bar he'd happened to stop in at on his way somewhere else.<sup>8</sup> When he arrives there, he learns that she is no victim (or not merely a victim), but a guilty party herself. One night,

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8 It is worth noting how often visceral human interactions take place in Wojasiński's stories, after such chance meetings.

cheating on her husband who is away at work in London, she was so wrapped up in herself and her own guilty pleasure that she did not check in on their infant daughter in the next room — who slipped between her crib's mattress and the wall, and suffocated.

In calling the woman a sinner, we simply call her human, imperfect, like each one of us. But it is not her actions, or the pain she experiences,<sup>9</sup> which shocks us, but how she deals with it:

‘Every time I get the chance to tell someone about it, the void inside me gets a little smaller. But it has to be a complete stranger.’

‘And that’s it? That suffices?’

‘Well, yes. You see, sir? I don’t want to cry any more today. Maybe I’ll laugh, even. Can you give me a ride back to the main road?’

And that’s it — no penance following this strange Schwarzenau-like confession; Ela feels a ‘little better’ and then is back off to the main road and... what?

#### ULTIMATE QUESTIONS AT THE VERY END OF THE WORLD

We have already used the word ‘subtle’ to describe Rafał Wojasiński’s approach to the craft of fiction, and subtlety indeed forms the foundation of these very beautifully written stories. Like all great works of poetry and prose, Wojasiński’s short stories show rather than tell. He never preaches, he never directs our reading to a predetermined end. Whether we are supposed to like, or even to come to like, characters such as those described above, that is not the writer’s aim. Instead, as in the films of Wilhelm and Anna Sasnal, Wojasiński provides us with an unvarnished, detailed account of the complex phenomenon of human existence in the unremarkable surroundings of a Polish village somewhere in the boondocks, and steps away. It is up to us to interpret what we see.

For while he does not lecture us, he does provoke us to thought. He asks questions. Although this may be somewhat surprising to those familiar with Polish literature, I would propose that in this, Wojasiński’s writing is most similar to that of the nineteenth-century Romantic

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9 ...perhaps ironically, she is the author of her own pain.

Zygmunt Krasiński. In the philosophical dramas of that 'third bard' of Polish Romanticism, questions such as the rights of the people, broadly understood, vis-à-vis the leadership of the aristocracy, social justice, and justice divine, are broached, dissected and examined, but no convincing answer is ever given. In scenes such as the confrontation between the noble Count Henryk and his antithesis, the pre-Marxist revolutionary Pankracy (in the *Undivine Comedy*), Krasiński is able to lay out the arguments of both antipodean rivals with sympathy and fairness, because he himself is trying to find a synthetic way out of the battle of thesis and antithesis.

In a similar way, Wojasiński poses questions in his stories, without providing answers, since, let us admit it, there *are no* facile answers to the great imponderables of human existence. In *Olanda*, Marek's friend Władek is tormented by dreams of his neighbour Świerszczyk, who, absurdly, choked to death on a doughnut:

OK, but how can [it] be, that his father and mother perished so horribly during the war — going through such torment? I bet they thought about their only son, that he'll be a trace of them remaining on this earth, that he won't let anyone forget about what people did to people. Maybe this was their one hope, the only thing they thought about at the moment of their passing. And who permits something like that? How on earth can it be that the son of such people who met such a horribly tragic end, should choke to death on a doughnut, dying with such a strange look on his face?

Is the world as absurd as that? In his story, Stanisław Hiacynt sees life as nothing more than a 'passing by.' He comes the closest to challenging our faith questions with an almost positive statement of the vanity of existence, presenting a pessimistic *danse macabre*:

Passing By. With nothing, to nothing. I look at the corpses in their caskets in the funeral chapel. A few of them each week. Travelling from the void which they masked during life into the void which they no longer feel. They pass by. With nothing, to nothing. Teachers, officials, farmers, owners of ice-cream shops and shoe stores, elementary and high school pupils, university

students, soldiers, wards of institutions for the handicapped and the retarded, juvenile delinquents and children from proper homes, the proper children of proper fathers and mothers. They all come here. And I bury them.

Death is omnipresent in the fiction of Rafał Wojasiński, to such an extent that Przemysław Poznański insightfully calls it ‘really, the main protagonist [*naprawdę główną bohaterką*] of Wojasiński’s prose.’<sup>10</sup> The more one reads, the more one sees the justice in the old chestnut that there are only two themes in all of human art, those of love and death. And while these phenomena are the common property of all mortals, universals, it is in his constant examination of the latter that Rafał Wojasiński most reveals himself to be a particularly Polish author. Despite the fact of his being born nearly thirty years after the war, the horrific suffering imposed on his native land during the Nazi occupation sets an indelible imprint on much of his fiction. Death, and history (perhaps one and the same thing?) enveloped the land of his birth and maturing like a fog one walked through, day after day:

I was raised in the house of a Lutheran cantor in West Prussia; I ate apples from the orchard he planted in the early twentieth century. I used his machines, his barns, his chaff-cutters, etc. Once, during the martial law period, his son visited us and showed us where he was born, near the stove in that big house. Just down the road is where I went to high school, in Izbica Kujawska. For four years I boarded in a dormitory, which had been the headquarters of the German gendarmerie (where a horrid torture chamber was located; there were cells in the basement, which I remember as well as I do my own house). My room had been an interrogation chamber. Nearly all of the inhabitants of that little town had been gassed in mobile gas chambers and then cremated not far away in Chełmno nad Nerem. This was the first and one of the cruelest Nazi death

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10 He goes on to say ‘an extraordinary protagonist [heroine], because a non-existent one. Since “death is nothing.” This continuation of his statement is just as insightful as the original position, for it reflects back Wojasiński’s basically optimistic, life-centred philosophy as well.



camps (according to contemporary data, up to 300,000 people were cremated — compare this with the 60,000 victims of the cruel Stutthof camp). Chełmno was razed, leaving only an empty space in the forest. Very few individuals survived. I was born in Lubraniec, which was a little Calvinist town before the war. There wasn't a single Polish grave in the village cemetery [...] After the war, people from Wołyń were resettled in my village after the Russians expelled the Germans who had been living there since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and even earlier. [...] Not much has changed since then. The Germans stripped the Poles and Jews of their stores and workshops, introducing German colonists. Then, after the war, people battled over the legacy [...] The town lies on a few large hills; there are three cemeteries: Lutheran, Jewish, Catholic; there are about 3000 inhabitants. When I was going to high school you could sense it all, like a bad smell (though no one spoke about it).<sup>11</sup>

And yet, despite all this, if anything, Rafał Wojasiński's writings are an affirmation of the value of life. To cold philosophy (which gets us nowhere), he opposes warm practicality (which leads us in the only direction worth heading). In *Old Man Kalina*, for example, when Romek refers to the situation in which the cognitively impaired old woman Alinka finds herself, he moves on from the particular to questions of universal significance: 'Such a lovely world. Stars, rabbits, lakes, mountains, seas, churches, offices, rockets, and here — Bam! Alinka.' The important thing here is that Wojasiński's Romek is not shaking his fist at the heavens. He is not accusing God, nor preaching to us the tired old 'How can a just and loving God exist, who allows things like this to happen in his supposedly good creation?' This is a statement of fact, and, most importantly, it's not words and ideas that are important, but how one approaches the more difficult facts of existence. Mentally handicapped people exist. Who knows why? What should our approach be to the Alinkas of this world? That of Romek and the Shopkeeper: acceptance, understanding, and love. In contrast to our imaginary reader above, singing along 'I don't belong here,' the message of Rafał

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11 Letter to the author, 25.10.2019.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rafał Wojasiński (born 1974) is a celebrated author of fiction and drama. Among his works are *Złodziej ryb* (*The Fish Thief*, 2004), *Stara* (*The Old Woman*, 2011) and *Olanda* (2018), as well as the plays *Długie życie* (*A Long Life*, 2017), *Dziad Kalina* (*Old Man Kalina*, 2018), and *Siostry* (*Sisters*, 2019). Many of his dramatic works have also been performed as radio plays; his philosophical novel *Stara* was adapted for the Polish Radio Theatre by Waldemar Modestowicz. His works have been translated into English, French, Spanish and Bulgarian, and have been consistently nominated for prestigious literary awards, among which: the Gdynia Dramaturgical Award (for *Siostry*, 2019) and the Marek Nowakowski Literary Award (also 2019, for *Olanda*).

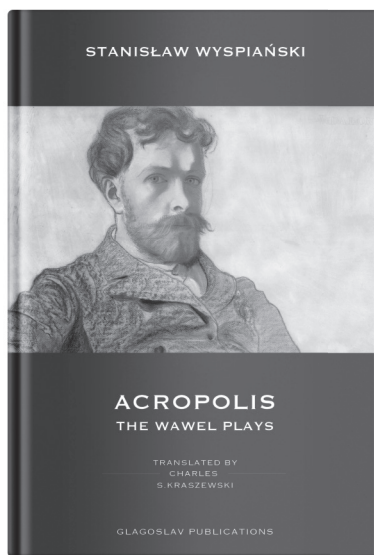
## THE TRANSLATOR

Charles S. Kraszewski (born 1962) is the author of three volumes of original poetry, as well as numerous translations from Polish and Czech, including classics such as Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*) and experimental poets of the modern period like Tytus Czyżewski *A Burglar of the Better Sort — Poems, Dramatic Works, and Theoretical Writings*, both published by Glagoslav.



# Acropolis – The Wawel Plays

by Stanisław Wyspiański

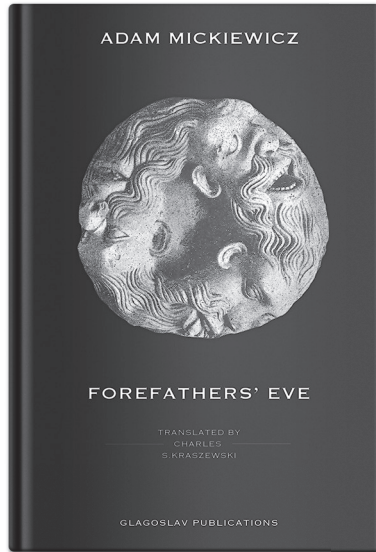


Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907) achieved worldwide fame, both as a painter, and Poland's greatest dramatist of the first half of the twentieth century. *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays*, brings together four of Wyspiański's most important dramatic works in a new English translation by Charles S. Kraszewski. All of the plays centre on Wawel Hill: the legendary seat of royal and ecclesiastical power in the poet's native city, the ancient capital of Poland. In these plays, Wyspiański explores the foundational myths of his nation: that of the self-sacrificial Wanda, and the struggle between King Bolesław the Bold and Bishop Stanisław Szczepanowski. In the eponymous play which brings the cycle to an end, Wyspiański carefully considers the value of myth to a nation without political autonomy, soaring in thought into an apocalyptic vision of the future. Richly illustrated with the poet's artwork, *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays* also contains Wyspiański's architectural proposal for the renovation of Wawel Hill, and a detailed critical introduction by the translator. In its plaited presentation of *Bolesław the Bold* and *Skalka*, the translation offers, for the first time, the two plays in the unified, composite format that the poet intended, but was prevented from carrying out by his untimely death.

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# Forefathers' Eve

by Adam Mickiewicz



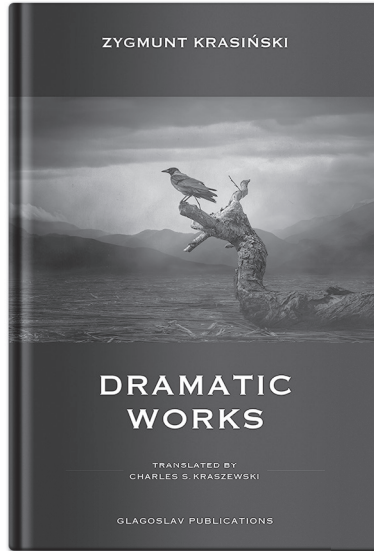
*Forefathers' Eve* [*Dziady*] is a four-part dramatic work begun circa 1820 and completed in 1832 – with Part I published only after the poet's death, in 1860. The drama's title refers to *Dziady*, an ancient Slavic and Lithuanian feast commemorating the dead. This is the grand work of Polish literature, and it is one that elevates Mickiewicz to a position among the “great Europeans” such as Dante and Goethe.

With its Christian background of the Communion of the Saints, revenant spirits, and the interpenetration of the worlds of time and eternity, *Forefathers' Eve* speaks to men and women of all times and places. While it is a truly Polish work – Polish actors covet the role of Gustaw/Konrad in the same way that Anglophone actors covet that of Hamlet – it is one of the most universal works of literature written during the nineteenth century. It has been compared to Goethe's *Faust* – and rightfully so...

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# Dramatic Works

by Zygmunt Krasiński



“God hath denied me that angelic measure / Without which no man sees in me the poet,” writes Zygmunt Krasiński in one of his most recognisable lyrics. Yet while it may be true that his lyric output cannot rival in quality the verses of the other two great Polish Romantics, Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, Krasiński’s dramatic muse gives no ground to any other.

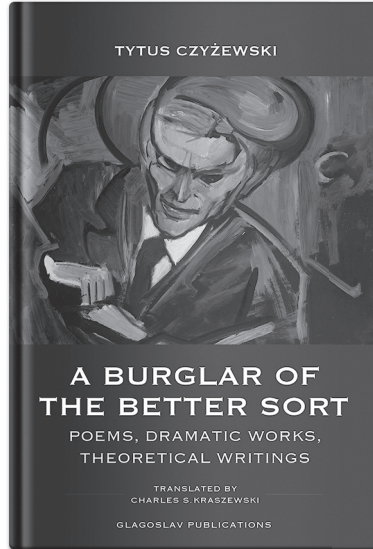
The Glagoslav edition of the *Dramatic Works* of Zygmunt Krasiński provides the English reader, for the first time, with all of Krasiński’s plays in the translation of Charles S. Kraszewski. These include the sweeping costume drama *Irydion*, in which the author sets forth the grievances of his occupied nation through the fable of an uprising of Greeks and barbarians against the dissipated emperor Heliogabalus, and, of course, the monumental drama on which his international fame rests: the *Undivine Comedy*...

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# A Burglar of the Better Sort

by Tytus Czyżewski

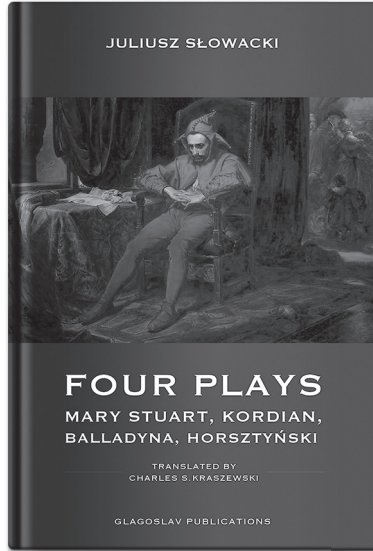


The history of Poland, since the eighteenth century, has been marked by an almost unending struggle for survival. From 1795 through 1945, she was partitioned four times by her stronger neighbours, most of whom were intent on suppressing if not eradicating Polish culture. It is not surprising, then, that much of the great literature written in modern Poland has been politically and patriotically engaged. Yet there is a second current as well, that of authors devoted above all to the craft of literary expression, creating 'art for art's sake,' and not as a didactic national service. Such a poet is Tytus Czyżewski, one of the chief, and most interesting, literary figures of the twentieth century. Growing to maturity in the benign Austrian partition of Poland, and creating most of his works in the twenty-year window of authentic Polish independence stretching between the two world wars, Czyżewski is an avant-garde poet, dramatist and painter who popularised the new approach to poetry established in France by Guillaume Apollinaire, and was to exert a marked influence on such multi-faceted artists as Tadeusz Kantor.

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Translated into English by Charles S. Kraszewski, the *Four Plays* of Juliusz Słowacki will be of interest to aficionados of Polish Romanticism, Shakespeare, and theatre in general.

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*More coming soon...*



*I've been happy since the morning. Delighted, even. Everything seems so splendidly transient to me. That dust, from which thou art and unto which thou shalt return — it tempts me. And that's why I wander about these roads, these woods, among the nearby houses, from which waft the aromas of fried pork chops, chicken soup, fish, diapers, steamed potatoes for the pigs; I lose my eye-sight, and regain it again. I don't know what life is, Ola, but I'm holding on to it.* Thus speaks the narrator of Rafał Wojasiński's novel *Olanda*. Awarded the prestigious Marek Nowakowski Prize for 2019, *Olanda* introduces us to a world we glimpse only through the window of our train, as we hurry from one important city to another: a provincial world of dilapidated farmhouses and sagging apartment blocks, overgrown cemeteries and village drunks; a world seemingly abandoned by God — and yet full of the basic human joy of life itself.



Our English translation of *Olanda*, which includes the radio play *Old Man Kalina*, brings one of Poland's great contemporary writers of fiction to the wider world for the first time. These narratives may not contain the entire world, just like a village at the end of a dirt road running through ponds, that floods after a heavy rain, does not contain all that may be found in Warsaw. But the world they contain is an intriguing one, in which everyone, from aging beauties through gravedigger philosophers, defrocked seminarians and even the occasional politician, is welcome.

