

## Pictures of Native Nature in Old-Polish Literature (XVI-XVIII)

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**Abstract:** Polish literature created the first images of native nature in the 16th century. This was done as a reaction to the ancient Greek and Latin cultures. A typical piece of this poetics presents a safe and quiet place of life, free of political or social problems, eg Mikolaj Rej's *Żywot człowieka poczciwego* (1568) [*Life of a Good Man*]. However, even before Christianity had firmly set its roots in Poland in the eleventh century, the depiction of nature was according to the Slavic tradition. Thus, the paintings of sacred nature, which were to be valued and worshiped are to be found in Jan Kochanowski's *Pieśń o spustoszeniu Podola* (1586) [*The Song about the Despair of the Podole*], Oraz's *Pieśń Świętojańska o Sobótce* (1586) [*The Song Saint John's Eve*] and Szymon Zimorowic's *Roksolanki* (1624) [*Ruthenian Girls*]. A man living in his native land felt fulfilled and happy, cared for his old habits, felt strongly connected with the seasons of the year and the laws of nature. In subsequent centuries the concept of nature underwent changes. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came Sarmatism, a cultural concept, which stated that the Poles came from the ancient, agricultural and warrior nation of the Sarmat living around the Black Sea since the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Literature from the late 17th and early 18th centuries shows native nature as the most important place on earth. The literary hero is not looking for excitement abroad, he is not interested in foreign cultures, but he cares about his own earthly estate, his homeland with which he feels emotionally connected, eg Waclaw Potocki's, *Ogród fraszek* (1691) [*Garden of Epigrams*], Jan Chryzostom Pasek's, *Pamiętniki* (1695) [*Diaries*] and Elżbieta Drużbacka's, *Opis czterech pór roku* (1750) [*The Description of the Four Seasons of the Year*].

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### Nature, Nativeness and Patriotism

Discussing the relationship between ecology and literature sometimes seems a new humanistic idea resulting from the problems of the modern world threatened by air, water and soil pollution (Przybylski, Janion, Fedoreczuk). Meanwhile, it is worth noting that from the perspective of the history of universal literature, literary works were created in ancient times,

in which the motif of nature or family land was quite common. Literature in the Polish language has its origins in the thirteenth century, but in the beginning it was strongly influenced by the Latin tradition. Till the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, classical literature continued to influence Polish literature; it was only later that Polish literature was able to shed its classical influences and evolve as a literature of the Polish people. Images of nature first appeared in the native literature of the sixteenth century and since then have become a key factor in Polish literature, sometimes valued for itself, sometimes as a character in its own right.

The first example of this type of representation of nature in the Polish tradition is found in *Pieśń o żubrze* (original in Latin: *Carmen de bisonte*), in 1523. Written by a Catholic priest Mikołaj Hussowski (1475-1533), the poem was to be a literary complement to the gift prepared for Pope Leo X, to whom a Polish aristocrat intended to give a stuffed bison. The gift was not handed over because the Pope had died. Therefore, the song about the bison was dedicated to the queen of Poland--Bona Sforza. The composition and narration of the work is connected with hunting; however the Polish author searched for originality and went beyond the patterns of ancient authors. The poet makes very pertinent observations regarding the natural world and vividly describes the flora and fauna of the place, in which the most distinguished animal was the bison. While presenting the natural world, Hussowski also refers to the history of the area, which is modern day Lithuania. The originality of his poem lies in the fact that the preservation of the natural assets from destruction is prioritized over the aesthetic value of nature (Krókowski, Backvis, Ochmański). Therefore, this work may be considered as the first example of the Polish ecological poem.

### **Polish Renaissance Model and Literary Images of Nature**

The period of the proper Renaissance in Poland began around the mid-15th century. However the most interesting achievements in the Polish literature of the Renaissance can be found in the second half of the 16th century (Pelc, Ziomek, Wilczek). At that time, the Renaissance man appeared against the background of nature. These images resulted from the aesthetic response to classical works from Ancient Greek and Latin literatures. The Greek works of Theocrit (3rd century BC) and Latin ones of Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro, 1st century BC) had the greatest influence here.

An example of this type of literature in the Polish tradition are the works of Mikołaj Rej (1505-1569), sometimes called the “father of Polish literature.” Besides satirical, moralistic

and didactic works, Mikołaj Rej also wrote *Żywot człowieka poczciwego* (1556) [*The Life of the Honest Man*). It is a prose description of a country house, a safe place where you could spend a peaceful life, free from political and social problems. The hero of the work is a nobleman. Not an aristocrat, or an ordinary peasant, but a man who limits himself to the basic needs of life and directs his activities to working on the field, in the garden, and in the family environment. As to the nature surrounding him, he does not intend to conquer it, but rather take advantage of its wealth, as a host who cares for order in his estates. The “honest man” is someone who knows the realities of life in the countryside, who co-exists with the seasons and listens intently to the needs of the community in which he lives. He accepts the passing of time peacefully; is not excessively ambitious nor does he aspire for political power. This attitude towards life was promoted by the ancient stoics, who were read by the creators of the Polish Renaissance. Mikołaj Rej was, after all, a Christian who could take life's wisdom from nature's phenomena and accept death in the hope of eternal life in heaven (Witczak, Kochan).

During the Renaissance, there appeared in Polish literature, the native trend of representing nature in the Slavic tradition, which had existed before the advent of Christianity in Poland in the 10th century. According to Slavic beliefs, nature was represented by the deities of fire, water, sky and earth. In the imagination of the ancient Slavs, nature therefore had religious significance, which had to be honoured and worshipped (Baczewski, Gutowski, Linkner). Some of the beliefs and customs of the Slavs were preserved by Polish authors of Renaissance literature. An important example of a writer in whose work one can find the motifs of nature, family land and landscape is Jan Kochanowski (Korolko, Pelc, Ulewicz). It is worth paying attention to his *Pieśń Świętojańska o Sobótce* (1586) [*Saint John's Eve*], which, despite having motifs from Virgil and Horace, is based on the pre-Christian traditions. The poem is divided into twelve parts, which are narrated by women. The themes of the individual pieces focus on the following depictions: celebration after work on the fields, dance of joy, sensual love, land of eternal happiness, disadvantages of hunting, charms of pastoralism, the myth of changing a girl into a nightingale, barbarism of war and finally--the ideal woman. The song, according to Kochanowski's recommendations, should be performed during the spring solstice to celebrate the night of the Slavic Knight Kupala as well as the night of St. John. The intention of the poet, is thus, to highlight the vitality and power of nature's forces. A man joining with the forces of earth and sky becomes their integral part, which provides him with a sense of fulfillment and meaning. He will not experience such values if he is focused on material life and is devoted to satisfying his selfish ambitions (Ziemba, Ulewicz).

Jan Kochanowski also wrote *Pieśń o spustoszeniu Podola* (1586) [*Lament on War-Ravaged Podolia*], a lyrical piece in which the images of nature and landscape are combined with a patriotic motif. The basic content here is a description of the destruction that occurred at the southern end of the then Poland, which had been attacked by the Tatars. The images of burnt towns and villages, scenes of kidnapping and arson are reinforced by images of destruction of the natural world. The war caused the desolation of forests, farms, orchards and apiaries, creating a gloomy vision of future years in which food would be lacking. The author suggests that the beauty of nature can only be appreciated in times of peace, while wars always bring chaos and poverty.

### **Baroque and Sarmatism**

Polish literature of the next century was marked by new baroque aesthetics and religious discussions of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, but there were no fundamental changes in the descriptions of nature. Nature was either idyllic or bucolic. The myth of Arcadia, the land of happiness and fulfillment, which was essentially pastoral was renewed. (Witkowska, Krzewińska, Karpiński). However, at the beginning of the Baroque in Poland, a poem, *Officina ferraria* by Walenty Roździeński, the administrator of Silesian mines and smelters, was written in 1612. This work shows the development of industry in one of the regions of Poland, as well as customs, beliefs and social relations among metallurgists and miners. The work shows Silesia as a space where the best iron ore deposits in Europe are found, and the whole region as the best industrialized part of contemporary Poland (Pluszczewski, Piaskowski, Jarosz). This is a very interesting poem as far as the depiction of the natural world is concerned because it shows how a traditionally agrarian culture is transformed into an industrial model. Roździeński understands the development of civilization as an example of the genius of man and his will to dominate. He does not mark the negative effects of the march of civilization in his work, praising builders, blacksmiths, steelworkers and miners instead.

The distinctness of the Polish model of baroque literature, in relation to what was developed in Italy or France, was the cultural concept of Sarmatism. It was created around the mid-seventeenth century, by representatives of the nobility, who began to have a greater say in state policy. According to a mythical novel, *Barok polski wobec Europy* (2003), especially popular in the Baroque, Poles as a nation came from the ancient Sarmatians, the people living

around the Black Sea around the 4th century BC. Sarmatians in the representations of Polish writers were basically agrarian and very brave. By their nature they were not aggressive, and only took up arms if they had to defend their homeland. Their settling on the banks of the Vistula and the Dnieper resulted from their desire for a peaceful life without the constant threat from the Romans.

Polish literature emerging under the influence of Sarmatism shows the native local natural environment as the most important and the most beautiful place on earth. None of the other parts of the world are as important as a homely area, with well-known flora and fauna that is not intended to be damaged or changed. Szymon Zimorowic's *Roksolanki* (1624) [*Roksolankas*] is a poem that glorifies the power of love, which is only present in the natural surroundings, not in the aristocratic manor or the crowded, noisy city (Grześkowiak). The poet reaches for symbolism and love metaphors, deriving them from various sources. The first group is associated with the symbols of classical poetry: figures of Muses, Cupid, and Venus; the second group draws its symbols from folk traditions: a pair of birds, a wreath made of roses, a rosemary wreath. Therefore, the images and metaphors of this cycle of songs is a syncretic blend of ancient and folkloric motifs. For example, an image of the orchard and apple trees, simultaneously conjures up the biblical world of Eden, as well as the popular perception of erotica; apples being a symbol of female breasts. The same is true with the images of birds, where the descriptions of pigeon pairs, swallows or storks are as much a reference to the motifs of ancient literature as to the use of folk associations linking these birds with fertility, happiness and wealth.

In the last century of the Old Polish epoch, the works of Elżbieta Drużbacka are significant. In her *Opisanie czterech części roku* (1750) [*The Description of the Four Seasons of the Year*], she once again reached out for the idyll genre to show the specificity of the Slavic-Polish approach to the world. The work consists of parts describing spring, summer, autumn and winter, which exist as a manifestation of Divine will. The work is a descriptive poem, and we find in it a meticulously outlined world of plants, animals, forest landscape, farm fields, wastelands, lakes and rivers. Descriptions of the seasons and geographical space, though not free from Greek and Roman mythology, are written freely, without erudite quotes or stylistic displays. In the poem, one notices the technique of anthropomorphizing nature and a more modern conviction about the rational order of the world (Borowy, Stasiewicz). According to

Drużbacka, nature should be respected because it is proof of the existence of God, and a reflection of the harmony and beauty of the universal order.

The eighteenth century in Polish culture marked the end of the Old Polish period and the advent of the modern era, i. e. Classicism or Enlightenment (Bajda, Średniowiecze, Renesans, Barok, Matoszko-Czwalińska). From the middle of the century, the influences of French and English culture, the philosophy of rationalism and empiricism, encyclopedic and utilitarian attitudes were becoming more noticeable in Polish literature. Native nature ceased to be attractive. According to the world view of the Enlightenment, nature became mainly an object of exploitation, a space to be acquired and managed by man. The advent of romanticism changed this approach and nature became a super reality, even divine. However, that is another kind of story . . .

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