

The Philosopher and the Simpleton from “the Imperial City of Shang-hai”: The Status of Early Humorous Tales in the Works of Bolesław Prus¹

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of Bolesław Prus’s satirical microstory “Filozof i prostak” [The Philosopher and the Simpleton] from the collection *To i owo, właściwie zaś: ani to, ani owo, czyli 48 powiastek dla pełnoletnich dzieci* [This and That, or Rather Neither This Nor That: 48 Tales for Children of Age]. It discusses the manner in which China, as the setting of the story, is portrayed, in line with the 19th-century knowledge and awareness of the remote country. The article addresses the question of the appropriateness of choosing China as the backdrop for events, given its geographical and cultural distance from the perspective of a Polish reader. In addition to embodying a significant concept in Prus’s entire body of work, namely humour understood as a precise and sophisticated literary tool, the work bears the characteristics of a parable. As shall be demonstrated, certain features that are present in this early work evolved and returned in fuller form in Prus’s later works.

Keywords

China, Bolesław Prus, philosopher, money, parable, humorous tale, microstory

The microstory “Filozof i prostak” [The Philosopher and the Simpleton], published anonymously in the magazine *Mucha* [The Fly] (1873) and then included in the debut collection *To i owo, właściwie zaś: ani to, ani owo, czyli 48 powiastek dla pełnoletnich*

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dzieci [This and That, or Rather Neither This Nor That: 48 Tales for Children of Age], belongs to Bolesław Prus’s juvenile writings and has not yet been subject to broader analysis.² Its action takes place in Shanghai and the whole is stylised as a story “from a foreign land” which is intended to convey a universal message. What makes this youthful text interesting is precisely the unusual location, very distant from the local surroundings, as well as the figure of the first of the title characters, whose analogues can be found in Prus’s later and more mature prosaic forms. Therefore, this short text should be carefully re-analysed (also in comparison with other, thematically close microstories from the *To i owo* collection) and the following question should be investigated: are there in this text meanings encoded amidst Chinese ornaments and names, other than the “universal” message and the presentation of a gallery of human types? For what other purposes are Shanghai and Beijing evoked as the place of action? Finally, if one of the concepts that will be later developed in the works of the author of *Lalka* (*The Doll*) is the use of such figures as philosopher or money, in what ways do the prototypes correspond to their later versions?

The presented events take place in China, in the imperial city of “Shang-hai”. The key theme is the fraud committed by the wealthy merchant Y-ang on the poor S-ju. First, he declined to repay the debt he owed, and then, having bribed the court, led to the judges’ proclamation that S-ju had deprived himself of the money in question (by entrusting his wife with the task to retrieve it). Accused by the mandarin of being a thief who robbed himself, he was sentenced to a cruel death.

The text, published in the magazine *Mucha*, is sometimes called a parable, similarly to two other short stories, both entitled “Z roczników chińskich” [From Chinese Annals], which appeared in print that same year. The text’s belonging to the genre of parable is supported by the moralistic-didactic message of the story, the simplified construction of characters and plot, as well as the place of action, which for the Polish reader in the 1870s must have seemed remote, inaccessible, almost fable-like. According to Zygmunt Szwejkowski, the foreign background of events is supposed to highlight the moral and social thesis and make it more universal.³ In his monograph on Bolesław Prus’s writings, the scholar defines this text as a short story⁴ constituting “a surprise among

² Fragments about this microstory can be found in the following studies: Zygmunt Szwejkowski, *Twórczość Bolesława Prusa*, Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1972; Jan Data, “O Chinach i Chińczykach w juvenaliach i kronikach Bolesława Prusa”, in: *Chiny w oczach Polaków*, eds. Józef Włodarski, Kamil Zeidler, Marcei Burdelski, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego 2010, pp. 359–366; Agnieszka Czajkowska, “Filozof na prowincji w utworach pisarzy XIX wieku”, *Wiek XIX. Rocznik Towarzystwa Literackiego im. Adama Mickiewicza* 2016, no. 1, pp. 121–143.

³ Zygmunt Szwejkowski, *Twórczość*, p. 63.

⁴ The genological incongruities concerning this text only confirm the difficulties with finding unambiguous terms to define the short literary forms created in the second half of the 19th century. Elżbieta Lubczyńska-Jeziorna claims that “in Positivism, and in particular in the works of Prus, there are in fact no pure genres, hence the troubles with nomenclature, with defining and exposing the genological features of individual texts” (Elżbieta Lubczyńska-Jeziorna, *Gatunki literackie w twórczości Bolesława*

the laughing, bouncing, caricatural or grotesque scenes”⁵ filling the collection *To i owo*. Indeed, in “Filozof i prostak”, Prus’s exceptional sensitivity to human injustice can easily be seen – perhaps for the first time in such a vivid manner. The writer pictured the greed and duplicity of the socially privileged, who abuse the working groups, while jeering at them and constructing a narration according to which material wealth goes together with intellectual superiority. This is a suitable description of Y-ang’s attitude to S-ju and his wife. The greatest trespass of S-ju was his too well accomplished service (perhaps this is why Y-ang delayed repayment of the debt, so that he could keep the dutiful doorkeeper) and the lack of resources to bribe the representatives of the judicial system. As for his wife, whose part in the story is small but significant, her subordinate position was related not only to her social class, but also to her sex. Y-ang destroys the debt receipt in the very presence of the woman and sends her away with no money; then, the bribed mandarin judge uses those circumstances against S-ju:

If you had a receipt from Y-ang for the money you deposited with him, why did you give so valuable a paper to your wife? He robs himself who entrusts his treasure to a woman, preach the sages; so it was not Y-ang who robbed you, but you robbed yourself, and thus you are a thief.⁶

A Polish reader could easily refer those power relations to the situation in his country. The relationship between the wealthy master and the poor servant, who is given work as “loan interest”, recalls the still vividly remembered system of serfdom, the remnants of which continued to exist in the Polish lands. While the biased court official represents the mistrust of authorities, the conviction that they are unjust and work for the citizen’s harm, thus resonating with the experience of an inhabitant of Warsaw under the Russian partition. We may add that the imperial system may have evoked associations with another imperialistic country – Russia and, in consequence, with Polish lands.⁷ This trope is all the more plausible since the use of Chinese ornaments by young positivist writers was often a means to avoid censure and to express, with Aesopian language, the opposition to or criticism of the homeland’s politics and conditions of life. In the

Prusa, Wrocław: Agencja Wydawnicza Alinea 2007, p. 23). On this subject see also: Barbara Bobrowska, “Wstęp”, in: eadem, *Male narracje Prusa*, Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz terytoria 2004, pp. 5–15.

⁵ Zygmunt Szweykowski, *Twórczość*, p. 63.

⁶ Bolesław Prus, “Filozof i prostak”, in: idem, *Humoreski, nowele, opowiadania*, vol. 1, ed. Tadeusz Żabski, Elżbieta Lubczyńska-Jeziorna et al., Warsaw–Lublin: Towarzystwo Literackie im. Adama Mickiewicza; Wydawnictwo Episteme 2014, p. 194.

⁷ This would not be the last time that Prus uses a “Chinese costume” to present one of the occupants in a negative light. In the chronicle entitled *List młodego Chińczyka Yang-tze-kinga do starego Chińczyka Li-yang-tze* [The Letter of a Young Chinese, Yang-tze-king, to an Old Chinese, Li-yang-tze], the core of this text is not the correspondence between two Chinese men offering a presentation of their relationship or a commentary on their surrounding reality, life or culture (as the title might suggest). In fact, this story is a pretext for the criticism of Germany and for predicting its fall that was to come soon in spite of its apparent power. See: Bolesław Prus, *Kroniki*, vol. 17, ed. Zygmunt Szweykowski, Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1967, pp. 108–116.

loosest form, these were jokes, with the pair of a Chinese man and a Chinese woman as main characters, with props such as the Great Wall of China, the figure of a mandarin, or with concepts such as politeness or wisdom qualified with the epithet “Chinese”.⁸ Frequently, the Middle Kingdom functioned as an anti-model, reinforcing the aversion to obsolete civilisations with little interest in progress. It was referred to in this vein, for instance, in the first years of publication of *Przegląd Tygodniowy* [Weekly Review].⁹

The presented interpretations are not the only models of reading the parabolic text of “Filozof i prostak”, but they constitute possible variants. Each of them relies on a network of associations, probabilities and conjectures. Indicating a specific city and country is only a game, perhaps even a conscious transfer of the reader into a country he knows little about.¹⁰ In fact, the China presented in the humorous tale is some remote, unspecified place, leaving much room for imagination. Nor is the time specified – we only know that the events take place during the rule of an emperor (which, in the case of China, spans a very long period of time). Such a device clearly points to the parabolic nature of the text, which in turn links it with Prus’s late works (but also with the works of other positivist writers, who made use of this genre equally often, as demonstrated by Anna Martuszewska).¹¹ This is, of course, not a parable of mature realism, introducing oneiric poetics, bearing features of a fable, a fairy tale or a legend (Martuszewska speaks also of those genres in this context).¹² Nonetheless, the imprecise indication of time, the truncated exposition of the place of action, as well as the shifting meanings and the nonliteral presentation of the surrounding reality allow this text to

⁸ See: Bogdan Mazan, “Figury myśli i (anty)wzory. Motywy chińskie w *Przeglądzie Tygodniowym* 1871–1876”, in: *Pozytywiści warszawscy: “Przegląd Tygodniowy” 1866–1876. Seria II: Świat, Europa, Polska*, ed. Anna Janicka, Białystok: Temida2 2020, p. 110.

⁹ See: *ibidem*. As indicated by Mazan, the pattern of writing about China as a conglomerate of negative phenomena developed especially under the pen of Aleksander Świętochowski, who in his manifesto article “Tradycja i historia wobec postępu” [Tradition and History in the Face of Progress] (*Przegląd Tygodniowy* 1872, no. 17, p. 145) called the Chinese “almost a barbarous nation” (see: *ibidem*, pp. 110–114). However, it should be underlined – after Józef Bachórz – that in consequence of the events related to the Chinese Boxer Rebellion, in 1900 and 1901, the magazine *Prawda* published current news from China and articles concerning the culture-creating role of this country in history. See: Józef Bachórz, “*Prawda* Aleksandra Świętochowskiego o chińskim powstaniu bokserów”, in: *Chiny w oczach Polaków*, pp. 354–353.

¹⁰ The state of general knowledge about China was deplored by the author of an article published in *Niwa* [The Field] in July 1874, see: *Niwa* 1874, no. 38, pp. 39–41. According to Bogdan Mazan, texts printed, among others, in *Wędrowiec* [The Wanderer], helped to spread knowledge about this country and to nuance its image in the common perception; see: Bogdan Mazan, “Figury myśli i (anty)wzory”, pp. 107–108. On the Chinese motifs in Prus’s work see also: *idem*, “Z obrazów Chin i Chińczyków w piśmiennictwie polskim drugiej połowy XIX wieku. ‘Chińskie cienie’ w *Lalce* Bolesława Prusa”, in: *Pozytywizm i negatywizm. My i wy po stu latach*, ed. Bogdan Mazan, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Biblioteka Mateusz Poradecki 2005, pp. 317–404.

¹¹ See: Anna Martuszewska, *Pozytywistyczne parabole*, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego 1997.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 110–111.

be included within the category of allegory or parable. This shows that certain budding ideas were already present in the early, “frivolous” works of the author of *The Doll* and would gradually become more mature as he continued to practice further literary forms. Thus, the conclusions drawn by Elżbieta Lubczyńska-Jeziorna from her discussion of the literary genres in the works of that writer are corroborated:

Prus’s work is a testimony to the evolution of forms and thus an indication of the history of literature as a logical sequence of interrelated “genological” particles, which, by determining one another, give origin to more mature genres and, what is more – by expanding the boundaries of cognition, in accordance with the chief principle of realism – they break with conventions, not allowing for passivity, stimulating development.¹³

The universally human dimension of the story is typical both of the genre of parable, and of the satire that clearly resounds from the text. Even though the work presents crucial issues, which could move a European just as much as an inhabitant of the Far East, the convention of a humorous tale is maintained. The absurdity of the principles formulated by the philosopher allows us to qualify them as one of Prus’s humorous devices. As a distinguishing feature of this individual, unique style, Szweykowski indicates “the writer’s ability of rigorous thinking and a lot of practice in formulating thoughts”.¹⁴ Prus’s wit, writes the scholar, is based on a reverse logic, on the conscious presentation of reverse order of things, on the incorrect nomenclature of phenomena and objects and – as it is the case in the microstory in question – on a subversive conception of justice, an exaggerated abuse of the law. At the same time, the reader is aware that the illogicalities are there on purpose, and the author, by making use of them, demonstrates his talent and inventiveness.¹⁵ Thanks to the sense of humour, Prus’s works do not strike as artificial, nor do they repel with exceeding tendentiousness or didacticism. As Elżbieta Lubczyńska-Jeziorna observed:

The author of humorous tales ridiculed various deviations from social norms, modes of conduct and attitudes towards reality. The readers were able to clearly interpret his intentions and, what follows, to perceive the ridiculed traits as negative.¹⁶

In this context, we need to refer again to the Chinese background of the microstory “Filozof i prostak”. The very first observation coming to mind is that the Middle Kingdom was also functionalised so as to make it easier to criticise corruption and false philosophy on an entirely foreign ground, not the author’s native one. Moving those problems to a remote end of the world created distance between the reader and the negative characters, thus diminishing the risk of unambiguous identification with persons living in the reader’s immediate surroundings. When we look at reality from

¹³ Elżbieta Lubczyńska-Jeziorna, *Gatunki literackie*, p. 353.

¹⁴ Zygmunt Szweykowski, *Twórczość*, p. 60.

¹⁵ See: *ibidem*.

¹⁶ Elżbieta Lubczyńska-Jeziorna, *Gatunki literackie*, pp. 18–19.

such a great distance, it is easier to make an objective judgment of an attitude and to accept its ridiculousness or absurdity. In this way, the readers could perform the task given to them by Prus as a “humourist in grand style”, who

is not trying to win anything, is not converting anyone and does not yield to anyone; he is rather observing everything and everyone with indulgent calm. He accepts no dogma, takes nothing for necessary or impossible, but only for probable.¹⁷

It is the reader who should draw conclusions from the text, the writer-observer is merely presenting to him an object for viewing and assessing. The device that makes this possible is humour, which, according to Prus, consists “not in creating fantastical combinations, not in punning, but in a diligent observation of a thing at least from two sides: good and bad, small and great, dark and bright”.¹⁸ The germs of this attitude can already be found in “Filozof i prostak”; even though the psychology of characters is not deepened, the work is extremely short and the heroes are black and white, yet even on their example we can see that Prus’s humour was based on unobviousness, sometimes on surprise, on finding wickedness where we would least expect it.

The short story “Filozof i prostak” can be compared with two other microstories, which create a mini-cycle “Z roczników chińskich”. All three texts come from the juvenile period of Prus’s creative work, all were published in the humour magazine *Mucha* and were then included by the author in his collection *To i owo* (1874). In both texts entitled “Z roczników chińskich”, the moralistic tendency seems to be the most important aspect. The plot of the first one is based on the theft attempt undertaken by “a poor young man” on a scholar, who had agreed to give him medical treatment for a lower payment. The whole story is maintained in an ironic tone, which suggests that the youth did not mean to commit a crime, but merely hid the money in the silk hat “out of care”. The second tale is also focused on a theft, but one that was actually completed. This time, however, the wickedness of the crime is even greater, because it is committed by Ya-o-tse, a scholar who keeps the secrets of science and crafts and, what is more who prepares the young generation for those tasks. In this case, we should note that part of the “guilt” of corrupting Ya-o-tse is attributed to his “foreign” education, received outside of the Celestial Empire.

The hero does not experience redemption, he persists in falsehood and rejects his conscience. Yet, the final paragraph pronounces an alarming moral of universal nature:

But woe to him! For there is Someone who watches over both the flight of a mosquito and the theft of a mandarin; He has a thousand eyes wide open, from which nothing can hide, and thousands of hands armed with swords, the brightness of which makes the crowd tremble and the mandarins cry: a – oh!¹⁹

¹⁷ Bolesław Prus, “Słówko o krytyce pozytywnej”, in: idem, *Publicystyka filozoficzno-społeczna i literacka*, vols. 3–4, ed. Cezary Zalewski, Lublin–Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Episteme; Towarzystwo Literackie im. Adama Mickiewicza 2016, pp. 140–141.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 139.

¹⁹ Bolesław Prus, “Z roczników chińskich” [inc. “Onego czasu”], in: idem, *Humoreski*, p. 190.

Although the title may suggest historical credibility – “from annals”, that is, from written historical sources, yet the time of action is not specified (“Onego czasu...” [At that time...],²⁰ “Niedawnymi czasy...” [Not long ago...]²¹), and the plot of both these stories is even more condensed and schematised. Nor do they show any larger intention behind the choice of Beijing as the place of action, they rather constitute a set of loosely connected images, which the young writer disposed of at that moment. We can also find here characters’ names stylised to resemble Chinese names and surnames, there is a name of a city and once again the figure of a Chinese official-intellectual.

The figure of a mandarin is always presented in a negative light. It represents the corrupted, biased authority (“Filozof i prostak”) or simply a thief (“Z roczników chińskich”, [inc. “Onego czasu”]).²² Many years later, Prus will openly condemn this part of the Chinese society, blaming it for China’s defeat in the war with Japan in 1894. In the chronicle entitled *Wojna chińsko-japońska. Mandarynizm, egoizm klasowy i konserwatyzm z 1894 r.* [The Chinese-Japanese War. Mandarinism, Class Egoism and Conservatism of 1894], the writer expressed his wonder at how a country with a long tradition, inhabited by millions of hard-working and courageous people could fall “under the first blow from a ten times weaker enemy”.²³ Allegedly, what contributed to the defeat was the internal weakening of the country, which resulted from “the debasement of Chinese intellectuals called mandarins, whose first feature was egoism or conservatism”.²⁴ On the pages of *Mucha*, in turn, the mandarin appeared as a character type which often served as the basis of a work’s humour.

This shows that in the vague, imprecise notions about the Far East that functioned in the collective consciousness, the figure of a mandarin was by far the most dominant, sometimes even constituting the only element of cultural otherness. This is the case, for example, of the anonymous microstory entitled “Traktat o czystości” [Treatise on Cleanliness]: “One rich mandarin living near Beijing was taking care of the suburban cleanliness for the sake of order and health”.²⁵ In this short work, we also meet his daughters, a bailiff comes in, a chase takes place and the whole story finishes with a moral lesson: “May it be known to the posterity that in the 19th century, cleanliness was taken care of even near Beijing”.²⁶

The microstories from the *To i owo* collection, which are related to China, concern frauds, absurdity, some of them, as “Filozof i prostak”, speak about exploitation

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 189.

²¹ Idem, “Z roczników chińskich” [inc. “Niedawnymi czasy”], in: idem, *Humoreski*, p. 184.

²² On the notions built in Europe about the figure of a mandarin, see: Bogdan Mazan, “Mandaryn polsko-chiński i ogólnokulturowy”, in: *Bez antypodów? Konfrontacje i zbliżenia kultur*, ed. Bogdan Mazan, Łódź: Fundacja Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego 2008, pp. 331–388.

²³ Bolesław Prus, *Kroniki*, vol. 14, ed. Zygmunt Szwejkowski, Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1966, p. 178.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 179. For a more extensive discussion of Chinese motifs in Prus’s *Kroniki*, see: Jan Data, *O Chinach*, pp. 359–366.

²⁵ “Traktat o czystości”, *Mucha* 1876, no. 27, p. 2.

²⁶ Ibidem.

and helplessness, but each of them involves the subject of money and its unlawful appropriation. Prus’s difficult relation with finances can be followed in his private correspondence, as demonstrated by Edward Pieścikowski.²⁷ The author of *The Doll*, struggling with economic problems, often evoked this subject in his epistolography or journalistic writing.²⁸

Echoes of those experiences can also be heard in his literary works, which are very remote – in terms of topics and time – from the first microstories published anonymously in *Mucha* or in *Kolce* [The Prickles]. Money appears as a destructive and creative power already in such works as *Katarynka* (*The Barrel Organ*), *Przekłète szczęście* [Cursed Happiness] or *Wielki los* [Great Fate], and it is present in an indirect manner in every Prus’s work that speaks about extreme destitution (*Pod szychtami* [Beneath the Layers], *Lokator poddasza* [The Tenant of the Attic]) or about functioning in poverty (often experienced by a young student, as in the short story *Sen* [A Dream]). Fortune is one of the main “heroines” of *The Doll*, as demonstrated by the frequency data provided by Pieścikowski: the noun ‘miłość’ [love] appears 104 times in the novel, whereas ‘pieniądz’ [money] is mentioned 229 times.²⁹ One of the interpretations of the character of Stanisław Wokulski suggested by researchers of Prus’s work says that this character was a fantasy of unlimited material resources, which never lack and which can be used to do good, something that the writer, struggling with financial problems, never experienced. This would have a therapeutic function both for the author and for the readers who, by delving into the world of luxury, would indulge in escapism.³⁰ Stefan Solski from *Emancypantki* (*Emancipated Women*), a wealthy magnate seeking a purpose in life and spending time on philanthropy, was in a way a continuation of Wokulski.³¹

Therefore, it is not devoid of significance that in Prus’s early, frivolous (though, after all, published later under a known pseudonym) works related to a remote country, money constitutes a vital element of the created setting. The juvenile Chinese texts speak about the poor exploited by the more powerful, or about crimes that may be committed just as much by a boyish stripling as by an experienced scholar. However, this is not the only interpretative key of those texts; indeed, “Filozof i prostak” speaks also about the powerlessness in the face of poverty, about the scope of conflict that may ensue from a dispute over debts. Concurrently, the message conveyed by the story also seems to be saying that in the modern world, it is fortune – not wisdom or simple “common sense” – that constitutes the greatest value and is even above the law (this is what happens in the microstory “Z roczników chińskich”: Ya-o-tse has knowledge

²⁷ Edward Pieścikowski, “Prus i pieniądze”, in: idem, *Bolesław Prus – “humorysta w wielkim stylu”*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie 2012, pp. 9–17.

²⁸ See: ibidem, pp. 9–12.

²⁹ Edward Pieścikowski, “Prus i pieniądze”, p. 13.

³⁰ See: Stefania Zahorska, “Wokulski – krzywe zwierciadło pozytywizmu”, quoted in: *Prus. Z dziejów recepcji twórczości*, ed. Edward Pieścikowski, Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe 1988, pp. 382–383 and Edward Pieścikowski, “Prus i pieniądze”, pp. 15–16.

³¹ Edward Pieścikowski, “Prus i pieniądze”, p. 16.

and education, which give him a position of authority, but he instantly abuses it and reaches for the “true” power – silver and gold). If we realise at the same time that these reflections were authored by the same person who created such characters as Wokulski or Solski, the text seems to be permeated with the desire to possess a privilege that liberates from everyday concerns, from requests and loans, which often entail troubles. This is by no means to suggest that Prus, even in a playful way, wished for a corrupted world – he rather desired transparency in administration and human honesty at every level of the social ladder. Nevertheless, the author presents the hardships related to the shortage of money in the family purse and the humiliation resulting from the dependence on diverse “sovereigns”. In the parable, these misfortunes are juxtaposed with the unlimited wealth, which is the key that opens all doors in an easy, albeit immoral, way. As for the greed presented in both microstories “Z roczników chińskich”, although it is ridiculed and even associated with the menace of eternal damnation, it remains (especially in the case of youthful recklessness) a human impulse, a temptation to which anyone can yield if they are haunted by the desire to possess riches and the benefits they provide – both material and psychological.

Another artistic idea that will return more than once as a complex theme of Bolesław Prus’s short stories and novels is the figure of a philosopher. The humorous tale “Filozof i prostak” is one of the first literary effects of Prus’s interest in logic. As demonstrated by Agnieszka Czajkowska, at the time when this microstory was written, the author worked on a theoretical work in that field and was also probably in the course of translating John Stuart Mill’s *A System of Logic*.³² Hence, perhaps, the criticism included in the text of a certain mode of practicing philosophy, selectively, for the purpose of justifying one’s own interests. This method is presented in the text as a technique of fact manipulation. The merchant Y-ang uses his own “logic” and prefers to bribe the court rather than repay the faithful servant the due sum (and since he has enough money to bribe the court, he could as well repay the debt). As for the mandarin representing the justice, for his own benefit – that is to gain some money – he twists the facts and bends the reality in favour of the man who bribed him. Then the convicted S-ju meets the philosopher, who traps him mentally with his argumentation, neither explaining to him the real cause of his misfortune, nor giving him consolation. The ending of the microstory leaves the reader with the question of whether S-ju, had he “known some philosophy”, that is, had he tried to explain the absurdities of the world by means of vague and mutually contradicting principles, would have been happier and would have more easily accepted his fate:

After those words of the philosopher, happiness and peace filled the whole earth. Y-ak was happy, for he knew no one could equal him in wisdom; the mandarins were happy, for recently an English ship had sunk on the Yellow Sea; the common people were happy, for there was great abundance of rice and tea; finally, the executioner Fu was happy, for on that day, he cut off various limbs of many people and took their garments.

³² See: Agnieszka Czajkowska, “Filozof na prowincji”, pp. 139–140.

Only S-ju the coolie spoiled the general happiness with his untimely screams and complaints; yet no one was surprised, for it was well known that he was a simpleton and knew nothing about philosophy.³³

The irony of this epilogue highlights the futility of the philosopher’s achievements, thus ridiculing not only this field of knowledge but also the person of the sage. This is not the last time when Prus portrays a professional thinker in this way. In the short story *Doktor filozofii na prowincji* [Doctor of Philosophy in a Provincial Town], there is a dissonance between the image of the scholar that the community of the provincial town of X has created and the actual figure of the man. The doctor of sciences does not want to talk endlessly about the theory of the unconscious, he prefers to eat or sleep, and his appearance is very different from the elegant, idealised image of an intellectual. The disappointment experienced by the provincial town after the meeting with the scholar puts into doubt the social utility of philosophy, especially when it is practiced in a hermetic language, within the walls of a university, perhaps also in detachment from the learned man’s life. The satire is aimed mainly at the town’s narrow-minded community, for whom the distinguishing feature of intelligence is proper appearance or wise harangues, but it also uncovers the inconsistency in the thinker’s actions; it seems that he is not in the least interested in trying out his own theses – his practice of philosophy ends with the publication of a treatise. An echo of the mocking attitude towards certain representatives of that profession can also be found in a note from *Kroniki* dated 6 June 1874: “Oh... how hot it is today! [...] The house proprietors ventilate the vestibules and corridors, the tenants – their apartments, men of letters – their hats, and philosophers – even their new shoes, all in vain”.³⁴

Professor Dębicki from the *Emancipated Women*, who is sometimes deemed as the author’s *porte-parole*,³⁵ is a completely different kind of philosopher. Above all, this teacher at Mrs. Latter’s pension does not proclaim himself a philosopher; he teaches mathematics, which fits the positivist conception of science. Prus did not construct him as a grotesque figure, but rather one that arouses sympathy and respect, even if he is not devoid of eccentricity, as remarked by Tadeusz Budrewicz: “The professor is consistently presented as the opposition of mediocrity [...]. Dębicki is both comic and sublime, a goof in the practical matters of life and a discreet influence on other people’s

³³ Bolesław Prus, “Filozof i prostak”, p. 195.

³⁴ Idem, *Kroniki*, vols. 1–3, ed. Iwona Węgrzyn, Warsaw–Lublin: Towarzystwo Literackie im. Adama Mickiewicza; Wydawnictwo Episteme 2017, p. 131.

³⁵ See, e.g., Janina Kulczycka-Saloni, *Z dziejów Dickensa w Polsce: “Emancypantki” a “Bleak House”*, Łódź: Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza Polonista 1947, p. 20. Tadeusz Budrewicz pointed out that certain key notions from the professor’s lectures can be found in Bolesław Prus’s *Notatki o kompozycji* [Notes on Composition] or his philosophical treatises, see: Tadeusz Budrewicz, “Filozofia profesora Dębickiego sposobem analitycznym wyłożona”, in: *Prus i inni. Prace ofiarowane profesorowi Stanisławowi Ficie*, eds. Jakub A. Malik, Ewa Paczoska, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego 2003, pp. 103–104.

fate [...]”.³⁶ The character has humorous, comic features, but at the same time, he has a lot of agency and demonstrates extraordinary wisdom and maturity. The clumsiness or ridiculousness of Dębicki reinforces the effect of surprise when his knowledge is most exposed, that is, during his lectures.³⁷

Thus, we can clearly see the evolution of the image of a philosopher in the work of the author of *The Doll*. After the writer’s reaching for anti-models, after the ironic tone accompanying the “achievements” of thinkers, and that with a suggestion that this is their universal mode of action (since it could take place even in the remote Shanghai), Dębicki appears as one who practices his discipline in an exemplary manner. His philosophy is not limited merely to theories, but it has a direct influence on other people’s lives – after all, he played an important role in the spiritual development of some of the characters, in particular Madzia. Although this statement does not entirely unravel the meaning of this complex hero of the *Emancipated Women*, it shows to what extent the figure of a philosopher has come to be appreciated in Prus’s work since his first text that spoke of a similar character.

From a work as inconspicuous as “Filozof i prostak” one can deduce many meanings and discern numerous forerunners of Prus’s later novelistic peregrinations. We need to stress once more the great significance of the fact that those meanings were included in microstories taking place precisely in China. Indeed, the remoteness of that place universalises the presented truths, turning them into “parabolic vehicles of practical wisdom”.³⁸ Considering how Prus perceived the Middle Kingdom in later years, with what values he associated it (tradition, strength, citizens’ courage) and what he must have known, at least in part, already as a thirty-year-old journalist and writer, that place also evoked the permanence of ancient principles and their otherness resulting from cultural differences between Asia and Europe. Thus, “universalism” does not fully render the semantic potential of China – even the imaginary China, full of stereotypes – as a place of action in a work of early realism. Shanghai and Beijing were radically different from the places known to the inhabitants of Polish lands (let us recall the ending of the humorous tale “Traktat o czystości”: “in the 19th century cleanliness was taken care of **even** [emphasis mine – MR] near Beijing”; near Beijing means not here, not at our place, in a location which we do not think about every day). Therefore, discovering a fragment of one’s own experiences among the foreign names of people and places was for the reader a surprise and thus had a cognitive value. According to the principles established by the humorous tale as a genre, but also by the profile of the magazine *Mucha*, in which the story was first published, the texts were supposed to be maintained in a frivolous tone, to entertain and not to encumber with knowledge or emotions. As a result, we do not find in them an analysis of the Confucian idea of

³⁶ Tadeusz Budrewicz, “Filozofia profesora Dębickiego”, p. 102.

³⁷ For more detail about the specific character of this figure see also: Dariusz Trzeźniowski, “*Emancypantki, czyli filozofia błazna*”, in: *Bolesław Prus – pisarz nowoczesny*, ed. Jakub A. Malik, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego 2009, pp. 71–86.

³⁸ Józef Bachórz, “*Prawda Aleksandra Świętochowskiego*”, p. 350.

social order or a detailed description of the geographical conditions of that part of Asia. However, we can learn what image of China was projected by the humour magazine and, to some extent, by Prus. Moreover, the comparison of this fragment of his writing with his later works has revealed which concepts were budding in his imagination from the first years of his activity and what shapes they took later.

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