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East is East? Polish Orientalisms in the Nineteenth Century

As Milica Bakić-Hayden argued in her seminal article on “nesting orientalisms”, eastness is “much more of a project than a place”: it is at once a projection of desire, a point of reference for the placement of the Self, and, often, a means of exercising power. Polish culture in the nineteenth century had many “Easts”. As part of the Slavic world, it was itself eastern, though begrudgingly so. The easternmost provinces of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth comprised another East – or rather, several; here, the territories’ ethnolinguistic and religious diversity provided fertile ground for the exploration of oriental alterity within the traditional bounds of the political Self. And then there was the Orient, the significant Other of the Ottoman world, India, and Asia more broadly, which inspired the German romantics, who in turn supplied the philosophical grounding for Polish romanticism’s engagement with ideas of Self and Other. Furthermore, there was the Russian Empire, itself caught between East and West, which ruled as a European empire over much of former Poland-Lithuanian but which was considered barbaric by most of its Polish subjects.

This paper considers the enmeshment of these Easts in the literary orientalisms of Polish writers in the first half of the nineteenth century. It asks: how did concepts of Europeanness and nationhood intertwine with the imaginative exploration of the East? In what ways did “familiar Others” such as Cossacks, Jews and Ruthenian peasants provide a prism for understanding “exotic Others” as reflections of a cosmopolitan Self?