

MEDIEVAL AND EARLY RENAISSANCE CONCEPTIONS OF NATURE IN POLISH LITERATURE

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*Fair Poland nestles on a fertile sod, / Content as though within the lap
of God. [...] Thy fields supply Thy very need.*

Sebastian Klonowicz

In general terms, one way of comprehending the world we live in is through historical perceptions of infinitely faceted nature. There is more to acquiring knowledge of nature than "curiosity". Such studies are important for the understanding of knowledge of nature itself as well as knowledge of the society that produced it. What emerges from the inquiry into nature's perceptions during the Middle Ages and early Renaissance period in Poland, is how much their variability was entangled with temporal circumstances, religious faith, supranatural beliefs, political and economic facts. Consequently, chronology reveals much not only about the evolution of images of nature but also about human being.

The present reflection does not pretend to be a "synthesis" but only a "sketch". It will offer some facts and a few interpretations. The purpose is to provide some insights on the subject almost lost in historical and philosophical generalizations.

FIRST IMAGES OF NATURE

In the seventh and eight centuries, one branch of the Western Slavs called afterwards *Polanie* or "people of

the open fields" settled itself between the Odra and Vistula rivers, founding the nation of Poles. In the earliest record dated approximately 965 a. D. Ibrahim-Ibn-Jacob wrote that (Western) Slavs "Inhabited the richest limits of land suitable for settlements, and most plentiful in means of support. [...] It produces abundance of food, meat, honey, and fish."

In terms of geographic and climatic opportunities that encourage or inhibit human settlement, Poland's location provided many advantages and some obstacles. Its continental climate with marked seasons gave strong summer sunshine without the extremes of summer drought. Extensive forests provided excellent wind cover. The extremely rich native fauna included tarpan, bears, bison and wolves. At the end of the thirteenth century, Godzislaw Baszko in *The Chronicle of Great Poland* wrote: "When [...] Lech (the first legendary founder of the Polish state) was crossing vast forests, where presently stretches the Polish kingdom, having come at last to an extremely charming place, with unusually fertile soil, full of fish and game [...] he put his tent".

It is very difficult to explore earlier perceptions of nature, in view of climatic changes, waves of colonization, patterns of settlement and cultural varia-

tions. Harsh winters, poor communications, and great distances resulted in the isolation of widely separated communities. The cultural life in Poland under the rule of the Polanian Dynasty (from a legendary past to the recorded history of 1370) is very ambiguous on account of the scarcity of sources. The society was overwhelmingly illiterate. Popular arts were either oral or ephemeral. The artifacts and writings that have survived are mainly religious. The Latin language maintained effective prevalence until the end of the thirteenth century. The earliest written evidence of the Polish language is found in a medieval document written in Latin, the "Bull of Gniezno" of 1136. The papal bull contains 410 Polish names of persons, places and tribes. The ancient *Roczniki*, the chronicles of Gallus Anonimus "the Anonymous Gaul" (d.1118) and of Kadlubek also known as Master Vincent (d.1223), added to numerous hagiographies, all belong to the universal Latin tradition. The *Chronicles of Gaul* (Anonymous) glorified the historical past and gave evidence for the expansion of the concept of *nature*, partially as a result of the expansion of a kingdom, partially as the outcome of the transforming economy. The anonymous author immortalized the twelfth century conquering of the Baltic Sea and the taste of fresh sea fish:

Pisces salsos et foetentes apportabant alii.
 Palpitantes et recentes nunc apportant filii.
 Civitates invadebant patres nostri primitus
 Hii procellas non verentur neque maris sonitus.
 Agitabant patres nostri cervos, apros, capreas,
 Hii venantur monstra maris et opes aequoreas.¹

1 Our fathers brought us reeking, salted fish;/But we, their sons, bring fish that's fresh and wriggling./ Our fathers invaded cities in the olden times,/ But we, their sons fear neither storms nor thundering waves./Our fathers dealt with deer, and bees, and goats;/ Their sons hunt for monsters and for treasures of the deep.

OPUS NATURAE EST OPUS INTELLIGENTIAE

Medieval perceptions of nature varied with degrees of education and social status. An inevitable difference between philosophical projections of nature and the local traditions of knowledge marks just about every culture.

Since Poland did not possess its own university, young men in search of higher education were obliged to travel abroad, especially to France and Italy. The names of several scholars, such as historian Martin the Pole in Paris or the physician Nicholas the Pole of Montpellier, bear witness to the cultural connections between Poland and the West. The best known of them was Witelo or Vitellon (1230-80), a Silesian philosopher who worked with Thomas Aquinas and William of Moerbeke. His essential treatise on the science of optics, the *Perspectiva* was considered the best and the most complete medieval work on the physical properties of light.

Witelo's confidence in experimental and mathematical method influenced his aesthetic view of nature. He contrasted the beauty of nature with the beauty of art and wrote: "Figura etiam facit pulchritudinem. Unde artificiata bene figurate videntur pulchra, magis autem opera naturae". (Witelo, *Perspectiva*, 148) His work, free of any neo-platonic influence, showed sensibility to the beauty of the natural world together with his desire to explain all its fascinating phenomena. He was the first one to experimentally disperse light. Although influenced by the ideas of Alhazen on the factors of beauty, Witelo in his empirical aesthetics offered his own definition of beauty. He realized the subjectivity of the perception of beauty, and its social conditions. At the same time, he found art unable to capture the subtle beauty of the natural world. Reflecting on the colorful rainbow, he wrote: "Nec possunt pictores tales colores plenarie simulare". (X, 67) Even the most talented painters could not re-

produce the perfect beauty of nature, the ultimate God's creation.

All in all, the philosophy of nature that was developed within the scholastic environment of the Jagiellonian University, (established in Krakow in 1364) emphasized the practical rather than cognitive significance of theological investigation. "Rationes theologicae sunt quaedam medicinae", wrote Mateusz of Krakow. The fifteen-century witnessed the further expansion of empirical studies of nature. It was mainly concentrated on a level of perception found in mathematics and the natural sciences. The economy of nature was a perpetual pre-established harmony defined by the divine intelligence. The science of nature quite often responded to a variety of practical demands like dealing with plaques, small-pox and other diseases.

In the early Renaissance, perceptions of nature in formal Polish philosophy still depict the scholastic traits. However, on the intellectual level, the question of change may be applied to two areas of particular importance: the astronomic theory of Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543) and the growing dominion of the Polish language as a language of theology, philosophy and literature. The new astronomic theory transformed the picture of cosmic nature and of human being. *De revolutionibus* bonds together the aesthetic view of the universe and its moral significance. The observation of stars and the beauty of the creation are not just to be wondered at and praised: they bring humans closer to the perfection of the divine creator.

THE BOUNTY OF EARTH: WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM US, LORD, FOR YOUR LAVISH GIFTS?

At the same time, the progressive victory of the Polish language brought descriptions of nature closer to people. Through the translations of the Bible or poetic psalms, the visions of God and his creation per-

meated the national cultures. The beauty of the universal nature unambiguously spoke of its divine source. It revealed itself to human being outwardly, it manifested its radiance, splendor, and sweetness, so that we might eventually know it for what it has always been: the Beauty of God. The beautiful pictures of nature in all its movements, in its power, in compelling descriptions of majestic mountains and wide plains, had an exceptional appeal. They expressed the universalism of the human reality, of our emotions and experiences. Translated in 1579 by the brilliant Polish poet Jan Kochanowski, the David's Psalms integrated the cosmos of nature and the microcosmos of human personality. The translation, called the "miracle" of the Polish culture, poetically blended the original into the earthly landscape of humans whose daily lives were intimately related to nature. Biblical symbols of earth, shadow, grass, flower and wind result from the most elementary life experiences and observance of nature.

Kochanowski in songs celebrated the beauty of the landscape and the joys of rural life. The countryside and rural activities, measured by a peaceful flow of seasons, became the favorite artistic subject for poets and writers of the early Renaissance. They extolled the life and occupations of the ideal country nobleman, their ideal of material and spiritual life. Familiar with nature and inspired by its luxuriant manifestations, the poets painted original pictures of the world, presenting it with simplicity and sincere fascination.

What do you want from us, Lord for your lavish gifts? [...] You are the Lord of the whole world, You built the sky, And embroidered it splendidly with gold stars high. Of the earth untraversed, You lay the foundation, And cover it with rich vegetation. By your own command the sea stands within its shores And is fearful to leap over its assigned course. Inexhaustible waters enrich the rivers, Bright day and shadowy night keep their hours diverse.

(Trifles, Song XXV, Book II)

Kochanowski praised the invisible God through the marvels of his creation —the work of art by *Deus artifex*. He glorified nature, its harmony, and its breath-taking beauty. Kochanowski referred to the “wreaths made from ears of corn”, wine and apples of various kinds, yet these gifts, like the spring flowers and the idleness of winter, focus on the admiration of harmony, not the recounting of beneficial crops. Furthermore, he entirely discarded the idea that the world and all the wonders of nature had been created for humans: “as it is all Yours, / Whatever in this world man names as his resource”. Human beings are but a part of the natural order and subject to its governing laws. The Everlasting Creator assures the cosmological and terrestrial order, offering us his lavish gifts and benefactions, which have no limits.

While Kochanowski observed the general rules of nature, and cherished wonderful changes of seasons, and cycles of the sun and earth, Mikolai Rey (1567) perceived mostly its utilitarian pleasures: idyllic life according to the natural rhythms of seasons. (Rey, *Zwierciadlo*). He extolled the life and activities of the ideal country noblemen who lived upon their own estates and occupied themselves with agricultural labors.

THE OTHER COMPREHENSION OF NATURE

Perceiving nature meant different things to a person whose life was daily influenced and determined by confrontation with the natural world, and to those who dealt with nature intellectually. The connotation of the term was different for those within their *own* nature, and for someone from *outside* the place. When we investigate the history of the concept of nature and its significance throughout the centuries, we should study not only the history of the idea and its perceptions in philosophy, theology and science. We have to look upon the daily life experiences and habits of peasants. The non-articulated experience

of nature might have influenced a far greater number of people than did the statements of philosophers, theologians and scientists.

Between the collapse of the ancient order and the rise of late medieval urban civilizations, people were necessarily “close to nature” in a Europe that was largely covered by untamed forests and wilderness. They had to cope with new and often-hostile environments, to fight wild animals and the ever-present threat of disease, at least in various regions of medieval Poland. The common people often regarded wilderness as distinctly undesirable, an asocial place teeming with spirits. Forest spirits were often an illustration of forests as “ugly”, untamed wilderness. The forest and the wetlands, the large lakes and the wild animals, were all potential sources of terror as well as of harvest.

During the early Middle Ages the custodians of learning, monks and ecclesiastics, were generally indifferent and suspicious of pagan interpretations of the natural world. In Poland, as in various parts of Europe, the gap was partially filled by the literature of practical and empirical tradition. Popular in Europe, the *exemplum* played a significant role in Poland. The information about the natural world was not that abundant, and much less precise than a medicinal one. The audience and the priests themselves instinctively learned the laws of physics while discussing the stars that seemed to grow bigger when looked at through the clouds. Equally the sun rising above the horizon and setting down gave the impression of being apparently bigger than the one observed during the day. Mikołaj of Błonie’s collection of 131 sermons, *Sermones de tempore*, written in 1431, contained 245 *exempla*. The *exempla* described sea water as salty, greasy, heavy and easy to sail on. He mentioned the other peculiar property of sea water, namely its capacity to ignite fire instead of extinguishing it. The effect was a probable result of the presence of sodium that, in small amounts, brightens the flame. However, all this in-

formation was quite a *novum* to Polish listeners. They were not a nation of sailors like their northern neighbors, not even acquainted with the sea. The *exempla* contained the following practical, although perplexing, gardening information: watering with blood was recommended to keep roses red whole year around.

Exempla provided a mine of information on the animal world, including species unknown in Polish territory. The fables of unicorns and dragons were the most popular among the collected works of Polish authors like Jacob from Parady (1442-1464). Before judging Polish medieval listeners naïve, one should look at the huge bone recovered from the "dragon's" cave that hangs over the entrance to the Wawel cathedral in Krakow. Knowledge about exotic species of animals like lions, elephants or some mysterious birds, originated from narratives for illiterates or from written bestiaries like *Fizjologus* or *Acta martyrum*.

The descriptions of the animal world are vivid with the detailed relationships among the species showing many violent occurrences, and only a few of a symbiotic bond. Mikołaj of Błonie provided various *exempla* of the coexistence of humans and animals, finding the animals more caring than their human counterparts. Courteous behavior distinguished the elephants that help people wandering in a desert. The female wolf would take care of an abandoned human baby, and the lion would not attack the kneeling *homo sapiens*. Numerous *exempla* elucidate on the dog's *ethos* as a faithful human friend (Szostak, *Exemplum*). A dog and a horse played very particular functions in a human's life; the horse was a companion that shared a destiny with the rider. It had a name and individuality. The dog was a friend and a guard till the death of its owner. Quite often the animal revenged his death. This perception of these two closest human's companions has persisted through many centuries. None one of these animals has been considered

somebody's pet. Nothing certain can be alleged about the human treatment of animals due to the absence of such *exempla* given by Polish authors.

WILDERNESS AND THE NATURAL RESOURCES

The first known Polish state (ninth through twelfth centuries) covered the country of imposing wilderness typical of its geographical conditions. Manifold had been the shapes taken by Polish wilderness. Magnificent, dense temperate woods of mixed conifer and broad-leaved forest covered nine-tenth of the territory, broken by natural pastures and fertile fields. Nature had been an omnipresent phenomenon. The survival of most inhabitants depended on the success of their agriculture. Therefore, the practical use of natural resources led the way to the knowledge of native Polish wilderness. In many historical records the idea of wilderness is that of a resource in the physical sense of the raw materials it contains.

The first medieval chronicles of Gall (Anonymous, XII century) portrayed Polish natural resources as a real treasure any other country could envy. Physical and biological nature (*przyroda*) seemed to be immeasurable and infinite, at least to Joannis Dlugossii (Jan Dlugosz) in the second part of the fifteen century, when he was writing his geographic and biological supplement *Chorographia* to his great historical magnum opus *Annales Seu Cronicae Incliti Regni Poloniae*. The supplement, regarded as outstanding in its own right, described all the natural resources known to the author over the whole Polish territory.

The Annals give a vivid picture of seven main rivers and of major lakes. They provide a very accurate description of the climatic conditions of Poland: harsh climate, rough nature, cold skies, strong winds, long lasting winters. Dlugossi also stressed the advantages of Poland's geographical position.

Poland, he wrote, is known by the absence of earthquakes with their disastrous consequences of wrecked cities and villages, and broken mountains. Neither is the country frequented by floods. He emphasized the absence of "poisonous nature" so disagreeable to human beings in many other places. "In quo et felicitas generis Slawonici, quod tam optimas terras sortitum fuit, (...) nulle enim terre orbis preter Indiam, quam he a Slawis/ primum possesse aurum, argentums, sal, ferrum, cuprum et cetera metalla, que mortals prima ducunt." (Dlugosz, *Roczniki*, 69).

These arguments, proudly describing the assets of Polish physical nature, would be repeated numerous times in the future. Dlugossi and his predecessors noticed only wild animals that were valuable for food, clothing and trade. He mentioned the Polish bison, wild boar, deer, moose, elk, beaver, and fur-bearing animals like sable, ermine, mink and fox. While the Polish climate prevented the growth of olives and vineyards, the quality of beer made of wheat and barley was superb, according to the chronicles. He also mentioned another biological phenomenon: the characteristics of resin, the product of the pine trees that in its solid state becomes like silex, with all its capacities to start a flame.

Wilderness is invariably depicted as a mighty, unconquered force. In many chronicles, we find evidence of the harsh part it played in molding the lives of those it touched. The natural phenomena like floods, hail, plagues, droughts frequently mentioned by the Polish chronicles, were the doings of nature itself, not a result of the human activity—at least according to the chroniclers. The first ecological thought concerning the human impact on the natural environment appeared in the sixteen century, together with the first legal conservation efforts (Wasawicz, "Czlowiek i woda w sredniowiecznej Europie").

Natural phenomena have always been important regarding their descriptions, their interpretation and their meaning. This was particularly so in the Re-

naissance, when interest in them accelerated. We can observe the systematization and classification of data, and the growing interest in the significance of the environment. This raises the relevance of national nature and shows a kind of positive self-identification with one's *own* nature. Representing national nature in this way is to be distinguished from the descriptions of other people's nature.

The posture of pride is clear throughout the writings: feelings of satisfaction and joy at the sight of the richness of the native physical and biological world. In fact, Polish flora, fauna and all the other natural resources, had long been the cause of pride for those who describe them. The faith in nature was connected with a conviction that nature could never be destroyed. Worry about the natural environment came after the sixteen century. Polish nature made the kingdom's landscape very attractive and its economy self-sufficient. There was enough food and building materials. Blocks found everywhere in the countryside had been used as a primary building material in the construction of churches and fortresses. "Regio Polonica fecunda frugibus, amena fructibus, deliciosa piscibus, sapida lactiniis, calmosa venacionibus, copiosa armentis et gregibus, dulcis mellibus, comoda equis, referta altibus, dives ferro et plumbo, gloriosa cera, crassa buitro [...]" (Dlugossi, HPI/9).

The chronicles of J. Dlugossi contain almost all the knowledge of the natural world of his times and its evaluation. His monumental history of Poland was based on extensive geographical and economical studies and research. He and his fellowmen celebrated nature as a source of national identity, and as the basis of national power. Nature was emotionally and politically charged, and never detached from questions of nation and identity. The vision of nature in the background of literary works and of chronicles can be seen as symbolic of the good and ideal life in harmony with a divine cosmological order.

Only a few of the many possible images of nature had been discussed in this paper. Polish medieval and early Renaissance writings reflect the immense variety of nature's perceptions. The poets turned their attention to the divine beauty of the natural world and to the questions of human existence in accord with the rhythm of nature. The succession of pictures and poetic images gives expression to the bounty of nature as the instrument of God. There was an elaborate correspondence between the little world of a human being and the greater world around him. The chronicles exemplified the pragmatic view of the natural world as a reservoir of resources determined by political and economic necessities of use. However, traditional Polish term for locality "gniazdo" (the nest) aptly expresses the strong sentimental bond, which tied people to the one small area where most of them would spend their entire lives, and where they felt great affinity with the neighboring nature. This correlation between the community and the natural world that surround it poses some of the most fascinating problems of the human-nature relationship throughout all Polish history.

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