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## SIEMIRADZKI AND THE THREE BARDS

In old Polish, the word “*wieszcz*” (soothsayer, bard) was not present at all, appearing only in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in a somewhat changed form (“*wieszczec*”, “*wieszcznik*”), meaning an augur, the one who can foretell the future. In the consciousness of educated Poles, there was also the Latin word “*vates*,” which held a double meaning of a foreteller and a poet. We can find the form “*wieszcz*,” used to this day, in the poetry of Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski from the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, where it simply referred to the men of pen, contemporaries of Lubomirski. The 18<sup>th</sup> century solidifies this meaning, indicating a “poet” without any additional implications; only in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, simultaneously with the loss of independence and the appearance of preromantic themes in Polish literature, a situation arose that “Among the words from the synonymic set of ‘poet’, the word ‘wieszcz’ proved the most usable in the context reflecting the uniqueness of their gifts – psychological or flowing from divine inspiration, playing the role of prophets and leaders of the nation.”<sup>1</sup>

Naturally, I don’t intend to present here in detail the entire, rather complex genealogy and affiliation of meanings of this word. It’s enough to state that, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a common belief

1] Henryk MARKIEWICZ, *Rodowód i losy mitu trzech wieszczów*, in: *Badania nad krytyką literacką*. Seria druga, eds. Michał GŁOWIŃSKI, Krzysztof DYBCIAK, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1984, p. 40.

that, as Seweryn Goszczyński wrote to poets: “For ages you had the gift of singing what the ears could not hear and revealing what the eyes could not see – for ages you have been prophets and miracle makers.”<sup>2</sup> And here, in the context of my speech, there is a very interesting later note of Goszczyński: “From this it does not follow that poets must necessarily be prophets, men foretelling the future, revealers of all secrets. Thus, they are also faithful to their calling **when they draw their themes from the past or reveal malicious facets of the present – they do it to give testimony to their ideal**: ‘He who works like that, even in the field of the past, is he who builds the future, never ceasing to be a true soothsayer, a true creator’.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, we have here quite a paradoxical situation – a soothsayer can mean not just the one who “soothsays,” but also the one who investigates the past to reveal errors resulting therefrom, being repeated in the future, the remedy of which in the present will lead us to a happy – not just individual but national as well – future. No wonder then that, thanks to such an amalgamation of beliefs and convictions, the authors that worked with historical themes could be seen in Poland as soothsayers, and this is true of both poets and painters. Nonetheless, poetry was the first and the most important, and its coryphaei were first awarded the honourable title of artistic soothsayers. In his seminars on Slavic literature, Adam Mickiewicz, the greatest Polish poet of the period, directly indicated that: “Art [...] is a kind of a conjuration of spirits; art is a secret and sacred activity [...] it is not and cannot be anything else than the recreation of a vision,”<sup>4</sup> and, beginning with 1840s, there will be a lot of similar statements in the Polish literature and critique. Interestingly, the three poets that were perceived as soothsayers of our national poetry: Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Zygmunt Krasiński, did not call themselves “soothsayers” in the prophetic sense, although Mickiewicz was called a “soothsayer” even in the 1830s, and they called each other that in many declarations and opinions. However, there was unrest and instability in determining the final hierarchy. Back then, on the “literary market,” if we can call it that, other well-known and acknowledged poets of the time were called “soothsayers” as well.

2] Seweryn GOSZCZYŃSKI, *Nowa epoka poezji polskiej*, in: idem, *Podróże i rozprawy literackie*, ed. Zygmunt WASILEWSKI, H. Altenberg, Lwów 1911, p. 263.

3] Ibid.

4] Adam MICKIEWICZ, *Literatura słowiańska. Kurs trzeci i czwarty*, eds. Julian KRZYŻANOWSKI et al., transl. Leon Płoszewski, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1955, p. 384.

In addition to the aforementioned trio, they typically included Bohdan Zaleski and Seweryn Goszczyński; nonetheless, the classical trio ultimately prevailed: Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Krasiński, although the order of the last two was constantly shifting depending on the tastes of individual critics or trends in our literature during subsequent decades.

As the old Russian saying goes, “*Бог троицу любит*” (God likes trinity), and the predilection for threes was prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and literature mainly due to the Hegelian dialectic, which in Poland was being transformed into the image and likeness of our historical and political needs. According to Karol Edmund Chojecki: “The number three, so mysteriously powerful in the dreams of old and new Utopians, was also such for Poland when it came to the enlightenment of the nation’s genius and directing it toward the difficult fight for its independence.”<sup>5</sup> And in this moment, in particular after the failure of the January Uprising (1864) and the death of the three soothsayers of poetry, there was a need to take over their command over Polish souls by artists who used images instead of words. People still believed in the power of poetry but the poets who materialized back then in the literary field could not match – in the perception of the people – Mickiewicz, Słowacki and Krasiński with the power of their poetry. Cyprian Kamil Norwid was also unable to compete with them; his “dark” poetry, incomprehensible for his contemporaries, found its readers only among the generations that followed. The trinity of soothsayers was therefore being built anew, sometimes in a quite indecisive and arduous manner. The role and function of Mickiewicz was taken over quite early by Jan Matejko after painting *Skarga’s Sermon* (National Museum, Warsaw, 1864). The second position in the trinity was awarded to Artur Grottger who died in 1867 and did not live to witness the height of the appreciation for his body of work consisting mainly of patriotic drawings. The third position remained vacant and, like with the literary trinity, various artists were nominated. However, two names appeared incessantly: Józef Brandt and Henryk Siemiradzki. Jan Bołoz-Antoniewicz wrote about this directly in 1894: “When the Three Bards died, art became a national necessity – the nation’s spirit must be manifested in it. [...] By appearing, [Matejko and Grottger] relieve [...] the great poets, take over their care over the nation’s spirit, their mission, they pick up what fell over,

5] Karol Edmund CHOJECKI, *La Pologne captive*, F. H. Brockhaus, Leipzig 1864, p. 116.

carry from the past what risked being forgotten, spiritually unite what is politically torn.”<sup>6</sup>

The “triadicty” of the period was also visible in returning to old genealogical traditions and searching for equivalents of the ancient division into the epic, lyric and dramatic in genres and types of paintings or drawings. In this hierarchy, Matejko was seen as the epicist, Grottger as the lyricist, while the dramatist was, according to the beliefs of the time, primarily Brandt, with Siemiradzki as the runner-up. According to Jerzy Mycielski, comparing Polish painters in 1890: “The supreme [painters], with the wonderful themes of their enormous paintings, were masters heretofore unrivalled in Poland, the powerful epicist Matejko and genius lyricist Grottger.”<sup>7</sup>

In this race for fame and success, such painters as, for instance, the battle painter January Suchodolski and other “minorum gentium” painters specializing in genre painting were rejected relatively quickly. Interestingly, people did not mention Juliusz Kossak in this context, a very popular painter known for folksy and national, but still parochial, “*szlachta gawęda*” (stories of nobility), not in the vein of Mickiewicz or Słowacki but rather Wincenty Pol. Therefore, the general dispute concerning the third soothsayer of Polish painting took place over the line of Munich – St. Petersburg, which predetermined a series of overtones which weren’t just artistic. Two models of academic education clashed here, with a noticeable overall aversion to academicism in the Polish critique of the period. This aversion resulted from the conviction that a truly national soothsayer of poetry or painting should not, as it was believed, “live in foreign lands,” which were associated with foreign academies, and should be a self-generated talent whose artistic abilities should flow from the Polish soil, climate and customs. It was also obvious that they should be a native Pole, and here arose certain issues of a critical nature with our soothsayers. Only Siemiradzki had a name with a Polish suffix, while Matejko, Grottger and Brandt did not. Thus, they had to prove their Polishness with other means in addition to their works of art. Brandt emphasized that, despite his German sounding name, he was a painter “from Warsaw.” Grottger wasn’t associated with his grandfather from Hungary, and Matejko was

6] *Katalog ilustrowany Wystawy Sztuki Polskiej od roku 1764-1886*, ed. Jan BOŁOZ-ANTONIEWICZ, Dyrekcja Powszechnej Wystawy Krajowej, Lwów 1894, p. 19.

7] Jerzy MYCIELSKI, *Sto lat dziejów malarstwa w Polsce 1760- 1860. Z okazji wystawy retrospektywnej malarstwa polskiego we Lwowie 1894*, edn. 3, Spółka Wydawnicza Polska, Kraków 1902, p. 393.

conditionally accepted with the explanation that it is perhaps a Lithuanian name, like Domejko or Dowejko, as popularized in *Pan Tadeusz* (*Master Thaddeus*, an epic poem by Adam Mickiewicz). Matejko himself, despite having a Bohemian father, declared he was a Pole very early on, and a particularly important moment in this matter was his rejection of the position of the director of the Academy in Prague in 1874. In his letter to the committee of the Academy in Prague, he wrote: “I can have friendship for Czechs, like I have a cordial friendship today, but to my land, Poland, my love belongs [...] it is the sign of the limitless attachment to one’s own, even if meagre, home, moving it above all abundances, even so similar and related like yours.”<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, the situation of Henryk Siemiradzki, despite his Polish name, was distinctive. I don’t want to delve in detail into the issue of his nationality here, which was analyzed many times from various perspectives.<sup>9</sup> It’s enough to state that he was a Pole for the Poles and often a Russian for the Russians, although there was a certain veiled hesitation and uncertainty here, and there were attempts to reconcile this in the spirit of “Slavic solidarity,” which was impossible from the political perspective, yet still postulated. For example, the obituaries published after the painter’s death in 1902 emphasized that the president of Warsaw Sokrates Starynkiewicz died in the same year, and he was very good for the city despite being a Russian.<sup>10</sup> The sharp riposte in the Polish language press to Vladimir Stasov’s view that Siemiradzki was a representative of the “Polish school of painting,” postulated by this critic, gives much to think about;<sup>11</sup> although the discussions here rather concerned the assignment of this “school” to the academic and antique approach of the 19<sup>th</sup> century painting than declarations

8] Quoted after: Maria SZYPOWSKA, *Jan Matejko wszystkim znany*, Agrotechnika, Warszawa 1988, p. 235. Author doesn’t provide addressee nor the date.

9] There are numerous publication dedicated to Siemiradzki, starting from the book by Józef DUZYK, *Siemiradzki. Opowieść biograficzna* (Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1986), to very extensive materials published by the Polish Institute of World Art Studies in the series “Sztuka Europy Wschodniej”, 2016, vol. IV. Earlier, detailed comments on this topic had been included in the book Waldemar OKOŃ, *Henryk Siemiradzki – alegoria żywa*, in: idem, *Alegorie narodowe. Studia z dziejów sztuki polskiej XIX wieku*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 1992, pp. 147-166.

10] An article about Starynkiewicz was published “St. Petersburg Viennese” (1902, no. 224, p. 17, the statement signed under the pseudonym “Poljak”) to commemorate his burial in Warsaw on 13 August 1902. We read that “Poles and Russians are fighting for his soul” and that among the Poles there were chauvinists who “did not give the Russians the right to call Siemiradzki a Russian artist”.

11] “Kraj”, 1892, no. 16, p. 287.

concerning the artist's nationality.<sup>12</sup> There were also difficulties concerning the nature and type of paintings made by the author of *Phryne at the Festival of Poseidon in Eleusis* (1889). Even with the sincerest intentions, it was difficult to classify the majority of Siemiradzki's paintings as Polish national paintings, and this was the type of painting that a third soothsayer should do. Naturally, it was easier to classify Józef Brandt's paintings as such; they were perceived not just as purely exceptional paintings but primarily as values that described the spirit of the Polish nation, such as zest and vibrancy, and – most of all – the direct connection with our heroic “Eastern Borderland” history, continuously alive and present in the Polish culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All disputes, however, were interrupted by Siemiradzki's donation of *Nero's Torches* in 1879 to Kraków, for 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of artistic work of Józef Ignacy Kraszewski. This gift was provided by the artist “for the purpose of placing it in the Kraków Cloth Hall,” and it was accepted with the highest admiration and praise. Thus, the second great donor after Matejko revealed himself, who – with no heed to the difficulties linked with making such a large painting – selflessly gifted it to Poland and Poles; perhaps they were Poles from Galicia, but they indirectly represented the entire Polish Nation. This unexpected gift started the collection of the National Museum, and Siemiradzki's generosity encouraged other notable Polish artists to donate their works to the Museum's collection. At that moment, everyone forgot the unfavourable reviews of another painting of the Master: *Chopin playing the Piano in Prince Radziwiłł's Salon*, where the topic chosen by the painter, more intimate than antique scenes of Polish history, did not meet the very high requirements posed for pieces made by soothsayers of painting<sup>13</sup> *Nero's Torches* redeemed all of the artist's “sins”, drawing upon the tradition of viewing the history of ancient Rome and its fall as analogous to the history of imperial Russia, as popularized mainly in *Irydion* by Krasieński (1836), but also upon the allegorical presentation of spiritual strength opposing an external overwhelming violence. The character

12] Fragments of V. Stasov's statement from his article *From the trip around the Europe* published in Северный Вестник (North Herald) are quoted by Władysława JAWORSKA, *Poglądy Stasowa na malarstwo polskie XIX wieku*, “Materiały do Studiów i Dyskusji z Zakresu Teorii i Historii sztuki, Krytyki Artystycznej oraz Metodologii Badań nas Sztuką”, 1952, no. 2/3. See also Waldemar OKOŃ, *Stygnąca planeta. Polska krytyka artystyczna wobec malarstwa historycznego i historii*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2002, p. 143.

13] See: J. K. [?], *Chopin u Radziwiłła – nowy obraz Siemiradzkiego*, “Przegląd Literacki”, suplement to „Kraj”, 1888, no. 1, p. 14.

of the gladiator painted by Siemiradzki, feeling compassion for the victims of Nero's tyranny, is a clear reflection of the warrior present in Polish art who hails the emperor and Roman citizens while going to die, as well as the sculpture of *Dying Gaul* (Musei Capitolini, Rome) who suffers far from his fatherland, giving testimony to the courage in the face of his people's doom.<sup>14</sup>

In 1863, Aleksander Kraushar saw in Mickiewicz the poet of the present Poland, in Krasiński – of the old nobles' Poland, while in Słowacki – the poet of Poland reborn under the slogans of progress, freedom of thought and action, and anticlericalism.<sup>15</sup> I don't know which of these areas can be assigned to Siemiradzki. He certainly wasn't a genre painter of contemporary or nobles' Poland. However, can he be compared to the author who didn't avoid the slogans of progress, freedom and anticlericalism? I hope that this will come to light in the following part of the discussion.

Finally, wishing to extend my paper no further, I want to present two scenes from the lives of our soothsayers of painting. We know that they were – as celebrities of the time – closely observed by the domestic public, not just the cultural one. Their steps were closely followed, letters noted when they came to and left the capital and other important cities in the country, banquets, receptions and formal academies were organized for them. In 1877, according to *Biesiada Literacka*, a reception was organized for Siemiradzki in Warsaw where the author of *Nero's Torches* made a toast to Jan Matejko and the entire event was honoured by Józef Brandt who sent a congratulatory letter in which he acknowledged the man of the evening himself.<sup>16</sup> After the death of Siemiradzki, he was perceived as a glorifier of the highest aesthetic beauty, sacrificing his entire life and creative output for the Fatherland which needed him in the times of bondage, an artistic and patriotic “flower that grows on a volcano”. The cult of the Three Bards penetrating the way people thought about art at the time made Jan Matejko, during his trip to France in 1867, visited Artur Grottger, already gravely ill, and he wrote to his wife: “I was at Montmartre and visited Juliusz's grave, I cried when I saw him buried in a foreign land. He smiled at me from the medallion – that is how I felt

14] Waldemar OKOŃ, *Wizerunek gladiatora*, in: idem, *Alegorie narodowe...*, pp. 28-45.

15] Aleksander KRAUSHAR, *Kartki z pamiętnika Alkara*, vol. 2: 1858-1865, Gebethner & Wolff, Kraków 1913, p. 84.

16] See: “Biesiada Literacka”, 1877, no. 71, p. 288.



[...] I felt small and miserable by the shadow of his ghost – yet I placed my hands against his grave, asking for brotherly spiritual help. He did not repulse me. I felt.”<sup>17</sup>

This symbolic meeting of two Spirit Kings of painting and of poetry could end my paper, but I would like to mention one more text demonstrating that the presence of genius soothsayers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish art resulted in the fact that other artists suddenly became smaller and the role of stalwart epigones was all that remained for them, or perhaps at most dexterous imitators of the best Masters of words and images.

Wiktoria Gomulicki wrote about this in 1886: “Oh you! The grave that rose over classicism / The trinity of soothsayers like the trinity of cathedral towers! / To the soil you corral us with the strength of thunder? – Such are the mournful whimpering complaints / Of small bushes covered by the shadow of great oaks”.<sup>18</sup>

Only Stanisław Wyspiański, especially after the première of *The Wedding*, was seen as, according to Wincenty Lutosławski, “the heir to our soothsayers.”<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, could another soothsayer painter appear in a similar vein, complementing the old trinity, and, for example, could Piotr Michałowski, rediscovered after many years of being forgotten, play such a role in less Romantic times? I’m not so sure of that.

17] Quoted after: M. SZYPOWSKA, op. cit., p. 158. The author does not provide the exact date of the letter.

18] Witold GOMULICKI, *Poezje*, Warszawa 1886, Quoted after: H. MARKIEWICZ, op. cit., p. 62.

19] Wincenty LUTOSŁAWSKI, *Wesele*, “Słowo Polskie”, 1901, no. 207, p. 13. W. OKOŃ, *Stygńska planeta...*, pp. 154-185.