

Adam FITAS

MILESTONES IN POLISH CULTURAL AWARENESS

Reflecting on the Polish heritage, I have decided to choose five monuments of art which may be considered as icons representing the complex socio-cultural realities in the history of Poland from the 10th to the 20th centuries. Appealing to the viewer via his or her sense perception, those artifacts might provide—if accompanied with a competent commentary—a visual key to the vicissitudes of Polish history and culture, frequently incomprehensible to those who approach them from outside.

The title of this paper has been inspired by the article “Kamienie milowe polskiej świadomości historycznej”¹ [Milestones of Polish Cultural Consciousness] written by Janusz Tazbir thirty years ago. Tazbir, an excellent historian and expert in early Polish culture, mentions twelve most important documents which are believed by him to have shaped Polish national identity, and in particular the historical awareness of the Polish people: (1) “Tractatus de potestate papae et imperatoris respectu infidelium”² by Paweł Włodkowic, written at the beginning of the 15th century, (2) *Annales seu Cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae*³ by Jan Długosz, (3) the Act of the Union of Lublin⁴ (1569), (4) the General Confederation of Warsaw⁵ (1573), (5) *Żywoty świętych*⁶ [The Lives of Saints]

¹ See Janusz T a z b i r, “Kamienie milowe polskiej świadomości historycznej,” in Janusz Tazbir, *Pisma wybrane*, vol. 4, *Studia nad kulturą staropolską* (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 321–40. The paper first appeared in the weekly *Polityka* in 1988. In his article, Tazbir referred to another work which aimed to present breakthrough events in the history of the world. In the opening sentence of his paper, the Polish historian confesses, “I came up with the idea of this article after reading Friedrich Heer’s *Die grossen Dokumente der Weltgeschichte*, prepared in cooperation with Xaver Schnieperer (Frankfurt am Main: Wolfgang Krüger, 1978), and comprising an analysis of thirty items, from the Code of Hammurabi to the drawings carried by the Pioneer 10 space probe launched in March 1972.” T a z b i r, “Kamienie milowe polskiej świadomości historycznej,” 321. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

² See Paweł W ł o d k o w i c, “Tractatus de potestate papae et imperatoris respectu infidelium,” in *Starodawne prawa polskiego pomniki*, vol. 5, pt. 1, ed. Michał Bobrzyński (Kraków: Sumptibus Academiae Litterarum, 1878), 161–85, 186–94.

³ See *Ioannis Dlugossii Annales seu Cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae* (Varsaviae: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1997), <https://polona.pl/item/ioannis-dlugossi-annales-seu-cronicae-incliti-regni-poloniae-lib-10-11-1404-1412,MzczMTU2OTQ/8/#info:metadata>.

⁴ See *Unia Lubelska, 1 lipca 1569* (Warszawa: Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych, 2017), <http://agad.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/unia-2C.pdf>.

⁵ See “Konfederacja generalna warszawska, 28 stycznia 1573 r.,” in Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych, https://agad.gov.pl/?page_id=968.

⁶ See Piotr S k a r g a, *Żywoty świętych Starego i Nowego Zakonu* (Kraków: Z drukarni Andrzej Piotrkowczyka, 1598), <https://polona.pl/item/zywoty-swietych-starego-y-nowego-zakonu-na-kazdy-dzien-przez-caly-rok-wybrane-z-powaznych,NDA1ODQ1Mzg/1/#info:metadata>.

by Piotr Skarga, (6) the Constitution of May 3⁷ (1791), (7) “Dąbrowski Mazurka,”⁸ (8) *Pan Tadeusz, czyli ostatni zajazd na Litwie*⁹ [*Pan Tadeusz, or The Last Foray in Lithuania*]¹⁰ by Adam Mickiewicz (1834), (9) *Księgi narodu polskiego i pielgrzymstwa polskiego*¹¹ [The Books of the Polish Nation and its Pilgrimage] by Adam Mickiewicz (1832), (10) Henryk Sienkiewicz’s trilogy (*Ogniem i mieczem*¹² [*With Fire and Sword*]¹³, *Potop*¹⁴ [*The Deluge*]¹⁵, and *Pan Wołodyjowski*¹⁶ [*Pan Michael*]¹⁷), (11) *Wesele*¹⁸ [*The Wedding*]¹⁹ by Stanisław Wyspiański, (12) *Kamienie na szaniec*²⁰ [*Stones for the Rampart*]²¹ by Aleksander Kamiński.

I shall not discuss the appositeness of Tazbir’s choice of texts despite the fact that already after my first reading of his article I was astonished by the gaps

⁷ See “Konstytucja 3 maja,” in Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych, https://agad.gov.pl/?page_id=1675.

⁸ See *Polish National Anthem: Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła* (n.p.: Atlantis Publishing, 1943), <https://polona.pl/item/polish-national-anthem-jeszcze-polska-nie-zginela,ODAYMTA3Mjk/0/#info:metadata>.

⁹ See Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz, czyli ostatni zajazd na Litwie*, vols. 1 and 2 (Paryż: A. Pinard, 1834), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k133014k/f9.image>.

¹⁰ See Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz, or the Last Foray in Lithuania*, trans. George Rapall Noyes (London, Toronto, Paris, and New York: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., J. M. Dent et Fils, and E.P. Dutton & Co., 1917), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/28240/28240-h/28240-h.html>.

¹¹ See Adam Mickiewicz, *Księgi narodu i pielgrzymstwa polskiego* (Paryż: A. Pinard, 1832), <https://polona.pl/item/ksiegi-narodu-polskiego-i-pielgrzymstwa-polskiego,Nzc4MDE1OT-c/12/#info:metadata>.

¹² See Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Ogniem i mieczem*, vols. 1 and 2 (Warszawa: Gebethner i Wolff, 1889), <https://polona.pl/item/ogniem-i-mieczem-powiesc-z-lat-dawnych-t-1,NTgxODE1NDg/6/#info:metadata>, <https://polona.pl/item/ogniem-i-mieczem-powiesc-z-lat-dawnych-t-2,NTgxODE1NDk/6/#info:metadata>.

¹³ See Henryk Sienkiewicz, *With Fire and Sword: An Historical Novel of Poland and Russia*, trans. Jeremiah Curtin (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1898), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hw2l2j&view=lup&seq=>.

¹⁴ See Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Potop* (Warszawa: Fundacja Nowoczesna Polska, 2016), <https://polona.pl/item/potop,NzA2NjEyNDM/0/#info:metadata>.

¹⁵ See Henryk Sienkiewicz, *The Deluge: An Historical Novel of Poland, Sweden, and Russia*, trans. Jeremiah Curtin (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1915), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015027661977&view=lup&seq=11>.

¹⁶ See Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Pan Wołodyjowski* (Warszawa: PIW, 1987).

¹⁷ See Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Pan Michael: An Historical Novel of Poland, the Ukraine, and Turkey*, trans. Jeremiah Curtin (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1893), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044094975463&view=lup&seq=11>.

¹⁸ See Stanisław Wyspiański, *Wesele: Dramat w 3 aktach* (Kraków: Drukarnia Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1901), <https://polona.pl/item/wesele-dramat-w-3-aktach,NTclMDEw/4/#info:metadata>.

¹⁹ See Stanisław Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, trans. Noel Clark (London: Oberon Books, 1998).

²⁰ See Aleksander Kamiński, *Kamienie na szaniec* (Warszawa: Komisja Propagandy Biura Informacji i Propagandy Komendy Głównej AK, 1943).

²¹ See Aleksander Kamiński, *Stones for the Ramparts: The Story of Two Lads in the Polish Underground Movement*, trans. Artur Horowicz (Łódź: Marron Edition, 2007).

in his catalog, especially by the absence of works representing the early and the recent periods in the Polish history. Tazbir's analysis starts with a treatise composed at the beginning of the 15th century and ends with a novel issued during World War II, as if Polish historical awareness began to develop only during the Jagiellonian period and ceased to develop in 1945. Without a doubt, it would be possible to supplement the cited list with *Gesta principum Polonorum* (*The Deeds of the Princes of the Poles*)²² by Gallus Anonymus or "Bogurodzica,"²³ created during the reign of the Piast dynasty, or with the list of the twenty one demands of the 1980 Inter-Factory Strike Committee.²⁴ Moreover, the 'first part' of Tazbir's catalog comprises mainly historical documents, while its 'second part' includes only literary works. Naturally, it is a meaningful asymmetry, as it suggests the division of the history of Poland into the period of independence (the First Polish Republic, 1569–1795) and the time of 'enslavement' (Partitions, 1772–1795, and World War II); however, Tazbir is not consistent in his choices, as the underlying concept of historical awareness he fosters seems to be frequently replaced by that of mythological consciousness. Finally, all the 'milestones' he indicates are verbal in their nature, thus remaining to a large extent inaccessible to the global public (particularly nowadays, when image and visualization are broadly used as a starting point for further historical exploration).

As I have just mentioned, my objective is not to discuss the cited list, but to compile a slightly different catalog. While Tazbir emphasized the historical and literary awareness of the inhabitants of the Polish Republic, my intention is to focus on broadly understood Polish cultural identity. So, I propose to juxtapose events, works of art, and historical figures, each of them related to a respective breakthrough in the history of Polish culture.

However, I shall attempt to go even further. My intention is to include in my list items with the greatest possible potential for communication, i.e., texts of culture which, like lenses, would bring to focus the most important qualities and cultural issues characteristic of a given period of history. Reflecting on the

²² See Gallus Anonymus, *Gesta principum Polonorum: The Deeds of the Princes of the Poles*, trans. Paul W. Knoll and Frank Schaer (Budapest and New York: Central European University, 2003).

²³ See *Bogurodzica*, <https://polona.pl/item/bogurodzica,Njg5MDU1MDE/1/#info:metadata>.

²⁴ See "21 postulatów z 17 sierpnia 1980 roku," Komisja Krajowa NSZZ Solidarność, <http://www.solidarnosc.org.pl/21-postulatow>. See also: "Twenty-One Demands, Gdańsk, August 1980: The Birth of the Solidarity Trades Union—A Massive Social Movement," UNESCO, Memory of the World, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-8/twenty-one-demands-gdansk-august-1980-the-birth-of-the-solidarity-trades-union-a-massive-social-movement/>.

As Tazbir's paper was first published in the 1980s, he was unable to include the latter document: the regime's censorship was still strict at the time.

Polish heritage, I have decided to choose five monuments of art which may be considered as icons representing the complex socio-cultural realities in the history of Poland from the 10th to the 20th centuries. It is not by accident that I have selected those iconic works: through their visual expressiveness they appear predestined for the task to which I have assigned them. Besides, being easier to comprehend than strictly verbal texts, the works in question might exert a much greater influence and be appreciated in a wide range of cultural contexts. Appealing to the viewer via his or her sense perception, those artifacts might provide—if accompanied with a competent commentary—a visual key to the vicissitudes of Polish history and culture, frequently incomprehensible to those who approach them from outside. In the successive sections of the paper, I shall propose my catalog of the milestones of Polish cultural awareness, or (if I may use an even more solemn expression) a ‘Pentateuch’ of Polish culture.

THE GNIEZNO DOORS

Along with the oldest Polish poem “Bogurodzica,” the Gniezno Doors (figures 1 and 2) might be regarded, for a variety of reasons, as a powerful symbol of the nascent Polish state.

Firstly, the Gniezno Doors were made in the second half of the 12th century, but the imagery employed by their decorators refers to the beginnings of the Polish state in the 10th century and expresses the commitment to the Christian religion adopted by Mieszko I in AD 966 (in fact, the baptism of Mieszko was tantamount to the creation of the First Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). Between the 9th and 11th centuries, the concept of Christianity and Europe became inseparable in the central and eastern parts of the European continent. The new Christian countries adopted either the Western rite (Hungary, Bohemia, Poland), or the Eastern one (Rus). The Gniezno Doors point directly to the authority of Rome, and thus the newly formed Polish state may be regarded as subject to a dominant influence of Western civilization (i.e., occidentalization), the second, Eastern, or Byzantine, root of Christian culture²⁵ being never entirely abandoned. Therefore one can say without any exaggeration that the Gniezno Doors combine, in an exceptionally expressive fashion, the fundamental semantics of the door as an object symbolizing a passageway and transition from one space to another with additional, symbolic meanings: the Gniezno Doors are also suggestive of legends penetrating into the historical reality, tribal communities turning

²⁵ For an extensive study of this subject see Jerzy K ł o c z o w s k i, *Młodsza Europa: Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia w cywilizacji chrześcijańskiej średniowiecza* (Warszawa: PIW, 2003).

into civilized states, and pagan beliefs replaced by Christianity. It is therefore not by accident that in the 17th-century descriptions of canonical visitations (and probably much earlier), the Gniezno Doors were called *Porta Regia*²⁶: the Royal Door.

Secondly, the Gniezno Doors are a monument to the cult of St. Adalbert, bishop of Prague, who has been regarded by most Polish historians as the first evangelizer of the pagan Prussia. His activity was cited as a vivid example of how Western Christianity had been introduced to Poland via Bohemia. The canonization of St. Adalbert in AD 999 precedes by only a year the pilgrimage undertaken by emperor Otto III to the Holy Sepulcher, the erection of the Gniezno archbishopric, and the announcement of the coronation of Bolesław I the Brave (the coronation took place a quarter of a century later and sealed the independence and high status of the Polish state). The Czech context would prove to be significant also in the next decades, particularly in the 11th century, when the young metropolis was invaded by the Czech prince Brzetysław, and the Gniezno cathedral was stripped of St. Adalbert's relics. It was only during the reign of Casimir I the Restorer that the temple was risen from the ruins and, in AD 1090, the translation of the relics to Gniezno took place. In other words, the Czech context, invoked by the life and martyrdom of St. Adalbert, provided the keystone of the difficult process of growth and consolidation of the Polish state during the first two centuries of its existence.

Thirdly, the Gniezno Doors combine the local (characteristic of the 12th-century young, developing state) manner of representing landscape and human figures with the universal cultural codes of the Christian Middle Ages. A monumental collection of scholarly studies published in the 1950s²⁷ makes the reader aware of the fact that the Gniezno Doors, a masterpiece of the Romanesque bas-relief, drawing on the art of Flemish masters, may be considered as a visual counterpart of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and thus as a synthesis of the medieval vision of the world and man. The extensive studies by Aleksander Gieysztor,²⁸ Jad-

²⁶ That Latin name of the Gniezno Doors was used in the title of a most interesting album presenting the monument in detail; the publication contains color photographs of the individual quarters of the doors. See Adam B u j a k and Adam S. L a b u d a, *Porta regia: Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie* (Gniezno: Fundacja Świętego Wojciecha, 1998).

²⁷ See *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie: Praca zbiorowa*, ed. Michał Walicki, vol. 1 (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1956); *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie: Praca zbiorowa*, ed. Michał Walicki, vol. 2 (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1959).

²⁸ See Aleksander G i e y s z t o r, *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie jako wyraz polskiej świadomości narodowościowej XII wieku*, in *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie*, vol. 1, 1–19.

wiga Karwasińska,²⁹ Marian Morelowski,³⁰ Lech Kalinowski,³¹ and Zdzisław Kępiński,³² comprised in the mentioned publication, as well as the captivating essays (on the religious motifs present in the imagery of the doors) by Janusz Stanisław Pasierb³³ and (on the architectural motifs) by Adam Labuda,³⁴ indicate how remarkable—ideologically and artistically—the masterpiece in question is. Not only are the Gniezno Doors a powerful icon of Polish culture, but they may also serve as an excellent visual introduction to the culture of the entire European continent. Like a bronze-cast book, they reveal the deepest axiological roots of Europe: the Graeco-Roman antiquity and Christianity. A great variety of mythical and biblical motifs and symbols are woven into the multithreaded epic narratives told both in the centrally located panels and in the decorative frieze which runs around the visual chronicle of the life of St. Adalbert. In its time, the *Porta Regia* played the role of a *Biblia Pauperum* and, should we deliver it from its purgatory-like existence of a museum piece, it may serve a similar function today. Being an icon of the first centuries of the Polish state, the Gniezno Doors take us back to our beginnings and enable a fresh insight into our history.

THE CHAPEL OF THE HOLY TRINITY AT THE LUBLIN CASTLE

The Polish-Lithuanian Unions of the late 14th and the early 15th centuries (the Union of Krewo of 1385 and the Union of Horodło of 1413) were the most important events which initiated the long process of the formation of a new state organism: an immense country with a great ethnic diversity. To the valleys, mountains, and uplands, vast areas of steppe and taiga were added. The Poles, Germans, and Jews who had until then populated the country were joined by Lithuanians, as well as by a large number of Ruthenians, the protoplasts of the inhabitants of today's Belarus and Ukraine. A significant eastward expansion of the country resulted also in an increased religious diversity: the population of the First Polish Republic comprised, along with Roman Catholics, also

²⁹ See Jadwiga Karwasińska, *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie a rozwój legendy o biskupie Wojciechu*, in *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie*, vol. 1, 20–41.

³⁰ See Marian Morelowski, *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie, ich związek ze sztuką obcą a problem rodzimości*, in *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie*, vol. 1, 42–100.

³¹ See Lech Kalinowski, *Treści ideowe i artystyczne Drzwi Gnieźnieńskich*, in *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie*, vol. 2, 7–160.

³² See Zdzisław Kępiński, *Symbolika Drzwi Gnieźnieńskich*, in *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie*, vol. 2, 161–384.

³³ See Janusz Stanisław Pasierb, "Próba syntezy treści ideowych Drzwi Gnieźnieńskich," *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 30 (1968): 240–2.

³⁴ See Adam Labuda, *Introduction*, in *Porta regia*, 18–24.

a large proportion of the Orthodox Church members, as well as adherents of Islam and other religions.

The 14th-century Chapel of the Holy Trinity (figure 3) may help visualize the process of the integration of that new country, which, since the 1569 Union of Lublin, was called the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The chapel belongs among Europe's best-preserved monuments and combines the achievements of Western architecture (the Gothic temple) with the Byzantine painting style, which makes it unique.³⁵ The artistic 'union' in question accomplished in the chapel was made possible by king Władysław II Jagiełło, who unified the lands of the Polish Crown with those of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Jagiełło was an admirer of Byzantine painting and commissioned decoration of royal chambers and numerous temples in Poland, among others in Sandomierz, Wiślica, and Cracow, as well as in the Holy Cross Mountain Monastery. Some of those works, e.g., in the Chapel of the Birth of the Holy Virgin Mary (or St. Mary's Chapel) at the Wawel Castle, are being discovered only now.³⁶

The decoration of the Holy Trinity Chapel by a team of Ruthenian painters led by Master Andrey was completed in 1418, i.e., at the time of the consolidation of the Polish-Lithuanian alliance after the Battle of Grunwald and progressing integration of the Polish Republic. The image of Poland as a vast multinational state (spanning, at the time of its greatest territorial prosperity, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea) in which the nobility played a particularly important cultural and political role was for centuries the main component of Polish identity. Not only was that image kept alive until the 18th-century partitions of Poland, but (as the 19th century poems: Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* and Wincenty Pol's *Pieśń o ziemi naszej*³⁷ [The Song of Our Land], testify) it survived until 1918, when the independence of Poland was restored. The nobility, which was developing into the most important political entity in the 15th century, would later become the only 'moving spirit' of the Commonwealth; in fact, until the 18th century, the specific system of 'nobles' democracy' was the main factor unifying that large and varied community of nations and religions.

³⁵ For more information on the Chapel of the Holy Trinity, see a monumental album by Anna Różycka Brzyk, *Freski bizantyńsko-ruskie fundacji Jagiełły w kaplicy Zamku Lubelskiego* (Lublin: Muzeum Lubelskie, 2000).

³⁶ Małgorzata Smorąg-Różycka reported new findings concerning this subject-matter in her paper "Byzantine Paintings in the Jagiellonian Poland: New Research Perspectives" presented at the LXVI Conference of the Association of Art Historians *Sztuka pograniczy*, Lublin, November 16, 2017.

³⁷ See Wincenty Pol, *Pieśń o ziemi naszej* (Lwów: Wydawnictwo Macierzy Polskiej, 1891), <https://www.wbc.poznan.pl/dlibra/show-content/publication/edition/109750?id=109750>.

Today, we are almost certain that the Chapel of the Holy Trinity was born out of Jagiełło's fascination with Eastern art rather than from the king's wish to affirm the union between Poland and Lithuania.³⁸ However, by revealing the complexity of the entirely new culture created by that historical act, the chapel may be regarded as a symbolic icon of the Polish history of the 15th and the 16th centuries.³⁹ Perhaps, contemplating the Byzantine frescos in the context of Gothic architecture might help understand the words, so puzzling to international readers, written by Mickiewicz in Polish, "Litwo! Ojczyzna moja!"⁴⁰ ("Lithuania, my country"⁴¹). Therefore, as a means to synthetically represent the history of Poland, I would choose the interior of the Chapel of the Holy Trinity, emerging as the second (after the Gniezno Doors) milestone in Polish cultural awareness.

"REJTAN, OR THE FALL OF POLAND" BY JAN MATEJKO

Completed in 1866 as an expression of the painter's experiences following the suppression of the January Insurrection, *Rejtan: Upadek Polski* [Rejtan, or the Fall of Poland] (figure 4) by Jan Matejko provides, in my opinion, a perfect summary of the history of Poland from 1772 (the year of its First Partition) to 1918 (the year when Poland regained its independence).

Incidentally, through his paintings, from *Zaprowadzenie chrześcijaństwa R.P. 965* [Introduction of Christianity to Poland, AD 965] to *Polonia. Rok 1863* [Polonia: Year 1863] (his only work devoted to the theme of Poland after the Partitions), Matejko seems to be teaching us an intensive course in Polish history. The latter work shows three female figures which are allegories of Poland, Russia, and Lithuania and reveal the painter's rootedness in the same cultural awareness which had been the symbolic source of the Chapel of the Holy Trinity.

It is also worth noting that *Rejtan* may be interpreted as part of Matejko's series of paintings addressing the fall of Poland⁴² (*Stańczyk* of 1862, *Kazanie Skargi* [Skarga's Sermon] of 1864, and *Polonia* of 1864, were all created prior to *Rejtan*).

³⁸ The issue was also discussed in the cited presentation by Smorąg-Różycka.

³⁹ For an introduction to the topic, as seen from the perspective of the history of Polish literature, see Władysław Pańś *Literatura polska w perspektywie Rzeczypospolitej wielu narodów*, "Roczniki Humanistyczne" 55, no. 1 (2007): 216–26.

⁴⁰ Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz, czyli ostatni zajazd na Litwie*, vol. 1, 7.

⁴¹ Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz, or the Last Foray in Lithuania*.

⁴² See Matejko: *Obrazy olejne: Katalog*, ed. by Krystyna Sroczyńska (Warszawa: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 1993), 80.

At first glance, the choice of *Rejtan* as another milestone of Polish cultural awareness appears problematic. The controversy which broke out shortly after the painting had been completed and the criticism it received from Matejko's countrymen and from art critics, despite its success with the audience at the Paris International Exhibition of 1867, are universally known.⁴³ It has also been admitted that the work is confusing and literally brims with historical inaccuracies. Numerous works on Matejko cite the story told by Stanisław Tarnowski who, while attending the Paris Exhibition, had overheard an intriguing explanation of the painting, "The one lying on the ground has lost heavily at cards, which is what those scattered ducats hint at, and he is about to blow his brains out, while those three standing over him are trying to persuade him not to despair at such trifles."⁴⁴

And yet I believe that as a synthesis and allegory of the experience of the Partitions and of Polish martyrdom, *Rejtan, or The Fall of Poland* finds no equals. While the first part of the title (the name of the deputy who was regarded as the patron saint of the insurrectionary acts during the 123 years of captivity) is a symbol of disagreement and resistance, the second (frequently forgotten) part of the title emphasizes the condition of the Polish state: its descent to the underworld, as it were, but not its total collapse. The fact that Poland was not completely lost, so well reflected in Dąbrowski's *Mazurka*, was also expressed in Matejko's painting, in a figure of a young man with a four-cornered cap (*rogatywka*) and a saber in his hands. The figure may be interpreted as that of a harbinger of the experience of the Polish nation, which, although deprived of its state, would survive through its culture: the experience which Bohdan Cywiński compared to a perseverant telling of our national 'tale' of sovereignty.⁴⁵

Thus, Matejko's painting—if supplied with necessary commentary—conveys a condensed vision: not one of the cause of the fall of the First Polish Republic, but rather that of its entirely new destiny in the coming century. Matejko, who is known to have supported the January Insurrection by delivering weapons to the insurgents, was acutely aware that the new future was approaching. *Rejtan*, painted after the Insurrection had been crashed, was so explained by the artist:

⁴³ On the reception of the painting by the critics and the general public in Paris, see Marek Z g ó r n i a k, *Matejko w Paryżu: Opinie krytyków francuskich z lat 1865-1870* (Kraków: Instytut Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1998), 153–82.

⁴⁴ Quoted after Z g ó r n i a k, *Matejko w Paryżu*, 172.

⁴⁵ See Bohdan C y w i ń s k i, *Baśń niepodległa, czyli w stronę politologii kultury: Wykłady witebskie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2006).

The man on the ground, vibrant with the fire of enthusiasm and the pain of despair, ready for sacrifice up to the point of martyrdom—symbolizes the nation, that is Poland, thrown to the ground with brutal force, treachery, bribery, rape, and pillage, but not defeated. *Rejtan* is a historical symbol ... The Nation-Rejtan will endure, like he did in the *Sejm* [Parliament] chamber, stubbornly, forever, until the mad idea of the homeland without a land of its own had taken root; the Nation will last as lasts the memory of Rejtan's virtue and Rejtan's love.⁴⁶

Interestingly enough, *Rejtan* belongs among the most characteristic and most popular paintings by Jan Matejko, its relevance having been recognized in a variety of later political contexts.⁴⁷

“EXECUTION VI” BY ANDRZEJ WRÓBLEWSKI

Another work I have chosen as a milestone of Polish cultural awareness is, in fact, located within the same paradigm as Matejko's *Rejtan*. Described by Maria Janion as the romantic model, it emerged with the Partitions of Poland and ended with its regaining full independence in 1989.⁴⁸ Upon Janion's view, the twenty years of freedom of the Second Polish Republic, between 1918 and 1939, are but a mere episode: perhaps not unimportant, yet not meaningful enough to permanently change Polish national consciousness shaped during the time of ‘captivity.’

The work I have in mind is the famous series of paintings entitled *Rozstrzelania* [Executions] by Andrzej Wróblewski. However, I shall not focus on the most frequently discussed *Rozstrzelanie surrealistyczne* (or *Rozstrzelanie VIII*) [The Surrealist Execution], but on the one, posthumously entitled *Rozstrzelanie VI* [Execution VI] (figure 5), which differs from the others in the series in that it shows not only the victim, but also the executioner.

In fact, the whole *oeuvre* of Andrzej Wróblewski, an extraordinary artist who prematurely died at the age of thirty, might be regarded as a guide to the history of both the Second Polish Republic and the People's Republic of Poland. His early works, created before *Rozstrzelania*, include references to the 20th-century avant-garde movement and to surrealism, some of his later paintings are

⁴⁶ Quoted after Maria S z y p o w s k a, *Jan Matejko wszystkim znany* (Poznań: Zysk i S-ka Wydawnictwo, 2016), 148.

⁴⁷ For more information on this subject, see Ewa Ch o j e c k a, “Jana Matejki ‘Rejtan’ – powrót czy pożegnanie?” *Alma Mater*, no. 3 (2002), <http://web.archive.org/web/20100527193501/http://www3.uj.edu.pl/alma/alma/45/01/13.html>.

⁴⁸ See Maria J a n i o n, “Zmierzczyć paradygmatu,” in Maria Janion, “Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś” (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 1996), 5–23. The essay was written between 1990 and 1992.

connected to socialist realism, while others bear witness to the objectification of human beings, portraying them as defective and reduced to mere flesh.⁴⁹

The work I have selected, *Rozstrzelanie VI*, painted (like others in the cycle) within a short period of time, in the first half of 1949, is remarkable for its power of expression, metaphor and symbol, although art historians associate it with Wróblewski's return to realism and the so-called photographic painting. Regardless of any detailed aesthetic analyses, however, the painting may be viewed as both a universal study of death (with the horrible harvest it reaped in the 20th century) and a symbol of tragic local history (with the almost total extermination of Jews and the death of millions of Poles). The actual extermination of a large part of the community which had lived in Central and Eastern Europe for centuries resulted in a radical change in that community's cultural awareness. Auschwitz and Kołyma, i.e., the German and the Soviet extermination camps, will remain universally comprehensible symbols of that time; from our Polish perspective, such symbols include the Warsaw Uprising and the Katyń Massacre, the latter representing a 'decapitation' of the Polish nation. The disintegration of man caused by an anonymous tormentor (the executioner in Wróblewski's painting does not have any features clearly indicating either type of totalitarianism) may be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the fate which awaited the new political entity Poland became after 1945.

The symbolism of *Rozstrzelanie VI* is even more powerful should one extend the narrative constructed in the picture to include more recent history. In fact, executions in Poland did not cease; instead, they continued taking place in woods or in prison basements. The deadly shots resounding in Poznań, Gdańsk, and Silesia bore witness to the fate of the nation which, 'chained' to communist ideology under the Soviet occupation, was still deprived of sovereignty. By depicting, in his late works, human figures as 'chaired,' petrified, or maimed, not only does Wróblewski grasp the condition of people afflicted by war, but he also portrays the 'Soviet man,' dramatically transformed (like the

⁴⁹ See Dorota J a r e c k a, "Sztuka przedstawiania zła: O 'Rozstrzelaniach' Andrzeja Wróblewskiego," in *Figury i figuracje: Materiały LIV ogólnopolskiej sesji naukowej Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Lublin 20-22 października 2005*, ed. Małgorzata Kitowska-Lysiak, Ryszard Kasperowicz, Marcin Lachowski, and Lechosław Lameński (Warszawa, Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki, 2006), 273–86. Jarecka writes in depth about the rootedness of Wróblewski's *Executions* in the past, referring back to Goya or Manet, as well as to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and to ancient art; she also discusses the ways in which Wróblewski anticipated the aesthetics of the future. See also Marcin L a c h o w s k i, "'Rozstrzelania' Andrzeja Wróblewskiego – 'socjalizacja' śmierci", in *Figury i figuracje*, 239–53; Joanna K o r d j a k - P i o t r o w s k a, "Przekształcenia: Obraz człowieka w twórczości Andrzeja Wróblewskiego (1955-1957)", in *Figury i figuracje*, 255–72. For more on *Rozstrzelanie VI*, see interesting remarks in *Andrzej Wróblewski nieznany*, ed. Jan Michalski (Kraków: Galeria Zderzak, 1993), 50–7.

hollow men in the poem by T. S. Eliot⁵⁰) by the reality in which he happened to exist. It is not by coincidence that the commentators of Wróblewski's works juxtapose his *oeuvre* with that of other great Polish symbolists of his time: Tadeusz Kantor and Tadeusz Różewicz.

“HIGH NOON” BY TOMASZ SARNECKI

The decline of the romantic-symbolic paradigm, became apparent in Poland in the years following 1989, in the period of the so-called political transformation (the term is not entirely out of use today). Having been involved, as a fresh high school graduate, in the campaign supporting the first partly free democratic elections of June 4th, 1989, I remember that historical moment well. One can perhaps describe it as the final act—as if the last ‘cavalry charge’—in some ways connected to the myth of Romanticism, or ‘Wallenrodism,’ and to political engagement expressed in underground activities, reading of samizdats, and long conversations until the small hours of the morning.

The famous election campaign poster *W samo południe 4 czerwca 1989* [High Noon, June 4th, 1989] (figure 6) by Tomasz Sarnecki (deceased in 2018, then a student of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts) seemed to me a particularly iconic picture of that time, and I was certainly not alone in perceiving it as a symbol of how Polish culture would change after 1989. The poster featured Gary Cooper, popular also in Poland for his leading part in the eponymous American Western film of the early 1950s. The walking figure of the actor was altered only slightly: Sarnecki placed the emblem of Solidarity over the sheriff's badge and changed the revolver in his hand into a ballot. On the one hand, the image defined good and evil in an unprecedented way, pointing to the need for protecting the state from ‘bandits’ and for supporting democracy; on the other hand, it signaled the beginning of a new cultural paradigm. With the advent of democracy, the opening of the borders and of the society, we were gradually abandoning our romantic myth and embarking on a path towards an Americanized version of popular Western culture, waking up, at the same time, to a new reality and recognizing the necessity to both rediscover our identity and create it anew. By choosing a well-known actor playing in a cult movie—and not, for instance, Lech Wałęsa or John Paul II—Sarnecki anticipated the future in which our enemy would no longer be defined clearly; instead, we would have to grapple with various elusive forms of neocolonialism. As Janion correctly diagnosed, what happened after 1989 was “internationalization of

⁵⁰ Thomas Stearns Eliot, “The Hollow Men,” <http://aduni.org/~heather/occs/honors/Poem.htm>.

culture on a previously unknown scale, but not at the level of—symbolically speaking—‘Thomas Mann,’ but at that of a western, an illustrated magazine, and rock-and-roll.”⁵¹

Has Polish culture been able to cope with the new situation? It is not for me to answer this question, but I believe that we still remain within the paradigm opened before us by the poster with Gary Cooper walking towards us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bujak, Adam, and Adam S. Labuda. *Porta regia: Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie*. Gniezno: Fundacja Świętego Wojciecha, 1998.
- Chojcka, Ewa. “Jana Matejki ‘Rejtan’: powrót czy pożegnanie?” *Alma Mater*, no. 3 (2002). <http://web.archive.org/web/20100527193501/http://www3.uj.edu.pl/alma/alma/45/01/13.html>.
- Cywiński, Bohdan. *Baśń niepodległa, czyli w stronę politologii kultury: Wykłady witebskie*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2006.
- Gieysztor, Aleksander. *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie jako wyraz polskiej świadomości narodowościowej XII wieku*. In *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie: Praca zbiorowa*. Edited by Michał Walicki. Vol. 1. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1956.
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns. “The Hollow Men.” <http://aduni.org/~heather/occs/honors/Poem.htm>.
- Heer, Friedrich. *Die grossen Dokumente der Weltgeschichte*. Prepared in cooperation with Xaver Schnieperer. Frankfurt am Main: Wolfgang Krüger, 1978.
- Janion, Maria. “Zmierzch paradygmatu.” In Janion, “*Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś*.” Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 1996.
- . “Beethoven i Casino de Paris.” In Janion, “*Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś*.” Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 1996.
- Jarecka, Dorota. “Sztuka przedstawiania zła: O ‘Rozstrzelaniach’ Andrzeja Wróblewskiego,” in *Figury i figuracje: Materiały LIV ogólnopolskiej sesji naukowej Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Lublin, 20–22 października 2005*. Edited by Małgorzata Kitowska-Łysiak, Ryszard Kasperowicz, Marcin Lachowski, and Lechosław Lameński. Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki, 2006.
- Kamiński, Aleksander. *Kamienie na szaniec*. Warszawa: Komisja Propagandy Biura Informacji i Propagandy Komendy Głównej Armii Krajowej, 1943.
- . *Stones for the Ramparts: The Story of Two Lads in the Polish Underground Movement*. Translated by Artur Horowicz. Łódź: Marron Edition, 2007.
- Kalinowski, Lech. *Treści ideowe i artystyczne Drzwi Gnieźnieńskich*. In *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie: Praca zbiorowa*. Edited by Michał Walicki. Vol. 2. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1959.

⁵¹ Maria Janion, *Beethoven i Casino de Paris*, in Janion, “*Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś*,” 25.

- Karwasińska, Jadwiga. *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie a rozwój legendy o biskupie Wojciechu*. In *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie: Praca zbiorowa*. Edited by Michał Walicki. Vol. 1. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1956.
- Kępiński, Zdzisław. *Symbolika Drzwi Gnieźnieńskich*. In *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie: Praca zbiorowa*. Edited by Michał Walicki. Vol. 2. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1959.
- Kitowska-Łysiak, Małgorzata, Ryszard, Kasperowicz, Marcin Lachowski, and Lameński Lechosław, eds. *Figury i figuracje: Materiały LIV ogólnopolskiej sesji naukowej Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Lublin, 20–22 października 2005*. Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki, 2006.
- Kordjak-Piotrowska, Joanna. “Przekształcenia: Obraz człowieka w twórczości Andrzeja Wróblewskiego (1955–1957),” in *Figury i figuracje: Materiały LIV ogólnopolskiej sesji naukowej Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Lublin, 20–22 października 2005*. Edited by Małgorzata Kitowska-Łysiak, Ryszard Kasperowicz, Marcin Lachowski, and Lechosław Lameński. Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki, 2006.
- Kłoczowski, Jerzy. *Młodsza Europa: Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia w cywilizacji chrześcijańskiej średniowiecza*. Warszawa: PIW, 2003.
- Lachowski, Marcin. “‘Rozstrzelania’ Andrzeja Wróblewskiego – ‘socjalizacja’ śmierci,” in *Figury i figuracje: Materiały LIV ogólnopolskiej sesji naukowej Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Lublin, 20–22 października 2005*. Edited by Małgorzata Kitowska-Łysiak, Ryszard Kasperowicz, Marcin Lachowski, and Lechosław Lameński. Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki, 2006.
- Michalski, Jan, ed. *Andrzej Wróblewski nieznan*. Kraków: Galeria Zderzak, 1993.
- Mickiewicz, Adam. *Księgi narodu i pielgrzymstwa polskiego*. Paryż: A. Pinard, 1832. <https://polona.pl/item/ksiegi-narodu-polskiego-i-pielgrzymstwa-polskiego,Nzc4MDE1OTc/12/#info:metadata>.
- . *Pan Tadeusz, czyli ostatni zajazd na Litwie*. Vols. 1 and 2. Paryż: A. Pinard, 1834. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k133014k/f9.image>.
- . *Pan Tadeusz, or the Last Foray in Lithuania*. Translated by George Rapall Noyes. London, Toronto, Paris, and New York: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., J. M. Dent et Fils, and E.P. Dutton & Co, 1917. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/28240/28240-h/28240-h.html>.
- Morelowski, Marian. *Drzwi gnieźnieńskie, ich związek ze sztuką obcą a problem rodzimości*. In *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie: Praca zbiorowa*. Edited by Michał Walicki. Vol. 1. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1956.
- Panas, Władysław. “Literatura polska w perspektywie Rzeczypospolitej wielu narodów.” *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 55, no. 1 (2007): 216–26.
- Pasierb, Janusz Stanisław. “Próba syntezy treści ideowych Drzwi Gnieźnieńskich.” *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 30, no. 2 (1968): 240–2.
- Różycka-Bryzek, Anna. *Freski bizantyńsko-ruskie fundacji Jagielly w kaplicy Zamku Lubelskiego*. Lublin: Muzeum Lubelskie, 2000.
- Sienkiewicz, Henryk. *The Deluge: An Historical Novel of Poland, Sweden, and Russia*. Translated by Jeremiah Curtin. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company,

1915. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015027661977&view=1up&seq=1>.
- . *Ogniem i mieczem*. Vols. 1 and 2. Warszawa: Gebethner i Wolff, 1889. <https://polona.pl/item/ogniem-i-mieczem-powiesc-z-lat-dawnych-t-1-NTgxODE1NDg/6/#info:metadata>, <https://polona.pl/item/ogniem-i-mieczem-powiesc-z-lat-dawnych-t-2,NTgxODE1NDk/6/#info:metadata>.
- . *Potop*. Warszawa: Fundacja Nowoczesna Polska, 2016. <https://polona.pl/item/potop,NzA2NjEyNDM/0/#info:metadata>.
- . *With Fire and Sword: An Historical Novel of Poland and Russia*. Translated by Jeremiah Curtin. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1898. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hw2l2j&view=1up&seq=1>.
- . *Pan Wołodyjowski*. Warszawa: PIW, 1987.
- . *Pan Michael: An Historical Novel of Poland, the Ukraine, and Turkey*. Translated by Jeremiah Curtin. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1893. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044094975463&view=1up&seq=11>.
- Sroczyńska Krystyna, ed. *Matejko: Obrazy olejne. Katalog*. Warszawa: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 1993.
- Szypowska Maria. *Jan Matejko wszystkim znany*. Poznań: Zysk i S-ka Wydawnictwo, 2016.
- Tazbir, Janusz. „Kamienie milowe polskiej świadomości historycznej.” In Tazbir, *Pisma wybrane*. Vol. 4. *Studia nad kulturą staropolską*. Kraków: Universitas, 2001.
- Walicki, Michał, ed. *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie: Praca zbiorowa*. Vol. 1. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1956.
- . *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie: Praca zbiorowa*. Vol. 2. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1959.
- Wypiański, Stanisław. *The Wedding*. Translated by Noel Clark. London: Oberon Books, 1998.
- . *Wesele: Dramat w 3 aktach*. Kraków: Drukarnia Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1901. <https://polona.pl/item/wesele-dramat-w-3-aktach,NTc1MDew/4/#info:metadata>.
- Zgórniak, Marek. *Matejko w Paryżu: Opinie krytyków francuskich z lat 1865-1870*. Kraków: Instytut Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1998.

ABSTRACT / ABSTRAKT

Adam FITAS, Milestones in Polish Cultural Awareness
DOI 10.12887/32-2019-4-127-23

Referring to Janusz Tazbir's article on the milestones of Polish historical awareness, published thirty years ago, the author offers a novel perspective on the most important monuments of the history of Poland. The works described in the

paper include: the Gniezno Door, the Chapel of the Holy Trinity at the Lublin Castle, the paintings: *Rejtan. Upadek Polski* [Rejtan, or the Fall of Poland] by Jan Matejko, and *Rozstrzelania VI* [Execution VI] by Andrzej Wróblewski, as well as *W samo południe 4 czerwca 1989* [High Noon, June 4th, 1989], a poster by Tomasz Sarnecki. Each of these iconic masterpieces may be considered as making a breakthrough in the history of Polish culture. Due to their visual nature, the artifacts in question are more accessible to international public than works of purely verbal character and might be effectively used to present and discuss Polish cultural identity.

Keywords: Polish culture, Polish history, masterpiece, cultural identity

Contact: Katedra Teorii i Antropologii Literatury, Instytut Filologii Polskiej, Wydział Humanistyczny, Katolicki Uniwersytet Jana Pawła II, Al. Racławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland

E-mail: <http://pracownik.kul.pl/adam.fitas/kontakt>

http://www.kul.pl/dr-adam-fitas,art_28050.html

Adam FITAS, Kamienie milowe polskiej świadomości kulturowej

DOI 10.12887/32-2019-4-127-23

Nawiązując do opublikowanego przed trzydziestu laty artykułu Janusza Tazbira „Kamienie milowe polskiej świadomości historycznej,” autor przedstawia nowe spojrzenie na najważniejsze dla dziejów Polski zabytki. W artykule omówiono pięć takich kluczowych tekstów kultury: Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie, kaplicę św. Trójcy na Zamku Lubelskim, obrazy *Rejtan. Upadek Polski* Jana Matejki i *Rozstrzelania VI* Andrzeja Wróblewskiego oraz plakat *W samo południe 4 czerwca 1989* Tomasza Sarneckiego. Te ikoniczne arcydzieła można uznać za przełomowe dla naszej świadomości kulturowej. Dzięki swemu wizualnemu charakterowi są one bardziej przystępne dla międzynarodowego odbiorcy niż dokumenty czysto werbalne i można je skutecznie wykorzystywać w prezentowaniu polskiej tożsamości kulturowej i debacie nad nią.

Słowa kluczowe: kultura polska, historia Polski, arcydzieło, tożsamość kulturowa

Kontakt: Katedra Teorii i Antropologii Literatury, Instytut Filologii Polskiej, Wydział Humanistyczny, Katolicki Uniwersytet Jana Pawła II, Al. Racławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin

E-mail: <http://pracownik.kul.pl/adam.fitas/kontakt>

http://www.kul.pl/dr-adam-fitas,art_28050.html