

Tomasz Markiewka

Akademia Techniczno-Humanistyczna w Bielsku-Białej

Willowa 2, 43-309 Bielsko-Biała

tomasz.markiewka@gmail.com

Bulwark or political playground? Teodor Parnicki's *Count Julian and King Roderic*

Constructing bulwarks

The idea of *antemurale christianitatis* is deeply rooted in the history of European culture. The term has been used mainly with reference to the ongoing conflicts between Western/Northern European states with the Turkish Ottoman Empire. For the first time the term itself was used officially by Pope Leo X in 1519¹ with reference to Croatia, which for the following centuries was perceived as the gate to European civilisation. The centuries-long tension between the Christian North and the European/Asian/African South was a defining element for the borderland countries, their identity, perceived political role, as well as their religious mission of defending the Christian realms against the Muslims. The role of Croatia in the 16th century was later overshadowed by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which, from the post-Reformation times started to establish a political and religious position of *fidei defensor*², successfully fighting against the enemies of the Catholic faith – mainly the Muslims from the Ottoman Empire, whose victorious northbound march was stopped by Jan II Sobieski in the Battle of Vienna in 1683. Yet, the special role that was apparently

¹ Cf. Mitja Velikonja, *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, Texas A&M University Press. 2003, p. 78. The term was in fact used already in the 15th century by Pope Pius II.

² The title officially granted to Henry VIII by Leo X (1521), later was granted to the Polish King Jan III Sobieski by Pope Innocent XI in 1684.

assigned to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was perceived in terms of a post-Trent, orthodox Catholicism, which was ready to fight all sorts of external “infidels” – be they Ottomans, Swedish Lutherans who invaded the country in 1655, or rebels (Eastern orthodox as well as Muslim) from the south-eastern parts of the Commonwealth. Gradually, a unique merger between politics and religion which took the form of Polish “Sarmatian culture” became a heritage defining the ideological framework for the future. The anti-Turkish and anti-Protestant poetry of Wespazjan Kochowski (1633–1700) from his collection *Polish Psalms* (1695) is a good example and embodiment of the “bulwark ideology”, which laid the foundation for the future ideological components of Polish culture and its artistic and literary expressions. Nevertheless, the xenophobic, counter-reformation Catholicism, combined with the inefficiency of gentry-based democracy, eventually led to the failure of the political project of the Commonwealth, and the collapse of the first Republic of Poland. Consequently in the 19th century the enemy of the “bulwark country” changed; the earlier Muslim threat from the South was transformed into the modern empires of Russia, Prussia and Austria which divided Poland and wiped her out of Europe’s map at the end of the eighteenth century.

The decline and fall of the Polish state, however, only enforced some ideological tendencies that shaped Polish culture in the sixteenth, seventeenth and partly in the eighteenth centuries. Polish Romanticism in particular was responsible for developing a mystical Messianic philosophy which reinforced of the historical “bulwark” myth. Poland, a former *fidei defensor*, became a “messiah” – suffering for millions (as a result of its political annihilation) and bound to play a unique spiritual role in Europe. The imagery of crucified Poland, a suffering body of the “messiah of nations” waiting to be resurrected and save the nations of the world permeated the Polish Romantic poetry of Adam Mickiewicz and his minor poetical and philosophical followers. The idea, being essentially nationalistic and in fact anti-Christian, led to a conflict with the papacy (expressed in the literary form of Juliusz Słowacki’s *Kordian* from 1833³) as well as to the development of sectarian mysticism of Parisian Towiański’s Circle.

³ The meeting between Kordian and the Pope (Juliusz Słowacki, *Kordian*, Act 2) exposes conflicting ideologies – the Pope, presented as an arrogant and ignorant politician, refuses to support Poles in their fight against Russians. This scene underlines the fact that Poles, in their suffering, are in fact alone and have to fulfill their own, unique historical mission. Later developments (especially in Towiański’s circle) led to the development of a sectarian and highly spiritual patriotism/nationalism, which was in fact in opposition to Catholicism, which is by definition universal and non-nationalistic.

The seventeenth-century-born idea of a special, unique role Poles are supposed to play in the world took a mystical twist in the nineteenth century, yet the spiritual concept could not be treated seriously for a long time. With the decline of Romanticism and, *a fortiori*, after the failure of the 1863 Polish uprising Polish society and, consequently, literature became more preoccupied with down-to-earth, pragmatic and positivist ideals of organic growth, preserving the language and identity in the country divided among three neighbouring political super-powers of Prussia, Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The splendour of the past with its inevitable component – the messianic ideology of defending the “true” religion and the state against the external aggressor – took on a parallel, transformed existence. The emerging genre of historical novel became a new place for the promotion of the old “bulwark ideology”. Undoubtedly the best realisation of the genre’s poetics, *The Trilogy* by Henryk Sienkiewicz, was written with one purpose – “to console the hearts” by showing the grandeur of the heroic past, and the successful, seventeenth century wars with the external aggressors or internal rebels. The three novels – *With Fire and Sword* (1884), *The Deluge* (1886) and *Fire in the Steppe* (1888) – undoubtedly shaped the imagination of a few generations of Polish intelligentsia, reaffirming, *mutatis mutandis*, the old Polish *mythos* – and ideal of heroic Catholic Pole ceaselessly fighting with the enemy who threatens both the religious and the political *status quo*. This messianic ideal became one of the components of Polish culture and left a trace in the popular imagination, artistic imagery and literature of the late nineteenth century. Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novels played an important role in inscribing this vision into the texture of Polish culture and left a permanent trace of it in Polish literature, philosophy of history, as well as the popular understanding of history.

Deconstructing playgrounds

The messianic imagery, from both high and popular culture, was a symbolic capital inherited by the twentieth century Polish culture. In the genre of the historical novel Sienkiewicz’s vision undeniably dominated and created an intellectual and aesthetic scaffolding, a framework and legacy that was to be challenged by the twentieth century historical novel. The framework both fascinated and irritated due to its lasting influence and, on the other hand, its intellectual limitations. The author who is now perceived as a radical reformer of the genre of historical novel in the twentieth century Polish literature – Teodor Parnicki (1908–1988) – had to face the challenge of Polish messianic vision of history as well as Sienkiewicz’s intellectual legacy.

The future reformer of the historical novel became a Polish writer as a result of an unusual chain of events. Born in Charlottenburg near Berlin in 1908, he grew up in Russia (Moscow, Ufa, Vladivostok) and spoke only Russian and a bit of German till the age of 12. At that time, back in 1920, he came to the Manchurian city of Harbin (Northern China) where he eventually stayed for the next 8 years. It was the Far Eastern cosmopolitan metropolis where Teodor Parnicki learned Polish (in a small secondary school run there by the Polish community) and where he fell in love with the historical novel, making a momentous decision (at the age of 15) to become an author of historical novels⁴. His biography, however, predestined him to be a writer who looks at history from the global perspective, and questions the particularity of nationalistic and imperialistic visions permeating the historical novels of various European literatures of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Living and writing in various places in the world – Lwów (1928–1939), The Soviet Union (1940–1943), the Middle East and The United Kingdom (1943–1944), Mexico City (1944–1967) and Warsaw (1967–1988), Teodor Parnicki remained faithful to his early decision to become a Polish author of historical novels. The author of almost 40 novels – the most intellectually and artistically sophisticated texts in Polish literature – set out on a journey through centuries, cultures and religions, creating his individual literary style, seamlessly combining history, metaphysics, fantasy and biography into a unique literary world. His major works were written in Mexico City and included, among other texts, *The End of the Concord of Nations* (1955), *Word and Flesh* (1959), a trilogy *The Face of the Moon* (1961–1967), a large scale literary project *The New Fable* (1962–1970), and the novel *Only Beatrice* (1962). To a certain extent Parnicki's understanding of history was inspired by Arnold Toynbee's *The Study of History*⁵ and revolved around two main themes: the decline and fall of civilisations and the phenomenon of the half-caste, a hero who is the product of at least two different cultures/religions/languages (quite often, but definitely not only, half-Jewish) and whose unique status, a certain "in-betweenness", allows him to see the "big picture" of the political and cultural mechanisms, preventing him from any narrow-minded nationalis-

⁴ More biographical information was revealed in the writer's lectures (*Historia w literaturę przekuwana* 1980). Some information is also available in the writer's *Diaries from 1980s* and his published letters and fragments of memoirs.

⁵ Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975) was a British historian and philosopher of history most known for his monumental *A Study of History* series, in which he "...examined the rise and fall of 26 civilizations in the course of human history, and he concluded that they rose by responding successfully to challenges under the leadership of creative minorities composed of elite leaders" Cf. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopaedia Britannica. Retrieved 28.07.2014.

tic engagements, yet making him prone to oppressive practices of uniform and univocal political/cultural/symbolic powers. The choice of historical events (and invisible processes that underlie them) shows that Parnicki was usually interested in the encounters and clashes of civilisations, and what he found particularly interesting was the process of a slow decline of powerful, culturally and politically advanced states and empires which face the evolving new civilisations. Always analytical, precise and highly intellectual, Parnicki tried to present the hidden mechanisms of power and the links between philosophy, theology, politics and fates of individuals, no matter if the elaborate, multilayered narrative is set against the background of the Hellenistic Kingdom of Bactria, Alexandria in the times of Origen, the Byzantium of the 5th or 8th centuries, the Avignon papacy of the early 14th century, 15th century Spain or the 16th century conquest of the New World. In his literary texts Parnicki created an in-depth, sophisticated, quasi-philosophical analyses and interpretations of events, turning reading into a complex puzzle-solving process without a promise of simplistic answers. In this way, combining the stream of consciousness technique with the language inspired by Platonic dialogues, the language of ultimate logical precision of argumentative discourses, Parnicki created a literary universe which is an antithesis of both, artistic form and intellectual contents of Henryk Sienkiewicz's historical novels. Yet, the literary *oeuvre* of Sienkiewicz remained a point of reference in Parnicki's dialogic, polemical relation with the tradition of the genre. Parnicki compared his ambiguous relation to Sienkiewicz to the biblical scene of Jacob wrestling with the angel (Genesis 32)⁶, trying to force the angel of God to bless the wrestler. The wrestler, to continue the comparison, whose literary ambition was to write novels which would "comfort the minds" – in contrast to Sienkiewicz's works, which were intended to "comfort the hearts".

The novel that started Teodor Parnicki's intellectual journey was written in 1934 in Lwów. However, unlike his official novelistic debut – *Aetius, the last Roman* (1937) – the text was lost for decades and only resurfaced in 1976, when it was published for the first time. The novel *Count Julian and King Roderic* is a juvenile text, with only one chapter suggesting the future historical and philosophical complexity of Parnicki's later prose. Yet, as his first intellectual statement, it can be perceived as a polemic with all the messianic sentiments that dominated in the Polish literary and cultural heritage. The novel is the first realization of the new vision of literature,

⁶ Teodor Parnicki described his wrestling with Sienkiewicz in terms of a struggle with his "angel" (Cf Genesis 32) in the *Prologue* to his academic lectures. Cf. T. Parnicki, *Historia w literaturę przekuwana*, Warszawa 1980, s. 6.

freed from nationalistic and patriotic responsibilities and even questioning the intellectual, messianic paradigms of the past. In his forward to the novel Parnicki declared his ambitions quite clearly:

I hold the opinion that today, when we possess our own state, when literature has ceased to be the only guide and “nation’s government”, we do have the right, we are even obliged to collaborate culturally and artistically with other nations in the creation of a universal civilization; now we can allow ourselves to leave the narrow circle of only “domestic” issues, we can – without fear of betraying the historical mission of our literature – get interested in things, themes, problems of the others, distant, even exotic and foreign. (*From the Author*, in: *Count Julian and King Roderic*, p. 10)

Distant as it may seem, the episode of the history of Spain from the early 8th century is a part of European history and can enable Polish readers to understand the past and the myths it produced. The analogies and similarities between the Spanish and Polish histories are visible in the plot of Parnicki’s novel which is centred on the Muslim invasion of Visigothic Spain in 711. That invasion changed the course of Spanish (and European) history by exposing the Christian-Moorish cultural and political conflict on the Iberian peninsula. The tension between the Christian kingdoms and the Islamic expansion in Spain is an experience parallel to the Polish-Turkish wars of the 17th century – the events, which laid the foundation for the Polish “bulwark” mythology.

The story presented by Teodor Parnicki focuses on two characters: a Visigoth king Roderic, and Julian, a loyal ally of the Visigothic kings whose main responsibility was to defend Ceuta – an African fortress guarding the access to the Strait of Gibraltar. The climax of the story is in fact a turning point in European history – the landing of a Berber commander Tariq ibn Ziyad (d. 720) on the Spanish soil on 28th of April 711, which started the centuries-long Muslim rule on the Iberian Peninsula.

Parnicki’s novel was supposed to be an epic narrative (a style he abandoned in his later novels) which objectively presents the events without any ideological or artistic bias. As Parnicki says, “for the author the one who is right is the one who speaks in a given moment” (*From the Author*, p. 8). The principle of objectivity enables the author to present dialogues and events in a way that suggests neutrality and leaves the interpretation of events solely to the readers. Yet the narrative, the distribution of information, the selection of facts and the recreation of dialogues is entirely the design of the author, so the desire of objectivity in fact remains just an idealistic ambition of the debuting writer. *Count Julian and king Roderic* recreates the events

of 710-711 focusing mainly on the Visigoth kingdom in Spain. The other, Muslim side of the conflict, despite the objectivity principle, is presented in a sketchy way, leaving the impression of a stereotypical, yet by no means biased, representation of the invaders preparing to land in Spain. A few sentences about the Muslim leader only briefly introduce the counterpart of the main *dramatis personae* of the novel – who are the Visigoths:

Musa bin Nusayr still remains a great commander, it is him to whom the caliph entrusted the rule over the whole immense Africa; in front of his house in Africa's capital city of Kairouan there stands a pyramid of thousands of enemy's skulls; it was him who took over the last African estates of the infidels, all but one – Ceuta, which is defended fiercely by the infidel dog with the soul of an eagle and the power of a lion – *rumi* Illan.

The additional information completes the portrait of the enemy:

Yet, the emir of all Africa prefers to recall the old times, when he had just arrived in Kairouan from the Umayyad's court in Damascus to take the rule after Hassan, when the land of Berbers was not yet conquered by those who believed in the Prophet. Defeating the heroic, freedom- and independence-loving Berbers, winning those idolaters to the faith of the Prophet, to the teaching of Quran and Sunnah – this is Musa's biggest pride, he is incredibly proud of it and he always tells stories about the first fights in Mauretania with pleasure. (*Count Julian...*, p. 155–156)⁷

Count Julian and king Roderic is in fact a story of the inner conflicts and tensions inside the Visigoth kingdom, which turns the narrative into a deconstruction of the process of decline of the state. None of the simplistic binary oppositions well known from Sienkiewicz's narratives can be seen in Parnicki's novel. The Visigothic state is not any sort of Christianity's bulwark. Similarly, the image of the Muslims is not based on negative stereotype. The novel presents the political events of two years which led to the collapse of the Christian kingdoms in Spain, yet the narrative is free – as planned by the author – of direct evaluations of characters' actions, which are replaced by objective descriptions. The main protagonists of the novel include: king Roderic, who assumed the throne as a result of a bloody *coup d'état*, his wife – queen Egilona, the Allyat brothers (the king's closest allies), Oppas – the archbishop of Seville (a brother of Witiza, the former king murdered by Roderic), as well as count Julian and his daughter Florinda. The plot is centred on the theme – probably legendary – of

⁷ All quotations in my translation. Page numbering based on the first edition: Teodor Parnicki, *Hrabia Julian i król Roderyk*, Poznań 1976.

the betrayal of Roderic, who was supposed to protect Julian's daughter in Toledo, yet had a brief love affair with her and eventually raped her. As a revenge for this disgrace, her father, count Julian, incited by the archbishop of Seville Oppas, invaded Spain together with the Moorish forces commanded by Tariq⁸. Those events have been the inspiration for literary texts for centuries. Parnicki himself mentions the works by Cervantes, Ernest Guiraud, Robert Southey, Alexander Pushkin and Felicjan Faleński⁹. However, the tragic story of Florinda – which inspired poets of Romanticism – is for Parnicki only an element of a complex political mosaic of aristocratic conflicts and a civil war among the leading Visigothic families. The key to understand the political mechanisms of the kingdom was the murder of king Witiza and Roderic's ascension to the throne. Witiza's brother, Oppas the archbishop of Seville, became one of the leaders of the anti-Roderic movement. In Parnicki's novel, the "bulwark of Christianity" in fact turns out to be an early medieval version "house of cards", where aristocratic families ruthlessly fight for power and try to establish a dynastic rule in the kingdom. Thus, "bulwark" becomes a political playground, whose deconstruction exposes passion, desire, incompetence, immorality and greed for power. The new king is honest with himself and his wife, when he states:

Let us be serious. I've just came to the throne. I cannot rule yet. I have mighty enemies. I need friends. (*Count Julian...* p. 56)

Roderic, the young king, realises that his role might be in fact aimless:

He wanted to tell her that all great kings [...] saw a certain goal in front of them, they wanted to rule because of that goal, not to fulfil their own ambitions and desires; he, however, sees no such a goal... (*Count Julian...* p. 48–49)

Egilona, the king's unfaithful wife, endlessly engaging in love affairs, leaves no doubts with regard to what power is for:

⁸ In the introduction to the novel Parnicki described and identified the source of inspiration for writing the novel in the following way: "It is difficult to explain – why and what for. I first felt the need to write this novel, a novel about these problems and people, when I was not even convinced that I could write a novel: 11 years ago [i.e. 1923], when in the school textbook for medieval history – I don't know myself why – I was struck by one sentence: "a party hostile to king Roderic (count Julian) summoned the Arabs for help." A year later the memory of this sentence was combined with a very brief mention in *Don Quixote* of the rock from which a miserable daughter of a famous count Julian jumped into the sea." Cf. Teodor Parnicki, *From the Author*, in: T. Parnicki, *Hrabia Julian...* p. 11.

⁹ The works on the same theme mentioned by Parnicki include: Ernest Guiraud, *Comte Julien ou l'expiation*, Robert Southey, *Roderic, The Last of the Goths*, Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Alexander Pushkin, *Rodrigo* and Felicjan Faleński, *Florynda*. Cf. *Hrabia Julian...*, p. 74.

Power is a woman – you fought for her, conquered her, now after you have seized her, do with her whatever you want. (*Count Julian...* p. 47)

Eventually the king defines his goal clearly and leaves no doubts regarding his motivation. His incompetence is turned into an uncontrolled desire for ultimate political power:

Yes, the strengthening of the royal power could be the goal of his life, the goal of his rule... a goal the lack of which made him complain in front of the queen on the first night of his reign. (*Count Julian...* p. 113)

Count Julian and King Roderic, however, is not only a story of passion, betrayal and power. Being a field of uncompromised political game, the Visigothic kingdom is at the same time a sophisticated, ripening civilisation and culture whose values and symbols may be surprising for a twentieth century reader. Parnicki realises this and, breaking the course of narration, he addresses the readers directly. These statements, though surprising in realistic epic with an omniscient, yet invisible narrator, enable the writer to expose the real mechanisms, which explain the political conflicts within the kingdom. On the eve of the Moorish invasion, the Spanish kingdom is not a primitive gothic culture. Far from it. As the narrator states:

[...] hundreds, even thousands of years have passed and people from the distance of ages are not able to imagine Goths in any different way than as raw, barbarian warriors dressed in animal skins – destroyers of states and cultures. And they don't want to believe that the day before the fall of their state, the Gothic culture, both material and spiritual, achieved a high level which was not achieved by any other culture of the time; a level higher than many earlier and later cultures achieved. With its law, great art – mainly architecture and Christian Latin poetry and historiography, with humanitarianism so rare in those times (ban on duels in the 7th century; the duels that were banned in France only as late as in the times of Richelieu!) – the culture of Visigoths was a perfect synthesis as well as a development of Gothic, old-Teutonic, ancient Romanesque and early Christian elements. (*Count Julian...* p. 20–21)

It is the cultural sophistication, though, that leads the slow, yet inevitable decline. Immorality of the court life, political alliances driven by sexual desires only, or the idolatrous cult of art (symbolised by Biklar's sculpture portraying the naked queen in Chapter 9) combined with cunningness and greed on the protagonists' agendas show a real decadence and inevitable downfall of the Christian state in Spain. The moral decline aligned with the loss of the sense of purpose is clearly the sign of cultural

corruption that leads directly to disaster, enacted in the opulent theatrical stage setting of artistic sophistication. Only few protagonists realise what the process leads to:

...our friend, count Julian [...] called all these things (he pointed at the villa, columns and white sculptures against the dark blue sky) worthless paganism, and my uncle, the bishop, says that us, the Goths, being effeminate, lecherous, with our love for luxury and laziness are different from the Romans of the times of the fall only because of our Christian faith, which is the only thing that saves us from annihilation. A total destruction – my uncle would say – a total destruction so that in no more than one hundred years we will be completely forgotten... Because us, the Goths – my uncle concluded – despite all the villas, Roman sculptures, Byzantine robes and magnificent cathedrals are barbarians inside, our fall is worse and more scary, and we are bound to disappear even more than the Romans. (*Count Julian...* 89-90).

An interesting component of the political and cultural mosaic of the Visigothic Iberia is the Catholic church. Since 589 AD, when the third synod renounced Aryanism, Catholicism was the only religion in the kingdom (besides Judaism). The Church became a powerful institution controlling the policy and playing active role in political activities. In Parnicki's novel Teodemir's letter to the king expresses the concern about the real role of bishops in the Visigothic state. Warning Roderic about Oppas, the archbishop of Seville, Teodemir writes clearly: "I don't trust a bishop, for whom a helmet with wings will be more fitting than a mitre – he is your worst enemy, my king, dangerous, because hidden." (*Count Julian...* p. 121). Officially, however, the Church always confirms her historical and political role:

Only the Church prays for the people, when they lose their souls... Only the Church saves peoples from annihilation. Where oh where can you find the invincible power of the pagan Rome?... Where are the Vandals, Alans, Suebi, Ostrogoths, our brothers? They are lost, because the Church did not stand behind them, and everyone who is not supported by the Church will perish in the same way. (*Count Julian...* p. 55)

Nevertheless, in the course of political events it turns out that it is archbishop Oppas – the brother of the former king, murdered by Roderic – who convinces Julian to use the help of the Moorish army to take revenge on Roderic and become a new king. Florinda, Julian's daughter disgraced by Roderic, is for Oppas, as well as for Julian, the ultimate argument to take action and allow the Moors to conquer the Iberian Peninsula. The moral

conflicts of loyalty, honesty, and betrayal are – in Parnicki’s narrative – only the problems of Julian – the bishop has no doubts – his particular political agenda of killing his brother’s murderer is way more important than the universal values of the Church. The bishop’s cynical arguments counter the moral concerns of Julian:

‘No, no, I don’t want to, I can’t [...].

‘Don’t you want to take revenge for the disgrace?’ – asked the bishop. ‘All right then. I’m going back to Toledo, I will pass Roderic your hearty greetings and best wishes of happiness in Florinda’s arms... The wishes from count Julian.’

‘Me... me, the knight of the Cross? How could I? What about the faith, the Church?’

‘Don’t worry, my brother, entrust the care of the Church to the Church’s shepherds. (*Count Julian*... p. 155).

In Parnicki’s vision Visigothic Spain of the early eighth century, rather than a bulwark of Christianity, is the arena of political intrigues, cultural decadence, immorality, cynical agendas of aristocratic families and desire for power and domination of politicians and bishops alike. It is a playground which is just to be easily taken over by Moorish invaders, invited to the kingdom by the loyal count Julian – the betrayed commander of Ceuta.

Designing histories

Teodor Parnicki’s novel was first published in 1976 and at the time it was perceived as just a juvenile text, characterised by simple narration, epic storytelling and conscious rejection of modern narrative techniques (which were “over-intellectual, too analytical and psychological, comparatively-sociological” – *From the Author*, p. 8). Against the background of Parnicki’s later novels, hallmarked by highest intellectual sophistication, use of stream of consciousness narrative techniques and ultimate logical precision of quasi-philosophical dialogical novels, *Count Julian and King Roderic* was inevitably treated as just a naive literary text from the distant past. Even the experimental chapter VI (*Count Julian* – “a man who never was”¹⁰), which broke from the straightforward narrative to indulge in critical historical analysis based on all available sources, could not match

¹⁰ Chapter 6 of the novel is in fact a critical analysis of the historical narrative about the rift between Julian and Roderic and the Moorish invasion that followed it. Here Parnicki reveals his historical competence and poses fundamental questions regarding the essence of historical events, legends, historiographies and both: nineteenth century criticism and twentieth century resurfacing of the characters and events in literary and historical texts.

Parnicki's later literary experiments with historical fantasy or alternative history novels of the 1960s and 1970s.

Nevertheless *Count Julian and King Roderic* remains a very interesting text when compared with the legacy of the genre of Polish historical novel. Not only did Parnicki introduce a relatively exotic topic (Visigothic kingdom in Spain in the 8th century), but he also presented the Christian-Moorish conflict from the perspective which questioned the so far tacitly accepted stereotypes based on binary oppositions, always positively valorising Christians and representing Muslims as ultimate evil. This binary ideology of Christian kingdoms' mission to defend the faith against the aggressive Islam dominated both Iberian and Polish historical narratives for centuries – either in the stories of the Reconquista or in the vision of Poland as *antemurale Christianitatis*. Such a binary logic of historical and literary representations was replaced by Parnicki with a careful, in-depth study of political agendas of the time, and rifts among aristocratic leaders; he presented the analyses of power relations and sexual dominance as the main drives of political activities and – last but not least – the analysis of the position and role of the Church of the time. Thus, a vision of a mission, the special role of the nation and even the messianism so important in the legacy of Polish Romantic and post-Romantic literature seem to be radically rejected. Teodor Parnicki presents the Christian-Moorish conflict on the local and global scale, combining historical competence, epic distance, reserved honesty and disillusioned pessimism. What seems to be really fascinating for Parnicki is the premature decline of the civilisation and the gradual fall of a sophisticated culture which does not even realise its approaching end. What is interesting, however, is the fact, that both the phenomenon of decline of a culture and the Christian-Muslim competition remained the central themes of later novels by Parnicki. The author observed civilisations that fall apart and give way to new models of culture in the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine contexts in his best novels that were yet to be written – *The End of the Concord of Nations*, *Aetius*, *the last Roman*, *The Face of the Moon*. The religious aspect of history always remained very important in those novels. The theme of the first novel resurfaced years later, when the writer – as a visiting professor – gave lectures at the Warsaw University in the early 1970s¹¹. His reflection, again, confirms the distance between the messianic / bulwark ideology Parnicki contested and his origi-

¹¹ The lectures were organized by the Warsaw University in the academic year 1972/1973. They were the fullest presentation of Parnicki's philosophy of history and the way he "forges history into literature". Cf. T. Parnicki, *Historia w literaturę przekuwana*, Warszawa 1980.

nal reflection. The writer recalling his own early thoughts about history from the times he studied in the secondary school in China, said:

How did it come around that Christians lost their highly civilised lands, after all, the lands from which Christianity emerged, since in fact it emerged from Palestine, from Syria, and for some time it was Syria and Egypt which were the main centres of Christian theology. And all that was lost in favour of Islam. [...] And then, when I was considering becoming a priest, I wanted to become the kind of a priest who would fill the gaps in the doctrine. Not in the doctrine in the theological sense, my aspirations were not so high, but rather in the historical sense, namely, that maybe somehow I could help to explain why God needed to take away Syria, Palestine, Libya, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunis from Christians and give them to Arabs. (*Historia w literaturę przekuwana*, p. 70–71)

Spain is not mentioned on the list probably only because in the autumn of 1972 – the time of the lecture – *Count Julian and King Roderic* was perceived as a novel lost forever. For many years to come, however, Parnicki was trying to fill the intellectual “gap in the doctrine” consistently replacing messianic and heroic narratives about Christian-Muslim centuries-long conflict by a detailed, critical historical analyses, always presented from the global perspective. The rises and falls of cultural formations – much in Arnold Toynbee’s terms – became the main terrain Parnicki was trying to explore in all his later novels. Yet it was never a “nation”, “civilisation”, “culture” or “religion” that was at stake. The real focus of Parnicki’s imagination and the ideological centre of his literary universe became the character of a “half-caste” – an intelligent and oppressed hero, “divided in oneself”, being at the same time a part of both conflicting cultural forces, benefiting from both worlds and traumatised, victimised and rejected by them at the same time. It was a “half-caste” sucked into the ever rotating cogwheels of the global machinery of competing civilisations. The early novel about Spain can be perceived as the first attempt to question the intellectual legacy of the “bulwark” ideology. Most of the later novels developed the highly sceptical discourse that drew the readers’ attention to individual traumas resulting from the clashes of civilisations. These novels were to become Parnicki’s sophisticated answer to nationalistic messianism so deeply ingrained in both, Polish literary tradition and European narratives about Christian-Muslim conflicts.

Tomasz Markiewka

Bulwark or political playground? Teodor Parnicki's *Count Julian and King Roderic*

The term *Bulwark of Christendom* (*Antemurale Christianitatis*) was for centuries defining the special – even Messianic – role of those European countries (Poland and Spain in particular) which were exposed to the direct influence (and attacks) of the Muslim world. Difficult encounter between Christianity and Islam and the role of the European “borderlands” is a theme of an early historical novel by Teodor Parnicki (1908-1988) *Count Julian and King Roderic* (1935). Contrary to the ideological interpretations of the Islamic invasion of Spain (711 AD) Parnicki presents this historical process as a product of complex political and ecclesiastical conflicts within the Visigoth state and, as a result, questions the ideological interpretations of this event. Thus the novel seems to be the anti-Messianic statement, which criticizes deeply ingrained belief in the special historical role of the those nations which are perceived as defenders of Christianity. The novel can be interpreted as the first, still somewhat veiled, polemic with Henryk Sienkiewicz's intellectual heritage, yet, what makes the novel important, is the problem of the complexity of political mechanisms which eventually produce simplistic, ideological “grand narratives”. The writer's university lectures (1973) provide an additional, more elaborate reflection on the theme presented in the writer's first historical novel.

Key words: Teodor Parnicki, historical novel, Muslim invasion of Spain (711), Visigothic Kingdom, Messianism

Słowa kluczowe: Teodor Parnicki, powieść historyczna, muzułmańska inwazja na Hiszpanię (711), Królestwo Wizygotów, mesjanizm