It is difficult to understand Polish art at the turn of the century without bearing in mind the uniqueness of our Romantic survival. I shall presently point out those circumstances of the Romantic era which forced us to ask both elementary and fundamental questions about its major issues: artistic activity as an expression of national identity; the freedom and/or ancillary role of literature, art, and music; the significance of actors' beaux gestes and of the parts played in real life; and the need "to be supranational in order to be national."¹ Others have asked similar questions, but in different contexts. The drama of those questions, so significant when posed by English or German Romanticism, later disappeared or fell apart, giving way, on the whole, to less important and sometimes poisoned dishes from Romanticism's banquet, upon which the Western world still feeds. Reaching for the first examples that come to mind, one could say, for example, that the fiery and melancholic illuminations of the English, Schwärmer, and French "medieval" apologetics have disciples today among the leaders of various suspect sects. Or else, consider Turner's Rain, Steam and Speed, or Alfred de Vigny's nostalgic aversion to trains, expressed in La Maison du berger:

Adieu, voyages lents, bruits lointains qu'on écoute,  
Le rire du passant, les retards de l'essieu ...

Both are the precursors of on-the-road film epics, whereas narcotic escapism and revolutions in fashion have become the domain of drug trading or crazed advertising.

It seems to me that, in our country, the vitality and seriousness of essential Romantic questions have stayed alive much longer. Not only have they survived, but they have also continued to develop, both in admiration of and in conflict with Romantic artists, thanks to this, the Modernist "Young Poland" movement and the twenty years of independence between the two

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¹. The quotations are from the poet C. K. Norwid (1821-83). Both phrases have become almost proverbial in Poland.
World Wars (known as the “Second Republic”) were periods in which the above questions were answered in a voice sonorous enough to be heard to this day.

This voice could be more clearly heard in the position occupied by Poles, that is, in the culture of a nation bereft of its independence. In such a position, problems of freedom (also the freedom of art) and responsibility (also the responsibility of the artist) were particularly resonant and particularly lasting, and they did not die down after 1918.

The very situation which could give our Romantic heritage universal significance, however, at the same time pushed it into parochialism. In 1915, concerned about the Polish novel appearing insipid to foreigners, Żeromski aptly observed: “We do not bring the world artistic knowledge about the complexities of the human soul. We talk and talk about the complexities of the Polish soul.”

Poland’s subjugation, while blowing up the importance of writers and painters, at the same time emphatically dislodged them from the normal European scale, from a universally (perhaps wrongly?) accepted division of labor. In 1841 Zygmunt Krasinskí wrote: “The force which our spirit has shown itself to be, after discarding its political body, is called Mickiewicz.” It is not a monumental but disturbing aphorism: a nation’s spirit identified with a single, albeit the greatest, poet?

In the same year, Seweryn Goszczyński, a poet and revolutionary, publicly proclaimed the following: “Now it is your turn, fellow citizen-painters! Show to our eyes the people’s Poland we feel in our hearts and see in our minds; let us touch with our eyes what our hearts already love.” The famous Polish history painter, Jan Matejko, was three years old at the time. The result of such proclamations was such that when master Jan reached the age of forty, he was offered the sceptre of Polish art, whereupon he spoke the following words: “Does not my nation acknowledge the presence of the spirit-king in Polish art today. By investing me with this sceptre, you allow me to anticipate imminent historic change—rebirth!” Let me explain that The Spirit-King is the title of a long mystical poem by Juliusz Słowacki (one of Poland’s three Romantic “bards”: Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Krasinski). Its hero is the nation’s spiritual leader, who from legendary prehistoric times, in successive reincarnations, has been the embodiment of the moral progress of the Poles.

5. Marian Gorzkowski, O artystycznych czynnościach Jana Matejki (Kraków: Nakładem autora, 1882), p. 82.