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A Trial of Materialism*

Próba materializmu

URSZULA ŻUKOWSKA

University of Warsaw, Poland

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6460-1401>

e-mail: u.zukowska@gmail.com

Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to present the main stream of the reception of Lucretius' materialistic philosophy in Poland based on the works of the positivist period, as well as the stances of scholars who take up this subject. It outlines how positivism remains faithful to the Romantic spirit concerning the primacy of spirit and God over materialism and scientism. Additionally, the paper presents the arguments used against the materialistic philosophy in the works of Bolesław Prus and Ignacy Dąbrowski. This has led to the conclusion that there was no place for an alternative to Christian doctrine.

Keywords: materialism, Lucretius, positivism, scientism, Bolesław Prus, Ignacy Dąbrowski

Abstrakt. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie głównego nurtu recepcji filozofii materialistycznej Lukrecjusza w Polsce na przykładzie dzieł z epoki pozytywizmu, a także stanowisk badaczy, którzy ten temat podejmują. Ukazano, w jaki sposób pozytywizm pozostaje wierny romantycznemu duchowi w kwestii prymatu ducha i Boga nad materializmem i scjentyzmem. Ponadto w artykule zaprezentowano argumenty z dzieł Bolesława Prusa oraz Ignacego Dąbrowskiego, którym filozofia

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Contact details of the author: Faculty of Polish Studies, University of Warsaw, 26/28 Krakowskie Przedmieście, 00-927 Warsaw, Poland, phone: +48 22 55 20 428; +48 22 55 20 696.

materialistyczna w Polsce musi się oprzeć. To doprowadziło do konkluzji o braku miejsca dla alternatywy wobec doktryny chrześcijańskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: materializm, Lukrecjusz, pozytywizm, scjentyzm, Bolesław Prus, Ignacy Dąbrowski

STATE OF THE RESEARCH

Polish scholars rarely take up the subject of Lucretius and his materialistic philosophy. They have been insisting since the end of the 19th century that there is no place in Polish culture for this philosopher of nature and his atheist alternative worldview. Friedrich Albert Lange diagnoses this rejection of rational, materialistic philosophy in his work entitled *Historia filozofii materyalistycznej*, the translation of which was published in 1881, as follows:

Once a rule is stated that it is our duty to build a spiritual world, more beautiful and perfect than reality, then we have to recognise myth – as a myth. However, it is more important to rise to the cognition that the very necessity, the same transcendental core of our humanity, feeds us with an image of the world of reality through our senses, and in the highest functions of poetic and creative synthesis leads us to create a perfect world, to which we could retreat, escaping the limits of our senses, where we will find the true home for our spirit. (Lange 1881, p. 6)¹

Polish scholars – including Tadeusz Sinko, who exactly thirty years later carried out the first synthesis of the presence of Lucretius in the general Polish thought in the humanities in his work *Polski Anti-Lukrecjusz [Polish Anti-Lukrecjusz]* – used much more explicit words than their German counterpart, referring to the Roman philosopher as a “fanatic of the lack of religion” (Sinko, 1911). For Sinko, the atheism of the first materialist was the reason for his rejection. Contemporary scholars also remain under the influence of the very same religious dogma, including Zbigniew Danek, who wrote: “A poet who preached extreme materialism and argued against religion could not be accepted in Poland” [“Poeta, który głosił skrajny materializm i programowo występował przeciwko religii, nie mógł być w Polsce akceptowany”] (Danek, 2003, p. 1). This would also be the reason for

¹ “Skoro raz stanie zasada, że powinnością jest naszą wytworzyć sobie w duchu świat piękniejszy i doskonalszy, niż świat rzeczywistości, wtedy i myt – jako myt – znać musimy. Lecz ważniejszym jest wznieść się do poznania, że też sama konieczność, ten sam transcendentalny rdzeń naszej istoty ludzkiej, przez zmysły daje nam obraz świata rzeczywistości, i w najwyższych funkcjach poetycznej i twórczej syntezy doprowadza nas do wytworzenia sobie świata ideału, do którego moglibyśmy schronić się, wymykając z granic zmysłów, i w którym odnajdujemy prawdziwą ojczyznę ducha naszego.”

rejecting materialistic thought together with burying the name of its creator – there was no place for God in the space made up solely of particles. Most scholars opposed against materialism can be found among positivists. Positivism, which at the beginning stood in opposition to Romanticism, was in agreement with it concerning this sole issue. As Henryk Markiewicz wrote: “Positivists generally refrained from metaphysical thoughts, they avoided taking a stance concerning philosophical materialism or distanced themselves from it” [“Pozytywiści powstrzymywali się na ogół od rozważań metafizycznych, unikali wyraźnego zajmowania stanowiska wobec materializmu filozoficznego lub dystansowali się wobec niego”] (Markiewicz, 1999, p. 19). They, however, did not stop at that and with time, when scientism began to run its course, they entered into a lively debate with materialism, eventually rejecting it. Could it have been any different in the epoch in which Markiewicz outlined four world-view models of positivism, two of which – “post-Romanticism: the recognition of the superiority of emotion over intellect, the primacy of the spiritual over the material [...] and traditionalism: an ideology that proclaimed the primacy of the truths of the religion, equating Polishness and Catholicism, emphasizing the value of tradition and the continuity of social institutions” [“postromantyzm: uznanie przewagi czynnika uczuciowego nad intelektualnym, wyższości walorów duchowych nad materialnymi [...] oraz tradycjonalizm: ideologii, która głosiła prymat prawd religii objawionej, stawiała znak równości między polskością a katolicyzmem, uwydatniała wartość tradycji i ciągłości instytucji społecznych”] (Markiewicz, 1999, p. 17) – were so clearly in favor of divine order. This does not mean that there was no debate concerning this *status quo* in the Polish culture, but it was too short-lived or too invisible to pierce through the Christian monolithic worldview. The examples of debates with materialism will be based on two works from this period. The first will be *Śmierć* [*Death*] by Ignacy Dąbrowski, a naturalistic work heralding the rise of Young Poland, the second is a lecture by Professor Dębicki from the fourth volume of Bolesław Prus’ *Emancypantki* [*The New Woman*]. The lecture, which Prus put in the mouth of his character, is treated by scholars as a kind of a separate work in relation to the novel in its entirety, linked with *Śmierć* by the circumstances in which it was delivered. In Dąbrowski’s work, the protagonist is a dying young man who – as a child of the end of an era – lost his faith and in this tragic situation must put his materialistic worldview to the test. As if in response to this, Professor Dębicki from *Emancypantki* gives his anti-materialistic lecture to a young man who has to come to terms with a similar fate as a materialist, like Dąbrowski’s student. A summary of the state of research on Professor Dębicki’s lecture is provided by Tadeusz Budrewicz in his text: *Filozofia profesora Dębickiego sposobem analitycznym wyłożona* [*Professor Dębicki’s Philosophy Explained in an Analytical Manner*], published in *Prus i inni*

[*Prus and Others*], where one may find a discussion of the studies by Edward Pieścikowski, Zygmunt Szweykowski, Stanisław Krzemiński, Janina Kulczycka-Saloni and others. As for Ignacy Dąbrowski, Teresa Walas brought him up in her work *Ku otchłani (dekadentyzm w literaturze polskiej 1890–1905)* [*Towards the Abyss (Decadence in Polish Literature 1890–1905)*], where not only does she carry out a thorough analysis of the state of the soul and the thoughts of the dying man in detail, but she also inscribes them into the general reflection of the end of the century. Danuta Knysz-Rudzka, among others, wrote about Dąbrowski's work, stating that it came from the epoch following that of Prus' prose. Dąbrowski was classified in a similar way by Tomasz Lewandowski, who prepared an extensive introduction to the 2001 edition of *Śmierć*.

INTRODUCTION

The first synthesis of materialistic thought in Poland was made by Stanisław Trembecki in his descriptive poem *Sofijówka*. The narrator of the work walks around the garden and witnesses a debate of philosophers, in which the philosophy of the cosmos as a theatre of the movement of matter is directly proposed. Their words are almost a mirror image of Lucretius' words from his only work: *De rerum natura*. Trembecki's materialism is the philosophy of a mature poet who, while creating a poem about the garden, encodes in it the signs of not only Polish but also European culture. His way with words and extraordinary talent were appreciated shortly after the publication of *Sofijówka*, among others, by Mickiewicz, who admired Trembecki's style while rejecting his worldview. Mickiewicz had to recognise the spirit of Lucretius in Trembecki's garden. He calls him in the third part of *Dziady* [*Forefathers' Eve*] like a ghost right after the Great Improvisation. The priest who comes to perform an exorcism on Konrad, after he tries to reject God in favour of reason, calls Satan five names: Lucretius, Leviathan, Voltaire, alter Fritz, Legio sum. This rejection and the primacy of the spirit over reason would later be taken over by positivism. Trembecki's stanzas, stemming from serene stoicism, the artistry and beauty of which were indisputable, would not survive in the face of the monolith of theocentric thought. However, positivism would deal with materialism in another way – instead of the stigma of evilness, it would drown it into nihilism and accuse it of taking away meaning, the domain of the young and inexperienced, who have yet to convert to the right way – the Christian way. We are of course talking about late Positivism, which prepared the ground for Young Poland, which Walas diagnosed as follows:

[...] the sense of ethical crisis, which often turns into a general crisis of values, could be clearly visible in Polish literature and journalism at the end of the century, [...] mainly by means of two ways of thinking – one of which is the issue of the loss of faith, the other is the clash of traditional morality with determinism and critical knowledge. The former is not so much philosophical as it refers to common life and is directly linked with another feeling – the awareness of the senselessness of life, which has been deprived of its religious justification, and which is unable to find support in an idea, while the suffering, fear and hunger of teleology become increasingly apparent and painful. (Walas, 1986, p. 178)²

She would also bring up the examples of Świętochowski, Sienkiewicz and his *Bez dogmatu* [*Without Dogma*], as well as Prus. In his work *Emancypantki*, Prus would make two men – Kazimierz and Zdzisław – materialists. Kazimierz Norski, described as a ne'er-do-well, spoiled young man without a conscience, would present his small lectures on materialism to the main character – Madzia, among many others, which Markiewicz would later describe as follows: “The internal crisis in the psyche of the protagonist is exacerbated by the nihilistic consequences of vulgar materialism” [“Kryzys wewnętrzny w psychice bohaterki zaostrza się jeszcze bardziej, gdy otwierają się przed nią nihilistyczne konsekwencje wulgarnego materializmu”] (Markiewicz, 1999, p. 153). It is Kazimierz, who represents the “vulgar materialism,” leading to dismay and even nihilism in this straightforward female character. Zdzisław, the second character marked by the stigma of materialism, is fortunately not so much vulgar as he is simply lost, deprived of parental care and busy – thus, he allows himself to be carried away by the philosophy of the end of the century, that of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and admits that he believes in materialism. When he gets a death sentence in the form of a tuberculosis diagnosis, he is not able to cope with his imminent death, because the philosophy he follows does not offer any consolation, instead causing even more pain. Luckily, Professor Dębicki comes to the aid of the dismayed Madzia and her dying brother – according to Markiewicz:

[he] offers his listeners a bold philosophical fantasy, he proves the existence of personal God, the immortality of spiritual beings, the ideal existence of human pursuits, as well as the sense and value of suffering as a stimulus for progress and as a factor that strengthens human solidarity. (Markiewicz, 1999, p. 153)³

² “[...] poczucie etycznego kryzysu, przeobrażającego się często w ogólny kryzys wartości ujawnia się wyraźnie w literaturze i publicystyce polskiej końca wieku, [...] za pomocą dwu przede wszystkim myślowych wątków: jeden – to problem utraty wiary religijnej, drugi – to zderzenie się moralności tradycyjnej z determinizmem i krytyczną wiedzą. Pierwszy ma charakter nie tyle filozoficzny co potocznie życiowy i łączy się bezpośrednio z innym odczuciem: ze świadomością bezsensu życia, któremu odjęto uzasadnienie religijne, i które nie potrafi znaleźć oparcia w idei, podczas gdy cierpienie, strach i głód teleologii są w nim trwale i coraz dotkliwiej obecne.”

³ “roztacza przed słuchaczami śmiałą fantazję filozoficzną: dowodzi istnienia Boga osobowo, nieśmiertelności bytów duchowych, idealnego trwania osiągnięć człowieka, wreszcie sensu i wartości cierpienia jako bodźca postępu i czynnika umacniającego międzyludzką solidarność.”

Rudnicki, the student presented in Dąbrowski's novel, unfortunately could not expect a rescue from a bottomless pit of despair. He would have to accept the fact of his mortality without hope of rebirth in paradise. It is death that would be the greatest trial of materialism – the fear of nothingness and oblivion, the suffering without guilt were what made the authors of the end of the epoch present reason and faith in science with near-hostility.

THE TRIAL OF MATERIALISM

Materialism has already been tried in the face of death. Trembecki, who was described by Jerzy Snopek as follows: "The melancholy, which has its source in existential anxiety, permeates [...] parts of the work [...]. The thoughts of death and soulless eternity appear in a poem that was supposed to be a cheerful paean to beauty and power" ["Melancholia, mająca swe źródło w niepokoju egzystencjalnym, przenika [...] partie utworu, [...]. Myśli o śmierci i bezdusznej wieczności pojawiają się w poemacie, który miał być pogodnym peanem na cześć piękna i potęgi"] (Snopek, 2000, p. 16), expressed his reflection on the passing away in the spirit of Epicurean stoicism:

And when the well-worn out and tired by age,
one discovers that it is time to cease to be a man,
he would lay alongside his ancestors then,
as if he stood up from the table after a grand feast.
(Trembecki, 2000, verses: 453–455)⁴

However, Trembecki wrote these words from the standpoint of a man who had much more time to live his life, which is why he can afford a stoic reflection on the time spent on Earth. It was Dąbrowski, who would put materialism to a real test in the face of premature death. His protagonist, who wrote a diary of a dying student, would gather reflections on the emptiness, caused by faith in nothing but atoms and his own mind:

I am the personified mediocrity of this phalanx of half-educated people, with nothingness in their souls, [...] with eyes turned towards the soil, instead of the sky. Life is the basis for everything,

⁴ "A gdy dobrze strawionym obciążonym wiekiem / pozna, że już przychodzi przestać być człowiekiem, / tak się spokojnie złoży, z przodkami pospołu, / jak gdy po walnej uczcie wstawałby od stołu."

[...] we never notice anything else. Living with it is not an issue, but when death comes, we then give in to despair. (Dąbrowski, 1921, p. 121)⁵

In the spirit of Lange's diagnosis brought up at the beginning, the protagonist lacks a world of spirit that would let him escape from the cruel reality, where he awaits the inevitable nothingness. His journey to coming to terms with his mortality starts at the end of February when he himself does not yet believe in the finality of his fate. Then, he slowly realises the seriousness of his situation in the coming months. In April, he is certain of his demise. Weeks spent on battling with his thoughts lead to final conclusions: "It is my »self« that seems so much conscious and vital to me that I cannot believe that it might cease to exist" ["To moje »ja« tak dalece wydaje mi się przytomnem i niezbędnie żywotnem, że nie mogę żadną miarą uwierzyć aby istnieć przestało"] (Dąbrowski, 1921, p. 160) – the protagonist wrote an entry, dated 5 April. The young man keeps looking for answers he has not found, he needs someone to give meaning to his suffering:

I would love to give up the rest of my life, just to give my wandering mind some respite, something to hold on, and I could not,

and:

It is so good, when it is so difficult to deal with one's own mind, to trust someone blindly, make that person one's own conscience and follow their orders, just go – even onto the steps of the throne or a scaffold. (Dąbrowski, 1921, pp. 162–179)⁶

The protagonist's agony starts on Easter, a celebration commemorating the great mystery of Christ's suffering and resurrection. The entry from 18 April seems to be a record of the last supper of a dying student. What calms him down just before he dies is the sacrament of last rites:

Now I can die calmly – it was the priest who told me that... I am calm, even happy, perhaps [...]. He did not even attempt to reconcile me with God, he reconciled me only with myself and gave me the absolution of the world. (Dąbrowski, 1921, p. 197)⁷

⁵ "Jestem uosobioną przeciętnością tej falangi współkształconych ludzi, z nicością w duszy, [...] z oczami ku ziemi nie ku niebu zwróconemi. Na życiu opieramy wszystko [...] nie poza niem nie dostrzegając. I żyć z tem dobrze, ale żyć tylko; a gdy umierać przyjdzie, stajemy się pastwą rozpaczy."

⁶ "Byłbym oddał z rozkoszą te resztki życia, by tylko móc zahaczyć o cośkolwiek swój błędny umysł – i nie mogłem," and: "To tak dobrze, kiedy z własną myślą uporać się trudno, zaufać komuś ślepo, zrobić go swoim sumieniem, i tak iść za rozkazem, iść – choćby po stopniach tronu albo rusztowania."

⁷ "Teraz już mogę spokojnie umierać: to on, to kapłan mi to powiedział... Jestem spokojny, nawet szczęśliwy może [...]. Nie pojednał mię z Bogiem, bo nawet nie próbował tego, pojednał mię tylko z sobą samym i dał rozgrzeszenie świata."

What turns out to be most important for him is a sense of belonging, being a part of history, finding an analogy of his own fate to that of Christ, and the words of the priest he found the most important for him were: “»My son!« – he said. »Why nobody ever calls me that?«” [“»Mój synu!« – powiedział. »Dlaczego nikt tak do mnie nie mówi?«”] (Dąbrowski, 1921, p. 198).

In the face of despair of Zdzisław, whose words are similar to those of the protagonist of *Śmierć*: “After all, in the pit, to which you are going to toss my corpse, not only the human being will be left rotting, but the entire universe that is reflected in my brain, which is alive and still exists today... But tomorrow it will be no more” [“Przecież w dole, do którego rzucicie moje zwłoki, psuć się będzie już nie tylko człowiek, ale cały wszechświat, który odbija się w moim mózgu, żyje i jeszcze dziś jest... Ale jutro już go nie będzie”] (Prus, 1884, p. 292), Professor Dębicki draws a simple conclusion, does what Dąbrowski’s student dreams of and with the certainty of a teacher he provides answers to the questions of the dying man, giving him hope: “And I am convinced that after death there is further life that differs from the earthly one only by being fuller” [“A ja jestem przekonany, że po śmierci następuje dalszy ciąg życia, które różni się od obecnego tylko tym, że jest pełniejsze”] (Prus, 1884, p. 293), which sounds almost infantile when we look at it just after reading *Śmierć*. Such certainty put in the mouth of the protagonist – “the novel’s resonator,” as Markiewicz put it – seems arrogant in the face of such a long study of dying, which is why the next excerpt complements it perfectly:

“Nothingness; eternal life... eternal life...” – just thinking about it brought such an immense joy to Madzia’s heart that she was ready not only to calm her brother down, but also to die with him, so that she could have this fuller life as soon as possible... (Prus, 1884, p. 293)⁸

Then the professor takes to explain to the incredulous Zdzisław that this is what the afterlife looks like. At first, his lecture may even sound familiar to a materialist:

As far as the decay is concerned, the body decays constantly, with every passing second. That is not all, our bodies change completely at least once a year – not a single particle remains unchanged within them. [...]. From this it follows that [...] you, who are about thirty years old, have already given your body to the air and earth thirty times. (Prus, 1884, p. 295)⁹

⁸ “»Nicość; życie wieczne... Życie wieczne...« – na samą myśl o tym w sercu Madzi zbudziła się taka szalona radość, że była gotowa nie tylko uspokajać brata, ale i umrzeć z nim, byle prędzej osiąść owo pełniejsze życie...”

⁹ “Jeżeli panu chodzi o rozkład organizmu, toć on rozkłada się ciągle, w każdej sekundzie. Nie dość na tym; organizm nasz co najmniej raz na rok zmienia się całkowicie: ani jedna cząstka nie pozostaje w nim ta sama, [...]. Z czego wynika, że [...] pan, który masz około trzydzieści lat, już ze trzydzieści razy oddał swój organizm powietrzu i ziemi.”

Trembecki put it in similar words:

None of these particles are left in me,
 which made up my body half a century ago.
 In their place, through food, breath and beverage
 I turned parts of other lives into my own. [...]
 Every second, turned into invisible particles,
 I am turned into food for other creatures again.
 When the edifices of our bodies, slowly decaying,
 won't be able to take the heavenly fire any more,
 we used to call it death, and our earthly remains
 the womb of our Great Mother will give to other beings.
 (Trembecki, 2000, verses: 373–384)¹⁰

For the Enlightenment materialist, what follows is the further life of the matter that we have borrowed for a moment, which will now create and die but without us. However, Prus – posing as a scientist – insists on an individual spirit, which not only will continue to live and apparently feel, but even do it better than in life. All this by the grace of God. As Tadeusz Budrewicz wrote:

Dębicki – an “inspired prophet” uses only his words. [...] he is an apostle of Christian truth about God in a world of lost Positivist souls wandering between materialistic atheism and spiritism. [...] Thus, in Debicki’s discourse, in addition to logical and scientific concepts of “proof” and “necessary effect,” also includes terms such as: “I feel instinctively,” “I do not believe in nothingness, but in life.” (Budrewicz, 2003, p. 110)¹¹

This seemingly scientific and logical reasoning, at the same time trying to steer clear of science. Edward Pięścikowski would describe it as follows:

[...] I believe that this lecture was addressed towards two recipients – in the plot, that is in relation to the late 1870s, it was about materialism; however, in relation to the beginning of the 1890s it was also about materialism (thus, *The New Woman* was one of the parts of the antimaterialist

¹⁰ “Żadnego z tych już we mnie prosków nie zostało, / które moje składały przed półwiekiem ciała. / Na ich miejsce przez pokarm, oddech i napoje / innych żyjątek części obróciłem w moje. [...] / Co chwila w niedostrzeżne rozrabiany pyłki / znowu innym istotom idę na posiłki. / Gdy ciało naszych budowla, niszcząca z wolna, / niebieskiego brać ognia już nie będzie zdolna, / zwać to zwykliśmy skonem, a nasze ostatki /innym rozda żyjątkom Wielkiej łono Matki.”

¹¹ “Dębicki – »natchniony prorok« posługuje się tylko słowem. [...] jest apostołem chrześcijańskiej prawdy o Bogu w świecie zagubionych dusz pozytywistycznych, błąkających się między materialistycznym ateizmem a spirytyzmem. [...] Stąd w języku Dębickiego obok pojęć logicznych i naukowych, typu »dowodzi«, »konieczny skutek«, pojawiają się z czasem coraz częściej określenia takie jak: »czuję instynktownie«, »nie wierzę w nicość, ale w życie«.”

campaign of the time). However, more than all, it was about the spreading philosophy of pessimism and the emerging Nietzscheanism, which – according to Prus – was a “philosophy about... nothing.” (Pieścikowski, 1970, p. 167)

CONCLUSIONS

However, was it really about rational materialism? About these immortal particles and the rational approach to life and the world? After all, in Dębicki’s lecture, Prus pretends to be a scholar, thus trying to fight for the rule of minds and hearts using the authority of science. As Walas wrote:

So all the young and old, conservatives and modernists, started attacking science, even the former followers all started to deny it. [...]. Scientific knowledge was to blame for everything and had to suffer the consequences for everything it had brought – the decline of faith, the death of poetry, the weakening of mental constitution and the twilight of ideals. (Walas, 1986, p. 174)¹²

But is science really to blame for this? Maybe it is this spiritual emptiness, which the Positivists see in the world made up only of particles. Was the pessimism of the end of the century really born out of knowledge and forgoing doctrines? Perhaps it was the inability to fill the void after “the death of God,” the lack of preparedness for building another spiritual system, apart from that imposed by Christianity. Perhaps it was the inability to believe in one’s own value and give meaning to existence besides the one denoted by God? Maybe this is Professor Debicki’s actual intent. Maybe this is the real trial of materialism and a class in Positivism at the same time – the previous deafening silence about alternatives to the doctrine of faith, the lack of questions and a single correct answer – perhaps they are to blame for the “death of poetry” and the “twilight of ideals” at the end of the century, when the world awakens to seek other philosophical systems. Dąbrowski’s student dies in peace with himself only after the priest visits him and reconciles him with the world, assures him that he still belongs to it by saying: “My son.” Thus, he takes him back to the Christian world, from which there is apparently no escape. Perhaps it was the lack of a true reception of the legacy of the Enlightenment that caused the loss of the polyphony of nascent modernity and new ideas that overthrew the old order. Without Lucretius, damned and rejected,

¹² “Na naukę rzucili się więc wszyscy: młodzi i starzy, konserwatyści i moderniści, zapierać się jej poczęli także dotychczasowi czciciele. [...]. Wiedza naukowa winna była wszystkiemu i za wszystko miała ponosić odpowiedzialność: za upadek wiary, za śmierć poezji, za osłabienie psychicznej odporności i za zmierzch ideałów.”

without Trembecki and others who were never given the voice, there was no hope of finding a way in the face of the twilight of the old world.

Translated into English: Lingua Lab

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