

Assimilation of Slavic mythology in the literature of Polish Enlightenment

Abstract

The dissertation *Assimilation of Slavic mythology in the literature of Polish Enlightenment* traces the mythological material present in the literature of the turn of 18th and 19th century with consideration to chosen research methodology, including: narrativism, the art of interpretation, and mythographic criticism .

In this paper, the concept of mythology was detached from the legendary history. For this purpose, the author adopted Northrop Frye's definition assuming that mythology is a system of stories intending to show the universe, in which the gods personify its elements, and the universe is organised by the tendency to "perspective portrayal of human origins"¹. Contrary to legends, depicting historic persons or those recognised as such, the mythology presents a set of beliefs of certain society communicated through carriers of meaning that require skilful interpretation. The legend may be such a medium, but it is not identical to the myth.

Taking into account the above distinction, the author conducted the analysis of assimilation of Slavic mythology in the literature of Polish Enlightenment. The texts originating from three periods of the Age of Reason (Saxon period, Stanisław August Poniatowski's reign, and post-partition period) were analysed. The author decided to extend the applicable chronology slightly further, for the discussed phenomenon, which may be termed "Slavic breakthrough", had had a progressive nature and had stretched over several decades.

One may divide discussed trend into three phases. The first, initial one, mainly featured historiographical and platform texts, that formed a theoretical base for the new comprehensive studies of Proto-Slavic culture. The second phase was focused on research on the past and texts inspired by history or written with the use of historical convention. The last phase was the heyday of the trend, where the Slavic mythology and tradition were the means to express political concepts and agendas related to cultural identity. All abovementioned stages produced the literature influenced by recent scientific achievements and the authors were usually committed researchers.

¹ N. Frye, *Mit, fikcja i przemieszczenie*, (*Myth, Fiction and Displacement*) translation. E. Muskat-Tabakowska, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 1969, No. 60, V. 2, p. 295

The main objective of this dissertation was to demonstrate the presence of Slavic elements in the literature of Enlightenment and to match their application with modern definitions of mythology. Although, the Slavic influence and the elements of legendary history in the literature of the 18th century has been widely demonstrated, the mythological inspirations are yet to be researched. The material gathered by the author was categorised with respect to function of Slavic references. Additionally, the extraction of Slavic archetype, personified by pagan lords, but primarily by a common hero (a simple, virtuous people inhabiting a utopian realm), took place.

The first chapter *The origins of Slavic reminiscences* presents the roots of interest among the writers of the era in Proto-Slavic themes. Thus, the contemporary widespread popularity of historicism, closely related to historical research, was indicated. The discussed trend produced some important disquisitions attempting to reconstruct pre-Christian world with consideration to belief system of the time. It was presented as the key to understanding Polish ethno-genesis, which served a crucial function of national integration in the times of Polish state disintegration. The bright minds of the Enlightenment also turned to Slavic culture under the inspiration of prevailing philosophical concepts such as liberalism, physiocracy and deism. The notions of philosophers contributed to the search of a new human role model, rooted in tradition and willing to develop the achievements of past generations. It also led to the creation of anthropological discourse. The primal societies (including Proto-Slavs), became the subject of analytic research, providing the source of ultimate values and solving the 18th century identity dilemmas. Reasoning on the origins of human kind also contributed to the change in defining the myth and triggered the formation of modern science of comparative mythology, which covered classical mythologies but also the heritage of smaller ethnic groups.

All works discussed in this paper were devoted to ethnic matters, but three dominants in the subject may be distinguished. The second chapter *Visions of Slavic world* contents the analysis of literary works overwhelmingly presenting the Slavic culture as imagined in the turn of 18th and 19th centuries. With the use of historical convention, Franciszek Salezy Jezierski presented the allegory of Arcadia. His work *Rzepicha matka królów* (*Rzepicha the mother of kings*) draws a picture of idyllic realm inhabited by a common, hardworking people, whose way of life is a reflection of their respect to natural laws. In turn, Aleksander Sapieha in his report from peregrination around southern Slavdom emphasised the tribal bonds determining the sense of ethnic identity. The notion of powerful and homogenous land is also present in contemporary translations from other Slavic languages. This holistic approach

complemented the attempts of cultural reconstruction and brought comfort in advancing civil crisis of the time. Poles were the part of a large society and for contemporary spectators they were socially dominant element, which was the vital source of national pride.

The title of the third chapter is *Proto-Polish Pantheon in the service for homeland*. The chapter features the analysis of platform works presenting the plans for healing the country. The selection of political poetry written during the romantic breakthrough was also discussed. The poems proclaimed adherence to tradition as a way to protect the national heritage and treated the study of ancient religion as a patriotic duty. Further part of the chapter, consists of the attempt to determine the aims of the poem *Lech* by Jan Paweł Wronicz. The inquiry led to the conclusion that the nature of the lyric is providential and the text beams with hope for the return of past glory. In addition, mythological elements express the traditionalism of the poet, who perceives the past as the parallel of the present. In turn, Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz in his dramatic opera *Piast* provided advice on the restoration of Polish state. According to the author, the social group playing an important role in this process would be peasants, whose potential would have to be considered when restoring the state system. Niemcewicz's play turned out to be largely propagandist. Its aim was to show the analogy between the past and the present and bring the conclusions on the perspective of bright future hidden in the national history.

The last chapter includes the analysis of works featuring some reflections on religion. Three models may be distinguished in this matter. The Greek revivalist style, represented by Wincenty Reklewski, who, in the aspect of *mythical thinking*, attempted to create an alternative system on the existing foundation. Then again, Tymon Zabiorowski and Kazimierz Brodziński proposed the comparison of pagan religion with Christianity. The former took a contestatory approach contradicting both traditions, while the latter the apologetically proclaimed that the "new" religion is clear continuation of the "old" one.

Conducted research reflects the growing tendency in studies of Enlightenment literature that emphasises its irrational inspiration. However, it must be underlined that the elements of Slavic mythology present in the literature of the turn of 18th and 19th stems from anthropological inquiries and scientific knowledge about pre-Christian communities.

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