

Polonia – National Allegory as a Place of Memory to 19th Century Polish Painting

Katharina Ute Mann



¹ A. Stercken, *Enthüllung der Helvetia. Die Sprache der Staatspersonifikation im 19. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 1998, p. 42.

² S. Krasa-Florian, *Die Allegorie der Austria. Die Entstehung des Gesamtstaatsgedankens in der österreich-ungarischen Monarchie und die bildende Kunst*, Wien 2007, p. 15.

³ A. Strecken, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

Polonia as a place of memory

My thesis, titled “Polonia – National Allegory as a Place of Memory to 19th Century Polish Painting”, analyses patriotic pieces of art and their creators to give a self-reflective view of a non-sovereign state. In focus in this study are historical and fictional figures that were used by Polish artists to influence the viewer emotionally. In connection with this I analyse representations of Polonia that were constructed after the division of Poland and that had to be adapted as their role changed.

These depictions offer a wide spectrum of representation between two special forms: from “dead Polonia” to “crowned Polonia”; as such, I also investigate “specific meanings and impression dimensions”¹. In particular, I analyse depictions of Polonia during the division of Poland with public appeal orientation: those that do not primarily represent the state but are designed to touch viewers emotionally and therefore sensitise them to Poland’s situation. In other European states we can also see a change in how national allegories of the 19th century were visualised – where the choice and vividness of the attributes were less important than their emotionality².

This artistic strategy deviates strongly from how political figures were originally represented; instead they appear in a new, emotional form, making them examples of a shift towards a new iconography of mood and expression³. This innovative idea was spread by artists to the Polish national allegory, resulting in some representations of Polonia that contained other, non-traditional figures. This complicates the identification of such works. For example, in some representations in the underworld, Polonia was substituted for the mythical nymph Eurydice; in others, the dead Polonia is visualised through the Polish legend of



il. 1 Unknown author, lithograph for a calendar Merry Christmas and a happy New Year wishes Jan Łapka, wholesale trade and butcher's shop, 1919, 49 x 38,3, Poster Museum Wilanów, Warsaw



⁴ K. U. Mann, *Polonia – Eine Nationalallegorie als Erinnerungsort in der polnischen Malerei des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Kraków 2013, p. 92.

⁵ *Polonia Polonia* [exhibition cat.], koncepcja, scenariusz A. Rottenberg, red. J. Chrzanowska-Pieńkos, 23 V – 2 VII 2000, Zachęta, Warszawa 2000, p. 9.

⁶ P. Nora, *Wie läßt sich heute eine Geschichte Frankreichs schreiben?*, [in:] *Erinnerungsorte Frankreichs*, Hrsg. idem, Vorw. E. François, München 2005, p. 19.

⁷ P. Ricoeur, *Gedächtnis, Geschichte, Vergessen*, Übers. H.-D. Gondek, München 2004, p. 619.

Ellenai. Importantly, the painter Jacek Malczewski (1854–1929) used such allegories during the First World War, when he replaced Polonia with mythological figures as a means of criticising the situation at the time⁴.

In addition to the works of Malczewski, I analysed visualisations of Polonia by Jan Matejko, Stanisław Wyspiański and Artur Grottger, among other Polish artists. Through this analysis it became clear how many different types of national allegory existed and which were particularly well suited to the development of collective memory.

Pierre Nora

Representations of Polonia made after the division of Poland can be categorized into three principal themes: the defeat of Poland, the martyrdom of Polonia and the hope of freedom⁵. In these instances, the artists used new and old codes to make it easier for the viewer to identify the Polonia theme. However, it must be pointed out that some motives were used ambivalently, with fluid borders between the different guises and differing degrees of intensity. In particular, this problem is evident in the representation of “Polonia in chains”, which was used often to illustrate the subjugation of Poland. At the same time, the artists wanted to demonstrate the Poles’ fighting spirit, so Polonia was shown trying to throw off her chains.

Despite some correspondence between analogue models of other national allegories, a separate and distinct tradition developed in Poland as a reaction to the contemporary situation – Polish messianism had a strong influence.

My main argument – that Polonia became a place of memory in the 19th century – is based primarily on Pierre Nora’s development of a new approach to historical consideration, which I applied to Polish paintings and their creators.

His idea, “*lieux de mémoire*”, was outlined in the multi-volume publication *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984–1992), in which he selected essays based not on geographical places – with which the collective associates a historical incident – but on recollection and even the political abuse of history in the present. His work focuses not on the traditional reproduction of the historical actions that make up facts but on their interpretation and reconstruction. To do this the publisher selected articles in which a collective memory and identity of France are reflected and, at the same time, their reception is analysed. Among them are themes such as La Marseillaise, the Tour de France and Jeanne d’Arc. Nora makes this clear in his introduction, where he explains that for a collective the future is not concrete, meaning that it must find its identity in the past. Therefore, we must understand that Nora speaks not about historical truth but about history as a necessity for a nation to form its identity⁶.

Nora’s idea about places of memory, as Paul Ricoeur explains, comes from “a historiographical awareness”⁷. This results from the reflection

that there is a breach between memory and history, as well as a loss of our memory of history⁸.



⁸ *Ibidem*.

Examples

Despite the huge popularity of the national allegory, it should be stressed that Polonia is an atypical place of memory that is not based on its own biography – as is, for example, Jeanne d'Arc – but is created by associations, whether through Christian iconography or the biographies of other people, so that the viewer develops the idea of a non-existent state. This is particularly evident in representations of Polonia that discuss the martyrdom of the Polish population, such as the striking Christ-Polonia figure used by Mickiewicz to illustrate his theory that Poland was Christ of European nations. One of the most impressive versions of the Christ-Polonia figure was made by Ignacy Gierdziejewski in around 1854⁹. The graphic *Begging the Queen of the Crown for a Free Poland* (ill. 2) shows a special hybrid in the lower edge of his bipartite composition that joins the Polish national allegory and Christ. The figure sits at the foot of a rock, surrounded by dead soldiers and discarded weapons. Above the scene ecclesiastical dignitaries float around the Madonna with the infant Jesus, to whom they turn Polonia's request. This special Polonia figure attempts to make clear to the recipient the fusion of the Polish national allegory, the pain of Christus passus and the martyrdom of the Polish nation, according to Mickiewicz's model. Mickiewicz's idea for the function of the Christ-Polonia figure is explained to us in Maria Janion's statement about the messianism:

Silnie rozwinięta w polskim romantyzmie i odznaczająca się wielką trwałością topika masjanistyczna posuwała się do porównywania, a nawet utożsamiania cierpień Polski z cierpieniem Chrystusa. Polska, jak wiadomo, miała być Chrystusem narodów. W widzeniu księdza Piotra w III części *Dziadów* Mickiewicz rozbudował dokładną analogię między męczeństwem i śmiercią Chrystusa a ukrzyżowaniem i skonem narodu polskiego¹⁰.

W obrębie mesjanizmu dokonana się sekularyzacja metafory ukrzyżowania. Religia wprzęgnięta została w służbę sprawy narodowej, polityka faktycznie zapanowała nad religią¹¹.

This forceful comment by Janion that Mickiewicz's messianism was misused in propaganda, particularly after sovereignty had been regained (and not only in Poland), emphasises the status of the Christ-Polonia figure as a place of memory for the contemporary situation in Poland and for the wish of the population to give meaning to their pain and express their hope of redemption¹².

A place of memory is characterised by its popularity, which develops when it is reproduced by mass media. This underpins its function as a creator of collective memory by giving a new interpretation of historical

⁹ *Historia i Polonia* [exhibition cat.], red. E. Zapała, M. Zarnowska-Maciągowska, 29 IX 2009 – 3 I 2010, Muzeum Narodowe, Kielce 2009, p. 204.

¹⁰ M. Janion, *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury*, Kraków 2007, p. 275.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 278.

¹² *Historia i Polonia...*, p. 269.

il. 2 Ignacy Gierdziejewski, *Begging the Queen of the Crown for a Free Poland*, around 1854, 76,5 x 49,5, National Museum Warsaw



incidents – only through widespread distribution can it be guaranteed to have a sustainable influence on the memory of a nation. To illustrate this, consider a lithograph intended for a calendar (ill. 1) that was made in around 1919. This graphic does not demonstrate a high level of art; however, through it I can indicate the structure of standardised memory aids that creators used, for example, to present a new, summarised picture of 123 years of foreign rule in Poland. For this reason, I chose to consider such representations separately.

The colour lithograph shows a half-naked, crucified Polonia that is being attacked by three dark birds of prey. At the top of the wooden cross is the inscription “*Finis Polonia 1795, 1831, 1863,*” which indicated the three great Polish uprisings. Under this cross, which stands on a small hill, the artist placed a three-part coat of arms of the January Uprising comprising the White Eagle of Poland, Vytis of Lithuania (a knight on horseback holding a sword and shield) and Archangel Michael of Ruthenia. Below that winds a banner with the words “God redeems Poland”. To the right and the left of the coat of arms the artist wrote in red letters against the pale green background of the hill “And from your blood the avengers of this ground will rise”. Behind the hill we can see those who blood was shed: dead, unarmed men, women and children. Deeper within the picture the artist shows a burning town, a cannon and three charging soldiers with spiked helmets. Two male figures flank the right and left edges of this illustration: on the right a Cracow farmer in national costume holding a scythe and an axe, and on the left a man in the uniform of the organization Sokoł, who holds a gun with mounted bayonet and a standard showing the Sokoł motto: “With the forehead to the nation – with the claws against the enemy.” As such, this lithograph gives a very pithy depiction of the situation in Poland before 1918, the uprisings, and the pain of the Polish population. However, it is important to note here that this crucified Christ-Polonia figure was used as part advertisement, part greetings card, as can be seen from the text in the upper-right corner: “Merry Christmas and a happy New Year wishes Jan Łapka, wholesale trade and butcher’s shop.” In a similarly jarring contrast to the illustration, the words “made in the USA” highlight that this is an advertisement for an American butcher’s shop in Cicero, Illinois.

As a calendar decoration this lithograph would have been seen by the emigrant recipient for a whole year; however, the theme was no longer the motivation for the viewer – instead, this had become an illustration of Polishness. The messianic representation of the crucified Polonia had been established firmly in the collective memory of Poles, such that this particular client, together with the artist, decided that this visualisation was a suitable representation of Polishness, even in America. It is remarkable that the artist chose without any inhibitions the crucifixion of Polonia as the main motive for an advertisement for a butcher’s shop, in spite of the sacredness of this place of memory. This indicates that this depiction of Polonia had lost its emotionality on account of the huge number of reproductions made – it had been reduced to an analogous reminding function, and collective memory was steered primarily by standardised memory aids.

Here we can see clearly the negative side of the transformation of Polonia to a place of memory: the misuse of the Christ-Polonia figure in an advertisement. At the same time, it also becomes clear that the analogy between the crucified Polonia and the pain of Poland, as propagated in non-art media, was very important for the popularisation of the figure. However, this bizarre connection between the calendar representation of

 ¹³ K. U. Mann, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

Polonia and the American butcher's shop is genuinely distressing; it can only be explained by the fact that the Christ-Polonia figure had become a part of the Polish art memory of the 19th century. This could be compared with Aby Warburg's idea of Pathos Formula. On the other hand, it would seem that the dramatic link between the figure and the pain of the Poles had lost its analogous meaning in America and, therefore, that the Christ-Polonia figure was no longer being used as a commentator of current events and had instead become a conventional synonym.

Final remarks

Polish messianism in particular marked the conversion of Polonia to a place of memory and had a considerable influence on her popularity. It is notable that the popularisation of Polonia occurred in the non-art media, while she was created in her different versions through the medium of art. Non-art media are characterized by simplification and general legibility that can be understood by everyone. Conversely, art requires an accordingly well-educated recipient who has the ability to interpret the work and the figures therein. The risk of interpreting these allegories incorrectly was very high in the 19th century because the artists considered decided against a conventional code; this led to general debate on the usefulness of allegories. The rejection of a specific code allowed to artists to develop more individual and emotional forms of Polonia; however, this also necessitated a more educated viewer.

The original function and visualisation of Polonia as a purely representation figure before the division of Poland was changed dramatically: she no longer represented only the political-physical nature of the state, but instead reflected the national self-image. This allowed her to gain widespread acceptance by the population, something that can be proved by the numerous inexpensive and transferable reproductions that were made. Her presence in the environment of the recipient did not take place initially in the public cityscape; instead, this occurred at home in "private spaces"¹³.

Another irregularity is the fact that Polonia was propagated in the 19th century primarily through fine art, and particularly through painting and illustration, and much less through the written word. Artists developed for themselves their own Pathos Formula, which emphasized the universal validity of different representations of Polonia types, even in other states. They also tried to make it easier to identify with Polonia, as well as for her to be absorbed into the collective memory of Poles. Artists used these mechanisms to simply transform aesthetic objects to a place of memory that supported their own national identity. Therefore, such pieces of art can be separated unequivocally from other objects that are also places of memory because with everyday objects the viewer applies historical awareness of life and other sentiments that vary from recipient to recipient. On the other hand, a piece of art or an illustrated figure is constructed by the artist in such a way that the viewer largely

accepts it and absorbs it into his or her collective memory fund. For this, artists created different effects, one of which is Pathos Formula, which supports legibility by using gestures and facial expressions. Theme associations and the choice of guises also belong to this memory fund. However, these analogous relations are no guarantor of success: it is only in the second phase of reflection that it becomes clear whether a group of recipients is ready to accept this representation and add it to their memory fund. Here it becomes clear that *Polonia* works as a (national) allegory as well as a place of memory, especially if her visualisation is based on a conventional code.

The popularity of *Polonia* and her acceptance by recipients in the past is in stark contrast with today, where the Polish national allegory is barely visible. This may be explained by *Polonia*'s closeness to Polish messianism, which is also no longer present in the collective memory of Poles, unlike before the First World War. The function of *Polonia* in art and non-art media must also be valued differently. The popularisation of *Polonia* is assured by the conventional code and non-art media, but the unconventionality and creativity of fine art permits the development of new representations. By merging *Polonia* with other figures, fine art can represent *Polonia* in ways and popularise figures that were normally not accepted by recipients. Historical facts are victims not only of the desire to create a functional idea of the past with its relation to the present but also of places of memory themselves. Besides the political misuse of places of memory, we can also observe the phenomenon of oblivion. The national allegory of *Polonia*, which was used only in times of crisis, is perhaps the best example of this: today, she has fallen into oblivion while other national figures, such as the fool *Stańczyk*, are still reproduced¹⁴.



¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 223.

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Summary

KATHARINA UTE MANN/ Polonia – national allegory as a place of memory in 19th century Polish painting

The article first of all discusses the ways in which the artists – after the Polish state had lost its sovereignty – were engaged in bringing back the former grandness of the nation and country, and the way they awoke the state rebirth. The task was hindered by the annexationists' policy, which – especially after the January Uprising – introduced intensive Russification or Germanisation by banning the use of Polish language in schools.

Polonia, as an allegory of the enslaved nation, is present not only in Jan Matejko's works. Thanks to complexity of the symbolic contents and various pictorial instances in different paintings this allegory implies on us a careful look at the compound and multi-layered mechanisms of creation which the artists reached out for in order to bring about the desired effects. In their works they employed this amazing figure as the centre of national identification, which was capable of producing deep impression on the audience and allowed the people to build permanent, collective, national memory. This process along with the artists' operations were best seen in extremely opposite approaches to Polonia as the Dead Polonia and the Crowned Polonia. These images moved the viewers in many different ways acting on them according to the artists' intention. The author of the article is convinced that the artists not only cherished the memory and built the national awareness, but also directed or even manipulated both of them.

The figure of Polonia is not deprived of her European context, which the author has taken into consideration together with analogous personifications, to name but Marianne or Germania. With this background, and by contrast, Polonia's individuality has been revealed. Polish Messianism applied on its banner Adam Mickiewicz's phrase "Poland the Christ of Nations" adding to the figure of Polonia a mark of martyrological beauty, and ascribing to it the roles of a redeemer and a leader of the enslaved nations on their road to political and social liberation. This martyrological aspect echoed most and endowed Polonia with a character of "a place of memory".

Streszczenie

KATHARINA UTE MANN/ Polonia – alegoria narodowa jako miejsce pamięci w XIX-wiecznym malarstwie polskim

W artykule omówiony został głównie problem sposobu, w jaki artyści – po utracie przez Rzeczpospolitą Polską suwerenności – przypominali w swych dziełach dawną wielkość narodu i państwa oraz budzili nadzieje na tego państwa odrodzenie. Zadanie to utrudniała polityka zaborców, którzy – zwłaszcza po powstaniu styczniowym – prowadzili intensywną rusyfikację lub germanizację, zakazując używania języka polskiego w szkołach.

Polonia, jako alegoria zniewolonego narodu, obecna jest nie tylko w dziełach Jana Matejki. Dzięki bogactwu symbolicznej treści i wielorakim malarskim konkretyzacji w różnych obrazach skłania ona do uważnego spojrzenia na złożone i wielowarstwowe mechanizmy twórcze, po które sięgnęli artyści w celu uzyskania odpowiedniego efektu. Wykorzystali oni w swych dziełach tę niezwykłą postać jako centrum narodowej identyfikacji, władne wyrzeć mocne wrażenie na odbiorcy i budować trwałą, zbiorową, narodową pamięć. Proces ten i omawiane zabiegi najlepiej widoczne są w biegunowych, skrajnie opozycyjnych ujęciach Polonii: jako Martwej oraz jako Ukoronowanej. Wizerunki te poruszają widza na różne sposoby, działając nań zgodnie z intencjami artysty. Autorka jest przekonana, że twórcy nie tylko pielęgowali pamięć i budowali narodową świadomość, lecz także nimi kierowali, a nawet manipulowali.

Postaci Polonii nie brak europejskiego kontekstu, który pisząca uwzględniła, biorąc pod uwagę analogiczne personifikacje, takie jak Marianna czy Germania. Na tym tle, przez kontrast, uwydatnia się swoistość polskiej alegorii. Narodowy mesjanizm wypisał na sztandarze hasło Adama Mickiewicza: „Polska Chrystusem narodów”, nadając tym samym figurze Polonii martyrologiczne piętno, a także przypisując jej rolę odkupicielską i przewodnią dla zniewolonych narodów w ich drodze do odrodzenia politycznego i społecznego. To właśnie martyrologiczny aspekt wywołał w kraju największy oddźwięk i sprawił, że Polonia przybrała charakter „miejsca pamięci”.