Preface

This one-volume outline of Polish literature is addressed to the reader who is largely unfamiliar with the subject. It begins in medias res, plunging into a world of themes, writers, and works. Nor is a good acquaintance with Polish history a requirement, for the reader will come away from my account with a basic knowledge that can easily be supplemented with historical studies should something prove unclear or arouse curiosity.

I aim to place writers and their works center stage, an approach that intersects, however, with themes and issues, allowing the character of epochs to emerge and setting literary styles within a context. In discussing the work and oeuvre of a writer, I begin with a biographical outline, which is frequently essential to understand the nature of a work. Polish contemporary literary histories tend not to do this, directing the reader instead to specialist reference books; in the past, Polish literary historians would include biographies, writing in accordance with positivist critical models that conventionally encompassed the “life and works.” Today’s readers have Wikipedia, of course, should they choose to use it, though they should also be aware of its unreliability as a source. A biographical outline is often indispensable for interpretation if a work happens to contain autobiographical elements; besides, the lives of renowned artists become themselves an element of culture on which later writers draw, and a collection of biographies constitutes something of a mosaic, an overview of an epoch. Such an approach enables one to avoid many general historical explanations, with the added advantage of being both multifaceted and individual.

The inconsiderable dimensions (given the extensive scope) of this book impose a quite strict selection of both names and works. I have frequently encountered expectations that a history of literature will do justice to forgotten or unfairly marginalized authors and works. Unfortunately, this expectation cannot but remain unsatisfied; a short outline is able to include only the most essential names and classic texts making up a literary portrait of the past. The book is meant to function as a guide: mastering a map of the highways makes it much easier to navigate the byways.

The discourse proceeds along a double track. The principal, basically chronological narrative is accompanied by voices, annotations or observations which are sometimes curiosities, sometimes gesture towards more general questions,
or suggest further avenues that the reader could explore independently. The very term ‘voice’ directs one to the medieval scribes and readers of the past who would sometimes make a note in the margins of a text; occasionally these annotations prove more interesting than the body of the text itself. It was not my aim to present a definitive compendium, but to direct the reader further, since interpretations, thoughts and ideas are never-ending. In the twenty-first century, when consulting the internet is a daily practice, such a double or multi-track approach should be unremarkable. The voices simply link up various questions which appear alongside the basic thread of deliberation, on another level of generalization. An old tradition thus meets the present day, and the basic outline presented in the book takes on an open character, encouraging complementary inquiry and exploration beyond the main train of thought.

It seems to me that ignorance of the Polish language presents no obstacle to using this book, though many of the works I discuss have not been translated. Several, on the other hand, have been adapted to film, so that one can at least familiarize oneself with the plot and questions posed by nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels. It goes without saying that this practice is no substitute for careful reading, but one that the Polish student resorts to with increasing frequency, reading fragments of a novel and watching a film which has in turn become a ‘classic’ and part of the canon. Besides, the Polish film school (the most important director in this regard being Andrzej Wajda) often drew on literary works.

Polish culture is considered (at least it was until 1989) to be “literocentric”; it is no surprise, therefore, that Polish film should be inspired by literature. This history of Polish literature concerns not only written works of artistic caliber in the Polish language, but also attempts to present as reliable as possible an outline of Polish culture and the formulae of identity that have arisen throughout the centuries in response to historic circumstances and the challenges of various epochs. At the beginning of the “second independence,” after 1918, it was repeatedly stated that Poland owed its survival despite the absence of a state for 123 years to its literature. And not only because the latter urged unceasing efforts in the cause of regaining independence. This role should be understood much more broadly. A literature of one’s own ensured a continuity of contact with Europe and a consistent exchange of thought; it proposed formulae of individual experience and was a locus of—often very sharp—critical reflection.

The English writer Joseph Conrad (that is, Józef Konrad Korzeniowski), in his ‘Author’s Note’ of 1919 to A Personal Record (Doubleday, Page & Company, New York, 1924, pp. viii–ix), made a few general observations:
Nothing is more foreign than what in the literary world is called Sclavonism [the Slavic spirit], to the Polish temperament with its tradition of self-government, its chivalrous view of moral restraints and an exaggerated respect for individual rights: not to mention the important fact that the whole Polish mentality, Western in complexion, had received its training from Italy and France and, historically, had always remained, even in religious matters, in sympathy with the most liberal currents of European thought. An impartial view of humanity in all its degrees of splendor and misery together with a special regard for the rights of the unprivileged of this earth, not on any mystic ground but on the ground of simple fellowship and honorable reciprocity of services was the dominant characteristic of the mental and moral atmosphere of the houses which sheltered my hazardous childhood.

Conrad is drawing on his own experiences of his early, and therefore formative, years, so it is hard to contradict his opinion. Despite the passage of a century, such a sense of Polishness remains dear to me, though I often doubt that it is the only one, or even particularly identifiable today.

Polish literature, associated with a language that is considered to be quite difficult, faces many obstacles the moment it steps outside its familial context. And yet Poland is situated in a place of peregrination from East to West (and vice versa), constituting a crossroads of various cultures, and has for centuries co-created a common space of European culture, and thus a background beyond its exclusively native elements is necessary in order to fathom it completely. This volume offers both the first, that is, the European filiations, and the second, that is, historical Polishness; they cannot in any case be separated. I attempt, as far as possible, to highlight also the various links with those nations that once formed part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the ‘places held in common’ with Jewish culture.