UWM PRACE LITERATUROZNAWCZE VIII ISSN 2353–5164
2020 23–32

DOI: 10.31648/pl.4792
Grzegorz Igliński
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1548-9211
University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn
e-mail: grzegorz.iglinski@uwm.edu.pl

Saint Genevieve and fauns. *Marmur* [*The Marble*] by Jan Kasprowicz a poem about the permanence of truths and human nature

Święta Genowefa i fauny. *Marmur* Jana Kasprowicza – poemat o trwałości prawd i naturze ludzkiej

Keywords: Jan Kasprowicz, St. Genevieve, faun, justice, social harmony

Abstract

This work explores an analysis and interpretation of the prose poem *Marmur* [*Marble*] by Jan Kasprowicz, from the volume *O bohaterskim koniu i walącym się domu* [*On the brave horse and the crumbling house*] (1906). The analysis focuses on the experiences of the main character (who is also the narrator) who first experiences a chance meeting with a pensioner, a supporter of social harmony, and then has a vision of fauns playing around the figure of St Genevieve. The article proposes two interpretations. First: man, irrespective of his views, usually surrenders to his inbred nature, biology, which is represented by the playing fauns. The second interpretation indicates the fauns' behaviour as a separate solution that invades between the conservative attitudes of the pensioner and the support of the main character for social transformations. It represents an affirmation of a full and joyful life as well as acceptance of variability as a permanent component of history and human fate.

The prose poem *Marmur* by Jan Kasprowicz, published in the volume *O bohaterskim koniu i walącym się domu* [*On the brave horse and the crumbling house*] (1st ed. 1906) is a look at a changing world and tells of a longing for something absolute and constant (Igliński 2018: 278). It is like "a short story built similarly to a video featurette, which suddenly changes into a fantastical poetic

vision" (Lipski 1975: 380)[1], including also grotesque elements. Its ideological axis is the idea of social harmony, which will be analysed here.

The place of the described events is not directly named, but many clues suggest that the story happens in Luxembourg Gardens in Paris.

> In one of the public gardens, I saw a sculpture – by whom, I have forgotten – placed among a large bevvy of marble allegories, and probably because of that, not attracting too much attention.
> Since it had a few convenient steps, while a nearby square pool, wreathed in cyclamens, breathed a pleasant freshness, quite a lot of people always gathered around it (Kasprowicz 1984: 493).

The piece is comprised of two parts. In the first, we witness a conversation between the protagonist (and narrator), who is an outsider, with a local retired official, who fears revolutionary social changes, since they can take away his present privileges (i.e. a small pension). This is all the more outrageous to the elderly gentleman because the changes are being advocated by the young generation of his compatriots. The two key concepts being named are "justice" and "social harmony". When the protagonist-narrator suggests that thanks to the upset "things will be more just in the world" (Kasprowicz 1984: 494), the pensioner is surprised. And when the latter mentions "social harmony", the protagonist, in turn, is surprised. Evidently, justice does not need to be equivalent to harmony, and harmony does not imply justice. Justice, in this case, is understood objectively (as aiming for the common good), while harmony is subjective (aiming for the good of the individual). For this reason, the two interlocutors misunderstand one another.

> This seemingly trivial dialogue points to the key strategic and ethical dilemma of revolution. It is posed by the continuity, tradition, and long-term bonds formed among people, threatened by the need to break these in the name of revolutionary necessity. These are the dilemmas of the primacy of objective human justice over subjective individual justice. […]
> It would not be the whole truth to say that the conflict is waged between an uncouth and dismissive stance of subversion, typical of youth, and the tolerance and need for security, which are characteristic for maturity. It is also a conflict between (self-righteous?!) altruism of youth and (reasonable?!) egotism of old age (Jakóbczyk 1992: 87).

[1] On the entirety of Jan Kasprowicz's volume, see also Hanna Ratuszna (2005: 225–242).

In order to impart on the stranger his understanding of "social harmony" (as the highest sanctity, a "sacrament"), the old man points to the nearby statue of St Genevieve, seeing it not only as a symbol of this "social harmony" (based on Christian ideals), but downright identifying himself with it.

> Our city's patroness, Saint Genevieve, who in the long, long past ages liberated her people from same such calamity as threatens us today. But it was a foreign foe who brought it then, and now down on me – on us, our people want to bring it!
> The artist who hewed this in stone, as if intimated my soul, as if guessed my thought! Were I a sculptor, I would have made no different a depiction… Whenever I look at her, and every day I am here, it always seems to me that this Saint is somehow the symbol of social harmony…
> Look here, Sir: her right hand, outstretched, chases away the storm, and her left embraces an old man and a few children; her eyes, turned upward as if beg God's help, and her lips, open, quivering with anger, plainly cry out: "Away, thou enemy of humanity, from these my orphans!"
> I always think that these are my grandchildren and I; look closer, Sir: the old man even has my features… (Kasprowicz 1984: 494–495).

St Genevieve (living in the years 423–512 CE, or, according to another version, in 422–500 or 502), patroness of Paris, prevented a panic and the city's abandonment by the inhabitants when Huns led by Attila invaded the area in 451. She foretold that the city would survive – and so it did, when the enemy retreated (Swastek, Kuźmak, Zwierzchowska 1989: 967–968; *Księga imion i świętych* 1997: 457–458; Sluhovsky 1998: 7–158).

The sculpture referred to in Kasprowicz's work is probably the statue *Sainte Geneviève* (1845, white marble, Jardin du Luxembourg, Paris), whose author is Michel-Louis Victor Mercier. The sculpture is part of a series of twenty figures, *Reines de France et Femmes illustres* [Kings of France and Illustrious Women], made in mid-19th century by various artists, and displayed near a promenade overlooking a large pool. The statue of St Genevieve depicts only herself, standing with folded arms, half-lidded eyes, and closed lips.

This does not match the description presented by Kasprowicz – Genevieve's pose (position of the arms, upward glance, open mouth), and the accompanying figures of an old man and children seem to be the products of the author's imagination. This is not how Genevieve was depicted in art (Niewęgłowski 1999: 13; Sluhovsky 1998: fig. 1–3). An exception is her statue at one of the bridges in Paris (Le Pont de la Tournelle), sculpted by a French artist of Polish origin, Paul Landowski. It depicts the saint with a child (signifying Paris under Genevieve's protection) and was created in 1928.

Photo. 1. Michel-Louis Victor Mercier, *Sainte Geneviève* (1845)
Source: Wikimedia Commons (2015, phot. Aymeric pathier), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paris_Luxembourg_Femmes_Illustres_Sainte-Genevi%C3%A8ve_Michel-Louis_Victor_Mercier_1845_DSC_0105_8.JPG [accessed: 06.12.2019].

The concept of "social harmony", explained and illustrated by the pensioner, behind which stands a conservative worldview, clashes with the views of the protagonist, who is sensitive to symptoms of injustice and social inequality. This is made evident when the elderly man points to a "shabby fellow" circling nearby, seeing him as an "anarchist", ready to destroy the statue of St Genevieve[2]. The protagonist, meanwhile, sees something completely different:

> – Come now, Sir. A poor, innocent man, it is poverty that his face emanates with, not hell: surely he is hungry…
> – So he should go to work, not traipse around public gardens.
> – Perhaps, just like you, he likes sun, water, and trees…
> – Perhaps… God knows what he is…
> We separated… (Kasprowicz 1984: 495).

The interlocutors walk apart after this scene, but the phrase "We separated…" should be doubly understood, both literally and in metaphor (since their worldviews separate as well). Nevertheless, this meeting and the pensioner's stance on "social harmony" prompts the protagonist to rethink his convictions. Perhaps he realises that it is man's need to have some point of reference, some unassailable sanctity, absolute truth, ideal, or benchmark, which in a constantly changing world will allow him to maintain balance, constitute a guiding thought, a landmark, and criterion for action, a factor which unifies people instead of dividing them. The statue of St Genevieve may be associated in his mind not so much with social order (as it is for the pensioner), as with a lasting, universal moral system, with sacrifice for the good of others, instead of focusing on oneself. The latter is the charge against the pensioner, who understands St Genevieve

[2] Among the most known 19th century French thinkers who advocated social change, two must be named: Pierre Joseph Proudhon and Georges Sorel. Proudhon, an anarchist and socialist, held justice and freedom as the key values in history. However, he did not advocate a violent revolution, but gradual reforms leading to a classless and stateless society. He was hostile not only to capitalistically understood property and money, but also religion: "Now the time has come when the allegory must give way to reality, where theology is impiety, and faith sacrilege" (Proudhon 1974: 439). Sorel in turn apotheosized social upheaval "as an expression of life's might and heroic will" (Tatarkiewicz 1988: 213). distinguishing between force and violence, he claimed that force is used by the authority which imposes order on the majority, while violence – by the proletariat revolting against the state. Violence turns out to be creative, heroic, without hate. In his *Réflexions sur la violence* [*Reflections on Violence*] (first ed. 1908), he wrote: "Not only can proletarian violence ensure the future revolution, but also seems the only means by which the European nations, stupefied by humanitarianism, can recover their former energy. This violence compels capitalism to restrict its attentions solely to its material role and tends to restore it the warlike qualities it formerly possessed" [Sorel 1999: 78).

in his own, warped way: "[…] I am a selfish man and I cannot sacrifice myself" (ibid.: 494).

The second part of the work is filled by the protagonist's lone musings, as he returns to the park late at night and sits under the saint's statue. He is nagged by the disparity in understanding of justice or "social harmony", and perhaps also by the consequences of any social upheaval, which are difficult to predict. After all, he talked to a potential victim, not a fighter. The surrounding mood affects the protagonist, and he experiences a vision of fauns:

> I was awoken from my reverie by a sudden whistle: tree branches rustled, flowers swayed, water in the artificial, cement pool brought delicate wrinkles over the smooth face of the moon.
> I looked behind me with some disquiet: there in front of me stood a brownish faun and, looking into my eyes, beat the ground with his hoof, held two fingers in his mouth and whistled, laughing uproariously. His hairy belly shook – I thought – almost to falling off.
> In the same moment, a legion of funny figures like him ran towards me from all sides of the garden and, abruptly pulling me into their midst, formed a circle around the marble statue, which the former Treasury official saw as the symbol of his revered social harmony (ibid.: 496).

At least two interpretations present themselves. Firstly, fauns ridicule the understanding of "social harmony" which the pensioner presented, mock St Genevieve, and in some part also mock the protagonist (narrator), who needlessly ponders over this harmony (as if trying to convince him that there is no way to stop progress and the course of life). What is more, they pull him into their circle, making him similar to themselves. Just as initially the pensioner identified with the old man in St Genevieve's statue, now the protagonist (narrator) becomes one of the fauns. They all circle around the statue, which stands as immobile as it did before. This can lead to the thought that St Genevieve ("social harmony") is something immovable, constitutes an ideal (which is only understood in different ways) – realised for some (the conservatives), imagined for others (progressives). However, the human, irrespective of his views, succumbs to his inborn, biological nature, emphasized by the frolicking fauns.

> I forgot entirely that I had a human stomach and I could have grandchildren: a faun beyond doubt, brown and pot-bellied, I dance with the rest of my goatish comrades, I climb the sculpture, I pull saint Genevieve's nose, I push my hat on the bare head of the stone old man, with my sleeve I shut the mouths of the Carrara orphans to stop their mewling, I whistle, I laugh, and I sing a melody which seems familiar: Ach, du lieber Augustin!… (ibid.).

The fauns remind the protagonist that he is a human individual first, and only second – a member of human society. The conflict between nature and civilisation (society) is resolved by them in nature's favour. This does not make the wild dance support the pensioner's views, who was concerned about his social security and worried about his living, should "social harmony" be disturbed.

The protagonist's vision is rather a form of relief from the encounter with the pensioner, an attempt to distance himself from the old man's words. It looks like the fauns mean to say: "Laugh it off!", "Forget about it!". Besides social order (which changes, for the worse or better), there is the natural order (which is constant) of vital force (the Dionysian) which breaks all laws and disrupts harmonies, for which the fullness and fertility of life, its dynamicity, is more important than perfection. Out of the Dionysian, Friedrich Nietzsche derived all that was great, creative, and insightful in human history. St Genevieve, petrified in marble, is a vestige of the past and her nose can be pulled. The grotesque situation is compounded by the protagonist's behaviour, who sings "a melody which seems familiar: Ach, du lieber Augustin!…" (ibid.).

The second interpretation points to the fauns as a separate, third solution, which imposes itself between the pensioner's conservatism and the protagonist's favour for social change.

> This particular Dionysian intermedium collapses orders. The frolicking faun with a hairy belly, his joy of life and vitality seem a reasonable alternative for the uncompromising asceticism of revolution. On the other hand the "dance of the goatish comrades" signifies a change, temporariness, transformation. It thus annihilates the immobile order of "social harmony" enjoyed by the doting old man. Between revolution and traditionalism, a third proposition has "barged in". A very vague and general one. One of activity, an affirmation of life, joy and fullness, recognition of change as a constant element of history and human fate (Jakóbczyk 1992: 88).

Encountering the fauns nevertheless does not bring solace to the protagonist. When the "merry company" disappears and he is again left alone with his thoughts, the question of the old man returns: "Yet, I cannot dismiss – the pensioner" (Kasprowicz 1984: 497). The reflection closing the piece proves not so much doubt or ambivalence of the protagonist towards social change, as his ethical sensibility – he simply pities the man who may bear the brunt of social transformation (although it was not he who created the existing order and made the laws). It is compassion for someone ordinary, who does not understand many things, but worries about his fate (survival).

> Although I am not an enthusiast of ministers, directors, councillors, secretaries, and cashiers defending the keystone of the Gothic church, in which – having chased away God – sundry "noble defenders of existing orders", along with other rabble, have settled in, I did think that I understand that old chap in his pressed top hat, and I seem to have a little compassion for his fear and resentment.
> Evidently, through me as well spoke – the human stomach (ibid.).

It does not seem true, as suggested by one scholar looking at this ending, that "The narrator sides with the old order and 'social harmony' in the name of the interest of ordinary man" (Zabawa 1999: 154). The protagonist's words "I did think that I understand", or "I seem to have a little compassion" indicate a temporary wavering. He knows that some things cannot be stopped and he is, in spite of his worries, curious about them (especially that the texts comprised in the volume *O bohaterskim koniu i walącym się domu* are tied together by the problem of a cultural, and mainly moral, crisis, and some texts are a scathing critique of those times' bourgeois mentality and social relations). The protagonist of *Marmur* notices the pettiness, superficiality, hard-headedness, narrow-mindedness of the pensioner, who additionally calls upon (not to say – uses, appropriates) Saint Genevieve. He confuses sacrifice, humility, and obedience with opportunism. In essence, it is not the fauns, but the elderly man who desecrates the saint, seeing or placing himself next to her.

Marmur is also a narrative about losing delusions (about the permanence of ideas, truths, and values). After the encounter with the pensioner, the protagonist experiences a moment of spiritual breakdown. Both the defenders and the destroyers of order have their reasons, but moral evil is unavoidable in either case, it is engrained in the human condition. In summarising the group of texts in the volume *O bohaterskim koniu i walącym się domu*, to which *Marmur* belongs, and then concluding about the whole volume, another scholar writes:

> These texts juxtapose, against the condemned bourgeois morality, a morality which is uncompromising, based on a belief in ideals, while at the same time they point out that such a morality cannot function in the modern world, that it became ridiculous. The sarcasm of the narration itself is directed not only against moneygrubbers, but also the representatives of that harsh morality. […]
> Kasprowicz is far from accepting a stance which rejects the values he has long subscribed to, but he does admit his own moral system has been shaken. Kasprowicz's prose is pessimistic in its message, it expresses an inability to form a moral position based on permanent, unquestionable foundations (Rosner 1962: 119, 121).

In *Marmur*'s last, sarcastic sentence: "Evidently, through me as well spoke – the human stomach" (Kasprowicz 1984: 497), the protagonist mocks himself and his internal crisis. His compassion (seemingly for the pensioner) is compassion for his own weakness and doubt, he is also inhabited by "fear and resentment", but not because of the passing world – it is sick and corrupt enough, and does not deserve any special consideration. The cause is the awareness of his own fallible, sensitive nature, or maybe human nature in general, which is not of immovable marble.

Bibliography

Sources

Kasprowicz Jan (1984), *Marmur* [*Marble*], in: *Pisma zebrane* [*Collected Writings*], Jan Józef Lipski and Roman Loth (eds), Vol. 4: *Utwory literackie 4* [*Literary works 4*], Roman Loth (ed.), Kraków – Wrocław: 493–497.

References

Igliński Grzegorz (2018), *Faun – Pan – satyr. Wyobraźnia fauniczna w poezji i sztuce Młodej Polski* [*Faun – Pan – Satyr. Satiric Imagination in Young Poland Poetry and Art*], Olsztyn.

Jakóbczyk Jan (1992), *Z różnych perspektyw... zbieżne widoki (L. S. Liciński i J. Kasprowicz)* [*From Different Perspectives... Converging Views (L. S. Liciński and J. Kasprowicz)*], in: *O tym, jak Młoda Polska posiwiała. Proza młodopolska wobec rewolucji 1905 roku* [*On How Young Poland Got Grey Hair. Young Poland Prose and the Revolution of 1905*], Katowice: 79–93.

Księga imion i świętych [*Book of Names and Saints*] (1997), Henryk Fros, Franciszek Sowa (eds), Vol. 2: *D–G*, Kraków.

Lipski Jan Józef (1975), *Twórczość Jana Kasprowicza w latach 1891–1906* [*Works of Jan Kasprowicz, 1891–1906*], Warszawa.

Niewęgłowski Wiesław Aleksander (1999), *Leksykon świętych* [*Lexicon of Saints*], 2nd ed., Warszawa.

Proudhon Pierre Joseph (1974), *Wybór pism* [*Selected Writings*], Jakub Litwin (ed.), introduction by Jan Garewicz, annotated by Marek Wykurz, Vol. 2, Warszawa.

Ratuszna Hanna (2005), *„Wrażeniowy odbiór rzeczywistości". O cyklu poematów Jana Kasprowicza „O bohaterskim koniu i walącym się domie" jako miejscu spotkania sztuk* [*"An Impressionistic Take on Reality". On the Poetic Series "On the Brave Horse and the Crumbling House" by Jan Kasprowicz as a Meeting Place of the Arts*], in: *Semiotyka cyklu. Cykl w muzyce, plastyce i literaturze* [*Semiotics of a Series. Series in Music, Art, and Literature*], Mieczysława Demska-Trębacz, Krystyna Jakowska and Radosław Sioma (eds), Białystok: 225–242.

Rosner Katarzyna (1962), *Struktura i ideologia prozy Kasprowicza „O bohaterskim koniu i walącym się domie"* [*Structure and Ideology of Jan Kasprowicz's Prose*

"On the Brave Horse and the Crumbling House"], „Przegląd Humanistyczny", No. 2: 107–122.

Sluhovsky Moshe (1998), *Patroness of Paris. Rituals of Devotion in Early Modern France*, Leiden – New York – Köln.

Sorel Georges (1999), *Reflections of Violence*, Jeremy Jennings (ed.), Cambridge.

Sorel Georges (2014), *Rozważania o przemocy* [*Reflections on Violence*], Marek J. Mosakowski (transl.), Warszawa.

Swastek Józef, Kuźmak Krystyna, Zwierzchowska Grażyna (1989), *Genowefa, Genowefa z Paryża* [*Genevieve, Genevieve of Paris*], in: *Encyklopedia katolicka* [*Catholic Encyclopedia*], Vol. 5: *Fabbri – Górzyński*, Ludomir Bieńkowski et al. (eds), Lublin: 967–968.

Tatarkiewicz Władysław (1988), *Historia filozofii* [*History of Philosophy*], Vol. 3: *Filozofia XIX wieku i współczesna* [*19th Century and Contemporary Philosophy*], 8th ed., Warszawa.

Zabawa Krystyna (1999), *„Kalejdoskop myśli, wrażeń i obrazów" – młodopolskie odmiany krótkiego poematu prozą* [*"A Caleidoscope of Thoughts, Impression, and Images" – Young Poland's Varieties of Short Prose Poem*], Kraków.