

Faces of the nineteenth century

Studies in literary history, theatre and opera



Summary

Faces of the nineteenth century. Studies in literary history, theatre and opera deals with issues in these fields of scientific inquiry. In presenting the nineteenth century the book aims to prove that this century, though perceived by literary and art historians as a conglomeration of extremely diverse currents, ideas and forms, to a great extent forms a coherent whole, marked by a unity of thought and continuity of processes, though one not deprived of internal tensions and polemics. The idea of this book was therefore to look at the nineteenth century in its entirety as a highly diverse yet coherent system, stretching from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, a system characterised by a plethora of competing worldviews and a polarization of philosophical and aesthetic stances, but at the same time still distinguished by the common interests of its constituent artists.

The authors focus on revealing the cultural 'whole' of the nineteenth century in its fullest sense, and concentrate on issues related to the following: tradition (understood as a cluster of cultural phenomena that provided inspiration for artists or proved to be a significant element of artists and intellectual experiments of the time); memory (treated as a creative force, in the ideas of St. Augustine as revived in the nineteenth-century); aesthetic form (perceived above all as the reflection of worldview investigations). The sketches and analyses in the book prove that what the spheres shown here have in common, of course alongside other categories and concepts significant for that time, is anthropology understood in the broad sense. This constitutes a distinct sign of continuity in historico-literary, philosophical and aesthetic processes of that time.

This hypothesis is reflected in the title of the volume – *Faces of the nineteenth century*, whose significance is revealed on at least three semantic planes. The “Faces” presented here take the form of profiles of nineteenth-century artists – writers, poets, composers, painters, philosophers and critics, as well as those who were outstanding and influential, or opinion leaders in their fields (Friedrich Schiller, George Gordon Byron, Giuseppe Verdi, Richard Wagner, Fryderyk Chopin, Eugène Delacroix). In addition, there are also those not belonging to the pantheon of premier artists, whose body of work constitutes a significant link in the nineteenth-century ‘whole’ (Zofia Węgierska, Stefan Witwicki, Dominik Magnuszewski, Antoni Edward Odyniec). “Faces of the nineteenth century” is also an outline of the human being that so fascinated the artists presented here – perceived and described as an embodiment of the contemporary, and yet also an explorer of bygone times, a being inextricably linked with art and seeking full existence between matter, feeling and thought. Ultimately, “Faces of the nineteenth century” comprises substantial and extremely diverse forms, in which the sketches, profiles and portraits of “man” they create in their fields and of the artists themselves reveal their complexity and unexpected meanings.

What is revealed here is an image rooted in the Hegelian idea of reciprocal relations between the general and the specific. Paraphrasing this German philosopher on the subject of human individuality, one might state that despite the diversity of its visions, the complexity of its aspirations and multitude of characteristics, the nineteenth century retained a certain “coherent subjectivity” clustered within an anthropocentric framework of perceiving the world. Moreover, although nineteenth-century anthropocentrism emerged out of numerous disparate principles and objectives that artists set themselves, for example, the desire to justify the rightness and significance of their own art (Byron, Norwid, Wagner), the sense of generational unity (Witwicki, Magnuszewski, Węgierska), preservation or modification of patterns taken from tradition (Schiller, Verdi, Chopin, Delacroix, Odyniec), it invariably reflected the essential foundations of philosophy of the time: a keenly astute, complete focus on the human as an autonomous entity set in the rhythm of universal existence expressed in historical, social and metaphysical categories. If the nineteenth century’s artistic legacy can be treated on some levels as universal, there can be no doubt that this stems to a great degree from the intensive and unconventional reflection on humankind of those days.

Translated by Rob Pagett