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[recenzja]

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Cette littérature dont l'existence et la diversité sont démontrées dans le dernier chapitre du livre de M. Włodarski, sort du sujet qu'il présente. Créée par des auteurs différents, sans être contrôlée par les théologiens, dans son développement spontané et exubérant, elle détruit les rigueurs classiques de *ars moriendi*, elle efface des schémas traditionnels et se répand largement sous l'essor irréprouvable du baroque.

Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa

Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa: **Homo Viator – Mundus – Mors. Studia z dziejów eschatologii w literaturze staropolskiej /Homo Viator – Mundus – Mors. Studies in the History of Eschatology in Polish Literature of the 16 th-18th Centuries/**, vols. 1-3, Warszawa 1988. Uniwersytet Warszawski. Vol. 1: 164 pp; Vol. 2: 374 pp; Vol. 3: 228 pp.

Juliusz A. Chrościcki, when publishing his book *Pompa funebris* (1974) about funeral ceremonies, thought it fit to „explain himself” and offered his „melancholy disposition” as a reason for his taking up such a subject. The author of the book under review admits that in her case one of the motifs was a humanist's apprehension concerning the conspiracy of silence about death and sufferings associated with it, so conspicuous in advanced societies of the Western world. Characteristically enough, authors of works dealing with various aspects of life, writing about love, politics, or entertainment, generally see no need for justifying their choice, while „thanatological” writers apparently feel obliged to provide some explanation. It would seem, however, that in literature the theme of death is at least as interesting as many other questions analyzed by scholars and critics. Thus, Albert Tenenti's belief quoted in the book (vol. I, p. 4) that „knowledge of views on, and attitudes to, death enables a historian to come closer to the anthropological centre of a given period” and that „in a specific way they account for official doctrines contained

in philosophical works as well as in the current views on man”, appears essential in this context.

Nowicka-Jeżowa’s work is made up of three logically interrelated parts, although one cannot help feeling that the core of the study was originally volume 2, devoted to Protestant and Humanist reflective-plaintive songs, the other two volumes stemming from it later on: volume 1 (treated as a background of, and a basis for, generalizations) covers eschatological reflection in various literary genres of the 16th-18th centuries, while volume 3 presents Sarmatian stereotypes oppositional to the model of Protestant anthropology. Starting in volume 1 with general consideration of death, the author draws up a brief historical outline of the shaping of views on the end of human earthly existence and attitudes towards the phenomenon as recorded in European culture. Here also appears the term that is to recur throughout the study – “*ars moriendi*” (“the art of dying”), which is conceived in a very broad sense, as referring not only to specific prescriptions, instructions and prayers designed to prepare a man for “good” death, but also to all texts in which human attitudes to „the final end of life” are expressed.

In the first two chapters: „Piśmiennictwo teologiczno-duszpasterskie upowszechniające sztukę dobrej śmierci” („Theological-priestly writings on the art of good death”) and „Epickie i dramatyczne wizje śmierci” („Epic and dramatic visions of death”) Nowicka-Jeżowa makes an attempt at classifying works of the *meditatio mortis* kind, and proposes to separate literature from other kinds of writing, a point of view which seems quite interesting. As far as the subject of the study is concerned, those various kinds of writing, says the author, „convey eschatological knowledge in the *apriori* manner (...). Literature, on the other hand, is characterized by a specific „empiricism”. Literary works (...) formulate truths about death in the a *posteriori* way, seeking them within the domains of epic observation of the world, of dramatic confrontation of attitudes and values, and of lyrical inner experience” (vol.1,p.44). With all the matter-of-factness of the argument and apt characterization of the texts under discussion, some titles of sections of particular chapters prove

to be misleading. And thus e.g. in Chapter 1, in the section entitled „Traktaty i podręczniki dobrego umierania” („Treatises and manuals on good dying”), along with regular treatises „*de arte bene moriendi*” also other, generically varied, works are presented, from Disthemius’, Rej’s and Bielski’s moralities to the prayers and meditations by Louis of Granada.

The two subsequent chapters of volume 1 deal with reflections on death occurring in Renaissance and Baroque poetry. In discussing Renaissance poetry Nowicka-Jeżowa makes a clear-cut distinction between a religious and moralizing perspective of meditation on the end of life, peculiar to „the most Renaissance writer”, as Mikołaj Rej is labeled, and attitudes expressed in the “learned” Humanist poetry. Rej’s man is mortal on account of his peccancy; the memento of destructive death and vanity of the mundane is to direct him to the transcendental goal as the sole object worth striving after. Humanists, on the other hand, find there is a value that can defy the power of death and the workings of time, this value being a man’s virtue, confirmed by posthumous fame. Hence they derive a lesson of a worthy death which does not annihilate life achievements. In characterizing two trends of Humanist death-oriented poetry: funeral laudatory verses and lyrical reflection, the author sees Jan Kochanowski’s work with its variety of genres and intellectual premises as occupying a special place in both of them. It is also Kochanowski’s *Threnodies*, written in a climate of ideological crisis and foreshadowing a new poetic, which become a bridge between the Humanist poetry and the works of the late-16th-century poets sunk in pessimistic meditation and focused on their own inner experience. In the author’s comments on the poetry of full-fledged Baroque the emphasis is on the variety of conventions and genres used in works dealing with death, on specific character of Medieval reminiscences, and on the significance of temporal motifs. Volume 1 closes with a chapter which shows death in „a distorting mirror of joke and parody”; here the reader can find a thorough analysis of means and ends of humor and comical devices of various texts which attack literary stereotypes in presentation of death. That chapter

is particularly interesting against the background of eschatological meditation, whose place and importance in literature of the time have been discussed earlier; with this humorous aspect the picture becomes complete.

Formulating her "Remarks on the method of interpreting Polish Renaissance and Baroque songs" („Uwagi o metodzie interpretacji pieśni staropolskich“) with which volume 2 opens, Nowicka-Jeżowa defines that part of her book as a „monographic outline of a genre not defined so far, based on analyses of sources and on philological study of texts" (vol.2,p.11). Negligence of plaintive melic in scholarly studies can be, according to the author, explained by its relatively slight artistic value and its marginality as against official poetry. From that point of view, the study is undoubtedly a pioneer one. What may be questioned, however, is singling out reflective-plaintive songs as a distinct literary genre, while on the basis of their characteristic features distinguished by the author we would rather tend to consider them as a specific *type* of song. When presenting the history of Protestant hymn-books and discussing their popularity and the role they played in the life of religious communities, Nowicka-Jeżowa argues that the growing number of such songs was „due not so much to a social need as to the authoritative social-religious programme of Reformed communities" (vol.2,p.29). In the court and nobility circles the popular character of those songs, which brought up associations with beggar's songs, met with disgust and reluctance. Among songs designed for „visiting the sick" (another group being „funeral" songs) we can find a paraphrase of the medieval „Skarga umierającego" („Complaint of the dying"), which to the author of the study under review is an example of passing inhumane judgements about the doom of a „bad Christian" (vol.2,p.34), even though, apart from the unquestionable didactic message addressed to those participating in the ceremony, reminding of the offender's sins was perhaps meant to rouse his contrition and repentance, and not to aggravate his stress.

The major part of the volume is devoted to analysis of ideological content, literary traditions and social-religious conditions of Protestant

songs on death. The author calls our attention to the markedly religious character of those works, considers the death dogmatics contained in them and the ensuing tendency to view life in its final aspect, demonstrates the specificity of *vanitas* motifs, and elucidates the role of images of bad and good death in relation to didactics of emotions of fear and anxiety accompanying this ultimate experience. From among commonplaces mentioned in the book especially noteworthy ones are, on the one hand, that of „bisexual” world, which in German-language literature appears as an „alluding and deceitful lady”, while in Polish texts (and, for that matter, Latin as well) it is a „lover and sovereign”, and, on the other, the almost archetypal motif of death identified with Mother Earth who with cannibalic rapacity devours her own children. In her discussion of literary form of the works under study, Nowicka-Jeżowa stresses the selective use made by the authors of Reformational songs of ideological and artistic heritage of European poetry: they wittingly rejected the classical tradition to turn instead to the Bible, which they treated, however, chiefly as a source of knowledge about God and man and not as a model of the verbal art. Elements of medieval heritage, dearer to the reformers both on account of the vernacular and because of its didacticism subordinated to theology, can be seen on the ideological plane (motifs) and in literary genres gradually assimilated to melic poetry (lamentation, sermon, morality).

Protestant songs, as a rule opposed to the Humanist model, could sometimes, however, be subject of artistic modernization, which was possible mainly thanks to Kochanowski, whom the authors of hymnbooks regarded as a patron of religious melic poetry. Thus the last chapter of volume 2, entitled „Pieśni czarnoleskie dedykowane Persefonie” („Songs of Czarnolas dedicated to Persephone”) is devoted to interrelations between Kochanowski’s poetry and Reformational song. The thorough analysis proves that also in this respect the poet was an open and independent artist. Associated with the reformers’ circles, a careful reader of various literary products of his time, he frequently drew upon the poetics of songs of religious communities. Yet, for all the affinities,

contrasting tendencies seem to dominate: reflectiveness as opposed to the prayer-like character of the collective song, the universal as opposed to the confessional, the private as opposed to the didactic. In that way, states the author, Kochanowski „could join the socially topical trend of poetry while keeping his critical distance to its imperfections” (vol.2,p.220). Separately, Nowicka-Jeżowa considers the plaintive songs mourning the dead in Krzysztof Radziwiłł’s family, included in the *Fragments*, taking them as illustrations of a change in poetics and, above all, in the outlook of the poet: his passage from the classical position and that of the Old Testament to the Christian one, marked by humility and understanding of love.

Volume 3 opens with a chapter on Catholic death song which the author describes as opposed to Protestant hymns. According to her, the fact that those texts are scattered in various collections can be explained by their marginal position in the Catholic life, since the Church did not define their precise function. Nowicka-Jeżowa distinguishes two groups of songs concerned with death: one related to the Mass and the funeral liturgy, covering prayers for the dead and songs derived from the Latin tradition, and the other covering non-liturgical, reflective-plaintive songs used in private devotion. It is the latter kind of texts which is the subject of the study. Describing non-liturgical funeral rites the author observes that many elements penetrated also to folklore, which leads her to a conclusion that Baroque songs in general circulation were „an amalgam of elements of the Church, gentry, and folk proveniences” (vol.3,p.19). A separate subject of the author’s investigation are Jesuit writers, who opposed Reformational hymn-books by publishing their own Catholic popular song-books, thereby also becoming propagators of death songs. The extreme popularity those works gained in time was won at the cost of primitivization of Christian ideas, limitation of faith to the gentry circles and their culture. And what fills the last two chapters of volume 3 is analysis of Sarmatian traits in meditational-plaintive literature and in songs with the eschatological theme.

Beside literary forms connected with funeral pomp, the author presents Sarmatian „*ars moriendi*” that set the models of good dying for a squire, a matron, a priest, or a knight. In her careful examination of the last-mentioned model, the author draws our attention to the lay character of the knightly „*ars moriendi*” based on the belief that the sacrifice of life has its earthly goal, which is fame as not yielding to the destructive power of time. A characteristic feature of Sarmatian Baroque poetry is a stylization aiming at monumentalizing the knight’s death, funeral and tomb.

Literary images of personified death were adapted to the realities of gentry life. Nowicka-Jeżowa registers many current iconic patterns, such as death riding a horse in the Tartar costume, or brawling in an inn, or as a coachman oiling the squeaking wheels of the coach of life. A noteworthy icon is also that of „the dying death”, especially when compared with the image of the heroine of a medieval dialogue *De morte prologus*, who will exist, even after the Doomsday and, though idle, will continue to be as cruel as ever to the sinners suffering in Hell who will summon her in vain. Typical of „national” Catholicism that becomes more and more general in the Sarmatian world is the rendering of dogmatic contents in shapes drawing upon the lay, mundane reality easily readable to Polish audience. It is also assumed that the audience are endowed with particular sensibility, and thus the songs mostly employ devices meant to stir their imagination. Nowicka-Jeżowa discusses, furthermore, macabre elements, so characteristic of Baroque literature, pointing to their didactic functions, but at the same time trying to explain the morbid deviations of imagination by a new sense of „distorted, defiled beauty” /vol.3,p.121/.

Finally, she analyzes mystical aspirations, seeing in them an escape into eternity in the face of general sense of corruption of the world, man’s ultimate attempt at liberating himself from the bondage of death.

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