Introduction

THE GREATEST realist in the history of the Polish novel suffered all his life from acute agoraphobia. Not that this curious piece of trivia will unlock any mystery about his writing. At first glance, it may even seem that the reader who enters the novelistic world of Bolesław Prus (1847–1912) is in no need of any special key at all, and most certainly not of a psychopathological one. This is the work of a supremely sane mind, produced in an epoch which, while in reality as much affected by human aberration as any other period in recorded history, at least put the principle of sanity relatively high on its list of priorities.

Still, the fact of Prus's agoraphobia *is* curious. The typical narrator in the realistic novel of the nineteenth century was, as a rule, one who blithely defied all the laws of 'realistic' probability by assuming an all-seeing, Olympian view. Prus's critics at the time accused him of a 'myopic' preference to focus on detail rather than seeing the large picture. While not true of his writing, this was true of his life. Venturing into any space broader than his Warsaw apartment or a couple of familiar streets in the neighbourhood made him dizzy. His worst attack of agoraphobia came upon him when, as a thirty-four-year-old man, he took, for the first time in his life, the risk of visiting a fashionable mountain spa. So much for the Olympian viewpoint. And yet, amazingly, if there is any novelist who has succeeded in unfolding a broad and richly detailed panorama of nineteenth-century Polish life while also bringing this picture alive with genuine human drama, it is Bolesław Prus in his *Lalka, The Doll.*

Serialised in a newspaper, starting in 1887, and published in book form in 1890, this novel had to weather a cold reception before it became what it is today, one of the few most loved and continually reread classics of Polish literature. On its first appearance, it had the double disadvantage of being too extraordinary for its critics and too ordinary for its readers. In the eyes of the former, it strayed too

much off the beaten path of the genre. 'Chaotic composition' was the most frequently reiterated charge, which particularly infuriated Prus, who thought it his most meticulously planned work of fiction to date. In the eyes of the reader, its appearance was overshadowed and its significance dwarfed by the almost simultaneous serialised publication of two novels by two extremely popular and respected authors for whom Prus at that point seemed to be no competition at all: Henryk Sienkiewicz with the final part of his *Trilogy* and the leading Polish woman writer of that epoch, Eliza Orzeszkowa, with her major work, *On the Banks of the Niemen*. Yet it was not Sienkiewicz, for all the tremendous popular appeal of his historical fables, and not Orzeszkowa, with her respected and influential if overly didactic contemporary novels, but Prus who left behind a work worthy of being called *the* Polish novel of the nineteenth century.

The Doll's initial cold reception resulted from both the critics' and the reading public's confusion about the nature of the work. In fact, the whole course of Prus's career up to 1890 was handicapped by a few popular misconceptions about himself and the nature of his writing. When Polish critics today attempt to give a Western audience some idea of Prus's place in Polish literature, they resort almost unavoidably to portraying him as the Chekhov of Poland. Even though such a comparison usually makes little sense, in this particular case the critics may be on to something. As well as their professional training in medicine or science rather than the humanities, perhaps the most striking analogy between the lives, if not the works, of Chekhov and Prus is that each of them had to struggle for a very long time to convince the public that he was a serious writer rather than a cheap humorist. Ironically, the exquisite sense of humour that these two writers shared was, at the outset of their respective careers, both their greatest asset and their curse. It gave each of them his first foothold in the writing business only to turn into a major obstacle on his creative path. In Prus's case, the condescending labels of 'humorist', '*feuilletonist*', 'journalist' and the like stuck so persistently that they affected the first critical reactions to *The Doll* – which saw the light of day when he was, after all, the forty-year-old author of at least one critically acclaimed and definitely serious novel and a large number of equally serious short stories.

His was an epoch that valued seriousness above all things. The so-called Positivists of his sober-minded, moderate, commonsensical and conciliatory generation resisted Romantic stereotypes of national martyrdom, urged involvement with social reform and generally inclined away from the visionary to the realistic and pragmatic. The typical Positivist critic or writer deplored the literature of the immediately preceding period of Romanticism as foolish

flights of fancy. The seeds of the controversy had been sown in 1795, when Poland's territory was ultimately divided and swallowed up by the three neighbouring empires – Russia, Prussia and Austria. An atmosphere of profound spiritual crisis, caused by the Final Partition (an event almost unanimously perceived by Poles as history's, and perhaps even divine providence's act of supreme injustice) meant it took a quarter of a century for the first Romantic poets to emerge. But when Adam Mickiewicz published his first collection in 1822, the avalanche of Romantic poetry began. Eight years later, a motley band of soldiers and civilians – most of them poets themselves, naturally enough – triggered the so-called November Uprising by staging a legendary assault on the Belweder, the Warsaw residence of the Russian governor of Poland. This band used the title of one of Mickiewicz's most celebrated poems, 'Konrad Wallenrod', as shorthand for what happened that November night: 'The word has become flesh, and Wallenrod has become the Belweder.'

The November Uprising was soon crushed, yet in Polish literature the three decades that followed saw the triumph of the greatest Romantic poets. Since the insurrection's defeat in 1831 all of them, including Mickiewicz, had lived in exile but that did not prevent them from exerting a tremendous influence on the minds of their Polish readers everywhere. Such was Romantic poetry's soul-stirring as well as its lethal potential and, more generally, the prevalence of the Romantic value system, that a few independent minds issued warnings against possible consequences. Cyprian Norwid, one of the greatest Polish poets but already a post-Romantic, lamented the fate that would await Poland if it continued to be 'a nation where every action is taken too early, and every book comes out too late'. This aphorism, one referring obviously to the Romantic antinomy of the Word versus the Deed, and reversing its usual order of priority, could not, however, slow down the momentum. In January 1863, another uprising against Tsarist oppression started in the Russian-occupied part of Poland. The future author of *The Doll* was then fifteen and a half years of age.

Because all published work in Russian-occupied Poland had to pass the Tsarist censor, Prus tended to avoid any direct mention of the Uprising or his personal involvement. Yet there is no doubt that this was the most powerful formative experience of his youth. Born as Aleksander Głowacki – the pen name Prus was a reference to his family's coat of arms – in the provincial town of Hrubieszów, he was orphaned early and raised by relatives in Puławy and Lublin. In the early 1860s he moved to Kielce in the custody of his older brother Leon, who was deeply involved in patriotic conspiracy. When the uprising broke out, young Aleksander fought in it, was wounded, and spent some time in hospital and prison. After he was

released he managed to complete his high school education in Lublin, and moved to Warsaw to study – a significant choice – physics and mathematics at the so-called Main School, which was the Russian authorities' official name for the heavily controlled and downgraded former University of Warsaw.

Prus never graduated from the Main School, yet his interest in science was much more than just a passing fad of the Positivist era: he retained it, as a personal hobby, throughout his life. (Some traces of this interest, bordering on science fiction, also show in *The Doll*; in particular, the fictitious invention of a metal lighter than air.) After dropping out of school he tried to make his living at a number of jobs, even as a manual labourer. He made his début in 1866 with a couple of humorous prose pieces published in the Sunday edition of a Warsaw daily. It was, however, only after 1872 that he began writing and publishing more systematically, initially as a frequent contributor to rather disreputable satirical broadsheets. In 1874 he started contributing to more respected periodicals and his writing shifted towards a more serious genre. It was the classic Central European genre of the *feuilleton*, a half-journalistic, half-essayistic comment on the events of the day. Prus was soon to become a master of it. Columns entitled *Kroniki* ('Chronicles') and published regularly between 1875 and 1887 in the *Kurier Warszawski* (*Warsaw Courier*) brought him wide recognition. And it would be fair to say that the enormous popularity of the *feuilleton* in the literary life of twentieth-century Poland, and the high level of its best examplars, owe a great deal to the standards set by Prus in his 'Chronicles'.

In the mid-1870s Prus's regular writing of *feuilletons* and other mostly journalistic or essayistic pieces began finally to bring him enough income to live on, and even to get married. In 1872 he nevertheless jumped at the chance to take over, as a new editor-in-chief, one of the periodicals he had contributed to, *Nowiny* (*News*). To devote his entire time and energy to this work, he even gave up – as it turned out, for no longer than ten months – his column at the *Kurier*. One is tempted to say that the failure of his ambitious plans to convert *Nowiny*, a run-of-the-mill periodical, into a 'social observatory' was one of the best things that ever happened to Polish literature. After this monumental flop, Prus never returned to editing, and instead focused on writing again. Even more important, his writing from then on included not just the re-started 'Chronicles', but ever more fiction.

Although Prus had written a couple of novels since the mid-1870s, it was the short story that dominated his early *œuvre*. Only after trying out a large number of different narrative approaches and scoring a number of artistic successes in the shorter genre did he feel secure enough to attempt a novel again. As a result, the years

1885–97, the most creative and prolific period in his life, produced four major novels, each of which has a secure place in Polish literary history. *The Doll* was the second of the four, preceded by *Placówka* (*The Outpost*, 1885) and followed by *Emancypantki* (*Emancipated Women*, 1894) and *Faraon* (known in English as *The Pharaoh and Priest*, 1897). Even without taking *The Doll* into account, it would be hard to imagine three realistic novels more different from each other. Suffice it to say that the chief protagonists of *The Outpost*, *Emancipated Women* and *The Pharaoh* are, respectively, an illiterate peasant in the Prussian part of the partitioned Poland, resisting the efforts of German settlers to force him off his land; a well-educated young woman coping with the contradictory expectations of the contemporary social and professional scene, both in Warsaw and in backwater Russian-occupied Poland; and an Egyptian pharaoh engaged in deadly strife with the powerful caste of priests who block his attempts at reforming the state. (Silly as this condensation of its plot may sound, *The Pharaoh*, Prus's only historical novel, is in fact a brilliantly conceived and executed portrayal of the timeless mechanisms of political power; it seems more and more topical, and several critics over the past two or three decades have given this novel even higher marks than *The Doll*. Add *The Doll*'s Stanisław Wokulski, a middle-aged businessman and store owner who has already made it from rags to riches but, spurred by his unreciprocated love for an aristocratic girl, tries unsuccessfully to win the aristocracy's respect as well, and you have a quartet of protagonists truly capable of impressing the reader with their author's range of interest, scope of vision, and depth of psychological insight.

After completing the manuscript of *The Pharaoh*, Prus treated himself – at the age of fifty – to his first longer voyage abroad, to Germany, Switzerland and France. It was to be the only trip of its kind he ever made. His last years were filled mostly with philanthropic and other social work; he helped organise, for instance, a citizens' committee to aid workers fired for their participation in the 1905 strikes and lent his support to initiatives aimed at spreading personal hygiene among the poor. His creative powers, on the other hand, were waning. Around the turn of the century he was also quite palpably losing his grip on his younger readers. Since about 1890, the year of the publication of *The Doll*, the literature of the *fin de siècle* had been dominated by the new generation of 'decadents' and misty symbolists; Prus, a believer in social reform and realistic observer of life, was anomalous. The shock of the revolution of 1905 restored the need for his kind of writing for a while. Prus spent the next two years writing for periodicals, making public appearances, and working on his last completed novel, *Dzieci* (*The Children*), which, as its title clearly indicates, was mostly

focused on portraying the spiritual dilemmas of the young generation. His work on the next novel, entitled, also tellingly, *Przemiany* (*Changes*), was terminated by his death in 1912.

If Prus's reaction to the events of 1905 forms the closing bracket of his creative evolution, the opening bracket must be the failed uprising of 1863. Of all the major works of Prus, it is *The Doll* that most needs to be read with the January Uprising in the back of our minds, even though the novel's action takes place fifteen to sixteen years after that event and the event itself is seldom mentioned – at least not directly – by the narrator or the characters. In its first published version, the text suffered a great deal from the censor's cuts.

The present edition follows the twentieth-century Polish critical editions in restoring all the missing fragments, apart from one which, for reasons explained on p.ix, is included as an appendix. *The Doll* is not only and not even primarily a political novel. It is, however, a novel about history's impact on individual lives. It cannot avoid being that since its protagonists are Poles living in the former capital of their country, which for the past eighty-odd years had been engrossed by the Russian Empire and which, in living memory, had experienced two massive and bloodily suppressed revolts. These defeats loom large: the consequences of the 1863 uprising, in particular, directly affect the lives of many of the novel's characters, including its chief protagonist, Wokulski. But the cause is more than the past ordeal of those wronged. The entire human landscape of *The Doll* is a landscape after a lost battle: after the defeat of the Polish version of Romantic ideology.

In the most revealing of his self-commentaries written after *The Doll*, an extensive letter to the editor published in 1897 in *Kurier Warszawski*, Prus succinctly defined his intention as the desire 'to present our Polish idealists against the background of society's decay'. (The Polish word for 'decay', '*rozkład*', actually has a number of English possible counterparts in this context, from 'breakdown' and 'disintegration' to 'decay' and 'decomposition'.) He also offered an alternative title that he considered in 1897, with the benefit of hindsight, much better than the unintentionally misleading *Lalka*. After the novel's publication, most critics took its title either for a one-word summary of the author's opinion about the chief heroine, the spoiled aristocratic girl and object of Wokulski's unrequited love, Izabela Łęcka, or an expression of Prus's more general conviction about our helplessness in the hands of overpowering Fate: '*lalka*' means both 'doll' and 'puppet'. The truth, according to Prus, was that he had chosen his title more or less 'accidentally'. It was supposed to highlight one of the novel's episodes, in which the alleged theft of a real doll leads to a curious court trial. The subplot around that event was modelled on a

newspaper story, which was for Prus the moment of 'crystallisation' of his general thematic design.

The less 'accidental' title that he came up with later was *Trzy pokolenia, Three Generations*. Such a title would certainly have helped Prus's contemporary reviewers avoid many misreadings and misunderstandings. In particular, the identification of 'the doll' with Izabela can only result in a considerably flattened, one-dimensional image of the novel. It *is*, of course, among other things, also a great novel about a middle-aged man's ill-fated love for a pampered and affected young woman. But Wokulski's infatuation is just part of his psychological profile and is not the only force animating the plot. Wokulski, while *The Doll*'s dominant figure, is flanked by two other characters vital to the novel: the old store-clerk Rzecki and the young scientist Ochocki. These three serve as representatives of the 'three generations' of 'our Polish idealists'. The thoroughly honest and humane but also disarmingly naive Rzecki is a late child of the Napoleonic era, able to think only in outdated, Romantic categories of sacrifice, conspiracy, and Messianic mission. Wokulski is an 'idealist' of the transitional phase in history: from the years he spent in Siberia as a punishment for his involvement in the January Uprising until his current position as a highly successful Warsaw businessman, his life connects the end of the Romantic era with the beginning of the new, Positivist one. (His commercial success actually stems from trade with Russia – one of the novel's many pregnant ironies.) His 'idealism' is incomparably more concrete, active and rational than that of his elderly subordinate and confidant. Wokulski's own Utopia can be built, or so he claims, through wise investment and sound economic policy, for only a nation with economic independence has a right to political independence. Finally, Ochocki is a new type of 'idealist', one of those who, buoyed up by their faith in scientific and technological progress, pin all their hopes on society's intellectual maturation.

Prus's entire novel would be an insufferably uplifting Sunday sermon had any member of this triumvirate triumphed. In fact, all three are, at least in the short run, losers. 'The decay' which, in Prus's own words, forms a background for their dreams and deeds, is not just the decay of the obsolete Romantic ideology. It is also, and perhaps even more so, the decay of Positivist beliefs. The fundamental idea of both Western and Polish Positivists – their concept of society as a gigantic organism, whose parts function harmoniously for the benefit of the whole – could not sound more ridiculous than it does here, when confronted with a starkly realistic picture of contemporary Polish society, chronicled so accurately by Prus the journalist. If this society is a living organism at all, it is the organism of a Colossus with clay feet and a very little brain. It has a disenfranchised, hopelessly vegetating lower class at

the base and aristocratic nincompoops, like Izabela's father, at the top. For a former enthusiast of Positivism such as Prus, who had placed so much hope in the enterprising spirit of the middle class, it must have been painful that between the workers and the aristocracy there was little more than isolated figures like Wokulski, whose every effort at lasting social improvement (*not* merely philanthropic improvisation) is doomed to fail. Why? Because each of Wokulski's specific actions is bound to be misinterpreted. His generosity is taken for a *nouveau-riche*'s wish to impress; his sound economic reasoning, for greed; his energy, for pushiness; his caution, for pettymindedness. In a total standstill, every step forward treads on a corn or two. Prus's 'social decay' is a mire of stagnation. Every effort that carries some weight has to sink sooner or later. Only the operations of small-time crooks stay afloat.

This diagnosis sounds even more well-founded since Prus makes it work ingeniously in many dimensions of his novelistic world simultaneously. His keen observation dissects society not merely along its vertical axis. It also moves horizontally, revealing, for instance, the immobilising, destructive results of ethnic animosity. Polish–Russian and Polish–Jewish conflict can find, in the eyes of Prus, neither a rational explanation nor an easy solution. It tears the fabric of society even more irreparably than the class distinctions. Yet another concern is the perennial problem of Poland's place among the civilised nations of the West. Wokulski's trip to Paris makes him – and the reader – realise the enormous distance separating Poland from France, which it claims to have emulated for centuries.

Lastly, the Polish stalemate is scrutinised in historical time. First and foremost a contemporary novel, focused on the present moment in history, *The Doll* is also to some extent a historical novel – a novel whose contemporary plot depends on the backdrop of the historical past. The narrative structure of *The Doll* is affected by the almost compulsive retrospection of at least some of the characters. They either idealise the past or abhor it as the source of present troubles. The most significant of these characters is Ignacy Rzecki. Prus had the brilliant idea of inserting entries from the 'Journal of the Old Clerk' into his narrative. This hybrid – third-person narration with pockets of first-person diaristic narration – crucially affected the novel's narrative and earned the writer much critical abuse. Yet it pays off in more ways than one. It allows him, first of all, to let Rzecki draw his own self-portrait – engaging and sympathetic because expressed in his idiosyncratic style. Second, Rzecki's diary releases a multitude of subtle ironies: the old clerk's naive interpretations of Wokulski's actions diverge from the actual motivations, revealed to the reader in the third-person narrative. But Rzecki's habit of reminiscing, turning back towards the distant

historical past at every opportunity, seems to be the chief benefit. It gives the novel a new dimension by demonstrating the extent – one unknown in nations blessed with more peaceful and less absurd histories – to which the burden of the past can mould an individual's as well as an entire society's attitude to the present and vision of the future.

A vision of the future derived from an interpretation of society's past and a critical assessment of its present state – this is actually what Prus's *The Doll* is all about. This is the minimum that this novel demands from successive generations of its readers. It is also an old-fashioned yet still fascinating love story, a historically determined yet still topical diagnosis of society's ills, and a forceful yet subtle portrayal of a tragically doomed man. *The Doll* is all this; but what is most enduring about it has been hinted at already by Prus himself.

In our age of shattered utopias, amidst the overwhelming odour of 'decay', perhaps the most persistent question is the one that this agoraphobic, myopic, yet bold and far-sighted nineteenth-century realist felt compelled to ask: how, without being blindly naive, can one remain an 'idealist' in a 'decayed' world? Or, to put it another way, how to continue in the belief that we can become something better than we are, while almost all available evidence seems to point to the contrary?

Stanisław Barańczak