

The Rebel Romantic

Stanislaw Wyspianski's contribution to Polish culture and national identity, 1869-1907



Stanislaw Wyspianski's birth year 1869 can be viewed as a hinge between Poland's past and its future – a past dominated by military revolt following the Third Partition of 1795 and the country's disappearance from the political map of Europe, and a future marked by the cultural assertion of national identity and a bridging of class divisions. Miraculously, it seems, Poland regained its independence after 123 years, in 1918. That the regaining of national sovereignty was by no means a miracle but the consequence of decades of cultural vitality in the absence of political expression, and that the focus of the cultural elite on national identity was concentrated in the more liberal Austrian-dominated part of Poland around Krakow, is personified by one of the beacons of Polish literature, Stanislaw Wyspianski. In conjunction with the other grandees of Polish literature of the time, Henryk Sienkiewicz (Nobel laureate in 1905) and Boleslaw Prus, Wyspianski's work fuelled the idea of nationhood, defined by Anthony Smith as 'a named population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories' (Smith, 1991, p. 14). It illustrated that the idea of statehood, as referring 'exclusively to public institutions (...) and exercising a monopoly of coercion and extraction within a given territory' gained potency when matched with popular beliefs, symbols, language, religion, and culture, rather than being confined to a relatively narrow elite project embraced solely by the nobility prior to 1863-4 (Smith, *ibid.*). This essay will sketch the prelude to Wyspianski's birth, introduce his oeuvre within the context of his times, and examine its reception. It will illustrate that Wyspianski's astonishing creativity uniquely contributed to Poland's cultural landscape and national identity.

Oppression and resistance as prominent themes after the Third Partition culminated in the unsuccessful January uprising of 1864. After the uprising, any expression of political will and indeed of Polish language and national identity faced strict prohibition, initially in the Russian-occupied territories surrounding Warsaw, later in the Prussian/German-dominated region around Posen and Danzig, and least severely around the Austrian dominated territories of Galicia around Cracow too. Most immediately, the failure of the 1863 January Insurrection brought about the execution and expulsion of those implicated – numbering 18,000 according to official Russian records yet estimated today at 80,000 (Davies, 1997, p.82). More broadly, the uprising served as a pretext for the Russian government to enforce a set of harsh repressive measures.

The first of these was directly targeted at the aristocracy. Even prior to 1863 a divide between peasants and nobility had marked Polish society. It contributed to the failure of the insurgency, and in 1846, had even led to massacres by Polish peasants against local landowners in the Austrian-dominated part of the country. As retaliation for the key role that the large landowners had played in the January uprising, the Tsarist decree of 1864 abolished serfdom and emancipated all former serfs in this part of Poland. By granting serfs their autonomy, resentments towards their former landowners could be more freely expressed, and tensions grew. However, it was also the confiscation of the land itself that proved to be economically consequential. A total of 1,660 estates were seized by Russian authorities, depriving the nobility of their income, and forcing them into poverty. In many cases, the nobility's struggle shifted from the aim of national independence, manifesting itself through the military uprisings of 1831 and 1863, to individual survival and economic subsistence.

The Polish cause was denied yet more spokesmen since the Russian authorities perceived the Polish Catholic church as the main instigator of the insurgence and instigated a mass deportation of priests to the Russian Interior. The anti-church and anti-Polish clamp-down was exemplified by the construction of the orthodox Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in the middle of Catholic Warsaw, standing at 70 metres tall, an imposing symbol of Russification.

This clamp-down was furthered by the Russian overtaking of the education sector. Wyspianski's birth year of 1869 also saw the systematic removal of Polish language teaching from the education system, at least in the Russian-dominated territories. This culminated in 1885 when the status of Polish language teaching was reduced to that of a non-compulsory language. The only subject still taught in

Polish thereafter was religion. Furthermore, history was taught according to a Russian curriculum, systematically intending to erase the legacy of past Polish resistance. By the 1890s, speaking Polish in schools was banned entirely.

In sum, the ramifications of January 1863 amounted to the complete suppression of Polish political expression and an onslaught on Polish identity and its vessels of representation. With the nobility destitute, the church persecuted and education serving as a tool for Russian control, Poland lay politically and culturally flat on the ground with no figurative light at the end of the tunnel. This was the world into which Wyspianski was born.

Wyspianski's early years critically affected his later work. He grew up in the cultural epicentre of Cracow in an intelligentsia-dominated milieu, and in an impoverished aristocratic family. With its past as Poland's capital until 1596, symbolic Wawel castle and Jagellonian university, the comparative lack of censorship in Cracow after 1863 helped nurture an already pre-existing artistic scene. His education at St Anne's secondary school provided him with exposure to the Polish language (forbidden in other educational institutes) and Polish history. St Anne's alumni, including the poet Lucjan Rydel, were a cultural force within the city. Later, his time attending the Philosophy Faculty at the Jagiellonian University as well as at the School of Fine Arts formed the foundation for his artistic inspiration, yet he sought to refine his cultural sensitivities by embarking on extensive travels from 1890-95, encountering significant inspiration from Paul Gauguin during his time in France amongst other long stints in Italy, Switzerland, and Germany.

Upon his return to Cracow, Wyspianski threw himself into a diverse range of artistic endeavours and contributed to Cracow's cultural scene with immense fervour. "I will necessarily", he stated, "produce miracles and wonders" (Hollidge, 2021). His activities included but were not limited to: drafting plans for the architectural renovations of the Wawel Royal Castle (as well as other public buildings); creating polychrome and monumental stained-glass windows for Kraków's Franciscan church; contributing artwork to the modernist literary journal "Życie"; painting in oil and pastel; illustrating, sketching and drawing; designing furniture; writing dramas; and developing stage designs as well as whole productions for Kraków's City Theatre. It is difficult to do justice here to the innovative force Wyspianski brought to each of his engagements. None of it was accidental, all of it was intentional. Within the space of twelve years, between 1895 and his premature death in 1907, he had made an immensely original and vigorous contribution in each field of his activities, had energized the cultural landscape of Cracow and Galicia, and had brought a perspective to Poland's body of culture and thinking about national themes that were fundamentally new, broad, and energetic.

Despite his later achievements, Wyspianski's first two plays, *Legend* (1897) and *Daniel and Meleagra* (1898) were largely unsuccessful. It was only with the publishing of *Warszawianka* (1898) that Wyspianski received recognition, marking his debut as a successful playwright. The past plays a prominent role in many of his plays, leading Stefan Srebrny to state that 'wherever the heroes of Wyspianski step, there the dead awaken from their sleep' (Srebrny, 1923). This holds particularly true given his recurring motif of the ancient Greek world, such as in the 1899 play *The Curse*. Influential political messages are expressed by the plays characters, symbolic figures representing various facets of Polish society. The central tenet of the play is the loss of national values through collaboration with the occupying authorities. This led the Austrian authorities to prohibit the staging of the play. Wyspianski's ability to merge historical events with timeless themes makes *The Curse* not only a powerful play at the time, but also an enduring piece of Polish literature.

These works importantly foregrounded his 1901 publication of *The Wedding*, catapulting Wyspianski to national recognition (Komaromi, 2002). *The Wedding* narrates the story of an inter-class marriage in Cracow, depicting the misery caused by oppressive politics, inert national traditions, and the scepticism of the intelligentsia towards the peasants (Prussak, 2006). The play was highly innovative in illustrating the strong social divides as a feature of Poland's national condition and portraying them

as a key cause of weakness. While the perception of these may have been enriched by the experience of Wyspiński's marriage to former peasant and domestic servant Teodora, *The Wedding* represents a veering away from the romantic ideals set out by the grand preceding Polish writers, including Adam Mickiewicz and Henryk Sienkiewicz, who had conflated the national cause with the ideals of the aristocracy. Wyspiński, in a sense, is quintessentially Polish and even Romantic, choosing the nation's fate as his primary subject matter, idealising the national cause, and elevating it to an utmost prominence in his work. Yet he is a rebel by calling out internal weaknesses and contradictions, and by grounding his work more in the realities of late 19th century life. With its roots in Greek tragedy and its equal emphasis on existing social conflicts and the national cause, *The Wedding* established Wyspiński as a rebel romantic and a figurehead for the lost Polish nationhood.

The play immediately gained traction after its publication in April 1901. It was staged in Lvov (then Galicia, today Ukraine) on May 24, and elsewhere, yet was censored in the Russian-occupied territory, highlighting its political gravity. Yet as many truly innovative artists have experienced before and since, breaking a taboo is good for publicity. At the premiere of *The Wedding*, the whole audience sat in silence. The fact that the play dared to question the founding myths of nineteenth-century Polish nationalism was perceived as outrageous. Yet the outrage mellowed, the play received critical acclaim, and Wyspiński was called upon to present a political agenda for national action. In fact, *The Wedding* is so significant to Polish self-conception that it has been performed in Poland nearly every year since its premiere, and it is still considered the greatest Polish play of the 20th century. How accomplished a playwright Wyspiński had become by the time he wrote *The Wedding* can be seen from the use of the spirits in the play. By using them Wyspiński disassociates himself from the past and builds upon it at the same time, the spirits being an allusion not only to Adam Mickiewicz's work *Forefathers' Eve*, one of the most celebrated texts of Polish literature, but also to other cultural landmarks, such as paintings of Jan Matejko and Jacek Malczewski. Wyspiński seeks to transcend the present and literal, all whilst exploring Poland's rich cultural past. In the absence of political expression such representation is necessarily political: 'Wyspiński was not only the all-embracing symbol of the most beautiful bloom of Polish art, but he was the most complete negation of the nation's slavery' (Srebrny, 1923).

Wyspiński at this stage was perceived as the most prominent figurehead of the Young Poland movement, a collection of artists joined together to revive folkish traditions and induce beauty back into people's lives, in the face of the oppression of occupying powers. After *The Wedding* followed *Liberation* (1903), *Weimar 1829*, (1904) *November Night* (1904), *Acropolis* (1904), *Skalka* (1907, English translation), *The Return of Oysseus* (1907) and *Zygmunt August* (1907, unfinished), all successful albeit not at the level of *The Wedding*. Thus, the collective dream of independence could be sustained, by reviving the history of Poland through the creation of art. Norman Davies encapsulates this lack of alternative more widely, stating that the country 'was just an idea- a memory from the past or a hope for the future' (Davies, 1997). Young Poland aimed to sustain this idea. By decorating churches and designing public buildings Wyspiński's ambition is traced to reach further than the intelligentsia attending theatres. His intention was to appeal broadly. The unparalleled variety of his artistic output ranging from sculpture, design, drama, drawings, oil paintings, illustrations, graphic art and of course drama effectively represented: 'the omnipresence of national aspiration,' (Adam Grzymala-Siedlecki, cited in Smith, 1991). He thereby left an indelible landmark on Polish self-identity.

Just as 1869 had marked the enrichment of Polish culture through Wyspiński's birth, 1907 represented a vital loss for the nation because of his death. On the day of his funeral, there were public demonstrations of sorrow. Wyspiński was inhumed in the Saint Michael the Archangel Basilica in Cracow, in the vaults reserved for prestigious public figures. Soon after his death, literary experts compiled a complete version of his works, although only published much later, with the first edition of *Collected Works* by Adam Chmiel and Tadeusz Sinko appearing in 1924. Perhaps precisely because

Poland lost the brief independence it had gained in 1918 for a further fifty years in 1939, Wyspianski has been a vibrant figure for Polish national identity ever since.

For his life and his times, Wyspianski's *oeuvre* can be placed within the wider context of Polish romantic ideas. His birth year 1869 served as a junction for past and present, leading him to experience oppression by foreign powers, yet also be cognizant of the futility of past revolt. Against this background he constructed his own vision for Poland's future, which ultimately shaped Poland's trajectory from the Third Partition in 1795 to the eventual restoration of statehood in 1918. As Henryk Sienkiewicz said in his banquet speech upon receiving the Nobel prize in 1905: 'This homage has been rendered not to me – for the Polish soil is fertile and does not lack better writers than me – but to the Polish achievement, the Polish genius.' (Sienkiewicz, 1904). This decisive declaration displays how culture filled the void that politics had left and became a form of political expression. In today's language, one would say that Wyspianski led the life of a rock star, dying young and dying of syphilis, contributing more than his fair share to the culture that had nurtured him within the space of a brief life, idealising the same romantic notions of nationhood whilst breaking harshly with the all-too-stale presuppositions of the literary grandees. He was a rebel romantic, with a cause.

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