THE POWER OF ILLUSIONS: ENLIGHTENMENT, ROMANTICISM, AND NATIONAL CATASTROPHE IN POLAND

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to show the consequences of the loss of independence for the public discourse in Poland in the context of 19th comparison between Poland and Spain. The loss of independence is considered a "catastrophe" so the first part of the paper deals with the meaning of the concept of catastrophe. In the second part, the author tracks the traces of this catastrophe in Polish literature in 19th and 20th century using as the examples texts of such authors as Krasicki, Lelewel, Mickiewicz, Prus, Brun, and Gombrowicz. Drawing on psychoanalysis the author argues that in Polish discourse the sophisticated system of illusions have been developed which has helped to maintain Polish national identity during the times of oppression. The paper ends with the question about the usefulness of this system of illusions in independent Poland after 1989.

I. Introduction: The Concept of Catastrophe as a Theoretical Category

Catastrophe appears in the humanities and social sciences in various theoretical and empirical contexts. It is closely associated with the concept of event, which is becoming a paramount notion in the humanities at present. In his genealogy of the concept of event, Martin Jay shows how introducing "the event" into the humanities was interconnected with the dismantling of structuralist supremacy. Analyzing the meaning of the event in "French theory," Jay concludes: "for them no event is a 'current event.' If it has any basic temporality, it is that of future anterior (sometimes called the future perfect), the time of what will come to be a completed past in what will be the future. The very singularity of the event, its resistance to being recuperated by contextual or conceptual meaning, serves for them all as a marker of distinction. For all of them, it is a sign of the ineffable, the

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surplus that always exceed any attempt to contain it" (Jay 2013, 16).

In literature concerning social and cultural consequences of catastrophe, both caused by nature and brought about by human activity, catastrophe is sometimes posited as a special kind of event (Koczanowicz 2007, Koczanowicz 2012). First, catastrophe is immediately perceived as a disaster not only as a particular physical occurrence but also as a dislocation of the regular course of social events. Second, catastrophe is a negative side of the event in the sense that, using Alain Badiou categories, it signals the inadequacy of the existing situation. Badiou describes relations among the subject, the event, and the situation as follows: "Let us say that a *subject*, which goes beyond the animal…needs something to have happened, something that cannot be reduced to its ordinary inscription in 'what there is.' Let us call this *supplement* an *event*, and let us distinguish multiple-being, where it is not a matter of truth (but only of opinions), from the event, which compels us to decide a *new* way of being" (Badiou 2001, 41). In this framework, catastrophe is a first phase of the event, that which shows the necessity to open "a new way of being." Third, also in the spirit of Badiou's work, catastrophe is a challenge to the old forms of subjectivity. If catastrophe is a negative side of the event, it is, similarly, a negative side of subjectivity. The challenge of catastrophe is first to overcome trauma through the re-construction of values and sentiments. If the event is, as Badiou argues, a reason why new subjectivities of militants arise, catastrophe is a call emphatically rendered in a line from Rilke's famous poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo":"[Y]ou must change your life" (Rilke 1995).

In this paper, I trace a particular catastrophe – Poland's loss of independence in 1794 – and its implications. Given my earlier definition of catastrophe, the forfeit of sovereign statehood put into question the old subjectivity of being a Pole. From that moment on, the main quandary tackled in the Polish consideration was "What does it mean to be a Pole if there is no Poland?" Other related questions concerned the status of a non-existent Poland. "What country would Poland be if it existed?" or "What would the Polish nation be like if Poland were independent?" In this short essay, I will not fully analyze the complexity of these queries. Instead, I will focus on critical points in this debate, drawing on three Polish novels for examples and illustrations. One of them, *The Adventures of Mr. Nicolas Wisdom*, published in 1778 and extolling the Enlightenment ideals, is the first Polish novel ever written (Krasicki 1992). The second, *The Doll*, published in 1890, enjoys the reputation of the greatest Polish novel (Prus 1996).

It shows a bitter confrontation of the ideals of Polish Romanticism with the reality of a backward, enslaved country. The third, *Trans-Atlantyk,* published in 1953, is probably the most emphatic attempt to revise the Polish national self-stereotypes (Gombrowicz 1994). As a prelude to my reflections, I will delve into *The Historical Parallel between Spain and Poland in the 16th, 17th, and 18th Centuries*, a non-fiction work by Joachim Lelewel, the greatest Polish historian of the 19th century (Lelewel 2006). This wonderful book has nearly sunk into oblivion, but its new edition prepared by Jan Kieniewicz shows that through his bold comparison Lelewel was able to anticipate and frame the discussions, which were to continue for the following two centuries. As a late counterpart to Lelewel's book, I will refer to Julian Brun's study *Stefan Żeromski's Tragedy of Errors*, first published in 1926 (Brun 1958). Julian Brun, an outstanding Marxist literary critic, used Polish writer Stefan Żeromski in order to discuss particularities of Polish national ideology. Concluding my essay, I will show that the debate on the nature of the Polish nation still lingers on even though Poland regained independence in 1989.

II. Prelude: Joachim Lelewel's Comparison of Poland and Spain

Why did Joachim Lelewel, a young Polish historian soon to become an outstanding politician, scholar, and leader of the struggle for Poland's independence, decide to launch his academic career in 1829/31 with a cycle of lectures on a historical parallel between Poland and Spain? Making that decision, he certainly knew that tsarits censorship would crack down on a book of this kind, with the comparison it offered readily decipherable as call for the restoration of an independent Polish state. The book was finally published during the November Uprising in 1831. At that time, Lelewel was a public figure, a member of Sejm (Polish Parliament) and a government official. Amidst his many duties, he nevertheless devoted time to preparing the book for publication, which implies how very important to the Polish nation he considered it to be.

In his brilliant introduction to the recent Polish edition of Lelewel's book, Jan Kieniewicz explores this question (Kieniewicz 2006). He claims that Lelewel's crucial aim was to show the mechanism of history, the mechanism, which could account for the Polish national catastrophe of losing independence in 1795. Spain serves, in fact, as part of the explanatory background against which the Polish calamity is analyzed. Lelewel paints a gloomy picture of both nations

inevitably descending into despair as result of a general historical tendency. "Who could stop ongoing bleak and improvident despotism in Spain, when this fate touched all Kingdoms in the West, who could stop ongoing playful gentry democracy in Poland, when it emerged from ancient movement of the Kingdoms in the East, of which Poland alone could save its liberties" (Lelewel 2006, 38). So, *The Parallel* depicts opposite social and political movements, which led both countries to catastrophe. For Lelewel, their fates testify to the power of an inexorable historical tendency which makes different, contradictory even, paths that states and nations walk wind up at the same terminus. This power is progress, which appeared in "things past" and guides nations and states to the future (Kieniewicz 2006, 8). Lelewel found the parallel between Spain and Poland so important that he decided to carry on with his work. His further studies culminated in *A Continuation: The Poles and Spaniards Attempt to Recover*, a book written originally in French (*Les Espangols et les Polonaise cherechent à se relever*), probably in 1837. Perhaps, intended to give Spanish liberal exiles, whom Lelewel – himself a refugee after the November Uprising ended in a failure in 1831 – met in Paris, a chance to respond. As Kieniewicz writes, the response was, predictably, rather cold as they had expected Lelewel's new work to correct the image of Spanish history sketched in *The Parallel*. They were disgruntled with Lelewel's text, which might explain why *A Continuation* remained in manuscript until recently (Kieniewicz 2006, 9). Kieniewicz places *A Continuation* of *the Parallel* in its proper historical context and suggests that it was probably meant to communicate the urgency of engaging in the revolutionary movement. Spain had already been involved in it; Poland was to follow soon. In this way, Lelewel joins the perennial debates of Polish intellectuals aspiring to regain independence in the 19th century. For my purpose, that marks the most significant moment I would like to address rather than exploring the complexities of the image of Spain in Polish history and mythology (Kieniewicz 2001).

The problem of how to regain independence has two interwoven dimensions. On the one hand, it was a political issue. In Poland clandestinely and among the émigrés openly, some Poles over 120 years discussed which European country Poland should form an alliance with in order to obtain at least partial independence. Others, in turn, believed that the only possibility was taking up arms and fighting for independence by themselves. As each generation felt obliged to start a fight, insurrections kept coming in resurgent waves: during the Napoleonic wars, in 1830/31, during the Spring of Nations in 1848, in 1863/64,

and in 1905, when the Polish socialists fought for an independent and just Poland. These political debates inevitably plunged Poles into unsolvable dilemmas as to the limits of political compromise with the oppressors. For instance, in the early 19th century Poles were locked in a bitter argument over Polish participation in Napoleon's intervention in Spain, when Catholic Polish soldiers, counting on Napoleon's promise to reinstall independent Poland, had to quench Spain's uprising for independence. Throughout the 19th century and in the early 20th century, Poles kept debating who they should ally with in order to restore independent statehood. The respective upholders of the Austrian and Russian orientations fiercely opposed each other. In the background was an even more fundamental question altogether: to fight or not to fight. Was it better to launch another national uprising or to try to negotiate with the oppressors? At the same time, the discussions had a more profound dimension to them. At stake was not just taking a such-or-such position in the current political situation but also rather defining the Polish nation. Curious thought it may seem, the question was imperative for the enslaved nation, which cherished memories of the glorious past. The conjunction Poland had found itself in on the one hand prompted interrogation of the basic national values, but on the other, it crucially induced uncritical endorsement of those values. As the outstanding Polish historian Jerzy Jedlicki observes, this mood is semantically reflected in the strange concept of *polskość*:

> How should one properly translate it into English? "Polishness"? This seems to have a somewhat artificial sound. The Polish-English dictionary does not give an exact equivalent, but instead defines it by some possible meanings. "Polskość = Polish character, or: traits, nationality, origin, descent, provenance." It is interesting that the corresponding word *angielskość* (Englishness), constructed analogously to *polskość,* has a false ring to the Polish ear. There is the legitimate form *angielszczyzna*, which can mean firstly, 'English language,' and secondly, 'things English,' 'the English way of life,' although in this second and now archaic meaning, it has derogatory overtones, similar to *francuszczyzna* (French manners and customs, things French) and in general, any sort of *cudzoziemszczyzna* (foreign influence). But *polskość* is a word that is fully natural and living, that sounds equally well in a historical dissertation and in current speech. It can signify everything that the dictionary says, but it also signifies, as it were, something more, something elusive.

> *Polskość* signifies the very essence of being a Pole. (Jedlicki 1990, 41)

Jedlicki goes on to claim if such a concept appeared in the Polish language, then it must have been necessitated by a need to express real social and cultural problems. In my perspective, the perennial preoccupation and difficulty with pinpointing *polskość* ensue from the catastrophe of the loss of independence. The structure of the *polskość* argument easily fits the framework outlined in Freud's famous essay "Mourning and Melancholia." Freud distinguishes between mourning as a normal healing process after the loss of a beloved object and melancholia as a pathological process of not being able to substitute an old object with a new one. Freud emphasizes that "[M]ourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (Freud 1957, 243). Given this, it is clear that Freud's insights are relevant to social and cultural aspects of loss and not only to strictly personal life. In melancholia, the healing process does not occur as "…the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not what he has lost in him" (Freud 1957, 245). He continues: "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished" (Freud 1957, 146). The psychological mechanism of melancholia is based on the transference of the lost object into the ego: "…the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object…. In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification" (Freud 1957, 249). To apply psychopathological categories to social analyses is, admittedly, a risky venture, but I believe they can provide a guiding thread in my socio-cultural interpretations of reactions to the national catastrophe. The split ego, the mood of dissatisfaction, and the problem with identification are symptoms of Polish post-traumatic melancholia, which were to pervade Poland's intellectual landscape for two centuries to come.

III. Nicolas Wisdom or Dilemmas of the Polish Enlightenment

The novel *The Adventures of Mr. Nicholas Wisdom* was written in the early 1770s, at the peak of the Polish Enlightenment. The onset of the Enlightenment in Poland coincided with a decline of the Polish state. Of course, many factors contributed to that failure, and *The Parallel* was one of the earliest attempts to probe into them. As an outside observer, an American scholar notes:

> The decline of Poland was largely a consequence of internal weakness exacerbated by geographical vulnerability. Feudal institutions had prospered from the start, and the central power was never able to crush the independence of the local landlords. The result was a limited monarchy similar in some ways to that of England under the Magna Carta. But Poland lacked the security of an English Channel: her neighbors to both east and west found it easy to intervene in the struggles between king and nobles. (Garrison 1988, 31)

This opinion, however, begs some clarification, as it fails to give justice to the cultural, social, and political complexity of Polish society at that time. First, Poland was unique in her social system where all the gentry (*szlachta*) were regarded as equal irrespective of their wealth or lineage. Therefore, there was no aristocracy in the legal terms, but practical terms some families had of course attained an enormous fortune and influence. However, under the unique political system of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, even the magnates were to some extent dependent on the masses of gentry. The cornerstones of the system were *liberum veto*, free royal elections, and the Right to Resistance against the tyrannical king. Given that the *szlachta* accounted for 8%-12 % of Polish society – another of the Polish peculiarities, with the nobility forming 1%-2% of populations in other European countries as a norm – it is clear that the Polish *gentry's* democracy was ahead of its time (Kamen 2000, 88). It was probably the reason why Jean-Jacques Rousseau viewed Poland as the best embodiment of his social projects outlined in *The Social Contract* (Wolff 1994). Rousseau's *Considerations on the Government of Poland* (Rousseau 1985) sketches an idealized image of the Polish political system, which is controverted by historical facts. Norman Davies, a British historian of Poland, observes the contradictions in the Polish democratic system:

> In their slogan of *Nic o nas bez nas* (Nothing concerning us can be settled without us), the Polish nobles of the sixteenth century had anticipated the ideals of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England, and of the American Revolution of 1776; and in their saying that '*Polska nierządem stoi'* (Poland stands by the lack of government) they gave a foretaste of Henri Thoreau, Proudhon, and Bellegarrigue. They were extreme devotees of individual freedom and civil liberty – for themselves. Like the slave-owning Fathers of the American Constitution, or the original inventors of democracy in ancient Athens, they saw no contradiction between a political system based on the liberties of the ruling estate and a social system based on the complete subjugation of the lower orders. (Davies 2001, 261)

Although theoreticians of democracy still underscore the unique and progressive character of the Polish political system (Przeworski 2010, 44), there is no denying it was this very system that overwhelmingly contributed to their loss of independence in 1795. The Polish political system was coupled with *Sarmatims*, a specific culture endorsed by the gentry. The 'Culture of Sarmatism' commenced in the late 16th century and reached its pinnacle at the turn of the 17th century. It persisted throughout the 18th century overlapping with the Polish Enlightenment. The name itself is meaningful as the Polish gentry claimed to originate from the famous ancient tribe of Sarmatians. The Sarmatians, purportedly part of a broader ethnic group Scythians, were supposed to have lived in the East, inhabiting the territory of contemporary Iran. This construction of ancestry is indeed telling. By this gesture, the Polish *szlachta* dissociated themselves from Western Europe as well as from Russia, which was considered part of the Northern people. The choice was reinforced by the ideology proclaiming the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as an island of freedom in Europe, an exception from ubiquitous absolutism. As a cultural phenomenon, Sarmatism permeated all spheres of gentry life ranging from the sartorial style in imitation of the Orient (a trace of complex relations with the Ottoman Empire) to literature espousing the baroque style with opulent Latinate loanwords (a trace of common education in Jesuits schools). Norman Davies summarizes the main traits of Sarmatism as follows: "Polish Sarmatism, the characteristic style of the Saxon era, wallowed sentimentally in the Republic's alleged glories and achievements, and is generally thought to have little literary or artistic merit. Allied to the fashion for oriental dress and decoration, it reinforced the conservative tendencies of the *Szlachta* and the belief

in the superiority of their 'Golden Freedom' and their noble culture" (Davies 2001, 263). In fact, Davies' description can be inscribed in the black legend of Sarmatism initiated during the Enlightenment. Sarmatism with its culture and political system was the main target of critique launched by the Enlightenment thinkers. The Enlightenment began in Poland around the fourth decade of the 18th century. Initially, the ideas were promoted by Catholic priests who sought to reform the Polish educational system, among others, by adding new philosophies to the curriculum. Soon, however, the spirit of the Enlightenment spread in Poland, especially after King Stanisław August Poniatowski rose to power in 1764. One of the most controversial figures in Polish history, he would turn out to be the last king of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, still blamed for political weakness and undue submission to Tsarina Catharina the Great, his former lover. The subservience made him unable to conduct independent politics and, eventually, contributed to the loss of independence. On the other hand, Poniatowski is celebrated as a great promoter of the arts and sciences who played a crucial part in implanting the Enlightenment and Classicism into Polish soil. Bishop Ignacy Krasicki, the author of *The Adventures of Mr. Nicholas Wisdom*, was one of his protégés. Krasicki himself came from an aristocratic family and received a thorough education, and with it a competence to identify and emulate the best Western literary models. In his work, he lampooned the vices of Sarmatian culture and the political system. Krasicki was a prolific and acclaimed poet and satirist, but *Mr. Nicholas Wisdom* is commonly considered the crown of his oeuvre. Drawing on the burgeoning of western prose, he used it with a consummate skill of a true innovator, creating a novel, which gained popularity in Poland, and throughout Europe (it was translated into German in 1776 and French in 1818). Though its literary merits are not my focal point, the book's tripartite structure needs to be mentioned. The novel is a typical *Bildungsroman*, with each part rendering the protagonist's specific experiences. The first part, which describes Nicholas' childhood, education and journey to Paris, ends in a shipwreck with the protagonist stranded on an unknown island. The second part of the story, modeled upon the utopian convention, depicts an ideal society of Nipuans, where the protagonist is re-educated by a sage named Xaoo.

Mieczysław Klimowicz, the editor of the novel's critical edition of the novel, describes the first part as a blend of satirical novel and philosophical fiction (Klimowicz 1973, XXXI-XXXV). He points out that Krasicki was greatly influenced by Voltaire's *Candide*. Nicholas's passive and good-natured character

reveals the absurdities and vices of "Sarmatian" Poland. Even in the introductory information about his family, Krasicki ridicules the Polish gentry's notorious custom to boast about their pedigree: "Had I wished to trace my ancestry using those testimonials in the graduation addresses and panegyrics attributed to my forebears (which to this day hang rotting on the walls of my home chapel), I would perhaps have found myself related by blood to all the ruling families of Europe. However, I am quite removed from that type of vanity." (Krasicki 1992, 9) Other passages in this part satirize the notoriously corrupt Polish legal system and practices. The bleak image of Sarmatian Poland is juxtaposed in part two with the utopian Nipuan society, which the protagonist finds on the remote island. This part is a typical Enlightenment utopia inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, with the island perfectly embodying the social program outlined in his work. The Nipuans have no private property, no political or social institutions, except family; they do not know either written literature or any educational system. In the course of re-education, which the protagonist undergoes in this society, he gradually abandons the prejudices instilled in him by his noble upbringing.

> I never would have thought that someday I would become a plowman. It was important, however, to make a virtue out of necessity and to make a courageous start on what was really a new type of apprenticeship rather than schooling. Had my own master and teacher not presented himself as an example, my situation would have seemed unbearable. My labors were ennobled by his company and our common efforts. Little bye little I rid myself of my aversion to "menial" work. In time I grew to recognize the injustice of that prejudice that deems husbandry and all other aspects of the farmer's trade shameful. (Krasicki 1992, 67)

Klimowicz notes that the image of an ideal society is rather schematic, but that is necessitated by the work's contrast-based composition. Such a contrast reveals an ideal society serving as a counterpoint to European, and especially Polish, realities of the day. Nipuan society, an embodiment of Rousseau's utopia, provides a point of reference for the critique of Poland's existing state of affairs (Klimowicz 1973, XLV). The third part of the novel is devoted to a confrontation with Nipuan moral virtues, which represent the Enlightenment program with Polish reality (Klimowicz 1973, XLVII). However, before the protagonist returns to Poland, he has to cope with some misfortunes, which bear out the gloomy

picture of Europe he got from the Nipuans. The captain of a Spanish ship sells him as a slave to the silver mine in the Bolivian city of Potosi:

> Many a time, buried alive in the caves, did I recall how angry I would get at the Nipuans for calling us Europeans savages. These fine people knew only in part the reason we so justly deserve this name. The Nipuans are themselves testimony to the fact that gold does not bring happiness. The world as a whole demonstrates how the gold that gratifies the excess of but a small part of the population makes ten people poor for every one made happy. (Krasicki 1992, 110)

Nicholas's release from the mine is due to the help of two people. One of them is an American native who, listening to the tales about the Nipuans recognizes that they must be the descendants of his own ancestors who escaped Spanish rule. The other is an American Quaker, William, who pays a ransom for the protagonist. When he is freed, he can eventually go to Europe. However, in Spain, when he arrives in Cadiz, the Inquisition incarcerates him, incensed with the stories he tells about Nipuan society. Fortunately, the accounts he delivers make the inquisitors believe him insane and consign him to the asylum. Again, he is able to leave the asylum with the help of a French aristocrat, the Margrave de Vennes. Nicholas accompanies him to Paris, where he revises his views about Europe partially at least:

> Although I was eager to visit my native land, I stayed several weeks in Paris, honored to be able to share the margrave's company. I became acquainted with many worthy and highly respected people who frequented his home, and it was this experience more than anything else that helped me overcome my tendency to generalize about nations. There in the middle of Paris I found sages who were not proud, rich men who were not haughty, noblemen who were accessible. God-fearing people, who were neither bigoted nor spiteful, and knights who did not boast. (Krasicki 1992, 127)

Eventually, the protagonist gets to his homeland, which gives Krasicki an opportunity to expose the absurdities of the gentry's social and political customs. First, he decides to improve the situation of his serfs: "I deemed the happiness of my serfs uppermost in the management of my property. My neighbors were

scandalized by this. They said it would do me no good to carry out such measures. Some pitied me, others laughed at my naïveté." (Krasicki 1992, 129) Nevertheless, the real test of the political system comes when Nicholas is asked to represent his province in the next Diet. Again, the teaching of Xaoo turns out to be of little assistance in Sarmatian Poland. "In the capital city proper, I tried to become a representative to the Diet by walking the straight and narrow path. My neighbors called me uncivilized for bringing only one cook with me. When they found out I had a mere two barrels of wine, the lord chamberlain himself stated bluntly that there was little hope of my being chosen. I brought as quickly as I could several kegs of good wine from the nearest cloister. Neighbors lent me cooks. And since money was abundant, everything was done quickly and turned out well." (Krasicki 1992, 129) Whatever expectations he might have, they are crushed when he eventually joins The Diet:

> The opening day of the Diet arrived. We entered the chamber; with the usual ceremonies the marshal of the previous Diet began the session amid great commutation and a deafening roar. After two days we tired of waiting for a new marshal to be elected. On the third day a decree was issued that adjourned the Diet. Six months' effort and expense by the public ended with a dismal oration by the former marshal, who mournfully lamented the unhappy fate of the fatherland. (Krasicki 1992, 135)

At the end of the novel Nicholas, like Candide, withdraws into private life, where he ultimately finds happiness, calm and, moreover, prospects of domestic bliss in the reunion with the beloved of his youth. Literary experts stress that although Krasicki's novel is profoundly affected by contemporary French philosophical literature (Voltaire, Rousseau) and the English novel (Swift, Fielding), it is an original piece of art in its own right and its formal qualities equal its predecessors' (Goscilo 1992). However, if approached as an ideological program for the country, the novel shows a troubled side. Had it been written in another country, its moral would have been incontestable as an expression of the *Zeitgeist.* Poland, however, was at that time increasingly preoccupied with the struggle for the survival of the independent state. There is an alarming note at the end of the novel that it was completed on 26 February 1775 in Berlin. The venue was by no means coincidental. In 1775, Bishop Ignacy Krasicki became a subject of the King of Prussia, Frederick the Great, when his diocese was incorporated into the Prussian

Kingdom following the First Partition of Poland (1772). The King, who liked philosophers, easily found a common language with the Bishop. He even put him in the same apartment where Voltaire used to live. However, the problem, which would haunt their conversations, was the future of Poland. It would be unfair to think the Enlightenment in Poland disregarded the threat of impending loss of independence. To the contrary, champions of the Enlightenment were actively engaged in the Reformist Movement. The Constitution of 3 May 1791 is a monumental testimony of these endeavors. Its provisions are supported by the Enlightenment, which strove to rationalize the political system, moving it in the direction of a constitutional monarchy, as well as to help non-gentry citizens realize a better living. These attempts eventually failed, and in 1795, Poland disappeared from the map of Europe. Rational and stoic philosophies were unable to offer a solid consolation in the face of the collapse of the state.

For the generations born into an enslaved Poland, the challenge and the national problem became how to regain independence? The greatest Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, in his youthful narrative poem *Konrad Wallenrod*, depicts the protagonist in these memorable lines, which have become proverbial in Poland:

> ….his noble soul
> Yet found no happiness in heart or home,
> For in the country was there blessing none." (Mickiewicz 1882, 52)

IV. Interlude: Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Polish Fate

The national catastrophe, the loss of independence, derailed the trajectory of Polish intellectual history. In his monumental book, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition* (2010), Zeev Sternhell states "In Herder and among the Herderians, not only in Germany but also in France and Italy, there emerged cultural nationalism and its product, political nationalism, which, as one advanced into the twentieth century, became more and more radical and more and more violent. Cultural nationalism very soon gave birth to the idea of the national state and its counterpart, the supremacy of the state and the idea that democracy is the enemy of the people" (Sternhell 2010, 101).

Such radical assertion is probably exaggerated, but the vicissitudes of Polish history precluded striking a balance between nationalistic and liberal ideologies. Poland was robbed of a possibility of tasting the magic power inherent in the

nation state, which as Terry Eagleton writes can harmonize contradictions: "What are ideally united in the nation-state, then, are *ethos* and abstract rights, ethnic uniqueness and political universality, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, the common folk and the cosmopolitan intelligentsia. Ideally, local pieties, customs and affinities – culture, in a word – are preserved, but a political unity supervenes upon them" (Eagleton 2000, 59-60). Deprived of statehood, the Polish intellectuals focused on fostering cultural conditions capable of preserving a Polish national identity. This task, in turn, demanded finding a prosthesis for a safe escape into the universalized idea of the nation state. When in the 19th century national identity became increasingly identified with having a state, Poland had to create herself as a nation, which was superior exactly because it was exempt from the mundane obligations of performing "normal" functions of the state. The most important mark of that superiority was the unity of the nation, which purportedly differentiated Poland from other European nations. The fantasy of the unity of a nation that withstood any temptation of pursuing particular interests was embodied in Romanticism as a reaction to the loss of independence.

These ideas were hardly compatible with the Enlightenment. Therefore, in spite of the Enlightenment's great heritage, it was Romanticism that contrived a common language for Polish culture, equipping it with a rich storage of idioms that deal mainly with national identity, often defined by martyrdom. The suffering-obsessed attitude was reinforced by the subsequent cycle of Polish uprisings against the foreign powers. These rebellions started with great hopes but finished in the mood of despair and tragedy. All the uprisings were enveloped in arguments in which advocates of Poles' coming to terms with the occupants and trying to find a niche for themselves clashed with champions of armed combat for independence. Probably the most tragic of these attempts was the January Uprising of 1864/65. Before this Uprising started, the Russian-ruled part of Poland was governed by Polish aristocrat Graf Aleksander Wielopolski, who had promoted economic development at the price of abandoning all dreams of independence. His policies were quite successful in economic terms but spurred a fierce resistance in patriotically minded clandestine organizations. Stefan Kieniewicz, an eminent specialist on the topic, claims that the January Uprising was a terrible tragedy not only because of the casualties but also because of social and cultural ramifications. This part of Poland forfeited its limited autonomy, and the Tsarist regime implemented the policy of russification, making the Russian

language mandatory in offices and schools. On the other hand, Kieniewicz stresses that Polish society was able to make up at least for the economic losses at an astonishing pace (Kieniewicz 1987, 75). Poland was thus entering modernization with the suppressed memory of heroic struggles on the one hand, and a booming economy on the other. Each of these facets called for a different language. Heroic struggles had to be described in the Romantic idiom of martyrdom, sacrifice, and future resurrection of the Nation. The booming economy demanded, of course, a language of barter, bargain, and stock exchange. Individual human fates were trapped between these two languages.

V. The Doll or the vicious Circle of Polish Modernity

These paradoxes of Polish modernity are reflected in *The Doll*, a novel authored by Bolesław Prus. Prus (whose real name was Aleksander Głowacki) was an insightful witness of the complex Polish fate. As a young man, he fought in the January Uprising against the Russian power. After the fall of the Uprising, he gradually became one of the main proponents of positivism. The book's plot is relatively simple and follows the conventions of 19th century prose. It describes the rise and fall of Stanislaw Wokulski, a successful tradesman form Warsaw, who falls in love with an aristocratic woman. He strives to gain acceptance into her social milieu and win her love. Despite an apparent proximity in achieving these purposes, he eventually fails in both endeavors, and the reader is left in uncertainty as to Wokulski's ultimate fate. He might commit suicide, but it is also possible he left everything behind to start a new life as an apprentice of a strange Paris-based genius who produces a substance lighter than air. The narrative includes multiple comprehensive and meticulous descriptions of Polish society. They add up to what literary experts repeatedly refer to in their analyses of the book as its outstanding realism. However, the novel cannot be reduced to realism alone as many awkwardnesses belie such a generic classification. First, the novel's protagonist is to some extent an enigma. Hints scattered throughout the narrative imply that as a young man he took part in the January Uprising against Tsarist Russia. The author, who himself left high school to fight for independence, had to resort to allusive language in order to avoid the censors' ban on the novel. After the failure of the Uprising, the protagonist was sent to Siberia, where he befriended a prosperous Russian merchant. When he returned, he married an older, rich widow and became a manager of her store. After her death, he

completely withdrew from his old company until, in the theater; he spotted a beautiful aristocratic woman. At that moment, he engaged in fervent economic activity and soon became an enormously wealthy man. The idealistic motivation to make a fortune stirred criticism from Marxist literary experts. Jan Kott, for instance, claims that Polish capitalism would never have emerged if it had been driven by love, so the image of reality in the novel is obviously false.

I think that Bolesław Prus uses his protagonist to display the paradoxes of Polish modernity. In the non-existing country, the social relations are still semi-feudal with strict class divisions. On the other hand, the growing bourgeoisie try to inscribe themselves into the Polish Romantic tradition, which still is a prevailing cultural pattern. The cult of the ideal woman, a pillar of Romantic literature, has an irresistible allure. In psychoanalytic categories, a woman functions as a cathexis object, which channels the protagonist's energy. Wokulski's individual *illusion/delusion* is harmonized in the novel with the collective illusion of Polish society. Its social relations backward, the country enslaved by the foreign powers seeks consolation in the imaginary glorious past or Napoleonic legend. Frederic Jameson, in his essay on *The Doll*, notices its post-modern traits:

> What we take to be the inhuman center of Wokulski's subjectivity and the impersonal nature of his obsession, the primal void around which the more seemingly human and psychological traits of this personality seek inconsistently to reunite themselves, is rather that deeper interrelationship of the absolutes, that unconscious or even metaphysical unity of individual and collective that makes Wokulski over into a vehicle for these unidentifiable and indeed untheorizable drives. *The Doll* is thus, all appearances to the contrary, a great political novel, a narrative whose absent center is a primordial political impulse that is never mentioned and that is everywhere present in its absence. (Jameson 2006, 443)

This absence of the center is not only a formal ploy, but also a reflection of the political reality of a non-existent Poland, whose subordination to the foreign powers resulted in the distortion of all social relations. Prus observes that Poland is becoming a bourgeoisie country, but the dominant feudal culture embodied in Romantic tropes thwarts the development of what was the core of European modernization: growing rationality and economic progress. There is no room for

them between idle aristocratic endeavors and the new bourgeoisie pursuit of short-term profit-oriented activity. In one of his internal monologues, Wokulski sums up his life:

> Then it occurred to him to ask what he had squandered his powers and life on? "On struggling with an environment in which I didn't fit. When I wanted to study, I could not, because in my country scholars aren't needed – only peasants and store clerks. When I wanted to serve society by sacrificing my own life if need be, fantastic dreams were put forward instead of a practical program and then – were forgotten. When I sought work, I was not given any, but shown an easy way to marry an old woman for her money. When I finally fell in love, and wanted to become the legal father of family, the pastor of a domestic circle, the holiness of which everyone acclaimed, then I was placed in a situation from which there was no way out…That is a region where certain kinds of plants cannot grow, nor certain kinds of people either…" (Prus 1996, 369).

VI. Polishness as an Ideological Form

The idea of the Polish nation was formed as a negativity, as an opposition to the other embodied in the oppressive power, but also to the completely external world, which failed to help or at least to understand Polish suffering. That conjuncture, described in the secret code of Romantic poetry, included a great promise – the unity of the nation. This promise could not be fully realized under oppression, but it was clear that as soon as independence was regained, the potential unity would transform into a political and social reality. The end of World War I seemed to fulfill the prophecy of Romanticism. The 'War of the Peoples' gave Poland a chance for independence, and Poles were able to seize that opportunity. On the 11th of November 1918, Poland once again became an independent state. Two years later, in the Polish-Bolshevik War (1919-21), Poland managed to defend its newly won independence against the aggression of a powerful enemy. However, the interwar period in Poland was, in fact, as a dramatic search for national identity. Regaining independence and possessing a nation state should have resolved all dilemmas of national identity, so deeply rooted in the period of the enslavement. However, the newly liberated Poland did not seem able to live up to the promises formed under the partitions. The most interesting document

conveying the discrepancy between the realities of independent Poland and its phantasmatic image is Stefan Żeromski's novel *The Coming Spring*, published in 1925 (Żeromski 2007). The novel is constructed as a *Bildungsroman*, where protagonist Cezary Baryka experiences different twists and turns, which augment his knowledge of the world and himself. However, his maturation entails primarily coping with Polishness. In his novel, Żeromski relies on an old trope, popularized by the Enlightenment, of seeing a familiar situation through the eyes of a stranger. Baryka has been brought up in a foreign environment in Baku, Azerbaijan, where his father worked as an engineer. Baryka is a witness to the pogroms of the Armenians, and afterwards he is involved in the revolutionary movement. Disappointed by the Revolution, he returns to Poland, which he had only known from his father's stories. Poland was presented to him as an ideal country of "glass houses," a metaphor for serenity and perfection. After returning to Poland, Baryka has to confront the classed society fraught with 'upper/lover class' divisions and ethnic hostilities. Attracted and repelled by the Revolution, suspicious of nationalist ideals, Baryka decides to follow his own path dissociated from the dominant powers struggling for hegemony in the newly sovereign Poland.

Julian Brun placed Żeromski's work in the center of his discussion of the Polish nation, as he would like to convert to radical left Polish intellectuals, who saw Żeromski's novels as a 'Bible of Polishness.' Brun wrote his essay in Polish prison, where he served eight-year sentence for communist activity. His essay was published in 1925 in *Skamander*, a journal of the progressive poetic (but not communist) group bearing the same name. Treating art and literature as "an instrument of social self-consciousness" (Brun 1958, 41), Brun insists that Żeromski's work is a prism, which can be effectively used to analyze and interpret the identity of Polish nation after the regaining of independence in 1918. Delving into Żeromski's texts, Brun observes that the resurrected Poland is for him a fruit of victory of ideals over mundane materiality. The first miracle was the regaining of independence, which happened against all odds. The second, and even more important, miracle was the victory against the prevailing Red Army at the Vistula River. The third miracle was to be the fulfillment of the Romantic prophesy of the complete national unity. Brun writes that, for Żeromski, independent Poland is a myth in the Sorelian sense – a myth as something that can never be attained but is, nevertheless, a powerful point of reference for the miserable reality. This myth inspired expectations for the times of independence:

> If other countries are ruled by private ambitions, cynical and brutal interest of one class only or, simply, the coteries on the payrolls of financial moguls, this is the case because – the Polish patriot thought – they are unable to appreciate what a treasure an independent state is… as soon as independence is regained, patriotism will go up in a mighty flame, burning and melting selfishness of individuals and social classes; the millions will work in accord for the common good and Poland will glitter in the luster of prosperity and enlightened thought. (Brun 1958, 22)

This, however, failed to materialize, as Brun comments: "Political life did not go the dreamed-of path of common unity in the name of public good; instead, it simply followed where interrelated powers and appetites of groups and classes pushed it" (Brun 1958. 23). This should not come as a surprise, if the nation's condition is analyzed in normal categories, that is, in terms of the development sequence observed in western European societies. These nations were created by dominant classes, around which other social groups assembled. In Poland, the idea of the nation became an ideological tool for petrifying the feudal relationships. This forestalled the emergence of not only a proletarian nation but also a bourgeois nation. Brun, a communist writer himself, unexpectedly praises Roman Dmowski (a founder of Polish nationalism), appraising his paramount book *Myśli nowoczesnego Polaka* [*Thoughts of a Modern Pole*] in the following:

> [T]he brilliant little book was a belated attempt to instill clear bourgeois, anti-gentry content in cloudy Polish national consciousness – to make it experience, in a literary form at least, a phase that out reality has never gone through… Clarity and consistency of thought, so rarely encountered in Poland, compels the author to acknowledge that what is commonly deemed 'national character' is basically the character of the ruling class and as such is bound to change when another class comes into power. Dmowski argues convincingly that so-called Polish national character is the character of a Polish gentryman and depends fully on the modes and mores of this class. (Brun 1958, 110).

Brun observes that the Polish bourgeoisie are too weak to launch a radical cultural reform. This can be accomplished only by the working classes, which are fighting their way up from the social low-life status. They alone are capable of making the Romantic dream of a great, sovereign nation come true.

VII. World's *Trans-Atlantyk* or Polishness as a Cultural Form

If Julian Brun attacked Polishness on class-related grounds, Witold Gombrowicz, his nearly 20 years younger contemporary, viewed Polishness as a collective cultural form which, in turn, imposed a form on individuals. In his lifetime, he had to confront not only the complexity of the interwar period but also all the changes that the communist rule worked in Poland after 1945.

When those transformations came to pass Poland, Witold had long been in exile in Argentina. He came there in August 1939 invited by the Government to take part in the maiden voyage of the new ocean liner *Bolesław Chrobry*, named after the 11th-century Polish king. Instead of spending a few weeks on vacation, he stayed in Argentina until 1963, when he moved back to Europe, but not to communist Poland. Gombrowicz started to wrestle with Polish history in *Ferdydurke*, his first novel (Gombrowicz 2000), in which he introduced the concept of "mug" (Danuta Borchardt's English translation of the Polish word *gęba*) designating the imposition of cultural values on an individual. According to Gombrowicz, we all live in the world of illusion, which puts mugs on our faces. This notion, of course, has a universal validity, but Gombrowicz developed it in the specifically Polish context, where the pervasiveness of Romantic culture clashed with its undeniable and growing obsolescence. In exile, Gombrowicz's insight into that tension became even more acute. In his novel *Trans-Atlantyk*, Gombrowicz interrogates the fundamental features of Polish culture (Gombrowicz 1994). *Trans-Atlantyk* has a very complex formal structure that parodies the literary genre of *gawęda* developed in Sarmatian Poland. *Gawęda* was a text written by Polish noblemen to be perused by their relatives or neighbors, retaining for this reason traits of oral literature. After the loss of independence, *gawęda* became the best genre to express the spirit of the Polish gentry culture and inspired many other literary works, including Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* (1832), the most important single work of Polish literature. Choosing this genre just to produce its travesty, Gombrowicz begins a polemic with the gentry culture, in which he continues to some extent the Enlightenment tradition of Ignacy Krasicki, a detractor of Sarmatian vices. As the plot of *Trans-Atlantyk* is set in Argentina, Gombrowicz shows an encounter of the gentry culture with otherness represented by Gonzalo, an Argentinean homosexual millionaire. Stanisław Barańczak claims, in his introduction to

Trans-Atlantyk, that in Gombrowicz's literary works:

> The opposition of Form and Chaos or perfection and freedom takes on many shapes depending on which particular social hierarchies are scrutinized. Form versus Chaos thus is translated into oppositions of age (maturity/immaturity), social class (aristocrats/plebeians), civilizational tradition (West/East), cultural background (elitist/mass culture), and even sexual persuasion ("accepted" heterosexuality/"ostracized" homosexuality). (Barańczak 1994)

Barańczak also notes that in *Trans-Atlantyk* the Form-Chaos opposition becomes an opposition between "Fatherland" and "Sonland," rendered in translation as an opposition between "Patria" and "Filistria." (Gombrowicz 1994, 307) The contradiction between an old culture imposing its forms and a new freedom is exemplified in several episodes of the novel, for example in the dialogue between a father and a son:

> Yet speaks he: I know that you hold me a Monster. Albeit I will give you cause to be on my side against that Father and acknowledge such ones as I the Salt of the earth. Tell me: do you not acknowledge Progress? Are we to step in place? And how can there be aught New if just to the Old you give credence? Eternally then is Pan Father to hold a young son under his paternal lash? Eternally then is a Young One to rattle off prayers after Pan Father? Give some slack to the Young One, let him free rein, let him frisk!" Speak I: "You madman! For progress I am too, but you call Deviation progress." Replied he to this: "But if to deviate a bit, well?" Whereupon, after he thus spoke, say I: "I'faith, you may tell this to such ones as you yourself are, and not to man decent and honorable. I would not be a Pole if I were to set a Son against a Father; know you that we Poles our Fathers respect exceedingly, and thus you do not tell a Pole that he should a Son from a Father and, moreover, for Deviation take." Exclaimed he: "But wherefore need you be a Pole?" Further says he: "Has the lot of the Poles up to now been so delightful? Has not your Polishness become loathsome to you? Have you not had your fill of Sorrow? Your fill of Soreness, Sadness? And today they are flaying your skins again! And you insist so on staying in that skin of yours? Would you not become something *Else*, something *New*? Would you have all these Boys of yours but just repeat everything forever after fathers? Oh, release Boys from the paternal

> cage. Let them veer off the path, let them peer into the Unknown!" …Mutters he: "To the Devil with Pater and Patria! The Son, the son's the thing, oh, indeed! But wherefore need you Patria? Is not Filistria better? You exchange Patria for Filistria and you'll see!" (Gombrowicz 1994, loc. 1213)

Gombrowicz's books were rarely available in communist Poland. But when I was a student, they were widely read, at least among students and academics, some of them smuggled from the West, some published during the short period of the 'Thaw' after 1956 (also known as the 'Polish thaw' or 'Gomulka's thaw'). Reading them in the 70s was an illuminating experience. Like most of my peers, I felt trapped in between two irrational systems of thought. On the one hand, there was the old traditional system of national and religious values, suppressed in the official discourse, but present in people's minds and expressed by the powerful Catholic Church. On the other hand, there was a new communist system, which was almost entirely discredited, especially after martial law had been proclaimed in 1981. Both systems were systems of Fathers, of Patria in Gombrowicz's language. The only thing we could do was wait for the collapse of communism and the arrival of a new, rational system. This happened in 1989 and shortly afterwards Maria Janion, an outstanding literary expert on Romanticism, stated that eventually, after 200 years the idiom of Romantic poetry had ceased to be a common language used for description and communication. It was to be replaced by a more rational, sober language of modernized society. (Janion 1989)

VIII. Coda: The Smolensk Catastrophe or the Return of Ghosts

The Romantic rhetoric of a unified nation has been dominant since the very onset of the transformations. In a way, it functions the way it did after 1918. The concomitant miracles of the collapse of communism and regaining of independence seem to herald another impending miracle – the miracle of the national unity or, in contemporary fashionable parlance, or reconstructing the national community. Both "the modernizers" and "the conservatives" fall back on this rhetoric. The former bizarrely combine the Romantic diction with ideals of liberalism construed more as a historiosophic project than as an economic doctrine. In his book on the Polish transformations, David Ost reminds how much the trade unionists and leading liberal dissidents were intoxicated with a vision of a liberal market economy, which was expected to solve all possible problems,

including social ones. Ost argues that resorting to such rhetoric its users ushered back in also the language of the unified nation founded on permanent national and religious values. (Ost 2006) Explicitly, it was easy to blame the insufficient mobilization of the nation and atrophy of a communal sense for all societal problems that appear and sometimes intensify in the transformation process. Only the reconstitution of a genuine national unity could avert the catastrophe the country was facing. Such reasoning, which as I showed above was the core of Romantic thought, turned out to be extremely effective politically. The conservatives, who always insisted that the end of communism should be bound up with a national revival, concluded toward the end of the 1990s that the classic language of Polish Romanticism could help recruit many supporters from across the social strata. That the strategy was effective was borne out by the victory of the Law and Justice (PiS) Party in the general election of 2005 and of Lech Kaczyński in the presidential election. PiS had to step down, losing the general election of 2007, but that event did not affect the chosen strategy. On the contrary, the two currently dominant parties have different constituencies and they rely on different languages. Civic Platform (PO), the current governing party, uses the language of modernization which ostentatiously eschews any ideology. According to PO, governing comes down to administrative effectiveness, which makes sure that "hot water keeps flowing from the tap." Yet, observably, PO strives to pose as a party of the whole nation, provided the nation is not interested in ideological disputes. In other words, PO's rhetoric circumvents both Romanticism and its critiques. It has no room either for Mickiewicz or for Gombrowicz and Brun.

PiS indeed continues the Romantic rhetoric, which was consolidated by the Smolensk catastrophe – an airplane crash that claimed lives of prominent Polish politicians, including President Lech Kaczyńsk. As shown elsewhere (Koczanowicz 2012), the catastrophe provided a definitive link between Poland's contemporary history, post-communist transformations and two centuries of struggles for independence. The rhetoric is used ubiquitously, but – in keeping with the Polish tradition – poetry is its best expression. On 6 November 2013, *Gazeta Polska*, a conservative daily, published the poem titled "Krew" ["Blood"] authored by outstanding poet Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz:

> Blood posted on billboards
> Blood on sidewalks and walls
> Blood – as morning silence on that day

Blood – black smudges on the screens

Blood on gray stone slabs
On Tusk's white gloves
Blood which asks you no questions
Blood like a birch broken in an orchard

And like poppies in the fields
And above the fields white clouds
Like signs for the nation
They ascended into the sky

Blood on the Tupolev seats
Washed off by rubber hoses at dawn
Will come to sing for you
A song of resurrection

The poem suggestively combines the story of the catastrophe to be blamed on Poland's enemies and collaborating traitors with the Romantic narrative of the fall and resurrection. On the one hand, it unmistakably alludes to the rumors that the plane was purposefully blown up, while pulling up to avoid the crash, and the evidence was tampered with to conceal the truth. The poem also mentions Prime Minister Tusk, who has been accused of negligence if not treacherous cooperation with Poland's enemies. At the same time, the fall of the plane is a metaphorical rendering of Poland's symbolic fall, which will inevitably lead to revival, a genuine one this time. Like so many times before, Polish politics, or rather political ideology, is torn once again between modernization, which defines the nation's future as catching up with Western civilizational and cultural standards, and national and conservative leanings, which repudiate modernization if it neglects the national identity. The two kinds of rhetoric are, inexorably, on a collision course. What we do not know is what will eventually come out of this clash. The end of the illusion of the nation? The end of the illusion of modernization? On the other hand, perhaps a new language will emerge and free Poles from the phantoms of history?

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