

# The Chivalric Myth in the Art of Jacek Malczewski, Stanisław Wyspiański, and Witold Wojtkiewicz

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The concept of chivalry, with its code of exemplary behavior based on the ideals of perfection and internal harmony, has always been a significant element in European culture. The knight's most important, and appropriate, occupation was to fight for truth and justice, always with regard for the rules of the code and respect for the dignity of his enemy. The ideal knight was courageous, faithful, honest, polite, and generous, but at the same time he was expected to avenge even the slightest insult to his honor. A knight's transgression of the code of chivalry would bring him infamy, which could only be erased by death. The knight's brutality on the battlefield was softened by his love for a chosen woman, which he proved through courageous deeds and participation in noble competition. The concept of chivalry encompassed not only the knight himself, but the armor he wore, the weapons he carried, his horse (so important in battle), the castle he inhabited, the tournaments in which he participated, the emblems that distinguished him from all others (his coat of arms), and the etiquette that defined his position and behavior.

At the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, Europe witnessed a revival of interest in the code of chivalry and the knight as a model of personal behavior worthy of imitation.<sup>1</sup> This reborn chivalry functioned in European culture as a myth that had both a social and a political character.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, it was the manifestation of the longing of various peoples for a respectable national history and for national heroes. On the other hand, in the nineteenth century, the chivalrous model underwent a metamorphosis that enabled the notions of honor, service, and exemplary behavior to be used in efforts to reshape the public's attitudes and behavior. Particularly in Poland, a country deprived of independence, the chivalric myth was pressed into service for political, social, and didactic purposes. In this revival, the understanding of what constituted Poland's knightly past was not limited to the glorious deeds of the Piasts (Poland's first royal dynasty). The concept was extended to include events up to the end of the seventeenth century when, in the face of a growing Turkish threat, the Poles rose up in defense of their territories and the Catholic faith, giving rise to the idea of Poland as the "bulwark of Christianity" and the Polish nobleman as "Miles Christianus," or the Christian soldier.

Out of the rich ground of the chivalric myth and under the influence of the political situation, Polish writers and artists created two knightly models: the hero of the courtly romance was changed into a

soldier who must choose between personal happiness at the side of his beloved and his obligation to sacrifice his life for his homeland, and the historic Polish knight-warrior became the contemporary knight-citizen-patriot. As Witold Gombrowicz would later say, "A Pole is either a romantic son of defeat or a virtuous son of Poland."<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the literature, historiography, and art of the *Młoda Polska* period, knightly models, including kings and hetmans, are depicted in the most exciting moments of Poland's history. These colorful stories of courage, devotion, faith, and loyalty are interlaced with the thread of love. But this love is not the Ovidian *ars amanti* but rather a dramatic love, torn between personal happiness and public duty. The same choice faces both Polish monarchs and Polish insurgents, those participants in the successive national uprisings that characterized the Poles' most recent history (see figs. 1-4).

For the creators of the *Młoda Polska* movement, the present was what counted, and they were open to new ways of perceiving and understanding it as they tried to liberate themselves from the nineteenth-century manner of thinking and feeling. This intellectual ferment, however, while it changed the way one spoke of, wrote about, or painted the past, did not preclude these artists' interest in the nation's history. The Polish spirit continued to be fueled by the inspiration provided by images from the mythological past. These images were fixed in the Polish mind, and their interpretations were confined within intransgressible boundaries. It was as if the past were carved in granite: the images could be polished but their basic configurations could not easily be changed.

The most notable painters of the period, Jacek Malczewski, Stanisław Wyspiański, and Witold Wojtkiewicz, lived in Cracow. There they wandered between the Wawel Hill and the Mounds of the three national heroes, the great leader Tadeusz Kościuszko and the legendary figures Krak and Wanda; they walked in the cloisters of medieval monasteries and the halls of the city's great museums, full of blackened family portraits and patriotic prints; and their hearts and imaginations were filled with visions that had not lost their suggestive power. Throughout the years of captivity, Poland had endured, and the ancient patterns of behavior and the ancient myths thus retained their validity. The artists found themselves caught between two worlds, the knightly world of their ancient Sarmatian ancestors<sup>4</sup> and the world of the present, stamped with the image of the approaching twentieth century. In the name

of the present, many painters trespassed on the territory formerly reserved for literary bards and national prophets, each bringing to the past his own "historical sense."

Jacek Malczewski saw the past less in terms of subjects and plots and more in terms of ideas and philosophies. The sources for many of the symbols in Malczewski's paintings are to be found in the constellation of meanings traditionally accepted by European culture, which reflect the national mythology and both European and Polish history. The figures of knights and their attributes, armor, weapons, leopard skins, medieval castles, etc., are symbols which have an "overt meaning,"<sup>5</sup> and it is not difficult to connect them to the national martyrology, the history of the motherland, or the defense of the universal notions of freedom, truth, and beauty. However, to date, the analysis of form and content in Malczewski's work has not made clear the sources from which the artist derived his personal artistic world, and an understanding of these sources is essential if we are to fully comprehend his works. It seems clear that Malczewski derived the formula for his "world" from the spirit of Romanticism, with its unusual compositional arrangements, intriguing coloration, models of peculiar beauty or ugliness, and refined scenery.

Leaving aside the differences between a literary work and a painting, Malczewski's art, in its density and intensification of symbols, in its atmosphere of ambiguity and hidden threat, is similar to the modern "gothic" horror novel. In building his artistic visions, Malczewski conformed, to some extent, to the rules that govern this genre, with its supernatural elements and sense of horror, its inexplicable phenomena and actions, its ominous and mysterious atmosphere. The mood of such a novel is achieved by introducing signs and symbols from the world of the supernatural into everyday reality or by presenting everyday events in unusual contexts. The plot of the gothic novel exists on two levels: the human drama being contrasted against a fantastic background, usually an idyllic landscape or medieval castle. In the gothic novel, man battles against the perversity of fate, whereby his destiny is dependent upon incomprehensible, supernatural, even cruel forces. An inexorable chain of events forces him to pose ultimate questions in dealing with this destiny.

In Malczewski's world, as in the gothic novel, unusual, supernatural events occur and mysterious elements are introduced, creating an atmosphere of tension, of lurking danger. Devils, harpies, chimeras, phantoms, satyrs, muses, angels, winged

horses, and saints appear as symbols of mysterious forces. The unusual attire of the human figures—soldiers' uniforms, knight's armor, the costume of the court jester, the clothes typical of the ancient nobility—as well as the unusual objects, birds, animals, insects, and flowers, all add to the sense of unreality.

The key position in Malczewski's vision is held by the landscape, which provides a setting appropriate for his scenes of suffering and drama. The artist found no aesthetic satisfaction in the landscape as a landscape, believing instead that the function of the landscape was to provide an appropriate setting. In a letter from Greece to a friend, he wrote:

. . . it surprises you, perhaps, that from this classical land, that trodding the ground of the harmoniously shaped gods, that from the middle of holy groves and sunny acropolises, I am sending you all these complaints and sufferings. What can I do, though? I cannot help it; perhaps I am some sort of national moan, made flesh and doomed to a life full of sorrow and lamentations.<sup>6</sup>

One could guess that in Malczewski's paintings the landscape serves the same purpose as it does in the novels of Witold Gombrowicz, that is,

"to hide something else . . . what? Whatever sense . . . of war, revolution, violence, promiscuity, poverty, despair, hope, flight, fury, shout, murder, captivity, infamy, death, curse, or blessing . . . Whatever, I am saying, the sense was too feeble to pierce through the crystal of this idyll, and thus left this obsolete, sweet little view untouched, though it is now only a facade . . ."<sup>7</sup>

A multitude of meaningful motifs of gothic origin emanate from Malczewski's paintings: evil hidden in beauty, good carried by hideousness, insanity, moans of the soul, unsolvable situations, courage and fear, sin and innocence, illness and death. When I say that Malczewski's painting is only partially subordinate to the rules governing the gothic novel, I mean that the world constructed by the painter is not limited to presenting abstract situations; it also evidences an unusually extensive autobiographical context. In *Melancholia* (*Melancholy*) (cat. no. 17); *Błędne koło* (*The Vicious Circle*); *Inspiracja malarza* (*The Painter's Inspiration*); in the cycles such as *Moje życie* (*My Life*) (see cat. nos. 29, 30, and 31); and in scores of self-portraits (see cat. nos. 27 and 32), Malczewski is speaking of his won battles with adversity, of his own fate being threatened by evil, of the hidden forces that direct the creative process. By contemplating his own fate, he forces us to look into the future, to confront our own destiny. In making the artist the hero of his paintings, Malczewski embraced ideas about the significance and

function of the work of art and about the artist's role in society that have their roots in the Romantic era. His powerful visions constitute one of the most vigorous links in the chain of Polish culture, conveying into our life today ideas born in the epoch of Romanticism.

Stanisław Wyspiański, in his dramas, *Wesele* (*The Wedding*), *Acropolis*, *Wyzwolenie* (*Liberation*), and *Bolesław Śmiały* (*Bolesław the Bold*) calls forth a knightly past that might be reassuring and might inspire patriotic deeds but, one which could also turn into a hollow formality, pulled from the storehouse of history.

Wyspiański's artistic passion centered on the Wawel Hill and what that national monument meant in terms of the myth of a knightly past. This meaning was most suggestively expressed in the words of the Romantic poet Zygmunt Krasiński:

With all my soul, I plunged into the past whose symbols towered before me in the arabesques, in the fantastic arcades and naves of the Gothic cathedral. Together with me, look at the knights who rise from their tombs, at kings elected by the nation who approach the altar, sinking to their knees to receive the Lord's unction! All of Old Poland has risen to my voice: Here she is! Here she is! She! Look how great, how magnificent, sparkling with arms, clamorous with shouts, harmonious with songs — a shield against the infidels, protecting Europe in a gigantic struggle, from the gates of Constantinople to the walls of Vienna.<sup>8</sup>

His fascination with the legend of the sleeping knights,<sup>9</sup> which had its origins in Polish folktales, found expression both in Wyspiański's literary works and his visual art. These lines from *Bolesław the Bold* are typical:

They would tell me long ago that somewhere in the Carpathians the king, Bolesław Chrobry, and his knights with their horses and armor are asleep in caves near the subterranean woods.<sup>10</sup>

In various versions of the legend, the symbolic shelter of Bolesław's sleeping knights is either the mountains or the dungeons of the Wawel, where they wait in an impenetrable wilderness or in the crypt of the Wawel Cathedral for Poland to call them to battle for her freedom. The mountains and the Wawel Hill, the national Pantheon, become symbols of a huge power asleep in the nation, which, if awakened, would strike a blow against those who keep the nation captive. In another work, the knights are called to action: "Take up your arms, mount your horses, and let the battle begin."<sup>11</sup>

The motifs of sleep and awakening are common in all of Wyspiański's art. Good examples are the three stained-glass windows that he designed for Wawel Cathe-

dral. Created in 1900-02, the cartoons for the windows present two rulers, Kazimierz Wielki (Casimir the Great) and Henryk Pobożny (Henry the Pious), and the bishop saint, Stanisław Szczepanow (see fig. 5 a-c). For Wyspiański the notions of sleeping and awaking had very definite connotations. One condition did not necessarily follow the other; one may stay asleep for good. Sleep is a numbness that leads to the inability to act and, thence, to death. Awakening is a resurrection to action, a rebirth of new forces and of life. The crypt of the cathedral represents the domain of sleep and death, but Wyspiański's placement of his images in the sanctuary of the cathedral establishes it as the domain of awakening to life. The images themselves, suggestive, monumentalized forms of heroic figures, are ambivalent in meaning. They are not idealized figures but petrifying cadavers in musty royal garments and rotten coffins. Did Wyspiański, by placing these figures in the symbolic sphere of Wawel Cathedral, mean to wake them? To this question there is no unanimous answer. In calling the corpses of Polish historical heroes to a national Last Judgment, inside the national Pantheon, did the artist intend to show their banishment to the hell of oblivion and destruction, to keep them forever asleep in the cathedral's crypt? Or did he hope to show their awakening to eternal life, that they might continue to strengthen the Polish spirit?

The motif of chivalry, broadly understood, also appears in the art of Witold Wojtkiewicz, particularly in the cycle he called *Ceremonie* (*Ceremonies*) (see cat. nos. 94-98).<sup>12</sup> In this series of drawings and paintings, Wojtkiewicz is concerned with the ceremonial rituals of chivalry. In the past, courtly ceremonies provided a precise framework in which all of life's events and emotions could find a place. One could compare this ritualistic framework on which courtly life was based to a text illustrated with carefully choreographed figures, which everyone had to learn by heart. Certain elements of these chivalric ceremonies continued to function in the bourgeois codes of manners at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Wojtkiewicz was an activist in the socialist movement, and the difficulty of incorporating these ancient ceremonies and symbolic forms into the contemporary social system must have been evident to him. He felt that these empty forms constituted a powerful obstacle standing in the way of progress as a new system of values emerged. Wojtkiewicz did not attack the universal values embodied in the chivalric code, but he felt adherence to the code served to preserve outmoded hierarchies, to support bigotry and serfdom, to impede personal freedom and spontaneity of action. On the stage of his "theatrum ceremoniale," Wojtkiewicz presents a picture of a world wherein pathetic gestures are performed in the absence of feeling, where garments are embroidered with gold

and uniforms decorated with lace to add importance to their owners, and where retinues exist to pay homage merely to satisfy the recipient's pride and love of power. Tears are shed in grotesque and tragic farewell scenes. Young girls defer marriage to prove their refined manners. Men pretend ardent prayer to exhibit their faith, kill each other in duels to meet the demands of honor, or commit crimes in the name of military ideology. Thus, in this cycle, the artist attempted to destroy the myth, to show its absurdity and artificiality, to point to its dangers. Wojtkiewicz's attitude toward the chivalric myth was not an isolated phenomenon, as is witnessed by the work of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz and Witold Gombrowicz. But with the coming of the First World War, the myth again reasserted itself and remains today a significant element in the Polish tradition.

1. The subject of chivalry in European culture has been widely discussed; see in particular, M. Ossowska, *Ethos Rycerski i jego odmiany*, Warsaw, 1973, and M. Girouard, *The Return to Camelot/Chivalry and the English Gentleman*, New Haven and London, 1981.
2. On the function of this myth in literature, see E. Kuźma, *Mit Orientu i Kultury Zachodu w literaturze XIX i XX wieku*, Szczecin, 1980.
3. W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik (1953-56)*, Paris, 1957: 332.
4. The concept of the Poles as descendants of the Sarmatians, the only tribe to resist the ancient Romans, arose in the sixteenth century, and the idea of the true Sarmatian — a brave warrior, conscientious landlord, respectable father, and good Christian — became a model for the Polish gentry in the Baroque era.
5. A. Ławniczakowa, "Proba klasyfikacji przedstawień symbolicznych w dziełach sztuk plastycznych," in *Sztuka około 1900*, Warsaw, 1969: 194.
6. J. Malczewski, letter to K. M. Górski, 9-28-1884, manuscript 7675 II, Jagiellonian Library, Cracow.
7. W. Gombrowicz, "Pornographia," in *Dziela zebrane*, Paris, 1970: II, 18-19.
8. Z. Krasieński, letter to Henry Reeve, *Correspondence de Sigismond Krasieński et du Henry Reeve*, edited by J. Kallenbach, Paris, 1902: III, 51-52.
9. On the subject of the sleeping knights in Polish painting and literature, see A. Rottermund, "The 'Road to Independence' in Polish Art of the 19th Century," *Bulletin de Musée National de Varsovie* 20, 2/3 (1979): 62-64, and F. Ziejka, "Z Dziejów literackiej sławy śpiących rycerzy," *Pamięnik Literacki* R. LXXXIV, c. 2 (1983): 23-49.
10. S. Wyspiański, "Bolesław Śmiały," in *Dziela zebrane*, edited by L. Płoszewski, Cracow, 1961: II, 83.
12. See W. Juszcak, *Wojtkiewicz i nowa sztuka*, Warsaw, 1965: 130-131.



Figure 1. Marcello Bacciarelli, Italian, active in Poland, 1731-1818, *Sobieski pod Wiedniem (Sobieski at the Walls of Vienna)*, 1782-83, oil on canvas, 60 × 54 cm. National Museum in Warsaw.



Figure 2. Józef Grassi, Italian, active in Poland, 1758-1838, *Portret Tadeusza Kościuszki (Portrait of Tadeusz Kościuszko)*, 1792, oil on canvas, 112 × 90 cm. National Museum in Poznań.



Figure 3. Jan Matejko, Polish, 1838-1893, *Bitwa pod Grunwaldem* (*The Battle of Tannenberg*, detail), 1878, oil on canvas, 426 × 987 cm. Collection of the Royal Castle in Warsaw.



Figure 4. Piotr Michałowski, Polish, 1800-1855, *Hetman Jabłonowski na koniu* (*The Hetman Jabłonowski on a Horse*), watercolor. National Museum in Cracow.



5a-c. Stanisław Wyspiański, Polish, 1869-1907, *Kazimierz Wielki* (*Casimir the Great*), *Henryk Pobony* (*Henry the Pious*), and *Sw. Stanisław biskup ze Szczepanowa* (*Bishop Saint Stanisław Szczepanow*), 1900-02, cartoons for stained glass, pastel. National Museum in Cracow.