

Alina Witkowska

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Descriptive Poem

Modern descriptive poem is a literary genre linked closely with spheres of life much broader than literature; above all with the scientific revolution which started in the 17th and continued in the following century. It enthroned natural science and physics which thus assumed the place hitherto occupied by “the queen of sciences” — mathematics. The era of Descartes, of mathematics and logic had come to its end and there began a series of great physical and natural discoveries, accompanied by an enthusiastic appraisal of empirical sciences, by a cult of the fact and the principle of description which supplanted *a priori* and systematic reasoning. Nature ceased to be a mystery book, written by the Almighty, in the face of which man stood helpless and uncertain of his own place in it. It now became a spectacle, a vivid picture which one observed, described and actually participated in.

This display of nature arranged by physicists and naturalists was by no means contained within the walls of scientists’ studies and laboratories; it simply captured mass imagination. It ushered in a new era of wonders, established a rationalistic marvel scoffing at the naïve notions about supernatural miraculous phenomena which fill the entire realm of life. Natural wonders—yes, but only those which could be fathomed, comprehended and described, that was the area where science and imagination met and into which, it seemed, anyone could enter within his own dilettantish possibilities. If not as an observer or a collector of curios—and that was a period which abounded in amateur-collectors—then, at least, as a reader of works describing the spectacle of nature. Works by Buffon made a veritable career among the reading public. The first three volumes of his *Histoire naturelle* were sold out within barely six weeks, and

his *Discours des époques de la nature* were translated into all the major European languages (Polish translation—1786). Of course, the rather epic manner of building up scientific narration, the picturesque, often emotional style, made reading easier for an amateur and created the impression of direct participation in unravelling the mysteries of nature.

The universal fascination with the newly-found wonders, the peculiarity of scientific narration combined with a literary style, created a specific climate of a bond between science and life, between the scholar and “just anybody,” between scientism and literature. This was probably one of the more fundamental reasons for the invasion of naturalistic erudition into the field of poetry, for the therein detectable voice of empirically orientated reflections about nature, and the passion of describing the world, both causally and finally. Such trends should certainly be linked with the modern descriptive poem which sought to bring the knowledge of nature into poetry, to promote the ties between the language of science and that of literature as well as to bring into the sphere of artistic description that cognitive attitude which steered the revolution in physics and broadly conceived studies of nature. It was no accident that great scholars were the patrons and inspirators of the two most famous modern descriptive poems—Isaac Newton of James Thomson’s *The Seasons*, and G. L. Buffon of Delille’s *L’Homme de champs*. After the appearance of only the initial fragments of *The Seasons* (*Winter*, 1726), Thomson wrote a poem dedicated to the memory of Newton, which left no doubt how close to him was Newton’s physics and metaphysics. Any such doubts would eventually be dispelled by the poem itself, full of digressions and of philosophical declarations inspired by the great physicist. One could even quite justifiably presume that the vision of the world governed by the rhythm of the four seasons was for Thomson a peculiarly conceived equivalent of the Newtonian universum. In turn, the influence of Buffon was unmistakably and in many ways present in Delille’s “French Georgics,” either in direct references, in expressions of praise or else, and above all, in the actual contents of the Song III which paraphrased Buffon’s ideas about the epochs of the formation of nature. The Song, now regarded as un-poetic, dry and presenting the translator with innumerable difficulties (very inadequate was also its Polish translation by Alojzy

Feliński), because of the over-abundance of scientific terminology and information, was nevertheless written in line with the then prevailing tastes and reckoned with the readers' fancies and partly also with the state of their knowledge.

Another major element of the spiritual climate of those days, and at the same time the ideological foundation of the descriptive poem, was the utilitarian ethics and the transformations of the laws of nature. It was John Locke who became the law-maker of ethics for the society which was learning the secrets of nature. Locke claimed that the striving for happiness is an absolute law of nature and should thus determine man's mode of living. Yet, the want of happiness cannot be achieved in an imaginary state of nature, in isolation from culture and social life. Locke's concept of happiness amounts, therefore, to the acceptance of a so-called civil society, fully formed and organized, in which man should find an advantageous and satisfactory position. How to achieve it? In the first place by work which, according to Locke, is the expression of man's creative abilities. Thanks to work man not only ensures for himself commonly conceived material benefits but realizes himself as the second creator (second after God, of course) who moulds the chaos of nature according to his own will, knowledge, needs and capabilities. J. Locke said paradoxically that "labour is a pain which eliminates pain," meaning by this the pain of unorganized living, subordinated to the dictates of essentially imperfect nature. Thus, at the very heart of Locke's ethical system was man—the creator of reality, of material goods and of beauty and at the same time, a happy lord of the world which he formed according to his genius and needs. This concept represented both anthropocentrism and hedonism turning into utilitarianism in social thinking, for happiness and work of individuals comprised the universal capital of that civil society—the earthly domain of laborious, wise people creating new values and utilizing them knowledgeably.

Locke's ethical principles constituted a logical extension, or rather an integral factor, of that vision of man and universe which lay at the root of the scientific revolution. They were permeated with the same enthusiasm for mankind, with the belief in the possibility of resolving the dilemmas of human condition, and with the conviction that a properly selected and confirmed in practice system of values

such as work, benefit and peace, must in effect bring universal happiness. The enthusiasts of the knowledge of nature were apt to conjecture that the world is protected and patronized by a smiling God which gave to man a well done entity. Locke unveiled a social system of existence arranged in such a moral order that the smile of God was reflected in the smile of a happy lord on the land.

In the history of European culture there was a literary genre which represented a not unsimilar system of values and notions about man's happy destiny. It was the ancient descriptive poem which followed the slogan of *laus agriculturae* known in two different versions—the older one, Greek, from Hesiod's *Works and Days*, and Roman, from Virgil's *Georgics*. Both advocated an ethos contrary to that of Homer's and its model embodiment. Not a knight but a farmer was the human ideal and the system of values was built around work, above all—work on the land. The supreme ideal of work attracted to itself all other values especially precious and revered in the world of farming. Coming first in this respect was peace which guaranteed stability of rural life, its durability, traditions and the bond with a specific place on earth.

These values were set in opposition not only to destruction, but also to violent changes in general and to the rhythm of history. Work was thus regarded as the absolute value of human existence. Interpreted in this sense can be the famous words from the *Georgics*—*labor omnia vincit improbus* (I, 145, indomitable labour conquers all)—one of the most optimistic sentences in culture and also one which found such wide-spread reflection in partitioned Poland where the descriptive poem searched for ways of salvation for those conquered by force of arms. But in the descriptive poems, work appears also as a complex of labours, as different works of unequal value. Most highly valued is work connected with the cultivation of soil and trees, and with animal husbandry. The *Georgics* praised not only the dignity of these labours but also their beauty and the pleasures derived from them. Already the antiquity combined ethics and esthetics—a combination so characteristic for modern descriptive poem. Beauty should go hand in hand with usefulness and even with benefit, and thus comprehended it should become a major element of the utilitarian idea of happiness. The farmer had therefore the chance of becoming the archimodel of *homo felix*.

This ancient tradition of the descriptive poem has attracted attention not only in the days of Locke and Newton, but it was, in a way, re-discovered as a living part of contemporary European culture. *Georgics*, in particular, entered a period of new life, and translated into French—the main European language of those days—enjoyed tremendous popularity among readers. It happened thanks to the translation by Delille (1769) which was regarded by many, including Voltaire, as a revelation in culture. Antique poems were not only a source of encouragement and inspiration but also an always actual model, the presence of which in one's own work had to be most emphatically and even demonstratively accentuated. Hence the paraphrases and semi-quotes in original texts as well as the vast number of notes which connected by a network of references the contemporary work with its ancient model. Thus the concern for the audibility of someone else's voice in modern descriptive poems—the voice of ancient culture—was largely due to the Classicist attitude to models. Whenever it is the model and not originality which has its aesthetic value, the confirmation of illustrious origin—and the *Georgics* were seen as an example unsurpassed—nobilitated the newer work and justified its aesthetic existence. Furthermore, it also enriched the text related to the reality presented in the work, by another contents deeply set in the tradition of culture and representing an internal dialogue conducted within its framework.

Thus emphasized link with the model was probably intended to reveal the closeness of ideological premises and perhaps also to bring out the eternal identity of the rustic theme based on the same labours, benefits and joys. As D. Bończa Tomaszewski wrote: “Wszędzie cep, widły, grabie, pług i radła z broną / Starożytności prostej piętnem naznaczono” (Everywhere a flail, a fork, a rake, a plough, a lister with a harrow. / A picture by simple antiquity impressed). Revealed thus was the indomitable ethos of work, and the vision of a world founded on harmonious cooperation of man and nature demonstrated its unshakable stability unmoved by the vagaries of history.

The modern descriptive poem introduced, however, certain innovations into the antique model. Firstly, in addition to the agricultural poem long sanctioned by its glorious Georgican example, it called into being also a poem extolling gardens. Most representative in

this respect is Delille as the author of both kinds of descriptive poetry: *Les Jardins* and *L'Homme des champs*. The two types of descriptive works are mutually complementary: the Georgic is more didactic and looking more toward moral values, while the "garden" type is concerned rather with aesthetics, a problem of such importance for classicists. After all, both a farmer and a gardener are men of similar spiritual condition: modern interpreters of nature gifted with an "eye of a philosopher," who, however, not for a moment forget the ancient Horatian principle *beatus ille*... *Furor hortensis* which engulfed 18th-century Europe and found its reflection also in the multitude of literary creations containing description of gardens, had hardly brought any fundamental changes in the Classicist concept of aesthetics. That is why it could make use of the descriptive formula moulded by the agricultural theme. For the triumph of the "English garden" with its rich greenery of free growing trees, shrubs, the lawns and streams imitating undefiled nature, a garden which exploited the law of contrast and surprise, was not in itself a sign of any aesthetic revolt. It was rather a shift of accent within a garden as a closed aesthetical structure which, while preventing chaos and an uncontrolled reign of nature, has put an end to the prevalence of geometry and of purely mechanical means of dominating over nature (with the help of shears). Thus, the role of geometry in the aesthetics of laying out gardens has shared the fate of mathematics in exact sciences.

If, however, we would look at an English garden as upon a text containing certain philosophical meanings, it would reveal, especially in the aesthetics of contrast and in the variety of seemingly disconnected elements, the ideas of garden architects about harmony, including the harmony of space being a sound structure in which contradictions are blended together. In a way, the Newtonian theory of the structure of universum was thus translated into aesthetics of gardens, and the happy gardener became a sort of philosopher with a tranquil soul delighting with joy in the garden spectacle of nature. But the gardener was not a mere spectator who admired the beauty of gardens, he was a double hero of that spectacle of nature staged by art. For he was the creator of a new entity which he built with material provided by nature. Delille wrote about it in *Les Jardins*. An English garden required that this rule

should be free from despotism and based on the knowledge of and respect for nature. Delille often warned—“do not abuse nature,” and Izabela Czartoryska in her book about gardens shuddered at the thought of a rich but despotic gardener who would “crush the soil with the weight of his incompetence.” On the other hand, the existing arrangement between the creator and the material he used which emphasized the dominant role of the gardener was never questioned.

Yet, the whole spectacle of nature, the life of plants and the meaning ascribed to this life show that anthropocentrism has penetrated deeply into the way of thinking about nature and about gardens. The entire life of nature is like that of man and the book of nature is but a paraphrased fable about human nature. Hence, the real hero of the “kingdom of plants” is man. This notion can be observed in Delille’s description of gardens, and in particular, in the so often mentioned by critics vitality of the images full of movement and permeated with the dynamic force which stimulated this movement. The life of plants flows in accordance with the semantics of human feelings. Trees standing close to each other were, of course, seen as a married couple. A brook winding its course around an islet was pictured as a lover holding his beloved one in his gentle arms. Delille thus presented the idea of humanization in Song IV of *L’Homme des champs*. This idea was strictly followed by Polish authors of descriptive poems who clearly grasped its philosophical and structural function in the microcosm of earthly reality. Thus Koźmian in *Ziemiaństwo polskie (Polish Landed Gentry)* assured that:

Ludzie, zwierzęta i rośliny drobne
Są do siebie początkiem i końcem podobne.
I dlaczegożby czucia nie wzięły w podzielenie?

[Men, animals and frail plants, / all have the same origin and the same end. / So why shouldn't they have the same feelings?].

And Tomaszewski in *Rolnictwo (Agriculture)* based upon that notion his general presentation of the world of plants and animals. This was most emphatically, not to say obtrusively, evident in his language, which all too readily resigned from elaborating its own vocabulary for describing realities of nature. Thus plants have “a torso or body,” milk flows in their roots, their stems are covered with

skin or "soft fleece" and the leaves—with varnish or veneer. In such a world, likened to that of man's by the very use of terminology, there prevailed, of course, the same feelings as existed among humans: joy, tenderness, sorrow and, above all, love the description of which was indispensable in explaining the phenomenon of reproduction in nature. Thus, for example, Cupid's hectic endeavours among birds and flowers aroused "bridal feelings." For Tomaszewski the act of marriage seemed absolutely necessary for explicating the very principle of natural reproduction.

The Polish examples of anthropocentrism in observing and explaining nature are found in descriptive poems about agriculture. There are no equally representative poems in our literature devoted to gardens. Philosophy of nature, aesthetic principles of descriptiveness, ethical ideals—all these were enclosed within the agricultural poem. Unless we consider the discursive, but also of high artistic value, work by Izabela Czartoryska *Myśli różne o sposobie zakładania ogrodów* (*Various Thoughts on the Methods of Laying Out Gardens*, 1808), as a prose equivalent of a garden poem.

The situation in partitioned Poland created a favourable ground for descriptiveness rooted in the tradition of *Georgics*, with their praise of work generally and of agricultural pursuits in particular. The didacticism peculiar to this specific kind of descriptive poem was not regarded as its weakness but rather as a priceless virtue which presented the opportunity for ideological declarations, for a clash of ideas and for the defence of adopted values. There is no doubt that at a certain period, Polish literature put the greatest hopes in precisely this genre, hopes which went beyond purely literary life. The salvaging power of agriculture, the benefits of work and the blessing of peace provided ideological solutions which were to furrow the Poles' mentality and give a desired form to their historic past. It was not accidental that the work by D. Bończa Tomaszewski bore the demonstrative title *Rolnictwo* (1802) and not only praised *laus agriculturæ* but was also replete with unconcealed references to the political and therapeutical function of farming pursuits in shaping the historical destiny of the Poles:

Pokłon tobie, rolnictwo i zagrodna strzecho!
Wyście teraz Polaków jedyną pociechą.

Wyście nam całą zostali ponętą
 Gdyśmy wszystko stracili z wolnością odjętą.

 Co dzień z wschodem jutrzeńki, porzuciwszy łożę,
 Odwiedzę sad mój, gumno i zasiane zboże:
 A może w tych rozrywkach i w tych zabaw zbiorze
 Choć na moment zapomnę o smutnym rozbiorze.

[Praise be to you farming and the thatched cottage! / You are now the Poles' only consolation, / You are to-day our only enticement / When, together with freedom, we lost everything / [...] Each day at dawn, leaving my dwelling / I shall go to my orchard, the farmyard and the grain fields: / Perhaps among these joys and occupations / I shall forget for awhile the sad partitions].

The descriptive poem was to be, in a sense, a recipe for deliverance from ill-fortune, for a spiritual image of a Pole, but also a recipe which prescribed medicine that was pleasant, effective and accessible to all.

Our descriptive agricultural poem reflected the country's economic structure, dominated by farming, and the state of landed gentry possession. It was thus a reflection of what, at the beginning of the 19th century, was seen as everyday social experience: life in the countryside, contact with the land based on the ownership of at least one village. The poem, therefore, described a reality well known and was, in fact, addressed to small "gentlemen farmers," all of whom were heroes of the poem, and every village described in it was a possible scene of action. For, every village could be the glorified *campania felix*, a place of happy seclusion, honest work and a source of national prosperity. In the descriptive poem, the positive model of man is a moderately wealthy country squire for whom his land is not a source of profit, but a place where farming, its pleasures, and rustic virtues are pursued. Behind this model, as emphasized by Koźmian, is the Virgilian ideal of mediocrity ("Laud great property but remain on small"), and the old Polish tradition, of which the most eminent poet—Kochanowski, a farming gentleman himself—advocated the virtue of being content with modest requirements, and in which every warrior was a Cincinnatus who, in peace time, took to the plough. In this way the descriptive poem embarked upon a new interpretation of the ideological traditions of old Poland, and its prevailing ideal of personality, while stressing morality of farming, ethos of work and the measure of human

freedom linked with them. Aimed towards the same objective were efforts of the contemporary theoretician of rustic idyll and the discoverer of idyllic elements in the literature of Polish Renaissance and Baroque—Kazimierz Brodziński. Thanks to such interpretative endeavours, a new hero of old Poland—a country squire and farmer—began to emerge side by side with a warrior.

Hence, among the many faces of the narrator which appear in *Ziemiaństwo polskie* very frequent is that of a good husbandman, lord of the manor who practices the virtue of mediocrity. He is no longer a country squire but simply a farmer. For Koźmian and also for other authors (K. Tymowski, *Dumania wieśniaka—Meditations of a Farmer*), a farmer is a man who follows a rustic mode of life and his *habitat* is the village. Thus, the term is applied to both, the lord of the manor and the peasant. Within this rustic mode of expression, Koźmian sought therefore to eliminate all realities which could destroy the bucolic image of the life of a *l'homme des champs*. The squire's domicile was thus never called the manor but a cottage, and was invariably placed in a typically rustic scenery. Also its inhabitant had simple pastoral tastes and predilections, often openly stating what he would like to do and to look at. So, he would like to sit in front of his cottage and look at "playful lambs jumping beside their mothers," and, delighted with such a "graceful sight," he would indulge in gently philosophizing about human happiness and the golden age, just as all wise farmers would do, sitting and meditating on the porch. Such declarations were of a rather important character. Their authors intended to reveal such norms of beauty which would be easily discernible, and in which rustic simplicity would be not only necessary and useful but also full of aesthetic charm. But this beauty of simplicity must be perceived and in this respect the descriptive poem was a lesson in shaping the tastes.

The farmer in Koźmian's poem has not only an eye of an aesthete who discovers beauty in simplicity but also a moral instinct, a virtue without which one could not become a farmer. Koźmian, C. Godebski in his *Listy ze wsi (Letters from the Village)*, and others readily painted a satirical picture of a cloyed dandy or a bored society lady who descend upon a quiet village scorning at the simple pleasures of country life. The rustic from the descriptive poem is

a man of high morals, internal harmony, a wise Epicurean reconciled with his destiny. As Koźmian sententiously stated: „Zgodzisz się z wiejskim życiem, gdy zgodzisz się z sobą” (You shall be reconciled with rural life when you become reconciled with yourself). Thus it was a question not only of setting a moral contrast between town and village, between cultures of unequal ethical values, which was accepted almost as a binding norm in Polish literature of those days. Koźmian fought for an ethical image of a gentleman-farmer, a positive hero of the time who should suffer neither from a complex of a simpleton evicted from urban paradise nor from post-partition neurosis of a Pole condemned to rustic existence. Koźmian admits that he started to work on his poem only when „zepchniętym z politycznego życia do nieczynności nic nie zostało, jak wieś i rola” (those driven out of political life into inactivity, had nothing left but village and work on land), but he also uses all possible arguments, of ideological and aesthetic nature, to present compulsion as privilege and a sorrowful situation as one radiant with rustic happiness.

Hedonism is a major element of the set of values proposed by the descriptive poem. Life in the countryside has been so arranged that smiling faces surround a man on all sides and his toils are remunerated with pleasures. Nothing stands in the way of such life, if the farmer is a philosopher of mediocrity “reconciled with himself,” a tiller of the land and an accomplished naturalist who knows all about the course of nature and soil cultivation, a sagacious master who respects the peasants, and, finally, a hedonist who can make good use of the wealth of rustic existence. It is precisely the joys and pleasures of village life which are an essential element of the postulated vision of the world (Koźmian devotes to them the whole Song IV). Their role in the rural mode of living could be compared to the descriptions of nature with which it was advised to enliven the dryness of the agricultural theme in didactic poems. Nevertheless, there too, the fun is also didactic. For the descriptive poem strove to teach the culture of rural entertainment and to refute the ingrained prejudices about alleged monotony of country life. Thus, aside from picturing rural customs, meanders, hunts, Koźmian mentioned also books as a farmer’s favourable pastime. It therefore appears that the narrator of the *Ziemiaństwo* is not

really just “anyone” but a person who could combine nature with culture and transform a country cottage into a hospitable retreat for the great spirits of mankind. The pleasures of a humanist significantly supplement the portrait of a country squire, depicting him as a skilled farmer, learned naturalist and, partly, a philosopher of nature. Thanks to an extensive library the formula of his humanity has become much richer and the village—that happy abode—has ceased to have the character of a simplified rustic idyll.

But, in the descriptive poem not only the specific problem of enjoyable life outlines the horizons of happiness. It deals also with political hedonism embracing social and national entity. The authors appointed the village as the forge of national prosperity which can lift up the war-tormented country. This point has been frequently confirmed in a variety of ways; especially in *Ziemiaństwo*: „Gdzie szczęśliwe są wioski, tam i kraj szczęśliwy” (That is a happy country where the village is happy), or „Ty ziemię orz lemieszem, ty sącz na nią zdroje, / To twój kunszt, to twój warsztat, to kopalnie twoje” (Plough the soil and moisten it with stream waters, / It’s your art, your workshop and your mines’ riches).

The revived agriculture is the most fundamental of the “gifts of peace”, which must be deeply cherished, argued Koźmian who treated the Congress Kingdom as a model of ideal economy of a country endowed with peace. Of equal importance for the authors of descriptive poems were the social benefits of well developed agriculture. They were to help resolve the dramatic controversy between degradation and freedom, the lord of the manor and the peasant, poverty and affluence. The drastic social situation of the peasantry was so strongly revealed in 18th-century political journalism that it could not but become the basic issue for the authors of didactic poems. They were also fully aware that a free peasant works better and more efficiently. Nonetheless, the agricultural poems were rather cautious in advocating a new rural order. Such order into the unstable moral and social structure should—they claimed—be introduced by the lord of the manor, the father of his subjects and their righteous judge. The patriarchal system of relationships between the squire and the peasants seemed to Koźmian to be not only rooted in Polish traditions and strongly entrenched customs, but also aesthetically appealing. For, he argued, it restores the importance

and the dignity of farm works, giving them the character of august rites in tribute to Ceres, Flora and Pomona, of a grand spectacle of joyous labour.

The solemnity of style, evident especially on the most outstanding Polish descriptive poem by Kajetan Koźmian, is at the same time an artistic vision of such an organization of the rural world which would eliminate all its too glaring realities, triviality and vulgarity usually linked with the agricultural theme. Koźmian's description is not only selective but uses a language which is harmoniously blended with this lofty vision. The very use of adjuncts indicates that we are in a circle of highly commendable moral and aesthetic values: the milkmaids are good looking, the youth—comely, the gardener—diligent a.s.o. This aesthetic trend is even more clearly evident in the periphrase which strips objects and phenomena of their literal meaning and commonplaceness. It is not simply a question of changing a horse into a “four-legged wind,” but of ingeniously constructed and accumulated paraphrases which evoke associations rooted in rich cultural traditions. Such is the manner of writing about domestic fowl, hens and geese—invariably described as the “snow white” ranks of Capitolian sentry—and their swimming in the pond as “ploughing the waters crystal bright.” All domestic chores and work in the yard, so solicitously listed by Koźmian that they could be called farm vossism, are bereft of the mark of genre and maximally generalized, despite a very scrupulous enumeration of details. Labouring in this aesthetically distilled world are not peasants but ploughmen, mowers and rustics—a harmonious mixture of a gentleman-farmer and a peasant. The intention behind such language and style manipulations was not to distort reality. It was a question of Classicist nobilitation of the theme of work, of the dignity of the plough and harrow, of an aesthetic equivalent of the ancient ethos of farming pursuits, and finally one of didactics which was to teach not by satire but by presenting positive examples of beautiful life and by wise moral instruction. Hence, another prominent feature of Koźmian's style are aphorisms, maxims and proverbs. His work is a peculiar book of rustic and moral wisdoms which define the ethical horizon not only of the plot's positive hero but also the ethos of a contemporary Pole generally: a worshipper of peace, devoted to work and one who appreciates his own and national

benefits. The Classicist descriptive poem painted a most comprehensive and harmonious vision of a Polish entity permeated with an idea not, hitherto, strongly ingrained in the collective mentality. It also proposed its own set of values which were to guide the Poles' collective effort onto a sphere different from resort to arms. It marked the beginning of a Polish epos of work.

Transl. by *Leon Sz wajcer*