

JERZY SNOPEK

## The Polish Literature of the Enlightenment

*In the early stage of the Enlightenment, the Saxon Elector August III Wettin acceded to the Polish throne (1733) owing to Russian military backing. His years of reign brought about progressive anarchy in the life of the country, dominance by the nobility, and paralysis of the central authorities. The first signs of positive change appeared in the field of culture and education (the work of reformer S. Konarski). After August III's death, Stanisław August Poniatowski became the next and final king of the dual Polish-Lithuanian Republic (in 1764). He, too, acceded to the throne with Moscow's backing, which again engendered constant Russian meddling in Poland's internal affairs. This sparked a revolt fomented by the nobility against the king and against Russian influence (the Confederation of Bar, 1768-1772). The defeat of this movement led Russia, Austria, and Prussia to carry out the first partition of Poland (1772), whereby the Republic was stripped of 1/3 of its land and made more dependent upon Russia. Under such difficult circumstances the king did make successive attempts at pushing through social reforms, but these were generally torpedoed both by Empress Catherine the Great of Russia and by the conservative faction of the Polish nobility. It was only the Four-Year Sejm (1788-1792) that managed to pass a constitution that enacted numerous progressive reforms (the Constitution of 3 May 1791), which was nevertheless soon repealed, with Russia playing a key role in undermining it. An armed intervention by the Tsarina's army and a Polish-Russian war ensued,*

*followed by the second partition of Poland (1793). The Kościuszko Uprising broke out in defense of the country, but despite many acts of heroism and several successful skirmishes, it was ultimately unable to avert the demise of the Polish Commonwealth. With the third partition in 1795, the Polish state ceased to exist and throngs of Poles went into emigration. In 1797, Polish Legions were formed in Italy under the command of J.H. Dąbrowski, with the aim of securing Poland's independence via an alliance with Napoleon. The Warsaw Principality, an ersatz Polish state, was indeed set up in 1807, and the republican Napoleonic Code was put into force there (from 1808). Nevertheless, Napoleon's defeat in Russia (1812) led to the downfall of this Warsaw Principality and to a new division of the Polish lands, instituted at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.*

In Western European syntheses on the Enlightenment, Europe stops at the Elbe River. The perceptual horizon of such studies' authors (who frequently are otherwise outstanding researchers, such as Paul Hazard) does not even encompass Russia, not to speak of the smaller countries of Central Europe: the Czech lands, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, etc. Such works might sometimes mention an individual from Polish culture of the Enlightenment period – such as Konarski or Krasicki, or most often just the name of the king, Stanisław August Poniatowski – but such passing references only appear on the fringes of the main line of exposition, when the author wants to inform the reader about what was going on over there, *ubi leones*, meaning outside the boundaries of true European culture.

We may find it disheartening that Central European research by such renowned historians of literature as Claude Backvis, Paul Cazin, Jean Fabre, and Sante Graciotti has been of little avail here. Indeed, Cazin in his monograph on Krasicki as well as Backvis in his book on Trembecki, through detailed comparative analysis, laid bare the great artistic value of these authors' works yet did not manage to incorporate these brilliant representatives of the Polish Enlightenment into the generally-recognized canon of the epoch. And so, the lack of a modern reception, or at least of adequate translations, also seems fraught with unfortunate ramifications.

Nevertheless, such attempts do have to be continued – and this is just what we are doing here – since the political and economic integration of our continent must be coupled with a genuine recognition and reassessment of our common cultural tradition. The achievements of Central European literatures (Russia being a distinct problem) are not just a complement to this tradition, they indeed significantly enrich it.

Our point of departure here might be misleading. There is no doubt that the culture of the dual Polish-Lithuanian Republic found itself in a historical backwater in the 18th century. There was a clear time lag in the developmental rhythm of Polish literature as compared to Western European literatures. The Enlightenment began in the West, of course, at the outset of the 18th century (or according to some researchers even earlier, around 1685) but the period did not begin in Poland, strictly speaking, until midway through the 18th century. During the preceding period in the West, Baroque culture had blossomed, or – as in France – the tone had been set by a magnificent Classicism. In Poland the great Baroque period had run itself out by the end of the 17th century, to fall into protracted agony over the next half-century, in tandem with the progressive atrophy of artistic taste in literature and the demise of language. The transition to the Enlightenment in the West had been fairly mild; the role of a cultural keystone of sorts, a factor of cultural continuity and continuation, had been played by Classicism, and in the realm of ideas by Cartesianism, by the philosophy of Locke and Hobbes, by English deism and the movements of 17th-century intellectual libertinism. The transition to the Enlightenment in Poland, on the other hand, involved an artistic and “intellectual coup” (a term coined by W. Smoleński). The chronologically closest domestic tradition was a negative one; this pertained in particular to the literary language and artistic forms. In the realm of ideas the situation was more complicated, since Christian heritage played a great role in Poland during the Enlightenment period as well. As a result, this realm was the scene of constant clashes between the old and the new. Such conflicts and polemics, as a result of the necessary compromises, gave rise to new substance.

This situation was the result of specific historical, political, social, and cultural conditions that we can merely touch upon here; these included the incommensurately large (for the Enlightenment period)

cultural role played by the clergy, and the undeniably peculiar nature of the governmental system in force in the Polish Republic at that time. How did this system compare against the general European backdrop of the age? Here we might draw upon the classification presented by the outstanding statist of those times, Stanisław Leszczyński (himself earlier king, albeit briefly), who asked: “Is Europe not divided into two types of government?” The answer, one can surmise, was affirmative; these two types being the monarchy and the republic. In such countries as France, Spain, Portugal, Naples, Sardinia, Denmark, Prussia, Russia, and the kingdoms of Germany and Italy, absolutism prevailed (albeit an enlightened absolutism). In England, Poland, Sweden, Poland, Venice, Genoa, and the Swiss cantons, in turn, there was a republican form of government, according to the definition of those times, which entailed a large parliamentary role. Nonetheless, there was very significant variation amongst the latter countries in terms of the scope of civil rights. Besides, these “republication” countries literally had a monarchy as well – even a hereditary monarchy in some countries, such as England and Sweden.

The monarch with the littlest say on political issues was probably the Polish Commonwealth’s enlightened King Stanisław August Poniatowski. Power was *de facto* in the hands of magnate oligarchies that took advantage of the middle and petty nobility, being themselves oftentimes manipulated by external powers, especially Moscow. A certain historical continuity can be perceived in this regard, as such a situation had persisted in Poland essentially since the first free royal election in 1572. The men of the Enlightenment attempted to break this continuity, but did not manage to (perhaps we should say: before it was too late).

These conditions had a multifaceted impact upon the shape of the Polish Enlightenment. As historians have shown, absolutism was always coupled with endeavors to subjugate the Church (or Churches) to the state. In Poland such subjugation was out of the question; too powerful were the noble classes that cultivated the old ideal of the Catholic-Pole. At the same time, the burghers, like the bourgeoisie in Western countries, were too weak to propose new models. By the standards of the times, a huge role in shaping Enlightenment culture

was played in Poland by the noble elites, forced to come to grips with their own heritage in dramatic fashion, and frequently by the clergy, who had to seek various compromises and a “golden mean.”

For this reason the Polish Enlightenment could not be as ideologically radical as the French Enlightenment. But by the same token, owing to this very fact the former could not be a copy of the latter (and indeed was not). The Polish Enlightenment fostered its own salient values. It did of course look for inspiration, especially at the outset, both to its own Renaissance tradition and to contemporary Western European writing. The receptivity and industriousness demonstrated by the writers of the Polish Enlightenment were unprecedented in this regard. The number of translated and travestied works of foreign literature was many times greater than the entire output of Old Polish literature in this field. Moreover, prior to the Enlightenment it was the classical tradition that had most frequently been drawn upon, but now a majority of the works being adapted to Polish culture were from the modern or even the contemporary epoch: adaptations were chiefly being made from 17th-century Classicist works and from Enlightenment literature. This was done with a keen awareness of Poland’s above-mentioned cultural backwardness. Such efforts were aimed at fertilizing and enriching domestic literature, at cultivating the language and rendering it more subtle, at reaching out to the widest possible circles of readers (it was clear, after all, that the elite knew French, plus German to a lesser degree).

Due to the time lag in the development of Polish literature, the Enlightenment in Poland (just as throughout Central Europe) was of a somewhat syncretic nature, and a vast role was played in the literature of the region by Classicism, which had seen its apogee significantly earlier in the West.

## THE EARLY AND MATURE ENLIGHTENMENT

As was already mentioned above, the Enlightenment in Poland, just as in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe lagging several decades behind the West, began in about 1750. The period came to an end at the same point as the Western European Enlightenment,

in 1815, when the treaty of the Congress of Vienna symbolically laid to rest the most important ideas, utopias, and illusions of the epoch.

This protracted latter half of the 18th century was exceptionally momentous for all of Western civilization. It led from Diderot's *Encyclopédie* and the much-publicized discourses of Rousseau, through daring attempts at social reform and change in the realm of individual ethics (based on a foundation of secular values and rational argumentation), to revolution, which represented both the culmination of the Enlightenment and the source of its crisis and demise.

In Poland this was a colorful and diverse period, a time of "hope and disaster." A cultural revival was achieved during the period, political and social changes aimed at modernizing the country were initiated, but it was also then that the successive partitions of Poland were carried out by the surrounding countries: Russia, Prussia, and Austria. In 1795, Poland would disappear from the map of Europe. The end of the Enlightenment would antedate, therefore, the downfall of the state.

\*

The years 1750-1764 should be considered the early Enlightenment period in Poland. Then on the throne of the dual Polish-Lithuanian Republic was the Saxon King August III. Even though the monarch was a foreigner, Poland was dominated by the culture of the domestic nobility, generally termed "Sarmatian culture." It manifested itself chiefly in the customs and rituals of everyday life, in forms of Catholic religiousness within the framework of late Baroque esthetics. This was a culture of balls and feasts, of hunting and merry-making, at times embellished with readings of purpose-written poetry and theatrical performances. The years preceding the Polish Enlightenment, as well as its initial stage, are spoken of as the "golden age" of noble democracy, a period of peace and prosperity. Nonetheless, the noble oligarchy's domination rendered the monarchy powerless and paralyzed state authority, a state of affairs that would only be rectified (although not fully) by Enlightenment ideologists and politicians. For many decades, Jesuit education had led to the ruin-

ation of language and taste. A lot was written, but these were works devoid of artistic value. Monstrous, terribly conventional poems were written, along with clumsy satires and panegyrics, while the Old and New Testaments were zealously translated into cumbersome versions reminiscent of medieval poetry, but lacking its naive, fresh faith.

On the threshold of the new epoch, a prominent role was played by the educational reform championed by the Piarist monk Stanisław Konarski, the “father of the Polish Enlightenment.” He also launched a struggle to perfect the Polish language. Soon, Konarski was joined by more crusaders in the battle to refine the Polish language. Another outstanding figure during this pioneering stage was Franciszek Bohomolec.

In the literature of the early Enlightenment, not many names are worthy of note — and even those that are laudable are only of local Polish significance, such as the work of Poland’s first outstanding poetess, Elżbieta Drużbacka (1699-1765), as well as her contemporary poets Józef Epifani Minasowicz and Hetman Waclaw Rzewuski. All three strove in their verse for a classical simplicity of expression, while still lingering within the Baroque aesthetic and especially the worldview of the Baroque and Counterreformation. In Drużbacka’s best works — such as *The Four Seasons* (*Cztery pory roku*) — such a conflict of contradictory aesthetics engendered a more intensive expression. Rzewuski’s verse, in turn, is already dominated by the classical model, as is demonstrated by his didactic poem *Lesson for the Verse-Writer* (*Nauka wierszopiska*), which harks back to Horace and Boileau. Consisting of 32 artistically-wrought octaves, the language of this versified poetics is clear, light, and voluble; no comparable work is to be found in the Central European literature of the time. In Poland, *Lesson for the Verse-Writer* would only be dethroned in the 1780s by Franciszek Ksawery Dmochowski’s *Art of Poetry* (*Sztuka rymotwórcza*), a systematic exposition of Classicist poetics itself in the form of a deft poem, not inferior to Boileau’s *L’art poetique*.

Interestingly, Rzewuski’s poetry is devoid of Baroque figures, yet his worldview remained Sarmatian. The hetman was a staunch advocate of the gentry’s liberties, the Counterreformation ideal of the Catholic-Pole, etc. A fuller relapse of the Baroque would be seen in

the grotesque poetry of Józef Baka and the religious lyric poetry of Konstancja Benisławska, written during the first stage of the mature Enlightenment.

\*

The mature Enlightenment in Poland encompasses the period from King Stanisław August Poniatowski's accession to the throne of the Republic (1794) until the calamity of the state (1795).

Stanisław August is a controversial figure. He had as many supporters as he had opponents, and this remains the case today. In his lifetime he was hated by Sarmatian traditionalists; nowadays he is most often accused of having lacked heroism, of having been submissive to foreign models and especially to foreign powers, Russia in particular. Nevertheless, it is universally accepted that he embodied the ideal of the enlightened ruler. He was superbly educated, demonstrated subtle tastes, and commanded extensive historical and literary erudition. He showed concern for education and culture, including political culture. But the times were not propitious. The king lifted the country out of torpor and backwardness, but in so doing propelled it into the unforgiving embrace of the partitioning powers, who had an interest in ensuring that Poland was weak and acted as a kind of buffer.

The king and the royal reform program patronized science, the arts, and literature, which were expected to further the cause of reform, to support and popularize it. One very important institution that arose out of this program was the national theater, inaugurated in 1765 as one of the first in Europe. A huge role in fostering culture was played by Enlightenment-minded journals: *Monitor*, similar to the English *Spectator*, and Poland's first literary journal *Pleasant and Useful Entertainment* (*Zabawy Przyjemne i Pożyteczne*).

Certain magnate manors acted as literary centers and even fostered literary trends. The most famous of these, the Czartoryski manor in Puławy, generated, inspired, and supported a literary group in the 1780s that was independent of the royal circle. While the monarch's court was dominated by Classicism, the Puławy manor harbored sentimentalism (with elements of Rococo).



\*

The groundwork from which Enlightenment-era Classicism grew in Polish literature was not so much elements of 17th-century Baroque, but more the entire cultural, social, and political complex that comprised the civilization of the Polish Commonwealth in the period immediately preceding (and even partially overlapping) the Enlightenment. This encompassed a vivid and formidable mix of hedonistic customs for the privileged classes but destitution for the servile masses, chaos and corruption in politics, pomp and circumstance in religious life, plus degenerate language and debauched tastes. Then, the possibility of Classicism appeared on the cultural horizon. This current had survived in the Western European Enlightenment, although it was at that time of lesser significance in the West than it was in Central and Eastern Europe. The strong bourgeoisie in the West gravitated towards realism, rapacious publicist commentary, and sentimental emotionality.

In the Polish Republic, Classicism was envisaged as a cure for the ills that plagued the country. It was supposed to purify language, to cultivate speech and thought, and to refine tastes. Stanisław August Poniatowski harnessed Classicism to further the cause of cultural renewal and social reform. All the more significant rules of Classicist esthetics were adopted, but it was a characteristic trait of the Polish Classicism of the Enlightenment that it emphasized the social (i.e. moralizing, patriotic, educational) functions of literary art.

Classicism dominated the Polish Enlightenment for long years, although the first heresies and contestations were already appearing in the 1770s. As time passed, the didactic objectives of literature began to be questioned, including against the backdrop of Classicism; the import of individual experience began to be emphasized and the role of passion and emotionality reasserted.

Among such alternative trends, the greatest autonomy was achieved by the sentimental current. Sentimentalism developed chiefly in the provinces, above all at the aforementioned Czartoryski manor in Puławy, as a reaction to the Classicism of the royal court and Warsaw. It drew chiefly upon Jean-Jacques Rousseau, especially in terms

of general ideological messages. It was encrusted with elements of Classicism.

Of a definitively Rococo nature, on the other hand, were the cultural happenings and events organized at another residence of the very same Czartoryski family, in the Warsaw suburb of Powązki. In the 18th century, as is well known, the natural milieu of the Rococo was formed by the aristocracy, which could already sense a vague premonition that the twilight of its historical role was nigh. It flitted back and forth from basking in life's pleasures with a devil-may-care spirit, to harboring a covert and sometimes perverse fascination with simplicity, the plebes, and primitive brawn. At times the aristocracy was active within the camp of revolutionaries, social radicals, democrats, freethinkers, and libertines, not always realizing that it was thereby hastening the destruction of its own world.

The Rococo man is not concerned with the past, but is subconsciously apprehensive of the future. He professes the classical principle "*carpe diem*." He wants to lose himself in enjoyment; he wants to feel delight, chiefly through love. Erotic delights, flirtation, cold scheming with others' feelings had to be coupled with the pleasures of the table, brisk conversation, and ridicule of sentimental lovers and serious mentors. Everything was guided by the spirit of entertainment, although such enjoyment was reminiscent of an escape: from weariness with one's own countenance, with one's own face and one's own class, an escape through masks, playacting, and masquerades. The "house of pleasure" itself, concentrating perverse excesses hidden inside the guise of an impoverished peasant's cottage, constituted a hallmark embodiment of the Rococo spirit. But note the duality: a modest, sentimental hut on the outside, yet perverse Rococo excesses on the inside. Rococo within one's own circle, but outwardly a sentimental and patriotic message to the people.

The pre-revolutionary French aristocracy no longer bothered itself in this regard, but in Poland the aristocracy still harbored certain scruples and illusions – and thus the literature that arose within its domain was the least Rococo. Literary Rococo, construed as the unbiased grace and harmony of small forms and pastel colors, as a game of enchanting words, piquant phrasings and glimmering masks, as

free beauty without moral tributes or didactic aims, appeared in the Polish Enlightenment quite sporadically, although certain Rococo traits can indeed be found even in the works of such outstanding authors as Krasicki, Książnin, Trembecki, Naruszewicz, Jasiński, Zabłocki and Jan Potocki.

## POETRY

During this none-too-poetic epoch, it is hard to find a lyrical masterpiece in all of European poetry. Perhaps the closest to making such a claim are the verses of André Chénier and the late works of Mihály Csokonai and Franciszek Dionizy Książnin. Masterpieces were being consistently written, on the other hand, in such Classicist genres as fable and satire. In both of these cases, perhaps the best works of the Enlightenment were penned by Polish poets: Ignacy Krasicki and Stanisław Trembecki.

The predecessor of both these poets was Adam Naruszewicz (1733-1796), whose impact upon the development of Enlightenment poetry in Poland was very great. Naruszewicz still clearly lingered within the Baroque esthetic, but he consciously blazed a path for himself and his successors towards Classicism. Particularly in Naruszewicz's odes, a kind of clash unfolded between the Baroque and Classicism. Only a few of these odes approach the threshold of excellence. One of these is *Balloon (Balon)*, which in lofty and vivid words sings the glory and power of reason, only to descend in its final stanzas into a quite shallow panegyric addressed to the king. Naruszewicz the poet felt best in the role of a satirist and denouncer than in the garb of the flatterer and eulogist, although he had to (perhaps wanted to?) don the latter garb for almost his entire life. In an astounding poetic work full of polemical verve and virulent sarcasm, *Daniel Kalwiński on the Disbanding of the Jesuits (Daniel Kalwiński na zniesienie jezuitów)*, he did not shrink from making violent attacks against the pope, or even blaspheming certain truths of the faith. All of this ostensibly in defense of the recently disbanded Jesuit order. (He himself was a Jesuit, and later a bishop, although he did not eschew tones that were quite libertine.) In Naruszewicz's work we have on the one hand a plainly

Baroque sense of the human condition and existence, yet on the other an Enlightenment-age coldness towards Christianity and idolatry of reason!

This raging attack against Pope Clement XIV finds its formal compliment in Naruszewicz's passionate satires, especially in *Redoubts* (*Reduty*), *Spoiled Age* (*Wiek zepsuty*) and *Stupidity* (*Głupstwo*), where he gives a sound thrashing to dandies, fools, and prudes. These works are characterized by pithiness of expression and a plainly Sarmatian truculence. Naruszewicz the satirist lacks the humor, lightness, and finesse of Krasicki (here we anticipate somewhat the conclusion of our argument below), but he does bring a passionate power of sarcasm and clarity of verse. He does not cut to the heart of the matter with a single precise thrust, but rather stuns by means of a thousand blows, through a rain of epithets, images, and comparisons. Within the form of drastic and post-Juvenal satire, but at the same time generalized and impersonal, these works constitute an interesting and to a significant extent original phenomenon in Enlightenment-age Europe.

Naruszewicz had many imitators and continuators among Enlightenment poets. The libertine poet Tomasz Kajetan Węgierski, who died young, tried to match him in terms of satirical verve, but Węgierski's muse was already too toned-down by Classicist moderation, and contained more irony and causticity than impulsive force of expression, such as distinguished Naruszewicz's satire. Węgierski, the most talented of the more minor poets at the time, was still more distant from the undoubted masterpieces of the genre: the satires of Krasicki.

\*

Ignacy Krasicki (1735-1801) was merely two years younger than Naruszewicz, but relics of the Baroque are not to be found in his work. He appeared before the literary audience as a fully-fledged poet (he was then, admittedly, already 40 years old); leaping into public view like Minerva from Zeus's head – immediately in full fighting gear. His *Satires* (*Satyry*) appeared in the bookshops in 1779, four years after his debut; a second part of the cycle was produced by the Prince Bishop of Warmia five years later (Krasicki was a bishop, after

all, and even primate after 1795, although religious fervor is not to be encountered in his works).

This literary genre of satire has a magnificent classical tradition (Horace, Persius, Juvenal), and was subsequently practiced by such well-known authors as Voltaire, Boileau, and Pope; nevertheless Krasicki's satires represent perhaps the most outstanding artistic achievement in the modern history of the genre. They bear the stamp of masterpiece.

Due to the author's personality traits – gentleness, an excellent sense of humor, irony, and at the same time skepticism and restraint, as an artist he employed more subtle and refined means of criticism than the outright venom and hatred-ridden invectives the anonymous political poetry of the times were rife with. Krasicki was well aware that he would fail to hit home if he were a boring satirist, something that at times befell even his outstanding predecessor Naruszewicz – when the righteous indignation that prompted the latter's pen with vivid images faltered for but a moment, to be replaced by the moralizing tone of the preacher who knows everything better. In order to educate and instruct, one has to entertain – the Prince Bishop of Warmia always bore this Horatian truth in mind. And, more importantly, he knew how to employ it.

All sorts of phenomena from the reality of the time, not just in Poland, fell within his scope of vision: phenomena meriting rebuke, reform, and in certain cases even eradication. He found them chiefly within the milieu that was best known to him, and was at the same time of the most import: the nobility. Krasicki the satirist thus portrays the unquestionable stupidity and ostensible wisdom of trendy tricksters and smart-alecks, the wastefulness and miserliness, the beligerence and gambling, the intrigues of court life and drunkenness. He unfolds before readers a colorful gallery of figures with these vices, looks upon them with humor, but sometimes finds it difficult to refrain from sarcasm; he listens in on their conversations, in order to suddenly change perspective and look philosophically at the whole: at the “depraved world.”

He expresses disapproval both for the vices that in the general conviction were all that remained of Sarmatian society, as well as for the social ills that had begun to proliferate as a result of the mindless

aping of novelties from the West. The expansion of superficial, shallow, cosmopolitan pseudo-Enlightenment seems to him so menacing that he himself points society toward the example set by “decent ancestors.” We should integrate with Europe – the Prince Bishop of Warmia says to his countrymen – but in a conscientious and wise way, without disdain for ourselves or for our own culture, because then what shall we contribute to Europe, what shall we build together? He expounded the principles of decent life in detail in the novel *Mister Pantler (Pan Podstoli)*. But did he believe that they could truly be lived by? In his satires he at times demonstrates skepticism. It is telling how often he abandons the position of a narrator and critic who views his characters from above, in order to find himself somehow among them – or even to do no more than listen to what they have to say, as in the superb *Drunkenness (Pijaństwo)*. The cycle contains more dialogic satires than monologic ones, but the latter are also far from the sermon schema.

Krasicki offers varying points of perspective, excellently portrayed, typified characters, superb genre scenes, and a varying tone of expression – and all of this shot through with irony. If we also consider the linguistic virtues and impeccability of Krasicki’s verse, we grow closer to comprehending his prominence as a satirist.

\*

Krasicki’s epigrammatic fables, published in the collection *Fables and Parables (Bajki i przypowieści)* in 1779, are generally considered to be an even greater artistic achievement than his *Satires*. Experts do not deny the excellence of his later narrative fables as well (in the style of La Fontaine), but here Krasicki is surpassed by his domestic rival, Trembecki. As an author of epigrammatic fables, however, Krasicki has few equals in all of world literature. He is not inferior to the classical Phaedrus, or to Benserade, the author of French paraphrases of Aesop encapsulated in tetrastich, or even less to Lessing, who wrote wittily and concisely, but in prose.

In one of his books, Krasicki wrote: “A fable should be short, clear, and as far as possible assert the truth.” And such are his epigram-

matic fables: pithy and aimed at portraying as concisely as possible some fundamental truth about mankind and society. They are at the same time exceptionally precisely constructed, and delight readers with a kind of beauty that is conventionally termed “geometric.” Nevertheless, their author had to manage an utterly insuperable task. Each fable had to remain what it essentially was, i.e. a parabolic story, yet its content had to be condensed to the greatest possible extent, thus requiring that descriptive passages, more extensive characterizing of the heroes, etc., all be cast aside. Under such conditions, how can one avoid schematism, retain the impression of lightness and ease, and salvage the excellent balance between the opposing demands of individualization and generalization? Herein lies the secret of Krasicki’s craft, his Classicist artistry! In the miniaturized space of his works he proved himself to be a grand master of form, almost always finding the ideal solution, using symmetrical juxtapositions of parallelisms and contrasts with infallible intuition. In so doing he worked with unstrained wit, and used language that was simple and elegant, but tended towards a colloquial tone.

Some literary historians recognize Krasicki’s fables to have been his most lyrical works. Such an evaluation does contain quite a bit of exaggeration, but it is a fact that they do manifest a sort of philosophy of the Prince Bishop of Warmia. Not without good reason, Krasicki maintained that a fable had to strike at the truth in order to achieve its moral objective. It is the world of moral behavior, therefore, that is the subject of cognitive pursuit and contemplative generalization. The ethics of *Fables and Parables* are of a dual nature: they report as well as postulate. Above all, however, the author portrays the world as it really is. The Italian Slavist Sante Graciotti even attempted to argue that Krasicki’s fables portray real life, while his aforementioned novel *Mr. Pantler* presents life as it should be.

So how did Krasicki see human morality? This (it would seem) cheerful Classicist proves to have had a downright depressing view. In nature (in society), the principle of supremacy by the strongest prevails. As a principle of ethics, this principle is voiced in many old Greek works. We can find it, for example, on the pages of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. There, however it is accompanied by the principle

of the repentant heart, which makes room for altruistic attitudes, something we cannot find in Krasicki's fables. As Paul Cazin wrote: "Krasicki is able to portray horrifying images of the relentless rules of the struggle for existence." Drawing upon Konstany Wojciechowski's opinion that the Prince Bishop's epigrammatic fables are "little dramas," he maintains that "they are more an extensive tragedy in 100 almost cruel acts."

Successive experiences, successive observations and conclusions lead to a somewhat minimalist program, the chief theme of which emerges as the (relative) security of the actors appearing in this gloomy "human comedy." The road to such security, for Krasicki, leads through the Horatian "golden mean."

The aforementioned Cazin made a salient point in his study of the Prince Bishop: "Even if Krasicki had written only his narrative fables, he would have taken a place among the most outstanding fablers of the world. Yet in epigrams he is one-of-a-kind, incomparable."

\*

As an author of narrative fables, however, Krasicki is nevertheless surpassed by both Trembecki and La Fontaine. The works of the Prince Bishop of Warmia lack the tenderness and warmth that are so characteristic of the French master, and lack Trembecki's vividness and force of expression.

Stanisław Trembecki (1739-1812) was a very picturesque figure – a Sarmatian adventure-seeker, a libertine, a great reader and erudite, but above all: a poet bordering upon genius. He wrote superb political verses, and in his philosophical and descriptive poems he extolled tolerance and other enlightened noble ideas – as in *Polanka*, *Powązki*, but also the tragedy of human existence, the lushness and beauty of nature – as in *Sofia's Garden (Sofijówka)*, a work we will return to below.

When we contrast this poet with Krasicki, we must assert that the smooth and refined poetry of the Prince Bishop of Warmia was wanting of the kind of savagery that imparts color and power to Trembecki's works. This Classicist did not hesitate to utilize "crude" expressions, archaisms, or regionalisms in his poetry, employing them with infal-



lible accuracy. He was their “benevolent ruler,” as Mickiewicz, fascinated with Trembecki, phrased it. Trembecki quickly achieved a state of artistic balance: he had a voice that was as if inherently well-toned. And so he possessed what Naruszewicz, with whom he was bound by a kinship of poetic art, forged with great effort.

Trembecki was an excellent embodiment of the conjurer-poet; he was able to write excellent verse on any topic and with any ideological spin. He was thus an ideal court poet, despite the fact that he sometimes – fortunately – dropped out of character in this role. He was characterized by original depictions of topics, by a capacity to create superb phrasings, but above all by language that was unique in its beauty, conciseness, and vividness, and by his absolute command of poetic form. Adam Mickiewicz, who incidentally did not hold Enlightenment-age poetry in high regard, expressed the greatest esteem for Trembecki’s masterly skill in his Paris lectures: “The most fluent and most fully-fledged writer that there ever was in Slavic literature (...) he was a true Greek from the times of Pericles, or a Latinist from the epoch of Augustus.”

The domain of Trembecki’s artistry lies in the realm of style. This is why there is indeed a bit of truth in Waclaw Borowy’s paradoxical statement that this poet’s originality is evidenced in his translations, adaptations, and paraphrases. In them, Trembecki generally exceeds his own models. This is true in the case of his poetic adaptation of Voltaire’s *Prodigal Son*, as well as in the case of his paraphrases of La Fontaine’s fables. Almost all of them are masterpieces. They are so vivid and lively that next to Trembecki the great La Fontaine seems somewhat pale and anemic. At the same time they are very harmonious, with a clear *pointe*. In order to appreciate this writer’s class, it suffices to compare, for example his version of *The Wolf and the Lamb* with other nevertheless outstanding versions of the fable: those of Krylov and especially La Fontaine.

\*

Krasicki’s great talent shone in yet another genre of Classicist poetry – in the mock-heroic poem. As is well known, the heroic

genre boasts a very long and beautiful tradition. The most famous manifestations of this genre include the *Batrachomyomachia*, for centuries ascribed to Homer. Among the famous mock-heroic poems of the modern era we find Tassoni's *Rape of the Bucket* and Vide's *Game of Chess*. Many similar works were produced during the Enlightenment period, with the most well-known of them being Gresset's *Vert-vert*, Boileau's *The Lectern*, Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, and Voltaire's *Maid of Orleans*. Not inferior to them artistically are Krasicki's mock-heroic poems: *The Mouseiad* (*Myszeis*) and especially *Monachomachia* or *The War of the Monks* (*Monachomachia albo wojna mnichów*).

The mock-heroic poem is a genre excellently suited to the Prince Bishop's creative temperament, to both his poetic talents and his personality traits. Krasicki loved to look at the world from a distance. He was at home in the role of the observer, humorously describing the theater of human follies and passions. He perceived the ridiculousness in all pomp and pathos. He was struck by the triviality of matters considered great and important. Not a single pretense in the mask of truth was safe from his gaze. Krasicki loved to hunt out foolishness under the guise of seriousness, being passed off as wisdom, pettiness concealed behind bombastic gestures, grandiloquence trying to imitate competence.

We find much of this unmasking passion in the Prince Bishop's mock-heroic poems, especially *Monachomachia*. In it, two needs of the author's artistic nature found an outlet: teaching and entertaining. He expressed this concisely in one of his songs, writing: "Laughter, too, can at times be a lesson." Nonetheless, here too we encounter a pure laughter, intended only as good entertainment. It resounds predominantly when comedy stems from the parody of the epos. Once we approach the characters, a shade of satire appears and laughter also becomes a lesson.

As the poem's title indicates, its characters are monks. Krasicki nevertheless did not want for his mockery and satire to be associated with the orders that had contributed to the Enlightenment cause in Poland: the Piarists and Jesuits. And so, although the pages of *Monachomachia* teem with a multifarious and motley bevy of monks,

those in the foreground are representatives of two mendicant orders: Franciscan-Observants and Carmelites. These are the chief characters, and the conflict between them is the axis of mock-heroic action. This conflict rapidly degenerates into battle, and ultimately to an accord achieved under grotesque circumstances. Employing irony and ridicule, the author, as if *en passant*, exposes the vices of monastic society, which are otherwise identical to those of noble society: chiefly ignorance and drunkenness.

*Monachomachia* is superbly written. It is full of concise phrasings that have since become proverbs in the Polish language. It sparkles with humor that illuminates the bitter truths the writer wants to portray to society. It contains no obtrusive moralizing or directly expressed condemnation. Some disapprobation is even perfidiously concealed under the cloak of praise, although entirely transparently (Krasicki utilized this trick superbly in the ingenious satire *To the King – Do króla*). The overall image is refined by the excellence of Krasicki's octets (here as in *The Mouseiad*), which would only be surpassed by the great romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki.

Published anonymously in 1778, *Monachomachia* sparked a scandal – and soon the issue of its authorship became an open secret. There was indignation that such ridicule of monks had in fact been penned by a bishop. Two years passed following the publication of *Monachomachia*, when *Antymonachomachia*, the writer's response to voices of criticism, appeared in the bookseller's market. Here the author ostensibly agrees with his critics, while in fact confirming and reaffirming all of his tenets and allegations. He does so in a poem with identical form and of the same size.

Many other mock-heroic poems were written in Enlightenment-age Poland, but despite many sometimes interesting concepts (in Jakub Jasiński's *Quarrels – Sprzeczki* we find the buds of the digressive poem) they do not match either the works of Krasicki or his foreign prototypes. If they are important, it is more within the domestic context.

In the wider Central European context, the Hungarian mock-heroic by Csokonai, *Dorothy or The Triumph of the Ladies at the Carnival (Dorotya vagyis a dámák diadalma a fárságon)*, is worthy of note.

\*

Great works were not penned by other important poets of the mature Enlightenment, who were admittedly within the realm of Classicism, but who also demonstrated pronounced connections to sentimentalism and Rococo. This primarily refers to Kajetan Węgierski (1756-1787) and Jakub Jasiński (1759-1794). The two both rebelled against social wrongs and injustices; in spirit they were revolutionaries as well as libertines. Jasiński adulated the French revolution and called upon his countrymen to carry out a similar one; Węgierski in turn did not live to see the French revolution. Both were individualists, observing the world from the perspective of the individual: Węgierski to the end, and Jasiński until the Four-Year Sejm and the outbreak of the revolution in France. The latter then died fighting the Russians, not long before the third partition of Poland.

Of a rather sentimental nature is the poetic output of both Franciszek Karpiński (1741-1825) and Franciszek Dionizy Kniaźnin (1750-1807), although Classicist and Baroque elements – and even entire compositions – can be found in the works of both of them, as well as Rococo in Kniaźnin. Karpiński, as a “tender-hearted poet,” was very popular, and Mickiewicz appreciated him as well, but the true pearl of his work is *Song on the Birth of Our Lord* (*Pieśń o narodzeniu Pańskim*), to this day one of the most beloved Polish Christmas carols. Kniaźnin was associated with the court of the Czartoryskis, and so he frequently wrote special works to order, which were chiefly patriotic – and fortunately so, because he could write frankly – such as the famous *Ode to Whiskers* (*Oda do wąsów*) or the opera *Spartan Mother* (*Matka Spartanka*). He also wrote many neat love poems (as did Karpiński), although he brushed upon true greatness in his dramatic works written under the influence of the national catastrophe. After the country’s demise he fell into insanity.

The sentimental movement, which both of these poets represented most becomingly, did revive after the demise of the Republic, and set forth Polish poetry’s path of evolution towards Romanticism. It was no coincidence that Mickiewicz combined an admiration for Trembecki with a weakness for Karpiński.

## DRAMA

The dream of writing a great national tragedy ran through the entire Polish Enlightenment. The bitter paradox is that the nation came up against such a tragedy in real life, before it found one in literature. Several attempts were made, all generally clumsy. The works that were written might be interesting for the researcher as important links in the developmental chain, or as documents of peoples' consciousness, but they are not of value in and of themselves. Even if they are written in decent verse, they lack what is usually the mainstay of tragedy: pithiness, logical construction, and above all, tragicness.

Things were better in terms of the Polish comedy of the day, chiefly thanks to two writers: Jan Potocki and Franciszek Zabłocki. Potocki, as the author of the Rococo *Recueil des Parades (Parades – Parady)*, belongs to French as well as Polish literature. This is a peak achievement in the history of this sub-genre of drama, vastly superior to the work that served Potocki as a source of inspiration, motifs, and characters, i.e. the parades of Gueueletty. The result is a masterpiece of comedy and the grotesque.

Zabłocki, in turn, wrote several dozen comedies. Most, or even all of them have foreign sources. This places a certain blemish on the Polish comedy writer's great talent, but one should realize that at that time the issue of originality and authorship rights were viewed differently than they are today. Even the greatest writers, Shakespeare not excluded, drew upon others' ideas and plot schemes (but really whose were they?). Molière, from whom comedy writers in all European countries borrowed, also based himself upon his predecessors: Plautus, Terence, Lope de Vega. The great Diderot has been accused, not without grounds, of having plagiarized Goldoni. The essential point was how much an author took from someone else, and how much original material he added. From this standpoint, most of the Polish adaptations of the Enlightenment period did not exceed beyond vacuous, predominantly hasty and slapdash imitations, although works of outstanding value can be found as well.

In the literature of the Polish Enlightenment, perhaps the most eminent work of comedy is Zabłocki's *The Fop-Suitor (Fircyk w*

*zalotach*). This comedy is based on an idea drawn from a play by Romagnesi, which it greatly surpasses. Worthy of note is the excellent verse, energetic and brisk, and the masterfully lively, witty dialog. Nevertheless, the virtues of Zabłocki's best work are not just limited to the value of its poetic language. The whole is complimented by well-thought-out characters, a simple and logical construction (something Zabłocki had trouble with in his other comedies), and finally intrigue – transparent, but at the same time full of surprises (i.e. the resolution comes not as a result of *deus ex machina*, but as a consequence of transformations that play out in the minds of the main characters).

In Enlightenment Poland, the comedy of manners developed, stage successes were enjoyed by adaptations and original attempts in the field of bourgeois drama, but during the decline of the Republic the greatest success was enjoyed by plays of a political nature: *The Return of the Deputy* (*Powrót posła*) by Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, but above all *A Supposed Miracle, or Cracovians and Mountaineers* (*Cud mniemany czyli Krakowiaczy i górale*) and other works by Wojciech Bogusławski, the “father of the Polish theater.”

## PROSE

The first “modern” novel in Poland is considered to be *The Adventures of Nicolas Doświadczyński* (*Mikolaja Doświadczyńskiego przypadki*, 1776) by Ignacy Krasicki. Both this work and Krasicki's other novels had a great impact upon the shape of the 18th-century Polish novel.

*The Adventures of Nicolas Doświadczyński* is a novel that adroitly combines various threads – moralist, educational, adventure/travel, and utopian – but it nevertheless cannot equal the best specimens of this genre in the Western European literature of the time. It does hold out well, on the other hand, against 18th-century novels in the remainder of Central Europe.

From the perspective of world literature, also very interesting are Krasicki's essays, Naruszewicz's *History of the Polish Nation* (*Historia narodu polskiego*) and especially the publicist commentaries of Hugo Kołłątaj and Stanisław Staszic. The latter two men contributed to the

drafting of the Constitution of 3 May 1791, the first constitution in Europe (and the second in the world).

The Constitution of 3 May significantly expanded the scope of liberties, although it only partially dealt with the matters of peasants and Jews. The reformers had to hold off on certain issues until a more favorable moment, but such a moment never arrived. The partitioning powers looked upon the Constitution with aversion and distrust. Ultimately, in April 1792, the Confederation of Targowica was formed under the aegis of Catherine the Great, overturned the Constitution and summoned Russian forces to enter the country. Kościuszko would still lead an insurrection, the people would rise up under his command, but this uprising would not prevent the catastrophe. The Polish state fell. Nevertheless, the Constitution would remain an expression of the nation's greatness and vitality, a guarantee of its right to freedom and dignified life, the pride of Polish Enlightenment-age culture.

## The Decline of the Enlightenment 1795-1815

The end of the Enlightenment in Poland did not coincide with the demise of the state, but the Polish historical catastrophe did undoubtedly propel Polish literature towards Romanticism. After 1795, it was as if social virtues had been eclipsed by national values. It was difficult to reform society without reforming institutions and laws. Polish society, after all, meaning the collection of all citizens of the Republic, had as such just ceased to exist; it had been torn into three parts, incorporated into the systems of the partitioning states, and subjugated to their laws and institutions. The Polish nation, however, could continue to exist, since it was felt to be independent of state structures to a considerable extent. It lived on in the minds and hearts of Poles. From this, the optimistic conclusion was drawn that as long as the memory of Polishness and Polish culture survived, the nation would still be capable of casting off the yoke and reasserting its statehood. Such is the message of *Dąbrowski's Mazurka* (*Mazurek Dąbrowskiego*) by Józef Wybicki, which soon became the Polish anthem, and of *Conversations of the Dead* (*Rozmów zmarłych*) by the aging Krasicki.

In 1800, the Friends of Science Association was set up in Prussian Warsaw, and worked to uphold national culture. The theater revived, and schooling began to function. Literature did not see as many achievements as in the period of the mature Enlightenment, but it did publish at least two masterworks: Trembecki's philosophical and descriptive poem *Sofia's Garden* (*Sofijówka*), and Jan Potocki's *Manuscript Found in Saragossa* (*Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie*), written in French. Also of outstanding artistic value is a dramatic cycle of Napoleonic odes by Kajetan Koźmian. Finally, outstanding although not superb Classicist tragedies were likewise written: *Barbara Radziwiłłówna* by Alojzy Feliński and *Bolesław Śmiały* by Antoni Hoffmann, the most prominent such tragedies – alongside the Hungarian *Bánk bán* by József Katona – in the Central European literature of the time.

In the poetry of the late Enlightenment, the strong Classicist trend (prior to its sudden death) was coupled with a sentimental trend of clearly pre-Romantic characteristics, which already dominated in the fictional prose of the time (L. Kropiński, A. Mostowska, M. Wirtemberska).

\*

In what way did the country's loss of independence affect attitudes towards the Enlightenment? The calamity undoubtedly led to a revival of religious elements in high culture and a questioning of freethinking and secular trends. At the same time, science and culture, the sanctities of the Enlightenment, after having been saturated with elements of native character, would become a refuge for the national spirit during the period of captivity. And they would remain such a refuge through the period of Romanticism and beyond. They would become an attribute of the age of modernity.



## Bibliographical Notes

Klimowicz M., *Oświecenie*, Warszawa 2002.

Kostkiewiczowa T., *Polski wiek Światel. Obszary swoistości*, Warszawa 2002.

Snopek J., *Oświecenie. Szkic do portretu epoki*, Warszawa 1999.

*Słownik literatury polskiego oświecenia*, ed. T. Kostkiewiczowa, Wrocław 1991.

Miłosz C., *History of Polish Literature* (various editions, including in other languages).

Backvis C., *Un grand poète polonais du XVIII siècle: L'étrange carrière de sa vie et de sa grandeur*, Paris 1937.

Cazin P., *Le Prince-Évêque de Varmie. Ignace Krasicki*, Paris 1940.