



# HUMANISM IN POLISH CULTURE

Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa  
Wiesław Pawlak  
Piotr Urbański  
(eds.)

PETER LANG

## Introduction

The research project entitled *Humanism: Ideas, Trends, and Paradigms in Polish Culture* (*Humanizm. Idee, nurty i paradygmaty humanistyczne w kulturze polskiej*; hereafter: *Humanism in Polish Culture*) began work in 2007. The project involved scholars from a range of Polish academic institutions supported by colleagues from abroad, was coordinated by the Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies “Artes Liberales” at the University of Warsaw, and was sponsored by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. The research was completed in March 2011.

The aim of the research was to investigate the role of humanism in Polish culture, where we understand humanism to be an anthropological idea that affirms the dignity, freedom, autonomy and rights of man, recognizing him as a being who prevails over the world of nature by means of his consciousness, subjectivity and creative potential, and who proclaims inalienable ethical values. This idea, which is the universal heritage of European culture and at the same time—along with Christianity—an important constitutive element of Polish culture, has shaped models of our full humanity without interruption, despite the various transformations it has undergone over the course of the six centuries of its existence from the 15<sup>th</sup> century until the present day: models that are derived from antiquity (the Greek *paideia*, Roman *humanitas*) as well as from the more recent Judeo-Christian era (the Bible). The humanist idea has shaped moral and social attitudes, but also models of culture where culture is interpreted as the creative work of man and the environment conducive to the development of this work, and as the aesthetics, rhetoric tradition and poetics of classicism.

The results of our research, whose aim was to produce a comprehensive survey of the long-term duration or *longue durée* of the humanist tradition in Polish culture and of the historical transformations that have taken place within it, are represented by eleven interdisciplinary or cross-sectional volumes of collected research articles, as well as fourteen editions of primary sources, compiled and/or edited by scholars at the following universities: the Universities of Warsaw, Wrocław and Szczecin, the Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznań, the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (Lublin), the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, the Jagiellonian University (Kraków), Pedagogical University of

Kraków and the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

The series of eleven volumes of collected articles published under the joint title *Syntheses* (*Syntezy*) covers the research outcomes of the project and discusses the ideas and categories that connote humanism from the Renaissance to the present day, thus presenting a broad image of the humanist heritage in both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. Meanwhile the editions of primary sources that make up the two additional series, entitled *Inedita* and *Polonica*, restore to Polish culture literary works and other neglected writings by Polish humanists, as well as texts inspired by humanism that were in popular circulation but have lain untouched either in Polish libraries and archives, or in libraries and archives abroad, until very recently. The inclusion of these texts in the research materials allowed the scope of research undertaken to date in this field to be expanded, and thus the historical image of Polish humanism to be adjusted and revised.

The research covers humanist ideas as they appear in the fields of literature, philosophy, religion, social life, politics, aesthetics and rhetoric. It also has an interdisciplinary and comparative character, combining cultural studies, linguistics and literary studies with theoretical and methodological reflections or with more traditional philological procedures.

A multidimensional interpretation of humanist phenomena as a part of the European heritage in general and of the Polish national tradition in particular, illuminates the ties between Polish culture and European centres and the participation of Poland in the creation of a European cultural community, and at the same time the formation of an original national culture. Regarding this latter aspect, Polish humanism should be recognized as a specific value that contributed to the formation of the national culture, created in a former age but enriched by the ideas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and still vital today; and also endowed with remarkable powers of endurance and unusual social and artistic creativity.

When it is examined in the diachronic perspective, it is possible to observe how Polish culture, by adopting humanist ideas in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and even in the pre-Renaissance period (for instance in mediaeval personalism), found its place in the European space and associated itself both with the antique tradition of the Mediterranean cultures and with the modern cultures of western and central Europe. At the same time Polish culture was developing its own distinct national features, which were visible already in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Humanist anthropological and axiological models helped consolidate the culture of this early period in the linguistic, national, religious, social and political spheres, and since

the 19<sup>th</sup> century this culture has remained a constitutive element of the national tradition. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries these models were confronted by new cultural formations: the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Despite these multiple crises and subsequent transformations, the humanist idea has retained its vitality and its distinctive character right up until the present day; it has influenced the conceptualization and internalization of the collective identity, above all in the sphere of individual ethics and the ethos of citizenship, in the shaping of (especially private) communities and educational models.

Writing at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the contributors to the project *Humanism in Polish Culture* attempt to identify and interpret the humanist elements in contemporary culture, to define their connections with the humanist heritage but also to describe phenomena that resist this heritage, challenge it or call it into question. They also try to identify the historical sources of the dynamism and creativity of humanist elements, which, in the Polish context, may be clearly discerned in the special relationship between the humanist idea and Christian spirituality or in humanism's deep assimilation of the republican idea, which promotes an optimistic individualism, activism and voluntarism.

Our research into an idea with such inexhaustible energy and creativity is therefore motivated not only by strictly academic concerns, but also by the necessity to support the public debate about Poland's place in Europe with genuine, reliable scientific knowledge; it is also driven by the responsibility that academics have towards the current needs of society: the reinterpretation of Polish cultural identity and the definition and explanation of the values that have gone into its making.

From the purely academic point of view, observation of the *longue durée* of this cultural tradition stimulates theoretical reflections surrounding both the visible and hidden functioning in culture of elements of a humanistic provenance, as well as their adaptations, transformations and diversity; of particular interest today is the interface or interaction with other cultural currents, including the dialogue or confrontation of humanism with non-humanistic ideologies, and likewise the encounter between methodologies adopted by the humanities and paradigms that have evolved in the social or natural sciences.

The scholars who have contributed to our project also cherish the hope that their work will facilitate the entry of issues relating to Polish culture into the wider domain of contemporary European research, and allow knowledge about Polish humanism to be integrated into the complex picture of European humanism taken as a whole.

The reconstruction of the humanistic cultural paradigms created by Polish thinkers and writers in dialogue with European models, as well as

the transformations that these paradigms have undergone from Renaissance times to the present day, are discussed, as mentioned above, in the series of volumes published by our project. This current volume presents a summary of these research findings and is addressed mainly to non-Polish readers interested in the history of Polish culture and the part it has played in the formation of a European community based on humanist values.

Our research, including the publications produced within the framework of the project, was financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (Research Project no. PBZ-MNiSW-03/II/2007). We wish to express our gratitude to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education for funding the project and also to the participating universities for their additional support. The Polish language volumes were published by Wydawnictwo Neriton (Warsaw) in the years 2008–2011. We would like to thank all our reviewers and consultants, whose names are listed in the individual volumes, for their valuable comments and advice.

*Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa  
Wiesław Pawlak  
Piotr Urbański*

## Translator's Note

Every translation involves choices and compromises and the current one is no exception. Some brief explanation is therefore required as to why certain choices in terminology have been made.

Wherever possible Polish forms have been retained, as the Polish terms designate specific historical phenomena which do not have exact equivalents in other countries and cultures. Translations into terminology used to refer to similar (but not the same) phenomena in English or German history, for example, (such as "gentry" or "Diet") have therefore been deemed inappropriate. Here I have followed the practice of the most recent English-language histories of Poland published in Britain, above all *A Concise History of Poland* by Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki (Cambridge University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2006). Whilst recognizing that to some readers this remains controversial, I have followed the practice of these authors and left the Polish *szlachta* (the nobility or noble estate), a term that designates a much wider proportion of the *communitas nobilium* enjoying hereditary status and crucial privileges, than does the relatively limited English category *gentry*. Likewise I have used Sejm to designate the Polish parliament. With the names of Polish kings and rulers I have tended to depart, however, from the practice of Lukowski and Zawadzki and have used the Polish and not the anglicized forms: hence Zygmunt III Vasa (not Sigismund), Jan III Sobieski (not John). The only exceptions to this rule are writers known only by their forenames and linked to a place; hence John of Wiślica, Gregory of Sambor etc. Meanwhile the Polish Brethren appear as such, or as Antitrinitarians; the term Arians (as the translation of *Arianie*) has been avoided because of its negative connotations.

As to place names, I have preferred the established English-language forms where these exist and are still in common use, hence: Warsaw, Kiev, Moscow, Saint Petersburg, but Kraków. Where there are no convenient English-language forms I have preferred the present-day usages and included other significant variations where appropriate in brackets: Vilnius (Wilno), L'viv (Lwów).

Formulations that use the adjective *staropolski* (Old Polish) and the various references to the Enlightenment (*oświecenie stanisławowskie, postanisławowskie*) need to be made more precise for the non-Polish reader since the time frames are not obvious and do not overlap with

any precise periods in the culture of other European countries. I have used the term Old Polish to refer only to the Polish language from 9<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and to the literature that was written in this language, thus conforming to the general usage by linguists. When referring to Polish history, literature and culture from 1500–1800, I have used the term “early modern”, thus conforming to how this formulation is usually applied by historians. As to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “early Enlightenment” is used for the period from roughly 1740 to the mid-1760s, “high” or “Stanislavian” Enlightenment for the period from 1764 to 1795, and “late Enlightenment” for the period after 1795, i.e. after the collapse of the Commonwealth. This last is especially important because in many European countries, the Enlightenment is deemed to be over by 1800; in the Polish context Romanticism is considered to have “begun” in 1822 with the publication of Adam Mickiewicz’s *Ballads and Romances*.

I would like to express my gratitude to Piotr Wilczek and to Richard Butterwick for their advice regarding some of these terminological choices, although I should emphasize that responsibility rests entirely with myself in discussion with the editors of the current volume.

Finally I should indicate that my use of the word “man” as the translation of *człowiek* (in its general sense of “human being”) is to be understood as gender inclusive. In a book on humanism where a considerable proportion of the text is devoted to Renaissance humanism, it is difficult to avoid the use of “man” and in this particular context it would be inappropriate to attempt to do so, since “man” is the central concept. Also, attempts to overcome this problem in English (by using such formulations as “he or she” or the plural “they”) become stylistically awkward when repeated many times over. However, I have been flexible; when referring to the contemporary historian or researcher, I have used “he or she” where appropriate.

*Ursula Phillips*