

Popular scientific abstract of the research project

Modernity and Exoticness. Polish Travel Writing in the Interwar Period (1918-39)

This research project deals mainly with Polish travel literature of the interwar period (1918-1939). Thus, we will interpret the reports, memoirs, journals, recollections-studies describing journeys to countries outside Europe, considered exotic at that time. These books, today almost totally forgotten, and, consequently, omitted in the studies into Polish literature of the interwar period, after World War I constituted a very popular category of literature. My library queries helped to establish a corpus of almost 150 travel books (not including the reports published in the press), and also numerous reviews and press discussions.

The main objective of the study is to demonstrate in what way self-awareness of Polish citizens was manifested in this kind of writing. They embarked upon travels to Africa, Asia, both Americas or Australia from a country which in the years 1918-1939 made great efforts to become modern. Modernizing tendencies were visible in many spheres of life (industry, education, law, infrastructure) and they also manifested themselves in the form of colonial aspirations. Despite numerous actions intended to bring Poland to the level of highly developed states, the Second Republic of Poland was a backward country, especially in comparison to Western Europe. That is why self-awareness of Polish travelers, who described their impressions from far-away expeditions, grew out of two contradictory tendencies: the conviction about modern character of Poland and the complexes regarding modern West. Hence, an “Exotic Alien” was indispensable in order to feel that, in contrast to him/her, we belong to the “civilized world”.

In order to complete the illustrated goal, many tasks must be realized before. First of all, it is imperative to define how the term “exoticness” was understood in the interwar period and in what contexts it was applied. This term, although used often in literary studies, has never received a coherent explanation. Next, I will conduct a literary critical analysis complemented with the achievements of anthropology of travel and postcolonial studies. Such an analysis will help to identify poetological features of these writings and to examine what could influence the manner of portrayal of the visited places (time of travel, knowledge of languages, education of the author, etc.). Only after the completion of preliminary research designed in this way, will we be able to embark upon the question of self-awareness of Polish travelers and their self-concepts. Here, I will draw upon the accomplishments of imagological studies.

The planned research project is the first attempt of a monographic description of Polish travel writing of the interwar period (1918-1939). Until now, there have been published only articles depicting selected travel books from the years 1918-1939, analyzing them in quite different contexts. The results of my research will not only supplement knowledge concerning Polish literature of this period and complete the studies into the cultural history of traveling (development of mass tourism, new ways of traveling, the role of photography). Generally, they will be a novel approach to travel literature as a reflection of Polish self-awareness in a newly reborn state.