

# The Gypsy Dream



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**The ways the Romani have been depicted in European literature are projections of various fears, phobias, and prejudices against strangers, while at the same time expressing yearnings for the idealistic side of life – freedom, happiness, and disregard for borders**

Literary portrayals of “the Other” (outgroupers and strangers), almost invariably contain multilayered accounts of strategies for coping with borders and, more specifically, with the paralyzing fear of crossing them and venturing into the unknown, beyond accepted and deeply entrenched norms. To paraphrase the words of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and Slovene cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, the fear of looking beyond borders, of gaining insight into the Real and realizing what lies hidden beneath the Visible, was the very factor that brought to life both romanticized and demonized narratives of reality. Such narratives in fact served the purpose of drawing a veil over reality, as standing face to face with the Real meant reaching the border of sanity.

### Magic and trickery

Fear-driven and truth-concealing narratives have likewise been used in portrayals of the Roma people as strangers in the eyes of European nations. Whether they originated in Western or in Eastern Europe, literary depictions of the “Pharaoh’s people” have always been exceptionally inconsistent with reality. Over as many as six centuries, such portrayals have served chiefly as accounts of subconscious fears and phobias or projections of the desires felt by those who wielded influence over people’s hearts and minds yet used their privileged position to effectively deny the Gypsy theme democratic treatment, instead of overcoming stereotypes and barriers in interpersonal communication.

Seen through the prism of this trend, Polish literature is unfortunately no exception. In their literary treatment

of Roma people, Polish authors have likewise highlighted their penchant for magic, thievery, and trickery, blamed them for preventing cows from giving milk and luring the crops away from the fields of their neighbors, as Sebastian Klonowic wrote in *Worek Judaszów* [“Judas’s Sack”], or portrayed them as people filled with hatred of a settled lifestyle and anything reminiscent of home, deprived of any religious affiliation, crassly reckless, and ignorant of the value of life, as Adam Mickiewicz argued at Collège de France. Fortunately, those distorted literary depictions also carry numerous positive overtones. Most of them can be found in Polish interwar poetry, characterized by fond affection for Gypsy culture. The interwar years brought the finest poems about the magic of Gypsy song and dance and Gypsy freedom such as Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński’s poem about Gypsy girls from the Bielański Forest, Julian Tuwim’s verses devoted to Małgorzatka who ran away with Gypsies, and Gypsy themes in the poetry of Józef Czechowicz, Kazimierz Wierzyński, and Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska. But those drawn to Gypsy women also include Russian romanticists (Alexander Pushkin, Leo Tolstoy, who adored Gypsy songs, and Alexander Blok, Russia’s most prominent poet from the beginning of the 19th century and a famous apologist for Gypsy romance) and modern Russian bards – poets and musicians such as Vladimir Vysotsky, Bulat Okudzhava, and Alexander Galich.

### Running away with Gypsies

Such poets went chasing *tabors* (Gypsy wagon camps), at least in their mind’s eye, because they sought to transport themselves into the idyllic world of the Gypsies. But those who actually came into contact with Gypsies often attributed the feeling of strangeness provoked by such encounters to their own failure to conform to the reality of their times. When observing life in Gypsy camps, poets started to yearn for freedom, as the Gypsies were infecting them with their desire for moral, social, political, and transcendental independence.

The most recurring Gypsy themes in Polish poetry included depictions of escapes with Gypsies or to Gypsies, possibly also with the help of Gypsies, into the realities of a different time and space – either away from cities, in the provinces, or away from history, politics, and totalitarian regimes. Gypsies offered them a chance to escape the carousel of history – break free from a world embroiled in political games and pragmatic interests, from the captivity of the here and now. Suspended between myth and





Franciszek Streitt, „Cyganie w drodze” [„Gypsies on the Road”], before 1887, oil on wood, 43.8 x 76.5 cm, private collection

reality, Gypsy enclaves fulfilled their ancient vagabonding imperative through music, mystery, and hectic oriental romance, thus allowing poets to forget about the “horrible world” – the frightening and appalling realities of the present day and to nostalgically return to a period of innocence outside any specific time frame.

Meetings with Gypsies were therefore seen as magical. Those who had even the briefest encounters with “the tribe of dark-skinned brothers” (a term coined by Kazimierz Wierzyński) felt the urge to escape to a different, magical world. By employing Gypsy motifs, poets could travel back in time to their childhood, an idyllic period of dreams, imagination, immortality, and poetry. Gypsy themes were therefore signs of nostalgia, embodiments of dreams of carefree timelessness. In the words of researchers of Gypsy themes in British literature, they expressed dreams of a nullification of history, yearnings for historical obliviousness. While watching “colorful carts,” envious poets thought of Gypsy life as an idyll, a fairy tale outside the borders of history and beyond the reach of any authorities.

Although Gypsies were believed to live their lives in harmony with the universe, their existence was obviously by no means idyllic. Some poets realized that perfectly well, one example being the poems of Maria Pawlikowska-

Jasnorzewska, who described the life of Gypsy women and their efforts to strike a balance between heaven and earth, life and death, fortune and misfortune, focusing on their life as vagabonds with all its consequences, above all poverty and destitution. Encounters with Gypsies suggested that only those who detached themselves from earth could reach for the stars – they achieved true independence by abandoning everything, turning their backs on the laws of this world.

Those who wandered with Gypsies could therefore feel the infinity of the universe and the eternity of time. If reached in such a painful way, freedom was seen as something desirable and fascinating, an object of envy. On the other hand, such freedom was rejected and forbidden, while Gypsy life, which meant nearing the Border, was seen as a source of fear, frustration, and aversion.

### The power of transformation

Nonetheless, following Gypsies meant not only escaping into a paradise that transcended history and the present day but also singing, being a poet, and regaining the power of the poetic word. According to numerous lyrics, poets, musicians, and sleepwalkers could only be understood by Gypsies, who understood very well the



## Romani motifs in Polish poetry in the interwar years



Kasper Pochwalski, „Cyganki wróżące z kart” [„Gypsies Reading Fortunes From Cards”], 1938, oil on canvas, 64.5 x 71 cm, private collection

beauty of the night and the moon, had contacts with gods, sometimes even wielded power over them. Just like poets, they chiefly wanted to demythologize the world, restore its original beauty, and return to existence filled with hope. Kazimierz Wierzyński, who understood that truth very well, wrote in his Gypsy poems that those enchanted by Gypsy music no longer had “darkness in [their] eyes” and could no longer be wounded by sadness, bad dreams,

yearning, the bitterness of passing time, or “worldly memories,” which had lost their mythical power.

Many artists in Poland, including Józef Czechowicz and the Lublin poets from his milieu, were fascinated by Gypsy music, which was believed to have the power of swaying people’s hearts and minds. Czechowicz’s famous poem “Nuta na dzwony” [“A Note for Bells”] from the volume *Nic więcej* [“Nothing More”] features a dark-skinned dancing



Gypsy girl who turns dreams, reality, and hills wandering on the horizon into music and life, imbuing them with both memories of paradise and reminiscences of death. Gypsy music, which had the magical power of effecting peculiar transformations, could change even a provincial street, as show in the verses written by forgotten poet Artur Rzerzyca, who was also close to the Lublin “mystic.” Another author who extolled the magical songs of the “Pharaoh’s people” was Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, who described a meeting with Gypsy girls in the Bielański Forest in his “Polowanie z sokołami” [“Hunting With Hawks”] and presented the mysterious power of a song hummed by the shoes made by Szymon the shoemaker in a poem written for Hanka Ordonówna. In both poems, Gypsy encounters marked the beginning of a journey into a different and magical world. For the shoes that sang “a green song” and carried “Gypsy tunes”, it was “a faraway world, a green world / with no wars, with no poverty, / where everyone has enough money.” Curiously enough, Gypsy music expressed nothing but truth despite the stereotypes of Gypsy trickery, treachery, and thievery. At a mere gesture of dark-skinned Orpheuses, at the magic sound of words in the Romani language, in Gałczyński’s poetry hills started to dance, morning glory flowers became more fragrant, bees appeared, and clouds continued their journey with a smile of happiness. Gypsy voices brought “hunting with hawks” out of oblivion, causing an outburst of the power of poetic imagination and bringing back the times of great military victories, achievements, mythical greatness, power, and prosperity.

### A life of singing

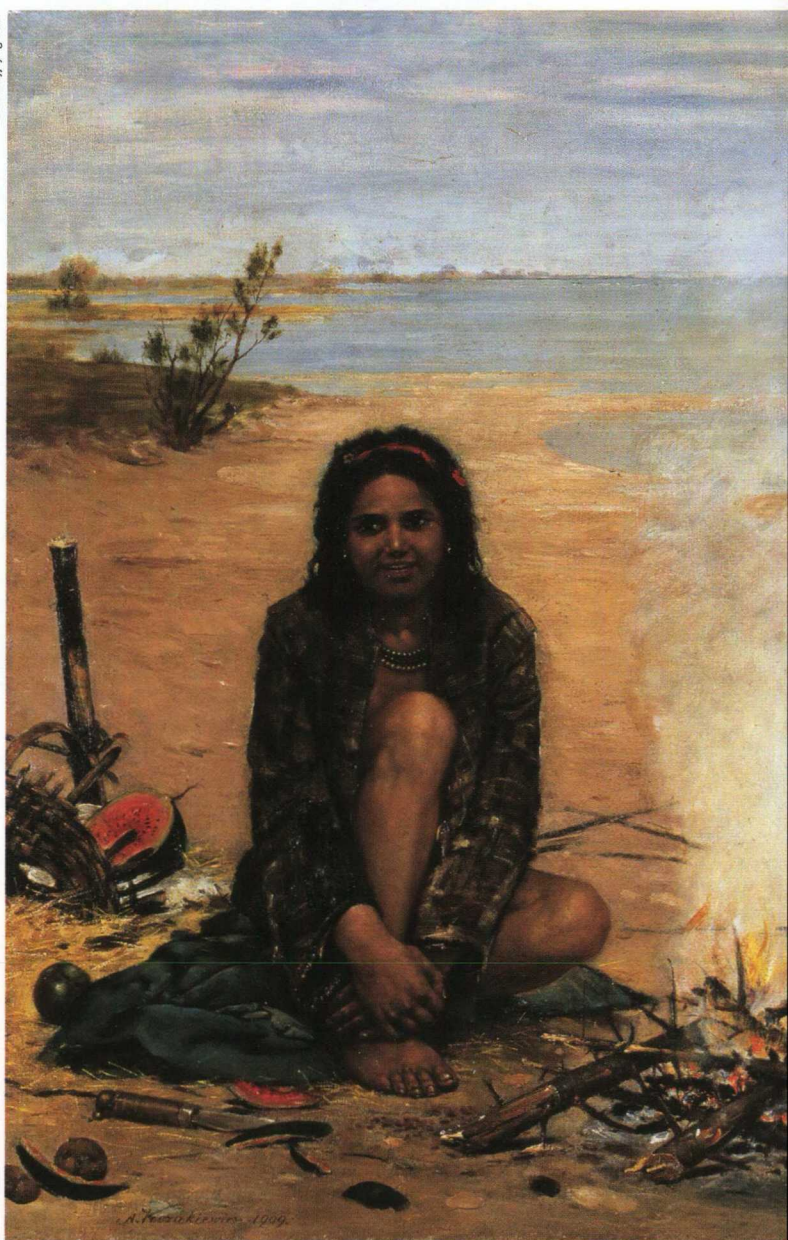
Gypsy music, Gypsy song and dance served as the antithesis of the horrible world, giving poets a moment of comfort and abandon, opening up the door to a different time and space. Gypsies signified links to the universe, infinity, and eternity and served as sources of inspiration, truth, music, and poetry, which were perceived as values that stemmed from a different world and led to that world, thus laying the foundations for the sense of brotherhood and kinship between poets and Gypsies. Obviously, stereotypical depictions of Romani culture involved putting Gypsy magic on par with the power of poetry and highlighting imaginary mental closeness between Gypsies and poets. On the one hand, such portrayals resulted from the romanticized reduction of Gypsy existence to “a life of singing” (such depictions of “Gypsiness” can be found in Russian poetry and Tuwim’s cabaret debut from 1925, the song “Stary Cygan” [“An Old Gypsy”], which featured an old man who lived only for his songs and died with them). On the other hand, such typifications came from the conviction that Gypsies had a different attitude to time and space, as their wanderings were seen as a certain pattern of existence that involved traveling, living on the move. Movements alternated with idle periods, thus

combining futility and purposelessness (going to unknown places for unknown reasons) with certain purposefulness – living to experience life, bear witness to life. And singing all that in songs. ■

#### Further reading:

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Antoni Kozakiewicz, „Cyganka” [„Gypsy Girl”], 1909, oil on canvas, 81.5 x 54.5 cm, private collection