

Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski's

Conceptist Poetics within the History of Ideas

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Introduction

Our contemporary understanding of poetry has been largely shaped by a long process of “lyricization”¹ initiated in the pre-Romantic era, and with some accumulated two hundred and fifty years of ongoing, still vital history. Here is one view:

In the course of that uneven process, stipulated verse genres that once belonged to neoclassical taxonomies or to certain communities or to specific modes of circulation gradually collapsed into a more and more abstract idea of poetry that then became associated with the lyric.²

This broadly sketched phenomenon, taken together with partially related developments, such as the Kantian concept of genius or the category of “originality,” seems to aptly indicate the specific nature of a long history of “lyrical” reading practices that belong both to the history of literature perceived as an autonomous entity and to the social factors governing reception. From that perspective, a perceptual chasm separates the post-romantic (broadly understood) formation from the pre-modern neoclassical (but not only) taxonomy and systematization we tend to link with the concept of formulaic historical poetics. Whereas the works of Sęp-Szarzyński, Sebastain Grabowiecki's *Rytmy* or the sonnets of the English Metaphysical Poets, which are closer to the dramatism of poetic expression sometimes identified with the lyric, can still retain a certain peculiar allure for contemporary

¹ V. Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery. A Theory of Lyric Reading*, Princeton, Oxford 2005, pp. 6–9.

² *The Lyric Theory Reader. A Critical Anthology*, ed. by V. Jackson, Y. Prins, Baltimore 2014, p. 452. trans. – A.K.

readers, the old normative poetics appear to present the image of a dead canon, which can only function as an object of historical study, reduced in its primary function to reconstituting the rules of the literary craft. In light of the long career of the Romantic conception of the writer, such postulates as the following, by Scaliger, cannot but appear dusty relics: *Pauca licere perfecto poetae*³ (“Not much is permitted the perfect poet”). Is it possible in our day to follow in Winckelmann's footsteps and interpret the old canon for the purpose of creating a viable new literary program, to reforge its antique fascinations into a poetics capable of awakening the contemporary reader's receptivity to experience? I do not attempt here to answer that question, though the scepticism evident in the asking is undoubtedly warranted.

Without reaching beyond our competencies as literary scholars, we can have meaningful discussions about the kind of history implied in the formulation “historical poetics,” reflecting precisely on what history we shall construct based on old theories of the literary work. Particularly in the face of the cultural turn in the humanities, the category of historicity unveils its multidimensional and ambiguous nature, ceasing to refer only to the enumeration – in any case already completed – of older aesthetic and theoretical prescriptions, the study of their reception and influence on the formation of genres and models. And although the history of literature was never taught, even by ardent proponents of the belief in the autonomy of the literary work that underlay the professionalization of the discourse, in a cultural vacuum, neglecting the connections between texts and other artistic disciplines or sociopolitical conditions, the contemporary understanding of the cognitive subject as a “literary-cultural construct” or a “many-layered concrete thing”⁴ demands that the question of these interdependencies be placed at the centre of reflection. What part of history can feature as the object of a contextual analysis conducted by a scholar of formulaic poetics of the past? In the present article, I propose to inscribe an old text of literary theory within broadly understood intellectual history, enabling the close study of older conceptions of creativity which by their very nature took shape at the intersection of arbitrarily separated areas of thought, such as literature, philosophy and theology, which served to construct a multidimensional vision of reality.

While contemporary theoreticians of historical poetics – usually seen notwithstanding in terms of modern and contemporary works – speak of two possible approaches to cultural history, namely reading the text “inside out” or “outside in”,⁵ the clarity of this methodological division at the theoretical level, leaving aside Derridean doubts regarding the distinction between inside and outside, does not survive in practice, where either gaze must hitch itself in a greater or lesser degree to the text.⁶ Cultures of the past, to which our notion of autonomous disciplines was foreign, particularly require this kind of two-sided dialogue.

³ J.C. Scaliger, *Poetices libri septem*, edition secunda, [Genève] 1581, p. 816.

⁴ R. Nycz, “Kulturowa natura, słaby profesjonalizm. Kilka uwag o przedmiocie poznania literackiego i statusie dyskursu literaturoznawczego,” in *Poetyka doświadczenia. Teoria – nowoczesność – literatura*, Warszawa 2012, p. 101.

⁵ This was the belief expressed by the organizers of the conference on “Poetic Genre and Social Imagination: Pope to Swinburne” held at the University of Chicago in 2014.

⁶ Y. Prins, “What Is Historical Poetics?”, *Modern Language Quarterly* 2016, vol. 77, no. 1, p. 14.

Concept as an Element in Poetics and a Conceptual Tool

Though every self-respecting student of Polish literature should be able to name in a heartbeat the classical authors of formulaic poetics, Aristotle, Horace, Pseudo-Longinus, and among the early moderns, Scaliger, Boileau, and finally, Dmochowski, the mannerist and baroque or, more generally, non-classical literary theories appear somewhat to have been overshadowed by these great names. This state of affairs is undoubtedly due in part to the authoritative criticism of the classics, as well as the formerly widespread practice among literary scholars of freely applying terms like “silly” or “freakish” to baroque poetics. Among early 17th century works that arose at the intersection of the influences of Renaissance poetics, post-Reformation culture and baroque artistic conceptions, the theoretical endeavors of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski (1595–1640) are worthy of particular attention; without the slightest hint of exaggeration, Sarbiewski must be acknowledged as the most celebrated Polish author in the European literary arena until the spectacular career of Henryk Sienkiewicz. The Christian Horace, pronounced poet laureate by Pope Urban VIII, was mostly known as an author of parodies of Horace,⁷ a champion of the Christianization of antiquity⁸ and the codifier of “perfect poetry” (*De perfecta poesi*), in which he joined the principles of Aristotle’s aesthetics to a truly baroque philosophy of poetic creation.⁹ A special place in Sarbiewski’s portfolio belongs to the genre of the epigram, which underwent lively development during the Renaissance, but despite its antique provenance remained far from attaining the perfection granted to the epic.¹⁰ The epigrammatic efforts of the Jesuit Sarbiewski have only begun to emerge from oblivion in recent years;¹¹ that oblivion forms the basis on which we may understand the Romantic translator of Latin poetry, Władysław Syrokomla, whose assessment clearly illustrates how incongruous baroque poetics was with the tastes of a later era:

⁷ On this subject, see E. Buszewicz, *Sarmacki Horacy i jego liryka. Imitacja – gatunek – styl. Rzecz o poezji Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego* (The Sarmatian Horace and His Lyric Poetry. Imitation, Genre, Style. On the Poetry of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski), Kraków 2006.

⁸ On this subject, see E. Sarnowska-Temeriusz, *Świat mitów i świat znaczeń. Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski i problemy wiedzy o starożytności* (The World of Myths and the World of Meanings. Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski and Problems with the Study of Antiquity), Wrocław 1969; P. Urbański, *Theologia fabulosa. Commentationes sarbiewianae*, Szczecin 2000; A.W. Mikołajczak, *Antyk w poezji Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego* (The Ancient World in the Poetry of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski), Poznań 1994.

⁹ See E. Sarnowska, “Teoria poezji Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego” (Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski’s Theory of Poetry), in *Studia z teorii i historii poezji. Seria pierwsza* (Studies in the Theory and History of Poetry. First Series), ed. M. Głowiński, Wrocław 1967, pp. 126–147.

¹⁰ Scaliger devoted a great deal of attention to epigrams, but classified them among the categories of rhetoric. See M. Piskała, “‘Nimis poeta’. Obraz grafomana w dawnej epigramatyce” (“Nimis Poeta”: The Image of the Hack Writer in the Classical Epigram), *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne (Silesian Polish Studies)* 2013, no. 2 (4), p. 175; R. Krzywy, *Poezja staropolska wobec genologii retorycznej. Wprowadzenie do problematyki* (Old Polish Poetry in Terms of Study of Rhetorical Genres. Introduction to the Problematic), Warszawa 2014, p. 25. For more on Scaliger’s poetics: E. Sarnowska, “Główne problemy ‘Poetyki’ Juliusza Cezara Scaligera” (Major Problems of Julius Caesar Scaliger’s “Poetics”), in *Studia Estetyczne*, vol. 3, Warszawa 1966, pp. 144–162.

¹¹ A notable sign of the growth of interest in Sarbiewski’s epigrams was the publication in 2003 of the first critical edition of *Epigrammatum liber* in the series “Biblioteka Pisarzy Staropolskich” (Library of Old Polish Authors): M.K. Sarbiewski, *Epigrammatum Liber. Księga epigramatów*, trans. M. Piskała and D. Sutkowska, Warszawa 2003. Among studies of those works, see M. Łukaszewicz-Chantry, *Epigramy Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego w świetle jego teorii poetyckiej* (Epigrams of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski in the Light of His Theory of Poetics), *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2000, no. 91/4, pp. 7–14; J. Musiał-Zaborowska, *Epigramy Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego* (Epigrams of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski), Pułtusk – Warszawa 2006; M. Piskała, *Boże miłości i wstydlive dowcipy. Studia nad epigramatyczną twórczością Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego i Alberta Inesa* (God’s Love and Shameful Jokes. Studies of the Epigrammatic Works of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski), Warszawa 2009; A. Kołos, „*Fides quaerens intellectum*”. *Wiara i rozum w barokowym konceptyzmie Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego i Stanisława Herakliusza Lubomirskiego* (“Fides quaerens intellectum.” Faith and Reason in the Baroque Concepts of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski and Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski), Lublin 2013.

Sarbiewski's epigrams are almost all Jeusitical in their style: thought distorted by unnatural figures strains laboriously to be witty [...] in short, Sarbiewski's epigrams express the degenerating tastes of his era ...¹².

All of the arguments used by this Romantic writer in the nineteenth century had already been voiced by the classicist system. In 1674, Boileau defended the French language against the "false lustre" of the fashion for foreign witticisms, a vogue imported from Italy,¹³ and 100 years later (1788), Dmochowski grumbled about outworn poetics:

In early days, the epigram was far too celebrated
 Every boy and his dog man's nature contemplated
 But after them, schools sharpened the pen's meanings
 What toil there was then for some vain gleanings:
 Why did St. George ride off on a white horse?
 How was Dionysus' head kissed by his severed corpse?
 The speech of epigrams went looking for embellishment
 And preacherly dumb talk flashed with new hellish din.
 Hence all went bad, good taste did wither
 And five score passed before it returned hither.
 Rhymes love drollery, but not too distinguished;
 In wordplay is glitter but it leaves no ingots.
 Cram into one a good thought wrapped in a rhyme
 And your epigram earns its applause every time.

(Franciszek Ksawery Dmochowski, *Sztuka rymotwórcza*, II, w. 175–188)¹⁴

Where Sarbiewski's creative concept of the epigram would have to wait many years to have its value duly recognized, his theoretical treatise *De acuto et arguto* (*O poincie i dowcipie*) has consistently been allotted high esteem by the literary scholarly tradition due to its mature and systematic elaboration of poetics.¹⁵ The "pointa" or *point* (punch line) was one of various concepts approximating the enigmatic inexpressibility of an impression, a so-called *je ne sais quoi*, the chief subject of discussions on taste in the second half of the sixteenth century. As Dominique Bouhours wrote in 1671, "*il est bien plus aisé de le sentir que de le connaître*"¹⁶ (it is much easier to feel it than to comprehend it). If the essence of the conceptual witticism, like that of taste, is the affective register (*delectare*), the difficulty in grasping the concept through

¹²W. Syrokomla, *Poezyje ks. Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego, Dział III. Pienia liryczne i opisowe* (The Poetry of Fr. Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski. Part III. Lyrical and Descriptive Songs), Wilno 1851, pp. 231–232. Quoted in: M. Piskała, D. Sutkowska, "Wprowadzenie do lektury" (Introduction), in M.K. Sarbiewski, *Epigrammatum Liber. Księga epigramatów* (Epigrammatum Liber. Book of Epigrams), p. 5.

¹³See D. Gostyńska, *Retoryka iluzji. Koncept w poezji barokowej* (Rhetoric of Illusion. Concept in Baroque Poetry), Warszawa 1991, p. 300.

¹⁴F.K. Dmochowski, *Sztuka rymotwórcza. Poema we czterech pieśniach* (The Art of Rhyming. A Poem in Four Cantos), Wilno 1820, p. 47.

¹⁵There is an inherent paradox in this disproportion between evaluations of Sarbiewski's theory and those of his artistic work, since *De acuto et arguto*, like other theoretical writings, was not published during his lifetime, while the epigrams, published together with his *Lycorum libri tres*, enjoyed great popular acclaim in Europe.

¹⁶D. Bouhours, *Les entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène*, nouvelle edition, Paris 1741, p. 312.

strictly rational categories is understandable.¹⁷ The authority of the ancients did not offer a useful point of reference in this case, and a statement by Horace in his *Ars Poetica* regarding witty combinations of words, taken out of context, did not clarify the heart of the matter.

Nonetheless, Sarbiewski, with his astonishingly well-developed analytical sense, managed to formulate the following famous and oft-quoted definition:

The punch line is a statement in which a collision occurs between something harmonious and something disharmonious, so that it is a form of verbal expression with concordant discord, or discordant concord. [Acutum est oratio continens affinitatem dissentanei et consentanei, seu dicti concors discordia vel discors concordia]¹⁸.

This gloss, though simultaneously lucid and conceptually oxymoronic in itself, does not establish the innovation of its author; the most interesting part of his essay is the graphic model used to describe the concept of the *pointa*. To summarize it: Sarbiewski presents the epigram as an equilateral triangle whose base is the subject matter (*materia*), and whose two sides correspond to the opposing thoughts drawn from that subject (*consentaneum* and *dissentaneum*). The figure's apex (the *acutum*, or "blade"), as geometry unfailingly indicates, consists of the point of intersection between the two sides, at which the punch line, or conjunction introducing "concordant discord" *vel* "discordant concord." Let us remember that the Latin term *conceptus* derives from the verb *concipere*, which also carries the meaning "to conjoin, to unite."¹⁹ The theory was put forward by its author with the verve of a classic structuralist, the more so in that in the first part of his treatise, Sarbiewski dispenses with the other definitions of "pointa" known to him, among which we find a psychological explication,²⁰ referring to the elicitation of an effect of surprise. Sarbiewski stipulates, however, that the phenomenon of surprise demands active participation from the reader in the process of completing the meaning of the *pointa*, whereas the act of defining its whole meaning should be carried out by the author or the work:

[...] surprise as such further involves the reader himself, whereas the punch line fits and functions inherently in what is said such that it operates by itself, without help from the reader. Because without exception, the punch line is the creation of the writer.²¹

In the contemporary language of Eco, we would say that the participation of the reader's intentionality is thus rejected in favour of the work's immanent intention, in which the prerogative fully belongs to the author.²² Though reflection on individual components in the poetics

¹⁷See T. Parker, *Volition, Rhetoric, and Emotion in the Work of Pascal*, New York, London 2008, p. 187.

¹⁸M.K. Sarbiewski, *De acuto et arguto. O poincie i dowcipie* (De acuto et arguto. On the Punch Line and Wit), ed and trans. S. Skimin, in: *Wykłady poetyki (Praecepta poetica)* (Precepts of Poetics), Wrocław 1958, p. 5.

¹⁹See Gostyńska, op. cit., p. 5.

²⁰See B. Otwinowska, "Concors discordia' Sarbiewskiego w teorii konceptyzmu" (Sarbiewski's "Concors discordia" in the Theory of Conceptism), *Pamiętnik Literacki* R. 59: 1968, no. 3, p. 86.

²¹M.K. Sarbiewski, *De acuto et arguto. O poincie i dowcipie*, p. 3.

²²Sarbiewski's work leaves itself open to being read in terms of structuralist literary theory. Łukasz Lipiński treats *De perfecta poesi* as a treatise on narratology. See Ł. Lipiński, "De perfecta poesi' Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego w perspektywie współczesnych teorii narracji," *Meluzyna* 2014, no. 1, pp. 49–64.

of the punch line can be developed much more extensively, examining the place occupied by Sarbiewski in the Aristotelian tradition, ideas shared by him with Scaliger, who represented an authority to him, or his relation to other seventeenth-century theorists of the concept, even such a perfunctory description as this allows us to grasp the immanent textual mechanisms that are expressed in *De acuto et arguto*. Outside the area that falls directly within the literary tradition, there remains the question of where the punch line belongs in the complex vision of reality held by Sarbiewski.

The question must doubtless be faced of what purpose the concept served for this post-Reformation Jesuit poet. His was not a theory made to fit the needs of a literary program, like that of Giovanni Batista Marino or Jan Andrzej Morsztyn, whose notions of wit, to generalize broadly, were meant for use in sophisticated, secular gamesmanship at court. Though Sarbiewski lived and wrote in the baroque period, the first quarter of the seventeenth century, some characteristic features of the Encyclopedist era with its universalist claims (as it is now customary to see the century of Descartes and Komensky) stand out in his intellectual profile.²³ Above all, he can already be recognized in the treatise *De acuto et arguto* as representing the new era in the history of science still taking shape at that moment, that sought to base the humanities on firmer ground. Sarbiewski collects different assessments regarding the punch line, and even conducts a scholarly survey himself, in which he approaches authoritative figures with the question of what constitutes the essence of *acutum*. As Barbara Otwinowska states:

The ambitions of the “Polish Horace” were explicitly scientific, in the broad modern sense of that word. His lectures resemble post-Cartesian philosophical analyses rather than using the figurative language of literary criticism in the age of Bacon. [...] His idea for a scientific survey [...] is something like applying an experimental method within the human sciences. It is not about searching for an authority but rather striving to be inductive.²⁴

Sarbiewski's polemic does not exhibit any of the fundamental features of the *agon* in the Renaissance *respublica literaria*²⁵, but rather is essentially closer to the inductive reasoning of the age of Bacon. For early adherents of the new approach to science the cognitive subject is entangled in a dissonance, difficult to overcome, between things themselves (*res ipsas*) and opinions about things, which practically by definition are faulty and illusive. Critical revision of previously existing views, by means of which the work of reason is done, allows vain “idols” to be rejected, mediating access to “truth” in order to make way for rational judgment. This infrastructure of thought was characteristic of both Bacon and Descartes in the sixteenth century, to name only the two most prominent scientists and theoreticians. Sarbiewski hastens, using the newly developed path of knowledge, to separate the effects of the punch line's influence from its essence, which is concealed in the universal structure of the epigrammatic concept.

²³In this regard, see C. Vasoli, *Encyklopedyzm w XVII wieku* (Encyclopedism in the 16th Century), trans. A. Anduszkiewicz, Warszawa 1996.

²⁴B. Otwinowska, op. cit., pp. 82–83.

²⁵See K. Pomian, *Przeszłość jako przedmiot wiedzy* (The Past as a Subject of Knowledge), second corrected edition, Warszawa 2010, pp. 128–130.

The intersubjectivity that marked Sarbiewski's innovative stance in the field of literary criticism is also visible in his effort to construct a totalizing vision of reality, which inevitably must be done under the aegis of theology. In his lecture on perfect poetry, the place of God and religion was clearly outlined; Sarbiewski postulated the "existence of a close homology between divine action and the act of poetic creation,"²⁶ and, consequently, performed a deification of the epic poet (*alter Deus*),²⁷ who, in order to attain that ideal in full, had to be a Christian, drawing from the resources of the authorized reservoir of the miraculous,²⁸ whose source lay in God, not in human fantasy. In this context, *De acuto et arguto* appears not to maintain such a close connection to religion, particularly since the epigram is to all appearances excluded from the poetic classification made by the author in his effort to follow Aristotle, since – especially in its most frequently used occasional form – it deals in particularisms, not general truths or "moral fictions,"²⁹ and is thus "non-imitative" and "non-narrative."³⁰ On the other hand, Sarbiewski's famous definition of poetry shifts the emphasis from mimesis (*à la* Aristotle) to the question of verisimilitude and the miraculous:

Poetry will thus be the art that imitates beings in its verbal material not according to how they exist, but how they should or could exist, relatively believably [*verisimiliter*] exist, existed or will exist.³¹

However, as Sarbiewski declares elsewhere:

[...] certain epigrams we do not exclude from poetry, if they contain some events attractively presented or the imitation of someone's personality, not as he is in truth, but as he might be.³²

A peculiar linkage between imitation and verisimilitude, connected to the definition of poetic art itself, thus allows a certain type of epigram to hold the status of poetry. In practice, Sarbiewski did not shun occasional works, panegyrics or stemmata, using the "concreteness" and "singularity" that he reproached Syrokomla for; still, among his own works, the "cycle"

²⁶E. Sarnowska, *Teoria poezji Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego* (Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski's Theory of Poetry), p. 129.

²⁷See K. Janus, "Wokół pojęcia twórczości. Ze studiów nad 'De perfecta poesi' Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego" (On the Concept of Creative Work. Studies of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski's "De perfecta poesi"), *Prace Naukowe Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie. Filologia Polska. Historia i Teoria Literatury* (Scholarly Work of the Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa. Polish Philology. History and Theory of Literature) 2006, no. 10, pp. 63–67.

²⁸See e.g. B. Niebelska, "Cudowność, paralogizm, koncept" (Miracle, Paralogism, Concept), in *Koncept w kulturze staropolskiej* (The Concept in Old Polish Culture), ed. L. Ślęk, A. Karpiński, W. Pawlak, Lublin 2005, pp. 29–47.

²⁹See M.K. Sarbiewski, *De perfecta poesi, sive Vergilius et Homerus. O poezji doskonałej, czyli Wergiliusz i Homer* (On Perfect Poetry, or Virgil and Homer), trans. M. Plezia, ed. S. Skimina, Wrocław 1954, pp. 20–21. See also: M. Łukaszewicz-Chantry, op. cit., p. 7.

³⁰See R. Krzywy, op. cit., p. 25.

³¹M.K. Sarbiewski, *De perfecta poesi*, p. 4. Sarbiewski inscribed his thought within the problem of a multifaceted dialogue with the tradition of *imitatio* and *mimesis*, which had been taking place in early modern aesthetics since the late 16th century. The most radical proposal for poetics had been presented by Francesco Patrizi (1529–1597), who wrote that "all poetry must have as its subject that which is unbelievable, for that is the foundation of true miraculousness, which should be the main subject of all poetry" (quoted in: W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia estetyki* (History of Aesthetics), vol. 3: *Estetyka nowożytna* (Modern Aesthetics), 3rd and 4th editions, Warszawa 1991, p. 273). See further: B. Niebelska-Rajca, "Poeta imitatore czy poeta factore? Późnorennesansowe włoskie dyskusje o mimesis" (*Poeta imitatore or poeta factore? Italian Late Renaissance Discussions of Mimesis*), *Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce* (The Renaissance and Reformation in Poland) 2011, vol. LV, 101–122.

³²M.K. Sarbiewski, *De perfecta poesi*, p. 21.

of religious (and according to Jesuit theoretical principles, legitimately poetic) epigrams *Divini amores*³³ occupies a special place. This is not the place to discuss the complex conceptist epigrams on divine love inspired by the Song of Songs, which despite the “moral fiction” they undoubtedly contain nonetheless met with accusations of transgressing classicist taste boundaries due to their application of “wit” to religious material.³⁴ Sarbiewski's poetic practice nevertheless allows us to shed some light on the metaphysico-cognitive meaning that could be concealed inside the punch line of an epigram.

In *De acuto et arguto* the triangle is presented as a universal model for the construction of the punch line; certain lines of thought from the author's treatise *Dii gentium* (Gods of the Pagans), which constituted the “summing-up of Renaissance mythography,”³⁵ enable us to perceive a connection between that geometric figure or its analogous stereometric solid and the principle ordering reality. In the context of ancient religions, Sarbiewski slips in the following curious observation:

If they took into account the nature of a God himself in juxtaposition with the world, they proved that Apollo, or God, was the zenith of the pyramid, that is, the point from which all lines of the whole pyramid, that is, the world, proceed and to which they return, though that point itself is completely indivisible and like God completely inaccessible to sight, while the whole pyramid is visible.³⁶

Here the author arrives at the statement of a “cosmic principle”³⁷ according to which the world resembles a visible pyramid whose summit (*acutum*) represents God, identified with Apollo by the pagans. This analogy enables a model of the world order, based on the triangle and the whole symbolic baggage of the number three, to be perceived in the structure of the epigram. Outside the sphere of “pre-Christian intuitions”³⁸ observed in the inheritance from

³³There is disagreement among scholars regarding the structure of the cycle, since no manuscript has survived that would direct us to the author's intended organization of the poems. The one thing that is known is that *Divini amores* was dedicated 1623 to Tarquinio Galluzzi; whether the epigrams in the cycle are intended to be separated from the larger whole constituted by *Epigrammatum liber* is unclear. On this subject, see: M. Piskała, D. Sutkowska, *Wprowadzenie do lektury*, pp. 11–12; A. Kołos, op. cit., pp. 96–103.

³⁴Within an earlier tradition in literary scholarship there was a widespread skepticism about the use of the concept in the context of religious themes. Stefan Zabłocki perceived doing so as “comical” and “sacrilegious” „komizm” (S. Zabłocki, *Od prerenesansu do oświecenia. Z dziejów inspiracji klasycznej w literaturze polskiej* [From the Pre-Renaissance Era to the Enlightenment. Studies in the History of Classical Inspirations in Polish Literature], Warszawa 1976, p. 178). Claude Backvis accused Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski, author of works based on the concept of “poetry during Lent” of “secular pranks” (“Osobność jako temat w twórczości i osobowości Stanisława Herakliusza Lubomirskiego” (“Seclusion” as a Theme in the Work and Life of Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski), in *Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski. Pisarz – polityk – mecenas* [Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski, Writer, Politician, Lawyer], ed. W. Roszkowska, Wrocław 1982, p. 38). Krystyna Stawecka, for her part, did not shy away from making aesthetic value judgments on Sarbiewski's baroque style; in the context of *Divini amores* she notes the unsuitability of the Song of Songs to “punch line gymnastics” (K. Stawecka, *Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski. Prozaik i poeta* [Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski. Prose Author and Poet, Lublin 1989, p. 180). Further on problems of the baroque aesthetics and scholarly evaluations, see: E. Buszewicz, op. cit., pp. 85–91.

³⁵P. Urbański, op. cit., p. 29.

³⁶M.K. Sarbiewski, *Dii gentium. Bogowie pogan* (Gods of the Pagans), ed., trans., and introduction by K. Stawecka, Wrocław, Ossolineum 1972, pp. 277–278.

³⁷See J. Bolewski, “Nascitur una... discors concordia. Aspekty teologiczne twórczości Sarbiewskiego” (Nascitur una... discors concordia. Theological Aspects of Sarbiewski's Work), in *Nauka z poezji Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego SJ* (Science in the Poetry of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski SJ), ed. J. Bolewski SJ, J.Z. Lichański, P. Urbański, Warszawa 1995, pp. 107–108; M. Łukaszewicz-Chantry, op. cit., p. 13.

³⁸P. Urbański, op. cit., p. 30.

antiquity, similar lines are opened by the intriguing “conceptist” consideration of the chief Catholic dogma:

These three colours of the rainbow seem to me to perfectly express certain properties of the Divine persons: blue of that uncreated Iris would correspond to God the Father, green to the Holy Spirit, and yellow to the Son. Because the exact illumination of blue is properly achieved through yellow, so the Son is the light of the Father and the gleam of His essence, since he is the word of the Father and the limit of the knowledge in which the Father is himself revealed, knows himself and in some way clarifies himself. And then just as green is in essence a colour that mediates between blue and yellow and exists as their unification and love, and more precisely (green) arises from blue and yellow, thus the Holy Spirit is the unification and love of the Father and the Son and from them entirely originates. [...] That is why among all created things, made by art and by nature, the universally known glass triangle, through which we see everything coloured by these three colours, seems to me to be the most beautiful symbol of the Holy Trinity, and the shape of the triangle itself as well as the triple colours, as I have said, accord with the Holy Trinity. I would say nothing more except that through the Holy Trinity, and the shape of the triangle itself, the three colours of every created thing are perceived, and the lines and lights somehow diffused: blue, that is the might of the Father, the colour yellow, that is the wisdom of the Son, green, that is, the goodness of the Holy Spirit, for we know that love toward God is born from looking at the Spirit’s attributes in creatures, as nothing is so near to you, when you know God, as your love for Him.³⁹

The mutual relationships of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are described in this passage from *Dii gentium* in terms similar to the grammar of the epigrammatic concept, in which the two lines of the triangle are joined at the point of intersection (*acutum*).⁴⁰ On the one hand, the author pronounces the rainbow to be a natural phenomenon that illustrates the properties of the Trinity; on the other hand, he refers to the “glass triangle,” no doubt meaning a prism that disperses light, as a perfect human invention that seems to imitate nature. Sarbiewski wrote in a time when it was still believed that the prism itself colours the clear light; it was not until Newton’s experiments, conducted in and after 1666, lay the foundations for modern spectroscopy, that it was proven that colour constitutes an inherent component of light, the fundamental lecture on this theory being published in 1704 under the title *Opticks*. The problem had in fact been studied since the Middle Ages. Robert Grosseteste, who lived in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, believed that the rainbow was a result of refraction of solar rays, and experiments with the prism were done in the 13th century by Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon, as well as one of the most important medieval scholars of optics, Vitello, who hailed from Lower Silesia.⁴¹ The sources of Sarbiewski’s erudition in natural philosophy

³⁹M.K. Sarbiewski, *Dii gentium. Bogowie pogan*, p. 163.

⁴⁰On this subject, see also: A. Kołos, “Trójkąt jako matematyczny wzór świętości. Metafizyka konceptu Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego” (The Triangle as a Mathematical Model of Holiness. The Metaphysics of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski’s Concept), in *Obraz świętości - świętość w obrazie* (Images of Holiness – Holiness in the Image), ed. I. Lis-Wielgosz, W. Józwiak, P. Dziadul, Poznań 2014, pp. 186–188.

⁴¹In the twelfth century translations of Aristotle’s *Meteorology* began circulating in Europe, which had considerable influence on medieval attempts to explain the rainbow, an effort begun by Grosseteste. European science lagged behind the findings of an Arab scholar of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, Alhazen, whose work on optics was translated into Latin in about 1250. Vitello and those who followed him benefited from Alhazen’s achievements. For further information see: R.C. Dales, “Studies of the Rainbow,” in *The Scientific Achievement of the Middle Ages*, sixth edition, Philadelphia 1994, pp. 81–88.

require further research by historians of science, which might indicate whether he knew the phenomenon of the dispersion of light only from medieval texts or had access (and if so, to what extent) to the scientific findings of his own time.⁴²

In any case, leaving the scientific material aside, Sarbiewski's declaration introduces a fundamental hierarchy of nature, creation and art that also translates into a creationist theory of poetry. If according to scholastic categories the Trinity should be understood as *natura creans*, the rainbow as a natural phenomenon corresponds to the notion of *natura creata*, and their "perfect" imitation is revealed to be the prism, which constitutes simultaneously a work of art and an imitation of nature. In the realm of poetry, the epigram, creating and recreating the harmony of opposites, represents an analogue to the glass object; in both cases, Sarbiewski explicitly underscores the element of creation, not limited to mere imitation. *Fingere et imitari* czy *creare et condere* in baroque poetics signifies that the poet imitates the creative power of God.⁴³ Understood thus, the concept is not a refined play on words, but constitutes an act of knowing the "cosmic joke" contained in the work of creation. Furthermore, in the context of the original cycle *Divini amores* it seems relevant to consider the observation from *Dii gentium* that the knowledge of God leads directly to love, and in consequence, we may consider that the poet was simultaneously attempting to affectively awaken mystical adoration through an epistemic act. In the second half of the seventeenth century, theoreticians of the punch line would express the image of God as the perfect conceptist even more forcibly, with Emmanuele Tesauro, author of *Il cannocchiale Aristotelico* (1654), declaring that: "For whatever is witty in the world is either God himself or comes from him."⁴⁴

Sarbiewski may not formulate that thought as unambiguously, but, as passages from *Dii gentium* show, he perceives in the symbol of the triangle or the spatial pyramid a certain "witty" mystery of God and creation, and the universal structure of the epigram proposed by him reproduces that cosmic principle. In another part of his mythographic treatise, the author provides another expression of his belief in the homology between the concept's discordant concord and the world order:

The cithern that Apollo carries in ancient statues represents that harmony by means of which God preserves the world and discordant concord [*discordem concordiam*] according to the ancient poet: "You rule all of Olympus with the help of a cithern." Clement of Alexandria expressed this marvelously when he described the mystical song of the Word of God: "It was for you," he says, "that he ordered the universe rhythmically and harmonically, and brought the disharmony of the elements into an order of accord, so that to him the whole world became harmony."⁴⁵

⁴²In the era of Kepler and Galileo the study of light was particularly closely bound up with the problem of telescope construction. Not until the 1640s did publications on spectroscopy appear (by Atanasius Kircher and Jan Marek Marci).

⁴³See K. Janus, "'Poesis – universi pictura'. Rozważania na temat twórczości Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego" ("Poesis—universi picture.' Reflections on the Subject of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski's Works), *Świat i Słowo* (World and Word) 2011, no. 1 (16), pp. 175–176.

⁴⁴Quoted in: W. Pawlak, *Koncept w polskich kazaniach barokowych* (Concept in Polish Baroque Homilies), Lublin 2003, p. 79.

⁴⁵M.K. Sarbiewski, *Dii gentium. Bogowie pogan*, p. 265. See also: J. Bolewski, op. cit., p. 106.

Conclusion

The formulaic poetics of Sarbiewski are not only an aggregate of normative rules of baroque taste that might, for successive generations, represent merely a testament to the whirlwind of change that literary tastes undergo from one period to another. Even if we can agree that the work of seventeenth-century poets of the *minorum gentium*, together with the continuation of that current in the Saxon period, meant that Dmochowski had some justification for his complaint that “[i]n early days the epigram was far too celebrated,” the work of this early baroque Jesuit poet far transcends matters of taste through its vigour. From the perspective of the history of European intellectual formations, Sarbiewski’s profile shows the distinguishing features of the transitional period between the Renaissance, whose *episteme* was based on the principle of projection, postulating a great chain of analogies of words and things,⁴⁶ and the new paradigm of modern knowledge. On the one hand, we can perceive in Sarbiewski – as Otwinowska previously suggested – signals of an objectivist method of argumentation that works by induction, bringing him closer to the consciousness of Bacon or Descartes; his encyclopaedic turn indicates roots in the current thinking of the seventeenth century, and his predilection for using geometric figures testifies to the growing authority of mathematics in the age of scientific revolutions. Yet, on the other hand, his universalistic vision of the world, privileging poetry in the hierarchy of knowledge, betrays a continued proximity to the gradually fading paradigm of the “great book of nature.” In this aspect of his work, Sarbiewski remains a part of the epoch of Galileo and Kepler, who conducted their innovative experiments while still adhering to the grand narratives about reality. As Galileo wrote in *Il saggiatore* (1623):

Philosophy is contained in this enormous book that we have constantly open before our eyes (I call this book the universe), but it cannot be grasped unless we first learn the language, and learn the alphabet in which it is written. And this book was written in the language of mathematics, and its letters are triangles, circles and other geometric figures; without these means, it is impossible for a person to understand a word that is written in this book; without them, man’s fate is to wander in vain around a dark labyrinth.⁴⁷

It seems that for Sarbiewski, the book of the world contains poetry, whose language still serves the projection of concepts and things. And the attachment to the category of cosmic harmony, even if somewhat redefined in the spirit of the poetics of the punch line, finds its analogy in the thought of Kepler, who set down his groundbreaking discoveries of planetary movements and particular reflections on polyhedrons in a work bearing the symptomatic, revealing title *Harmonices mundi* (1619).

Sarbiewski’s theoretical work, which employs a multi-layered complex of literary, aesthetic, cosmological and epistemic thought, should not be merely relegated to the field of older forms of normative poetics. It represents a group of texts that, read with a proper knowledge of the

⁴⁶M. Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York 1994, p. 94 and passim.

⁴⁷Galileo Galilei, “Waga probiercza” (The Assayer), in T. Sierotowicz, *Od metodycznej polemiki do polemiki metodologicznej. Impresje z lektury wraz „Wagi probierczej” Galileusza wraz z antologią* (From Methodical Polemic to Methodological Polemic. Impressions from Reading Galileo’s “Assayer” Together With an Anthology), Tarnów 2008, pp. 133–134.

history of ideas, reveal the intellectual atmosphere and cognitive aspirations of a fascinating era before the introduction of precise interdisciplinary divisions. Though the classical taste of the Enlightenment, and then the Romantic lyric had an irreversible effect on modern attitudes toward baroque poetics, Sarbiewski's work has an unflagging allure for historians of culture broadly understood. Perhaps we might (with a wink of an eye) say the same about the symbol itself that the Jesuit poet tied to his concept, since on the cover of Pink Floyd's cult record *The Dark Side of the Moon* (1973) there is a prismatic triangle dispersing light into the colors of the rainbow, an ideal illustration joining together (*concupere*) the ideas of *De acuto et arguto* and *Dii gentium*.

KEYWORDS

aesthetics

epigram

p u n c h l i n e

concept

ABSTRACT:

The theoretical writings of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski have provided a constant focal point of scholarly interest, most often in the context of the study of problems relating to poetry's concepts and aesthetics, the Christianization of antiquity, or the imitation of Horace. The multifaceted thought of this author, who belonged to a transitional intellectual formation in the history of European thought, can and should nonetheless likewise inspire studies in terms of the history of ideas, which place the object of knowledge at the intersection of artificially separated areas of knowledge. Sarbiewski's treatise *De acuto et arguto*, devoted to his conceptist structure of the epigram, represents not only an enunciation of baroque literary theory, but also, read in dialogue with his other writings, reveals a consistent cosmological vision of reality.

SARBIEWSKI

formulaic poetics

baroque

HISTORY OF IDEAS

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Anna Kołos (b. 1987) has a Ph.D in the field of Literary Studies. She defended her doctoral thesis, entitled *Sceptycyzm w literaturze polskiego baroku* (Skepticism in the Literature of the Polish Baroque), in 2015 at the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Her main interests include ancient intellectual culture and the history of ideas with particular attention to connections between literature and philosophy, scientific discourse, and religion. She also works on imagology, monstrosity studies, mental geography and images of “Other” cultures in writing. In 2013 Kołos published a book entitled „*Fides quaerens intellectum*”. *Wiara i rozum w barokowym konceptyzmie Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego i Stanisława Herakliusza Lubomirskiego* (“Fides Quaerens Intellectum.” Faith and Reason in the Baroque Conceptism of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski and Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski). |