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Jacek Malczewski's Picturesque Story

Abstract

Jacek Malczewski was a painter who, in his monumental artistic output, left works revolving around the problems of homeland, freedom and lost identity, life and death, spanning between romantic visions and metaphysics. He was inspired by the art of antiquity, Polish Romanticism, but also tapped into folklore, complicating the meaning of his paintings with symbolism that was not always easy to understand. It was a multi-layered oeuvre, a testament to his great erudition, but also to the imagination and sensitivity of a refined humanist.

In his paintings, he also asked about the essence of being an artist, the artist's responsibility, and was interested in the problem of whether artists are really only masters of themselves, or whether they have a responsibility for the artistic tasks they take on.

During the seventy-five years of the artist's life, the history of Europe and Poland changed profoundly. His creative personality was mainly influenced by Poland's loss of independence which entailed an identity crisis. Throughout his artistic path, Malczewski subscribed to the inherent mission of art to build national identity through creative exploration of various myths. He illustrated the dream of freedom and independence, showed

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the suffering of the nation and its sacrifice, and recalled the idea of the homeland which was to be both a homeland, a home, but also the foundation of national culture.

Keywords

Jacek Malczewski, Polish art, painting, symbolism, Young Poland, heritage

Jacek Malczewski was a painter who, in his monumental artistic output, left works revolving around the problems of homeland, freedom, life and death, stretched between romantic visions and metaphysics; he was inspired by the art of antiquity, Polish Romanticism, but also drew on folklore, complicating the subject matter of his paintings with symbolism that was not always intelligible. It was a multi-layered oeuvre, a testament to his vast erudition, but also to the imagination and sensitivity of a refined humanist. Finally, as Piotr Juszkievicz notes, he was a painter and writer, whose work is dominated by intellectual speculation, which the artist tries to convey through the medium of painting (Juszkievicz, 2002, p. 14).

In his paintings he also posed the question of the essence of being an artist, the artist's responsibility, he was interested in the problem of whether artists are really only masters of themselves, or whether they have a responsibility for the artistic tasks they undertake.

Jacek Malczewski was born in 1854 in Radom as the third child of Julian Malczewski, of the Tarnawa coat of arms (1820–1884), secretary general of the Landowner's Loan Society, and Maria, née Korwin-Szymanowska (1822–1898). During the seventy-five years of his life, the history of Europe and Poland changed dramatically. Poland's loss of independence entailing an identity crisis, and the nation's failure to believe in its own "self" defined his personality. The artist's monographer Agnieszka Ławniczakowa noted that he grew up in a period of the rising awareness of nations and their aspirations for autonomy or sovereignty, and in a time of ostensible

stability dominated by the power of Russia, Prussia and Austria, with no chance for Poland to regain its independence. As a nine-year-old boy, he learned first-hand about the events of the January Uprising and its defeat, which made him realize that armed struggle was ineffective and that for the sake of the Poland's future development it was necessary to raise its political and economic potential under the still existing order of the three partitions (Ławniczakowa, 1995, p. 6).

Throughout his career, Malczewski subscribed to the inherent mission of art to build national identity through creative exploration of various myths. He illustrated the dream of freedom and independence; he showed the suffering of the nation and its sacrifice, and finally he recalled the idea of Poland which was to be both a homeland, a home, and the foundation of national culture. It was Malczewski, as a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, who uttered the significant, oft-quoted words to his students to describe the attitude to the homeland and its future, "paint in such a way that Poland will rise from the dead." And he himself painted in such a way, drawing on both the history of Poland, which he dressed in symbols, but most of all seeking inspiration in the writings of Polish Romantic poets, which were so important for the cultural identity of the non-existent homeland.

In the early days of his work, Jacek Malczewski had to confront the greatness of Matejko and his visionary art. By uttering the meaningful words, later quoted by Adam Heydel "I cannot cannot walk in other people's shoes... with this new year (1878) I begin a new period in my life, I will start drawing inspiration from myself and painting my own things" he rejected his dictates and chose his own creative path (Heydel, 1933, p. 81). In an interview with Jan Brzękowski in 1925, he commented on his relationship with Jan Matejko:

In order to oppose Matejko's colorism, I began to paint pictures of Siberia in grey colours. I wanted to express the national element of my art in a different way. He was always the strongest stimulus for my work. Believe me. If I were not Polish, I would not be an artist. On the other hand, I have never confined the Polish character of my art to some narrow, predetermined frames. Wyspiański, for example, limited the concept of Polishness to one place.... Meanwhile, I always explained to

him that Poland is fields, meadows, roadside willows, the atmosphere of the countryside at sunset, this moment is now (Brzękowski, 1925, p. 1).

Malczewski also often dealt with problems that oscillated around purely "artistic" themes of the nature of art and the role of the artist. Nevertheless, he also included in many of these works, replete with symbols and inspired by romantic ideas, themes devoted to the suffering of his nation and the dream of liberating his homeland. Malczewski combined the nineteenth-century injunction to serve his enslaved homeland with the dilemmas typical of a Young Poland artist, thus conveying the problems of his era as well as expressing his own desires and anxieties.

Malczewski learned about Romantic literature at home, where it was important to worship the ideas of Romanticism, to embrace poetic thinking, Romantic sensibility and imagination: his father, Julian Malczewski, who was not only the guardian of his son's life, but also his friend and guide who watched over the formation of his personality and the development of his talent, had the reputation of an erudite man, he was an admirer of ancient literature, the works of Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Schiller, and especially Romantic poetry. Adam Heydel (Heydel, 1933, p. 13), wrote that he "knows Polish literature through and through, Słowacki is his favourite poet, and he has read *Anhelli* "a hundred times." Yet at the same time, being so fascinated with Słowacki, Julian Malczewski recognized the dangers that the fascination with his poetry could entail and, as Dorota Kudelska writes, "saw the poet, which was typical of the positivist view, separately as the author of brilliant poetry, serving the nation (as we know, not all works were so classified), and as a destructive egoistic personality" (Kudelska, 2012, p. 60). Malczewski's interest in Romanticism was sustained by his teacher Adolf Dygasiński, a naturalist writer, publicist, and participant in the January Uprising, who turned the young, sensitive Malczewski's attention both to nature, the land, the landscape, the world of flora and fauna, contemplation of the beauty of nature, as well as to the people and their customs and folk tales full of fantasy. It is then that the fascination began, which in later works will allow the artist to so freely use references to folklore.

The figures he met after his arrival in Cracow, such as Adam Asnyk and, most importantly, Konstanty Górski, were of no small importance in shaping Jacek Malczewski's artistic identity. It was the latter who underlined Malczewski's fascination with Juliusz Słowacki, and called him "the son of Słowacki," but also pointed out his artistic independence from the poet, as well as his belief that the painter could take up Siberian themes even without inspiration from Anhelli, because, as he wrote,

Malczewski had patriotic feelings, very intense feelings, and, frankly, became the greatest painter of contemporary national sorrows after Grottger for a number of years. In comparison with his paintings, *Poland after 1863* is pretentious and melodramatic. Malczewski did not need literary influence, after all, he was eight years old on the day of the January uprising. People born in this era are said, and I tend to believe this, to be more neurotic, more sensitive than others. How could such a child not remember the march of ill-armed but trusting volunteers and the eerily silent march of uniformed Russian soldiers? Didn't this child hear all about the hanged and hangmen? Słowacki's son would have remained himself, even if he had never read a verse of Anhelli (Górski, n.d.).

The themes borrowed from Anhelli, which begin to appear in Malczewski's works from around 1877, enriched by inspirations from the works of Grottger, take place during exile or transports of prisoners to Siberia, without reference to specific events, places or scenes from the literary original and history, without pathos, and far from Słowacki's visionary imagery, instead full of weary, apathetic characters who are stripped of hope. Malczewski, drawing on Słowacki and his tales of the value of sacrifice and the destructive power of suffering, shows, as Ławniczakowa (1995) also notes, the problem of the nation in terms of higher ethical values and from a general human perspective. The most important "Anhellian" artwork, and certainly the most famous one, is the depiction of Ellenai's death. Portrayed in the paintings, the heavenly beauty of the dead Ellenai, an exile, a criminal, and a product of fantasy, which was utterly unreal in the living conditions of the characters, inspired dreams

and spiritual and aesthetic experiences. And first of all, it became relevant and recalled the still vivid past associated with 1863 and the martyrdom of the Polish nation. The impulse of messianism inspired by Słowacki, as well as by Mickiewicz and Krasiński, which was not only an expression of rebellion, but also a consent to suffering and sacrifice, is also clear. Malczewski took up the subject of Ellenai's death in several versions, and if he focused on Anhelli's mourning and despair in his early works, in his later pieces, especially those in which Ellenai was accompanied by the angel Eloë, the artist referred to the idea of redemption of the nation through death, and these paintings acquired a more political significance, which, along with Słowacki's literary works, accentuates the idea of rebirth and faith in regaining national identity.

Malczewski was not only interested in Siberian exiles, but also in folk themes. Inspired by Dygasiński's youthful teachings, folk tales and the Romantic poems of Ignacy Kulakowski, Bohdan Zaleski, August Bielowski and, first and foremost, Adam Mickiewicz, the mermaids and nymphs that preyed on people's lives stepped into the realistic landscape of the Cracow region and the everyday life of village girls in folk costumes and the shepherds who accompanied them. Malczewski is also part of the trend of fascination with folklore, important at the turn of the 20th century, which was associated with the search for national identity, the idea of national solidarity and brotherhood of the intelligentsia and peasantry, faith in the vital forces of the people. The work of Juliusz Słowacki, his *King Spirit* and the discernment of the hidden spirit of the Polish nation among the colourful peasantry, which awaits a renewed rebirth with the emergence of an unspecified power, was again not without significance. In his paintings, Malczewski created a new fairy-tale and visionary world, which he uses as a pretext to represent, based on folk themes, an allegory of dreams and personification of illusions.

The landscape plays an important role in these paintings, and complements their mood and symbolism. While it is not always captivating or picturesque, it is a constant reminder of the beauty of Poland, builds an image of Polish Arcadia and evokes associations with childhood and happiness.

The artist discovered the image of this magnificent, lush nature as a child, mainly thanks to Adolf Dygasiński, who taught him to observe, love and admire nature. He would rediscover it again thanks to Słowacki and Beniowski. In Malczewski's paintings, one can find illustrations to poetic descriptions of "bright meadows, where the moist / lily of the valley blooms, full of pines, callas, firs; / where the lone wild rose glistens, / where the fair birches are the mistress of springs..." (Słowacki, *Beniowski*, Song 1).

The painting *In the Dust Storm*, in which a woman with her hands cuffed behind her back emerges from a great cloud of dust, whirling in a surreal dance with boys dressed in greatcoats, occupies a special place among paintings combining landscape with symbolism. The scene can be likened to a non-existent Poland and the female figure to Polonia, who has abandoned her children, but it can also be interpreted as Malczewski's own vision, as a figure of national allegory and anthropomorphized nation and nature, the dusty, desiccated land symbolizing slumbering forces rising up and awakening to life.

Malczewski also regularly addressed issues of the essence of art and the role of the artist. At the same time, he incorporated into many of these symbolic works, inspired by romantic ideas, themes devoted to the suffering of his nation and the dreams of liberating the homeland. Malczewski combined the nineteenth-century imperative of serving the enslaved homeland with his talent with the dilemma typical of a Young Poland artist, expressing the problems of his era, as well as voicing his own desires and fears. In his signature work, *Melancholia* of 1890–1894, in one of his many symbolic layers, he raises the very problem of the artist's responsibility for the subject s/he takes up, placing him/her in the role of involuntary liberator of the spectres of the past. Thus, he poses the question of whether artists have the moral right to take on such a challenge, to resurrect the phantoms of the past and engage viewers in their own visions. There appears the fracture of reality, characteristic of Malczewski's works, into the imagined and the real, which refers to the clash of historical and modern art, but also life and death. The painting, according to Agnieszka Bagińska, shows the position of an artist entangled in patriotic duties, while pursuing artistic freedom (Bagińska, 2022, p. 27). The painting is captioned on the back by the

author himself with the following words: Prologue. Vision. The Last Century in Poland (*Tout un siècle*) portrays successive generations of the Polish nation in the 19th century, the Polish reality and the faces of successive generations of subjugated Poles. An important interpretation of *Melancholia*, in the context of patriotism and loss of identity, was offered by Piotr Piotrowski who referred to the views of Sigmund Freud and went on to explain: "Subsequent uprisings, and with them subsequent disasters, functioned in this mechanism like the festering of wounds mentioned by Freud. Jacek Malczewski's *Melancholia*, therefore, is a state of awareness of this process, an understanding of the mechanics of the creation and functioning of national feelings: national narcissism. It seems to reveal the identity crisis of the Polish nation (Piotrowski, 2004, p. 101).

The woman standing in the sunlit window, dressed in black, who was identified by researchers both with the titular *Melancholia* (Piniński, 1925, p. 206), as well as the alter ego of the artist (Grzyb-kowska, 2002 pp. 30–31), or Death (Pieńkos, 2002, p. 52), played an important role. She was also interpreted as Polonia (Krzysztofowicz-Kozakowska, 2008, p. 18), which became another important heroine of Malczewski's works over time. Her appearance was again a consequence of the artistic trend inherent in Polish art of the post-partition period, when historical painting was dominated by patriotic subjects while the influence of romantic ideas was growing. Although always beautiful, usually with the face of the artist's beloved model and most important muse, Maria (Kini) Balowa, Polonia referred to the history of Poland, its nation and the search for its identity. Over the years, she also became, as Wacława Milewska noted, an expression of the atrophy of patriotic feelings not only of Malczewski, but of the Poles of the late 19th century (Milewska, 2018, p. 389). Malczewski was also guided by the thoughts he jotted down in a letter to his wife Maria Malczewska around 1896:

The Republic is safe and peaceful – because it is dead – because it is out of this world. So it stands before generations of honest hearts from time to time like a beloved phantom, and every generation – this phantom becomes weaker, and every generation – this phantom becomes more airy and elusive. This Republic of our imagination will finally lay down

for ever. – And then it will die, it will die forever (Malczewski qtd. in Puciata-Pawłowska, 1968, p. 84).

At first, therefore, mournful Polonies appeared, with their hands tied with rope or shackles, in straw crowns falling from their heads, in greatcoats, praying for the revival of the nation, shaking off languor and reminding us of our duties to the homeland. It was only after 1914 that the canvases were filled with dignified and proud Polonias, watching the battles of the Polish Legions, leading into battle and showing the direction of the attack, smiling, but still inspiring moderate optimism. Such restraint is present even after 1918. The heroes of Malczewski's earlier works return to their homeland, Anhelli, Polonia, soldiers fighting in the various partitioned armies return from their wanderings, and the artist himself also returns to his native home. And these deliberations can be summed up by a painting from 1918, *Corona Imperialis*, in which Malczewski again juxtaposed the real world – soldiers returning to the court in greatcoats with the symbolic meaning of flowers blooming in the flower beds of the imperial crown (*Corona imperialis*) – heralding, according to the words of Tadeusz Bednarski, “a truly royal blossoming of the rising homeland and the moral victory of invigorating feelings over ‘poisoned wells,’ ‘whispers of chimeras’ and traitors, ‘dust storms’ of historical events and the stupor of the ‘vicious circles’ of history” (Bednarski, 1990, p. 3).

In 1918, Poland regained its independence and, after 123 years, reappeared on the maps of Europe with new goals for art. In 1918, the need for a nation's self-identification and the method of building its identity and searching for new values was transformed. Enthusiasm for the new State brought the need to think about modernity and art, which would remind of the strength of the reborn State with its often monumental form. Malczewski, who painted in such a way that Poland would be resurrected, a melancholic and difficult symbolist artist, removed himself into the shadows of modernity, stepping down from the pedestal on which nineteenth-century history had placed him.

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