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## Introduction: Polish Romantic Philhellenism



One of the most important Polish poets and thinkers, Cyprian Norwid, wrote in 1875, recalling the enthusiasm that had engulfed all of Europe a few dozen years before: “Old men, ladies and children – those from drawing rooms and factories – the mighty and the poor – the educated and those who knew little – statesmen, the bureaus and offices of the ruling class as well as common crowds... everyone... absolutely everyone sent Greece their most selfless feelings, songs, gold, exceptional people and freedom”.<sup>1</sup> Looking at Europe’s disinterested enthusiasm towards the Greek struggle for independence in the 1820s, and at the solidarity with the fighting Greeks shared by different circles in European societies and nations, Norwid compared it to the enthusiasm associated with the Crusades from centuries before. Of all the events in the history of Europe, Norwid believed only the Crusades were comparable to the extraordinary activity and selfless fervour that united the continent over the cause of Greece’s independence: “solely the Crusades, and they as the one and only thing from all of Europe’s history, shine with similar and equal enthusiasm”.<sup>2</sup> Juxtaposing the Philhellenic movement with the Crusades, Norwid primarily underlined the ardour of its participants and their dedication to a cause that was more than just political. His comparison shows what Greece’s freedom

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<sup>1</sup> C. Norwid, “W rocznicę powstania styczniowego”, [in:] idem, *Pisma wszystkie*, J.W. Gomulicki (ed.), vol. 7: *Proza*, Warszawa 1973, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

meant to the whole of Europe, and to Poland in particular, a country which had lost its independence at the end of the 18th century. First and foremost, it was a question of Europeans' identity as heirs of the Greek classical tradition with its focus on respect for the human individual, for freedom and democracy, but also for the category of beauty that Europe learned from Homer and Phidias. In one of his "Greek" poems written on the shores of Crete at the time of the Revolutions of 1848, Norwid speaks of the Socratic tradition and – more broadly – ancient Greek culture as "mystic bread" shared by nations. He thus views Greek culture as the word uniting nations, creating the possibility of communication, as a "talisman for communing in art" provided by Providence.<sup>3</sup>

In Poland, Philhellenism is understood in a broad sense, not being limited to direct involvement in the fighting, although Polish Philhellenes also set off for Greece to aid the insurgents in their struggle. Let us add that their biographies, carefully reconstructed by Professor Gościwit Malinowski, are remarkable, as they poignantly reflect Poland's situation in the 19th century. Polish Philhellenes fighting in Greece most often took part in the struggle for Poland's independence as well. Many Polish Philhellenes who supported the Greek independence cause from Poland in the 1820s were often also independence activists who continued their struggle to free their homeland after 1831 as émigrés, some of them were sentenced to death by the tsarist occupying forces for their involvement in the Polish insurgence of 1830. Examples include Romantic poet Seweryn Goszczyński, who travelled on foot to Greece during the fighting there, and Franciszek Grzymała, an editor of Warsaw periodicals in the 1820s, participant in the November Uprising (1830–1831), and an émigré activist, who informed Polish readers about the Greek insurgent struggle. It can be argued that Polish Philhellenes fighting along with the Greeks or supporting their cause belonged to the mythical country of Romantic poetry; they were the "mad people" about whom the greatest Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz, wrote that it was they, accused of madness and belligerence but faithful to their conscience, who supported the liberation cause, rather than "reasonable people".<sup>4</sup>

The Polish press of the time was filled with reports on current insurgent events in Greece, and groups of university enthusiasts of Greek antiquity, e.g. in Vilnius, organised money collections to aid the Greeks. The Romantic Philhellenes saw a direct connection between the great ancient tradition and its

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<sup>3</sup> C. Norwid, "List do Wojciecha Grzymały [Paris 1852]. Post scriptum do *Tańce słowiańskie*", [in:] idem, *Pisma wszystkie...*, vol. 8: *Listy*, Warszawa 1971, p. 175.

<sup>4</sup> In an article from 1833 entitled "On Reasonable People and Mad People", Mickiewicz shows how paradoxical and ambiguous the category of "reason" is in political activity, while associating noble "madness" with the pro-liberation stance of Polish patriots.

heir and continuator: contemporary Greece. Nineteenth-century Philhellenism did not only have a political aspect; it became a great, inspirational, rich and diverse literary and cultural movement. In all countries and societies, it expressed the same idea: solidarity with the aspirations to independence of the Greeks treated as the heirs of the classical tradition. It thus had the same roots throughout Europe; furthermore, Philhellenism was expressed in similar topics, themes, and motifs.

While it shared its fundamental ideas and beliefs with other national forms of the movement, Polish Philhellenism had its own distinct facet determined by Poland's political situation in the 19th century, when it was deprived of sovereign statehood and subjugated by three partitioning powers (Russia, Prussia, and Austria). The aforementioned Norwid devoted much attention to this experience of bondage which Greece and Poland had in common but in which they also differed. It was a shared experience because both nations lacked state independence; it was different in the sense that Greece regained its self-determination in the 19th century and began building the foundations of its modern statehood, while Poland had to wait until 1918. However, the Poles did not wait passively for their freedom but pursued underground activity throughout the 19th century, preparing several national uprisings (the most important ones: 1794, 1830, 1848, 1863) and taking part in many liberation movements across Europe; their motto, "For Our Freedom and Yours", became the most important message of the Polish independence efforts.

Knowing this historical context, it is not hard to understand how the image of Greece in Polish Romantic literature is dominated by themes related to the independence struggle and a sense of shared historical fate. The Greeks were regaining their national identity by reactivating their ties to the distant, great, ancient past. Likewise, the Poles remembered the valiant and knightly history of the Commonwealth of the Two Nations: Polish and Lithuanian, its symbol being the victory of Polish King John III Sobieski, commander of Polish imperial troops, over the army of the Ottoman Empire at Vienna in 1683. Polish Romantics attached great importance to the pre-partitioning ethos of the nobleman brought up in the tradition of Mediterranean culture and committed to his homeland's cause. Throughout the 19th century, the image of the noble landowner cultivating the land, who was also a knight valiantly defending his homeland, determined the memory of that homeland's lost, and by then almost mythical, greatness. Also throughout the 19th century – the century of national bondage – the Poles debated at length the reasons why the Polish state had fallen, the roads to regaining independence and, finally, the form of future relations between different social strata, especially between the gentry

and the serfs. Greece played a very important role in these discussions: both ancient, especially Spartan exemplars, and those from modern Greece, and political as well as ethical – role – models.

In the period of national bondage, Romantic literature had a special function: it upheld the national identity and often stood in for the institutions that did not exist in the partitioned state. Most of the Polish Romantics received a very good classical education, and additionally many of them – especially students of Vilnius University, including Adam Mickiewicz – found themselves within the orbit of German neo-Hellenism (through Professor Ernest Groddeck in particular). The great Polish Romantics were mainly descended from the gentry of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, traditionally oriented towards the values of Roman culture and drew their role models as well as social and political ideas from that culture. Thus, rooted in ancient culture, the Polish Romantics were very well-versed in Greek and Roman antiquity, interpreting it in the Romantic manner. At the beginning of the Romantic period, all over Europe and also in Poland, Greece was esteemed more than Rome. Hellas as a mainstay of values – those important for Romanticism, like freedom, nature, openness to transcendence – was more meaningful to the “ascending” Romantics than Roman culture, which at the time was considered artificial and derivative compared to ancient Greece. Even though an interest in Rome’s complicated history reappeared as Polish Romanticism developed, it was Hellenism and Philhellenism that remained the Polish Romantics’ constant source of creative inspiration – artistic, intellectual, and moral. We should also add that Polish Romantics’ fascination with Greece was influenced by the exceptionally rich and intense reception of Byron, who was loved in Poland almost as much as he was in Greece. The famous initial passage about enslaved Greece from *The Giaour*, translated by Mickiewicz, the most important Polish poet, was also interpreted as a veiled reference to the Polish cause, while the words about the struggle for freedom, which “once begun, / With the father’s blood it falls upon the son”,<sup>5</sup> show what the heritage of ancient Greece meant to the Polish Romantics. “We are all Greeks”, wrote Shelley; alongside this general European commitment to Greece he thus expressed, the Polish Romantics felt a special bond between Greece’s “spirit of liberty” and their own imperative of freedom.

The parallel drawn between the history of Greece and that of Poland is the Polish version of the Romantic worship of Greece as a symbol of freedom. In

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<sup>5</sup> A. Mickiewicz, “Giaur. Ułamki powieści tureckiej z Lorda Byrona”, [in:] idem, *Dzieła. Wydanie Rocznicowe*, vol. 2: *Poematy*, Warszawa 1998, p. 158, lines 124–125.

Polish literature it also became a transparent mask for talking about Polish national history, an allegory of Polish affairs. That is the uniquely Polish aspect of the Romantic fascination with the ideal Hellas, a symbol of the ultimate freedom of nations, where the parallel between Poland and Greece, between tsarist Russia and Rome, was put forward and cited often in Polish Romanticism.

A special form of the Greek-Polish Romantic parallel emerged from the juxtaposition of the Greek uprising with the Polish revolts. However, it could be more accurate to use the plural for both the Greek and Polish uprisings. To give one example, Słowacki, poet and Philhellene, drew upon the events of the Greek rebellion of 1770, although it was actually the 1821 uprising that inspired him, and his poem *Lambro* considers the situation of his 19th-century contemporaries. The 1821 Greek revolution gave the Poles hope – hope that Poland would regain its independence – not in a short-term political way but in the sphere of moral ideas and in terms of the ethicisation of international relations. This aspect of ethicisation needs to be strongly underlined, as it establishes political relations on clearly ethical foundations. Analysing Poles' perception of the Greek uprising as an event of universal character that goes beyond a single nation's cause, we also need to emphasise the role of the Polish diplomat, aristocrat, writer, and highly influential politician for several decades of the 19th century, Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, who showed his support for the Greek cause in various ways. His political manifesto (according to researchers, inspired by the outbreak of the Greek uprising, and completed by 1827), *Essai sur la diplomatie ou manuscrit d'un Philhellène* [Essay on Diplomacy, or the Philhellene Manuscript] (ed. Nicolas Toulouzan, founder of the Société de la morale chrétienne and vice-president of the Marseille Philhellenic Committee, published Marseille, 1830), signed "Philhellene", contained a programme for the creation of a universal political order based on the laws of nations and, above all, on ethical principles. The Philhellene's text, or indeed "manifesto", is extensive and touches upon the fundamentals of European politics and speaks of the Greek cause that inspired the author to write the work. Czartoryski points to the contrast between the initial indifference of European governments and the passionate interest of nations in the Greek uprising.

The 1821 Greek revolution thus appears in Polish Romanticism in (at least) three dimensions: (1) a broad Philhellenic and Byronian perspective; Byron was one of the most important figures for Polish Romanticism, deeply assimilated by Polish culture; (2) a universal dimension – through a connection with ancient models; (3) as a mask for Polish independence aspirations

and as a context for reflecting on the Polish uprisings. In Polish circumstances, the theme of the 1821 Greek revolution is a painful summons to reflection on the failures of the 19th-century Polish uprisings, inspiring a bitter settling of accounts with the defeat of successive national rebellions.

The Greece/Poland motif in the works of the greatest Polish Romantic Philhellenic poet, Juliusz Słowacki, is of exceptional importance for Polish culture, due to his enormous influence on subsequent generations of poets. Greece juxtaposed with Poland, Greece as a model for Poland, and Greece as a mask for Polish national problems are themes which appear in all periods of his oeuvre. Before his great journey to Greece, the Holy Land, and Egypt, the image of Hellas in Słowacki's output was conventional, literary, reminiscent of Byron's poems. The trip to Greece in 1836 unfolded the beauty of Homer's homeland before his eyes. This was not just a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, but also precisely a pilgrimage to the ideal of Greece as the homeland of freedom and beauty. It was to Greece that Słowacki devoted a poem he wrote during his journey, most probably during a fortnight's stay on the island of Syros. Greece also appeared in the later, mystical period of his oeuvre, and it was then, in the 1840s, that it assumed the clear form – most characteristic of his poetry – of a parallel between the historical gentry of Poland and Sparta, with the ethical and patriotic values it embodied. Greece/Sparta interpermeating with Polishness and its ideals is Słowacki's most original poetic vision, and one to which he returned in all the periods of his oeuvre.

The Greek landscape as described by Słowacki is filled with traces of an extraordinary unity of the natural and the sacred, while also preserving the memory of both history and the world of myths. For example, the high mountain seen from the Gulf of Patras, behind which the famous Missolonghi lies, reminds the poet of a giant pyramid, built not by humans but by God, who sensed the greatness and glory of this land. Greece combines different dimensions of existence here: natural, historical, and sacred. Słowacki's text also abounds in tones recreating daily life in 19th-century Greece and the eternal – Greek – harmony between nature, art, and myth, but it also contains an extensive repertoire of Philhellenic poetic themes. *Podróż do Ziemi Świętej z Neapolu* [Journey to the Holy Land from Naples] is filled with the poet's admiration for the heroic struggle of both the ancient and the contemporary Greeks, and for their love of freedom. Reminiscing about his youthful reading of tales about the new Greece's fighters' deeds (including the Ypsilantis brothers, Botsaris, and Kanaris), the poet on his journey builds an unusual picture of both the Greek struggle for independence and his own inner world. For example, he recalls that he learned about the Greek uprising in

his youth, when he read about Botsaris as well as Kanaris, “the lord of two elements” – fire and water (he later visited Kanaris in Greece, an encounter which he described in his poem).<sup>6</sup> Slowacki is fascinated by Greek heroes, who form a kind of chain of freedom-fighting tradition, by Hellas not only as the homeland of beauty but, above all, characterised by its defenders: Prometheus, Miltiades, Themistocles, Leonidas, Kanaris among others – mythical and historical, early and modern figures – fascinate the poet with their bravery and heroism not only as they face life but also, or perhaps above all, in their attitude to death, their heroism without hope: “Each of them strong... each without hope... / Where are they from? they come from the graves of Chaeronea...”.<sup>7</sup> The poet is fascinated by heroic figures, but not utopian demi-gods, statues like the immortal Heracles. These heroes are people who carry an awareness of mortality and yet, or maybe exactly because of this, they rebel and fight.

The image of Greece as an idyll is an important point of reference for the image the poet creates of Hellas, entangled in history and its challenges. In the poem’s final canto with its images of Corinth, summarising the poem as a whole, concluding it both artistically and in terms of the issues raised, we find exceptionally beautiful descriptions of both Greek and Polish idylls. Here North meets South, and Poland meets Greece – “the blue Archipelago” where “the wonderful sapphire sea shines down below”, Corinth where the wistful eye is welcomed by “the whole country – fertile, green, wide, / Cut through by the ribbon of the Corinthian bay”.<sup>8</sup> Here, “the traveller poet” finds “his longings” assuaged, he feels as if he had returned home. This canto recapitulates the themes that make up the poetic vision of Greece; it is a look from afar but also a look bringing salvation, a look in which Greece again shows itself through the ancient topos of idyll and harmony between humans, nature, and culture – even if it is an idyll and harmony almost unattainable for the poet’s contemporaries, entangled as they are in history.

It was not only the “great Polish Romantics” (Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Norwid, Krasiński), mainly writing as exiles, who suggested Greece as a point of reference for thinking about history, especially Polish history. Poets writing in Poland under the partitions (Kornel Ujejski, Teofil Lenartowicz, Adam Pajgert, Mieczysław Romanowski) often delved into the history of Greece in search of models for contemporary times; in particular, they referred to Spartan themes,

<sup>6</sup> J. Słowacki, “Podróż do Ziemi Świętej z Neapolu”, [in:] M. Kalinowska, *Juliusza Słowackiego „Podróż do Ziemi Świętej z Neapolu”*, Gdańsk 2011, Canto IV, line 323.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, Canto IV, lines 239–240.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, Canto IX, lines 5–6.

especially those related to Tyrtaeus, who personified the values typical for the whole of Polish Romanticism.

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The small volume we present to you invokes earlier Polish research on Philhellenism, while also defining new paths for this field of study, mainly in two areas: establishing full knowledge on Polish Philhellenes who supported the Greek struggle, and the reception of the Greek uprising in the Polish press. The biographies of Polish participants in the Greek uprising are the subject of the text by Professor Gościwit Malinowski, who has managed to establish many new facts and identify many forgotten Polish Philhellenes who fought in Greece.<sup>9</sup> The paper by Professor Małgorzata Borowska, a leading Hellenist and translator of Greek literature, shows with the example of *Gazeta Krakowska* how important information about the Greeks' insurgent battles was to the Poles. Dr Magdalena Kowalska gives a synthetic presentation of Poles' interest in songs in modern Greek and the link between this fascination and the Greek independence cause. The two initial papers offer syntheses and introductions to Polish Philhellenism: Professor Jacek Knopek outlines the political background of the situation in Greece and Poland at the time; Professor Maria Kalinowska's paper is an introduction to further research and a recapitulation of what has been established so far.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See also the [al.uw.edu.pl](http://al.uw.edu.pl) website for a list of Polish Philhellenes supporting the Greek cause in Poland.

<sup>10</sup> My introduction has been based on my text "ΠΡΟΛΟΓΙΚΟΝ ΣΗΜΕΙΩΜΑ", published in the anthology *Η ΕΛΛΑΣΤΩΝ ΠΟΛΩΝΩΝ ΡΟΜΑΝΤΙΚΩΝ. ΠΟΙΗΤΙΚΗ ΑΝΘΟΛΟΓΙΑ*, Wydawnictwo N. & Σ. Μπατσιούλας, P. Krupka, S. Karageorgos (transl. of introduction), M. Kalinowska, P. Krupka (eds.), P. Krupka, J. Petropoulos (transl.), Athens 2018. In this text and in the entire book we used the works completed during a research project financed by the National Science Centre (registration number 2014/15/B/HS2/01360).