

# **I. Polish Realism**

## **Introduction**

### **Historical Background**

In the summer of 1864, the last insurrectionists of the January Uprising against Russia were defeated and five members of the National Government were hanged in Warsaw. When the wave of reprisals spread throughout the country, Polish leaders realized that the demoralized people might surrender unconditionally to foreign domination. Unable to challenge the military might of Russia, Prussia, and Austria, they began to search for new measures that would allow them to carry on the struggle for liberation. In order to sustain and strengthen national resolve, they gradually adopted the doctrine of positivism.

The French and English founders of positivism, among them Auguste Comte, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Henry Buckle, and Hippolyte Taine, placed emphasis on the study of natural phenomena, especially on facts as elaborated and verified by methods of the empirical sciences. They asserted that man and society resembled other organisms, and postulated that they functioned according to the same laws. They believed in evolutionary progress and a utilitarian function of human endeavors. They advocated “organic work” that promised benefits to the whole society or nation.

The program of Polish positivism put stress on “organic work,” asserting that the strength and unity of a society required that all of its members excel in their efforts. It promulgated new methods in industry, agriculture, and commerce. The long-range plan urged individuals and all classes to work “at the foundation,” with the goal of establishing a just society. Specifically, it spoke up in support of peasants, women, and Jews. It called for mass education, revised textbooks, better schools, and modern libraries. As its ultimate goal, Polish positivism envisioned novel ways of thinking, a new social consciousness, in a word—a renewed nation.

Indeed, the agrarian reform of 1864, one tangible victory of the January Uprising, strengthened Polish society, giving peasants a larger stake in the struggle for independence. Farm productivity increased and the quality of nourishment improved, while advances in hygiene and health care brought about a considerable population growth. Between 1870 and 1914 the number of Poles grew from about ten million, most of them peasants, to eighteen million.

This steep increase caused an agrarian overpopulation, which resulted in mass emigration. Over 3.5 million poor or landless peasants from the three partitions left their homeland, more than two million of them for the United States, while several hundred thousand moved to the burgeoning industrial centers, forming an urban proletariat.

Polish industry was developing rapidly, spurred by a technological revolution, foreign capital, and growing markets, especially in Russia. The center of the textile industry was Łódź, which grew in the course of one century from a little village to a bustling city, with 315,000 people in 1900. Other centers of textile production flourished in Żyrardów, Białystok, and Bielsko-Biała, and mining in Upper Silesia and the Dąbrowa Basin. The metal industry developed in Warsaw, and metallurgy in Poznań, while petroleum production was carried out in the area of Borysław (Galicia). The railway network expanded, facilitating the quick transport of industrial goods throughout the whole country and abroad.

The main threat to the Polish people, who were gradually forming a democratic and modern society, came from the aggressive policies of the Russian and Prussian governments, determined to root out all aspects of national identity and culture. In the Russian partition, renamed the “Vistulaland,” the Tsarist authorities launched a policy of russification. It was carried out by the Russian Army, which established a huge network of garrisons, fortresses, and jails, and by Russian officials, who took over most administrative positions. They banned Poles from purchasing landed property in the provinces of Lithuania and Ruthenia, and confiscated the property of the Roman Catholic Church. They forbade the Poles to use their native language in public places, then even to teach it. To eliminate any traces of opposition, they imposed a harsh system of censorship and severe punitive measures.

In the Prussian partition, the policy of Otto von Bismarck, Prime Minister of Prussia and the first Chancellor of the German Empire, was also aimed at the Polish language. In 1872, German was made compulsory in all state schools, and later in all government offices, including courts. All graduates, even priests, were required to take an exam in German culture. The main goals of Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf* (culture struggle against the Catholic Church), launched in 1873, were to bring the German language into Polish churches and to encourage German colonization of the territories seized by Prussia. The nationalistic *Hakata*, German Society for the Eastern Borders, established in 1894, supported him in his policy, but the Poles rallied. In 1901, they organized in Września a school strike against the introduction of German into religious classes, and in 1906–07 they launched strikes in almost one half of the schools in the province of Poznań. Their own organizations, e.g., *Popular Education Society*, *Popular Reading Rooms Society*, choir ensembles, and spirited clandestine groups cultivated the national heritage, while numerous agricultural co-operatives, credit associations, and an Industrial Purchase Bank successfully defended Polish landed property.

The situation in the Austrian partition was different. Galicia was one of the poorest regions of Europe, with a peasant population of over 81% in 1887. Yet the people of Galicia enjoyed a regional autonomy, as they could boast of a local Polish administration and their own provincial Diet in Lwów. What is more, they were educated in schools where the teaching was in Polish. They were in general free to express their ideas, had access to two universities (in Cracow and Lwów), and to numerous learned societies, libraries,

museums, and theaters, with Cracow again becoming the center of Polish culture. Satisfied with this state of affairs, influential conservatives (Szujski, Tarnowski, Koźmian, and others) published the *Stańczyk Portfolio* (1869), in which they called on their compatriots to work for independence by legal, organic methods, rather than by engaging in another unsuccessful uprising.

### Cultural Background

In the protracted battle against the occupying powers, the Poles clung stubbornly to their cultural heritage. Unable to use the Polish language in many schools, offices, and at times even in church, they put together an extensive system of private schooling and underground organizations, including clandestine libraries and the Flying University of Warsaw, which was established in 1882–83 and functioned in secret until it became legalized in 1906. They also developed an elaborate program and textbook materials for home study as well as for individual and group tutoring. In Cracow, the Czartoryski family established the first art museum, which was followed by the National Museum (1879). The Academy of Learning was founded in 1873, the Jagiellonian University became Polish again in 1870, and also the University of Lwów in 1871, drawing scholars and students from the other partitions.

The Cracow Academy of Learning (1857–64) and the new *Collegium Novum* (1883–87) were built in the neo-Renaissance style, while the Czartoryski Museum, formerly a Piarist monastery, and the grand Governor's Palace in Lwów were designed in a popular neo-Gothic style. Many public buildings, especially hospitals, banks, theaters, and museums, some of them neo-Classical, were erected in Warsaw, Poznań, Cracow, and Lwów.

The dominant trend in painting was historical and patriotic. It was practiced by Henryk Rodakowski, who excelled as a portraitist and historical painter, for example, in the portraits of his mother and of General Henryk Dembiński, hero of the 1831 Uprising and of the Hungarian Uprising. Juliusz Kossak (1824–99) painted scenes from the Swedish and Napoleonic wars and from the Polish countryside, especially of horses and hunting. Artur Grottger (1837–67), a disciple of Juliusz Kossak, depicted realistic battle scenes from the 1863 Insurrection, expressing his visionary patriotism in the series of drawings *Polonia* and *Lithuania*. But the artist who created a veritable pageant of Polish history was Jan Matejko (1838–93). In his representation of Poland's past, aimed at uplifting the spirit of his enslaved compatriots, Matejko depicted the most glorious events from the Polish annals, e.g., *The Battle of Grunwald* (1410), *The Prussian Homage* (1525), *Batory at Pskov* (1581), *Sobieski at Vienna* (1683), *The Constitution of the Third of May* (1791), and *Kościuszko at Raclawice* (1794).

Stanisław Witkiewicz (1851–1915), a painter, architect, and designer, as well as an art critic, championed the principles of modern art. In his influential book *Art and Criticism in Our Country* (1891), he extolled formal values, not patriotic subject matter, as the criteria of artistic excellence. Many painters adopted a realistic style, particularly suitable for depicting everyday

activities of their countrymen. Wojciech Gerson (1831–1901) excelled as a painter of mountainous landscapes, e.g., *A Graveyard in the Mountains*, and as an influential teacher. Aleksander Gierymski (1850–1901), was the author of realistic canvasses depicting Warsaw *Sand Diggers*, the Jewish *Holiday of Trumpets*, and *The Peasant Coffin*, while his brother Maksymilian (1846–74) painted historic scenes and haunting landscapes, e.g., *An Insurgents' Patrol in 1863* and *The March of the Uhlans*. Józef Chełmoński (1849–1914), a student of Gerson, excelled in landscapes and in scenes from the life of Polish peasants, e.g., *Indian Summer*, *At the Manorial Farm*, *Storks*, and *Four-in-Hand*.

In sculpture, the dominant style was neo-Classical. Andrzej Pruszyński (1836–97) sculpted the figure of *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1858), located in front of the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw. In Cracow, Walery Gądoński (1833–1911) executed a statue of *Copernicus* (1872) for the Academy of Learning, while Teodor Rygier (1841–1919) chiseled the monumental figure of *Mickiewicz* (1898) in the Market Square. Cyprian Godebski (1831–1919), who lived in Paris and Brussels, created the monuments of *Moniuszko* (1874), *Mickiewicz* (Warsaw, 1888–98), and *Copernicus* (1899).

Polish music was cultivated by a growing network of amateur groups. The Galicia Music Society was founded in Lwów in 1858 and the Warsaw Music Society in 1870. The leading composer of the period was Władysław Żeleński (1837–1921), who after studying in Prague and Paris returned to his native Cracow, where he directed the Music School, transformed later into the Conservatory. Żeleński was the author of operas based on Romantic literary texts, e.g., *Konrad Wallenrod*, *Goplana*, and *An Old Tale*. He also wrote numerous songs, chamber music, and symphonies, among which the overture *In the Tatra Mountains*, as well as another opera *Janek*, expressed his interest in local folklore. Similarly, Zygmunt Noskowski (1846–1909), for many years the director of the Warsaw Music Society and a distinguished teacher, composed the concert overtures *The Eye of the Sea* and *The Steppe*, in which he extolled the beauty of native mountains and plains.

Two outstanding composers gained world-wide reputations, mainly as brilliant performers. Henryk Wieniawski (1835–80), a composer of concertos for violin and orchestra, distinguished himself as one of the most brilliant violin virtuosos, while Ignacy Paderewski (1860–1941), a famous pianist, used his international celebrity to champion the cause of free Poland, becoming in 1919 its Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Theater life flourished in Galicia, especially in Cracow and Lwów. The leader of the Cracow School was Stanisław Koźmian. He surrounded himself with a group of outstanding actors, among them Helena Modrzejewska, who later became famous in Warsaw, England, and the United States. Koźmian believed that in Poland the theater's most important role was to cultivate and support the native language and literature. He developed a unified system of stagecraft and a diversified repertoire, which included eighteen plays by Shakespeare, a broad range of Western classics, and many Polish plays, old and new. It was mainly in the lively theaters of Cracow and Lwów that the plays of Mickiewicz, Słowacki, and Fredro were staged for the first time.

Gradually, theaters in Warsaw, Poznań, Łódź, and Lublin performed the tragedies and comedies of those preeminent Romantic playwrights.

### Literary Background

The main role in propagating the positivist program was played by journalists, scholars, poets, and novelists. The most influential theoretician was Aleksander Świętochowski (1849–1938), author of *Political Directions* (1882) and editor of the Warsaw periodical *Truth*. Świętochowski maintained that the people's welfare did not depend on political independence, but rather on a set of conditions that would allow them to work for their economic and cultural improvement. He advocated a liberal program of reform directed against ignorance and prejudice. Other journalists and periodicals, e.g., Adam Wiślicki, editor of *The Weekly Review*, Piotr Chmielowski of *Athenaeum*, and *The News*, edited for a time by Bolesław Prus, promoted positivist ideas. Newspapers in Warsaw and Cracow, e.g., *The Warsaw Courier*, *Illustrated Weekly*, *Daily Gazette*, and *Time*, considerably increased their circulation by publishing articles and serialized novels by Bolesław Prus, Henryk Sienkiewicz, and Eliza Orzeszkowa.

Bolesław Prus was the leading literary exponent of positivism and realism. He distinguished himself as a publicist, depicting in twenty volumes of his *Chronicles* the daily life of nineteenth-century Warsaw, and as a short story writer. In a series of short stories published between 1879 and 1883, e.g., *Stan's Adventure*, *The Barrel Organ*, *Michałko*, *Antek*, *The Waistcoat*, and *Sins of Childhood*, Prus dealt with social issues related most often to children and the poor, displaying at the same time his keen sense of observation, subtle psychological insight, and warmhearted humor.

In his first major novel *The Outpost* Prus showed the tenacious struggle of a backward peasant against German colonizers who wanted to buy his land. The novel's hero Ślimak (his name translates as 'snail') represents the Polish Job who suffers the blows of fate, and yet clings to his land. Unable to find help from the local landowners and village priest, Ślimak is spurred to action by his wife. When she dies and his farm is burnt down, he is befriended by a poor Jewish peddler, with whose help he finally manages to resist the powerful attacks of his antagonists.

Prus's next novel *The Doll* is a broad panorama of social and economic life in Warsaw. Its main character is Stanisław Wokulski, a penniless insurgent of noble origin, who by dint of hard work and business acumen becomes a prosperous entrepreneur. However, this intelligent and energetic man is a Romantic at heart and falls in love with the beautiful but shallow Izabela Łęcka, the daughter of an impoverished aristocrat. When the infatuated Wokulski fails to win Izabela's heart, he disappears in a tragic finale, most likely taking his own life.

**Figure 2.** *Collegium Novum* in Cracow

In *The Doll*, Prus depicts a memorable gallery of Dickensian characters, led by Ignacy Rzecki, Wokulski's delightful old friend and manager of his store, as well as an assortment of scenes from daily life. The author describes with realism a transitional epoch in the life of Polish society, softening the sharp contrasts between the Romantic values of the past and the new positivist mores with his profound sentiment and subtle wit.

Prus's historical novel *The Pharaoh* dealt with social and political issues of the state. By setting the story in ancient Egypt, Prus was able to examine the mechanisms of state power without alarming the censors. He showed an idealistic young ruler Ramses struggling against the entrenched priests in order to reform the country and help the oppressed, backward masses. Even though the young reformer perished in this struggle, his victorious adversaries implemented some of the ideas that he had advanced.

Eliza Orzeszkowa, who like Prus was an active participant in the January 1863 Uprising, was a stalwart champion of peasants, women, Jews, and small gentry from little provincial towns in Eastern Poland, where she was born and spent her whole life. Concerned primarily with moral and social issues, Orzeszkowa espoused early on the tenets of positivism and of realism, bringing them forward in her voluminous short stories and novels.

Orzeszkowa took up the issue of the emancipation of women, especially in education and in marriage, in *The Memoirs of Wacława* and *Marta*. In several other books, among them *Eli Makower* and *Meir Ezofowicz*, Orzeszkowa fought against anti-Semitism, depicting the rich culture of the Jewish people with empathy and understanding. She described the peasants' lot in a series of novels, e.g., *The Boor* and *The Dziurdzia Family*. Her greatest accomplishment, however, was a novel about the gentry, entitled *On the Banks of the Niemen*. Set in the idyllic valley of the Niemen River, the epic story describes the first settlers, whose descendants fought in wars and uprisings, preserved tradition, and tried to work and live in harmony, regardless of their position—all against the serene background of glorious Lithuanian nature.

The most popular writer of the period was Henryk Sienkiewicz, who excelled as a journalist, publicist, short story writer, and novelist. His early short stories, e.g., *Charcoal Sketches*, *Janko the Musician*, and *In Search of Bread*, dealt with pressing social issues. Soon, however, Sienkiewicz turned his attention to history, and in a series of epic novels, entitled the *Trilogy*, he showed the valiant struggles of the Polish nation against Cossacks, Swedes, and Turks during the stormy years between 1648 and 1673. Written to “uplift the hearts” of his countrymen, Sienkiewicz's *With Fire and Sword*, *Deluge*, and *Sir Michael* captivated readers with their haunting atmosphere, superb literary style, and unforgettable characters engaged in heroic military adventures and romantic entanglements, presented against the picturesque background of seventeenth-century Poland.

Encouraged by his literary success, Sienkiewicz wrote *Quo Vadis*, a panoramic picture of early Christianity and the Rome of Nero. The dramatic conflict between the powerful pagan empire and an emerging Christian community brought him international fame and the 1905 Nobel Prize for litera-

ture. His next novel *The Knights of the Cross*, in which Sienkiewicz called attention to Prussian nationalism, depicted the struggle of Polish knights against their erstwhile enemy, culminating in the victorious battle at Grunwald (Tannenberg) in 1410.

Sienkiewicz's psychological novels of contemporary life, e.g., *Without Dogma* and *The Połaniecki Family*, failed to win critical acclaim, but his numerous short stories, among them *The Lighthouse Keeper* and *Two Meadows*, as well as his *In Desert and Wilderness*, an African adventure book for young readers, confirmed his stature as a superb stylist and storyteller.

Poetry, especially in its Romantic rendition, was neglected during the height of realism. Among a handful of poets who attracted considerable popularity were Adam Asnyk, Maria Konopnicka, and Wiktor Gomulicki. Asnyk, who was brought up in the Romantic tradition, made his mark with a collection of melodious lyric poems *An Album of Songs*. He expressed his love for nature, manifested in the beauty and mystery of the mountains, in the cycle *In the Tatras*. In the collection of thirty philosophical sonnets *Over the Depths*, Asnyk combined a Romantic view of nature with the Positivist vision by depicting mountainous landscapes in their evolutionary development, which was guided by laws that also governed human lives and the progress of mankind.

Maria Konopnicka was a poet of the downtrodden, especially peasants and poor city dwellers, quite often children. Many of her poems, for example, the collections of *Songs of the Night*, *On a Fife* and *From Meadows and Fields*, were inspired by plaintive folk songs and depicted scenes from rural life with subtle feeling and sympathy. She wrote lyrical poems, e.g., *The Voices of Silence*, patriotic appeals, e.g., the popular *Oath*, and a peasant epos *Mr. Balcer in Brazil*, in which she showed the sad lot of Polish emigrants. She was also fascinated by the beauty of ancient and Renaissance art, which she saw in Italy and immortalized in two volumes, *Hellenica* and *Italia*.

Konopnicka excelled as a short story writer, showing in a naturalistic fashion the misery of human lives in Polish villages and towns, e.g., *In the Valley of Skawa*, *Our Old Nag*, and *Smoke*. She also wrote popular fairy tales, e.g., *About Dwarfs and the Orphan Mary* and *The Golden Seeds*.

Wiktor Gomulicki gained popularity as a poet of Warsaw, especially of the Old Town and its history. His love for the beauty of urban life extended to other towns, e.g., *Songs of Gdańsk*, and to people, as evidenced in his poem *El mole rachmim*, which celebrated a modest Jewish wedding in Warsaw. He also wrote historical novels, numerous short stories, and literary essays.

Michał Bałucki and Gabriela Zapolska gained prominence among playwrights. Bałucki's comedies, beginning with *Councilor's Councilors* and followed by *Open House*, *Big Fish*, and *The Bachelors' Club*, bordered on farce. His stage was filled with a gallery of set characters and resonated with unsophisticated laughter, where the action moved swiftly. Simple and mildly satirical, Bałucki's plays mocked old bachelors, flirtatious bounty hunters, and pompous bureaucrats.

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Gabriela Zapolska wrote short stories and novels, e.g. *Kaśka Kariatyda* (1888) and *Human Menagerie* (1893), in which she discussed social issues, especially pertaining to women, using the naturalistic convention. She also wrote a book about Polish socialists in Paris, patriotic melodramas, short plays about Jewish slum-dwellers in Warsaw, and several novels in which she described the most abhorrent aspects of the exploitation of women and sundry miseries of city life. Her most popular plays, however, were the comedies of manners, e.g., *The Four of Them*, *Miss Maliczewska*, and *The Morality of Mrs. Dulka*, in which she castigated the moral hypocrisy of the upper middle class.

The most prominent representative of naturalism was Adolf Dygasiński, the author of numerous short stories and novels. Influenced by French and English writers, especially by Darwin, he often wrote about man's basic instincts and his battle against hostile nature. He excelled in tales about poor villagers, e.g., *Beldonek*, and about animals, among which *From Villages, Fields, and Forests*, *The Hare*, and *The Feast of Life* gained considerable popularity.

**Figure 3.** Adam Asnyk