

TOMASZ CHACHULSKI

**JERZY STEMPOWSKI AND THE HERITAGE
OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT¹**

1

The connections of Jerzy Stempowski with the Enlightenment seem to be absolutely obvious, in a way natural, a part of his own interests and his stylistics, in the permanent system of intellectual references, and in his truly aristocratic way of life. They are grounded mostly in his utterances. Those who have written about these connections have derived them mostly from observations of the behaviour of a 'leisurely passer-by', from conversations with the writer (if Stempowski can be thus called), or from impressions derived from listening to his long monologues. Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk wrote that the motif 'Stempowski—a man of a different period' definitely belongs to spaces common to reminiscent narration about Stempowski ("if we attempt to avoid the expression—cant"²) and contradicted this formula with the deep interest of Stempowski himself in his own period and his grounding in contemporaneity. In 1947 Stempowski wrote to Józef Czapski in an excellent letter devoted, among other things, to this very issue:

¹ This is a changed and slightly extended version of a lecture given in Instytut Badań Literackich PAN (Institute for Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences) on 20 March 2007.

² Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk, *Niespieszny przechodzień i paradoksy. Rzecz o Jerzym Stempowskim*, Wrocław 1997, 159.

It seems to me that I could not write a single word beyond the topics of today, even when writing about meadows and mountains. [...]
 [...] Writers connected with their century through a common dictionary and set of ideas, through the concept a given generation had about the world and man, but not through events they witnessed [...]
 Maybe the fact that artists distance themselves from contemporaneity means only that their contemporaneity was not worth much.³

But to many researchers who have written about Stempowski the horizon of the eighteenth century (and to a lesser extent also about the Renaissance, the Baroque and Positivism) must have been obvious, and certainly Stempowski had his contribution in it. Stempowski at times, in passing and in the margins, would give his remarks which resulted in such an impression. “I am sending you three photographs of myself taken by Dr. Zbinden. One of them is in Voltaire’s style [...]”⁴—he wrote in one of his letters. While in his *Dziennik podróży do Austrii i Niemiec* (*A Journal from Travels in Austria and Germany*) he wrote about houses in Salzburg destroyed by the war: “New districts look particularly bleak in their neglect. The cheerful rococo buildings bear the times of hardship better. Dusty and dilapidated, they always preserve the greatness and charm of the Enlightenment.”⁵ He was a belated man of the Enlightenment, particularly to people who knew Stempowski personally, and had direct contact with him—it could be said that they were under his charm, especially during his Swiss years after WWII. The death of Stempowski resulted in a wave of reminiscences which were immediately published in the *émigré* press, later complemented and finally gathered together

³ Jerzy Stempowski, *Listy*, introduction Jan Kott, Wojciech Karpiński, afterword Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk, ed. by Barbara Toruńczyk, Warszawa 2000, 37, 38. Letter to Józef Czapski, 12.06.1947.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 150. Letter to his father, 05.09.1946.

⁵ Jerzy Stempowski, *Dziennik podróży do Austrii i Niemiec*, in Idem, *Od Berdyczowa do Lafitów*, ed. by Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk, Wołowiec 2001, 95.

in an extensive volume edited by Jerzy Timoszewicz.⁶ In this book we will find many opinions about Stempowski's behaviour, his ideological choices, membership in Freemasonry, reading preferences connected with the eighteenth century, and the famous anecdote about the Swiss census where in the field 'denomination' he inserted the formula only seemingly unambiguous: "A Voltairean". It seems that it is in the reminiscences of Janina Kościałkowska that we can find more such themes than anywhere else, but also in the reminiscences of Krystyna Marek, who exchanged letters with Stempowski over many years, and to a certain extent also in the reminiscences of, e.g. Tadeusz Nowakowski, Waclaw Zbyszewski, Maria Danilewicz-Zielińska and Czesław Miłosz. Of course, it could be said that some of them are congruent with Stempowski's personality as a writer, which can be detected from his essays, letters and travel journals. Some of them seem to be specious and untrue, contradictory to Stempowski's writings. Yet others are somehow in the middle of the road—it is not possible to confirm them or contradict them today, and the texts which we have do not allow for a proper verification of Stempowski's behaviours and convictions.

Janina Kościałkowska, who had met Stempowski during the war, wrote about their walks in Bern's Rosengarten, at that time empty, full of old trees as well as a very well kept lawn and fountains, white plumes of which were slightly swaying under the pressure of wind gusts. "The figure of Stempowski fit into this eighteenth century background very well"⁷—she wrote. And then she added that he, together with the eighteenth century rationalists, "shares [...] a rare ability of a warm-hearted distance, reserved and perfect politeness *pleno titulo*."⁸ Rosengarten, beautiful, carefully maintained and

⁶ *Pan Jerzy. Śladami niespiesznego przechodnia. Wspomnienia i szkice o Jerzym Stempowskim*, ed. by Jerzy Timoszewicz, Biblioteka „Więzi”, Warszawa 2005.

⁷ Janina Kościałkowska, *O Jerzym Stempowskim. Dopisane po latach*, w: *Pan Jerzy. Śladami niespiesznego przechodnia. Wspomnienia i szkice o Jerzym Stempowskim*, op. cit., 145.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

geometrical, is located high above old Bern and extends to the very bank of the river. Down there the river Aara flows swiftly, circling around the oldest part of the town, located at the palm-like isthmus. On the opposite bank, amidst the buildings of old Bern, there could be seen a wide street, Nydegasse, leading to the bridge and house number 17, in which Stempowski spent most of his final years of life (1952-1967). Going along Nydegasse in the direction of Rosengarten one crosses a bridge bearing the same name (Nydeggbücke), and a small roundabout, where since the nineteenth century, there had been a moat with tamed bears—a symbol of this town. The one has to go up a steep narrow road cobbled with regular stones, along high hedges separating old houses in gardens. It was one of Stempowski's walking routes.

Krystana Marek formulated her observations in the most emphatic way:

He himself would have defined himself as a man of the eighteenth century, as a man of the Enlightenment. Clearly, it was a distinct and probably most direct heritage. The eighteenth century invented rationalism and scepticism. The eighteenth century connected aristocratic *habitus* with political and social radicalism. The eighteenth century invented reformism and lack of any reverence for conventional grandeur and values. Stempowski oozed with the eighteenth-century atmosphere of a parlour in the same way in a Patrician Bern house as in a peasant inn in Emmental. The eighteenth century invented 'Voltaireanism' and the negation of all institutional religion. The eighteenth century invented clarity of thought and intellectual courage, which did not stop in the face of any established canon.⁹

Wacław Zbyszewski, with whom it is not necessary always to be in agreement, stated:

⁹ Krystyna Marek, *Jerzy Stempowski*, in *Pan Jerzy. Śladami niespiesznego przechodnia. Wspomnienia i szkice o Jerzym Stempowskim*, op. cit., 122–123.

The ideal of Stempowski is the aristocratic ideal of the Age of the Enlightenment. Stempowski was and remained a man of the eighteenth century. In the supreme version, [...] had Stempowski been born a hundred and fifty years earlier, he would have spent his life chatting with Madame Genlis and [...] he would have cheerfully walked in the direction of a guillotine, hiding, for the last time, a copy of Lucretius in his pocket *de son pardessus puce*.¹⁰

Konstanty Jeleński was right when he pointed at a post-war (1950) essay of Stempowski entitled "Monsieur Chlewaski" as a kind of key to the eighteenth-century fascinations of Stempowski and characteristic features of this essay's protagonist and his problems—as some features of his self-portrait¹¹ (let us add that Stempowski kept it away from his readers). Stempowski wrote himself:

[...] Chlewaski was one of the most romantic and charming figures of the end of the eighteenth century. Born in the Wołyń (Volhynia) region, he was the oldest illegitimate son of Prince [Adam Kazimierz—T. Ch.] Czartoryski, generał ziem podolskich (a general of the Podolia region). His father, not revealing the name of the mother, gave him the name of Klewański, which was derived from the name of the town of Klewań, where he had been born [...]. The prince was very attached to his first son. He could not have given him his name or his wealth, so he decided to give him something which according to the system of values which existed then was most valuable: the most studious and widest education. Hence Chlewaski's fantastic 'erudition' and width of interest.

[...] Klewański felt obliged to remain discreet. His ambition was – while using all the powers of *véritable vie de l'esprit* – to go through

¹⁰ Waław A. Zbyszewski, *Dwaj laureaci. Fragmenty*, in *Pan Jerzy. Śladami niespiesznego przechodnia. Wspomnienia i szkice o Jerzym Stempowskim*, op. cit., 72–74.

¹¹ Konstanty A. Jeleński, *Paweł Hostowiec, czyli o wysiłku wyobraźni* in *Pan Jerzy. Śladami niespiesznego przechodnia. Wspomnienia i szkice o Jerzym Stempowskim*, op. cit., 63. Cf. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, *Pożegnalny list*, op. cit., 79.

life as a generous and benevolent shadow and then disappear without a trace.¹²

It is here where we will find the premises to understand Stempowski's Voltairanism. While analysing the possible themes of the 'peripatetic' conversations of friends under poplar trees in Tuluse he wrote:

Chlawaski and Courier [two protagonists of the essay, Paul-Louis Courier wrote *Lettres de France et d'Italie*, some of which were addressed to Chlewaski - T.Ch.] perhaps were not as Greek as they imagined. Behind their words and gestures there hid Christian tradition, which in the times of Napoleon was the life form of the *ancien régime*. [...] In the period of the Enlightenment the notion of the soul's salvation was much extended. It could be understood in a Christian way and in a stoical way, which was probably dear to the Hellenists from Tuluse, and, finally, it could be understood in the loose and wide sense of Voltaire: *aimer et penser c'est la véritable vie de l'esprit*. The internal and spiritual life, understood in this or that way, remained in the ideas of this period beyond the scope of the state's activities.¹³

2

Stempowski himself created an Enlightenment myth of his person, and at first he associated it with a Ukrainian theme. In his biography we read that the Stempowski family moved to the Ukraine in the middle of the eighteenth century. At one moment there were some misunderstandings connected with these issues, connected both with the place of Jerzy Stempowski's birth and with his ancestors (some suggested that the Stempowski family moved to the Ukraine in the seventeenth century). The point is not from

¹² Jerzy Stempowski, "Monsieur Chlewaski", in Idem, *Eseje dla Kassandry*, Gdańsk 2005, 96.

¹³ Ibid., 94–95. Hans Zbinden had a similar opinion on it. H. Zbinden, *Wielki polski emigrant*, in *Pan Jerzy. Śladami niespiesznego przechodnia. Wspomnienia i szkice o Jerzym Stempowskim*, op. cit., 97: "In religious matters he was an inheritor of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment. However, he kept a distance from any type of narrow dogmatism and any form of organized religion."

which century—the seventeenth or eighteenth—was the real ancestor of Jerzy (this matter has already been settled), but that Stempowski many times returned to this issue, as if he had treated his own private eighteenth century as his constant point of reference. The history of the Stempowski family—of *these* Stempowskis—seems to have started in the eighteenth, not the seventeenth, century, although the earlier lives of his ancestors are known (also from Jerzy Stempowski himself). Most of the family's souvenirs came from the eighteenth century: a red, embroidered velvet pouch—a gift of a Turkish official from Chocim, and many other objects. The Stempowski family was an inheritor of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its end during the period of the Enlightenment.

In the case of Stempowski his knowledge of a historian of literature about the Enlightenment was not strictly connected with his reception of the period. Stempowski was very well versed in the period of Stanisław August, or perhaps it would be more correct to use the phrase, in the period of Louis XV. His system of references is more connected with eighteenth-century Europe and the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, the inheritor of the Jagiellonian ideals, than the Warsaw of king Stanisław August and the Polish Enlightenment in general, the Enlightenment which was the object of the research of historians of literature, historians of art, and historians (with no epithets). From this perspective there is no poetry of Naruszewicz, Krasicki, Karpiński, Książnin, no texts of Kołłątaj or Staszic. Let us tactfully disregard flattering comments about Jan Kott's literary research on the Enlightenment, made by Stempowski, who then lived in remote Switzerland, and apparently he was not aware about its real value or about the role played by Kott in the 1950s in the community of the researchers of the Enlightenment.¹⁴ Stempowski knew Kott, first of all as his pre-war student and an exquisite stylist, and then as a scholar of Shakespeare with a worldwide reputation, and perhaps his opinions should be taken at face value.

¹⁴ Jerzy Stempowski, *Felietony dla Radia Wolna Europa*, ed. by Jerzy Timoszewicz, Warszawa 1995, 19.

Stempowski concentrated more on the French and European tradition of Rousseau and Voltaire than the achievements of the Polish Enlightenment. A member of Freemasonry and a Voltairean—as he wrote about himself, when in high spirits and with the light irony with which he treated all questionnaires, reports and official forms. A liberal and an agnostic, at times declaring that he was an atheist, he lived in the Carpathian mountains in a haunted house, he slept under a row of holy pictures in Muri near Bern,¹⁵ and hung a huge, black crucifix on a wall of his room in Bern. But it was one English etching, of course from the eighteenth century, which was the most important object:

An etching of Hogarth has been hanging over my bed for few months; it shows an old man with wings [...]. Lying on a heap of debris and letting off his pipe the last cloud of smoke. In this cloud a word *finis* could be discerned and the white pipe breaks in his fingers. There is a will next to the old man, the last words of it could be read: I am assigning all the rest to chaos making it the main executor; witnesses: Klotho, Lachesis, Anthropos. The drama of life lies in debris, and only the last words could be read: *exeunt omnes*. [...] I have pleasure every day when I look at this etching. If my house caught fire, I would first take this etching, although its place in art's history is well known and clear to me.¹⁶

These days this etching is well known as it was placed on the cover of letters published by *Zeszyty Literackie*. Stempowski bought it from a Bern antiquarian at the beginning of 1947, shortly after the war, hanged it on the wall and was very attached to it, although he had no illusions about its artistic value. It is true that Hogarth's etching

¹⁵ Janina Kościółkowska, op. cit., 145.

¹⁶ Jerzy Stempowski, *Listy*, op. cit., 39. Letter to Józef Czapski, 12.06.1947. Cf. a letter of Krystyna Marek from this period (5.05.1947) in Jerzy Stempowski (Paweł Hostowiec), *Listy z ziemi berneńskiej*, introduction Wiktor Weintraub, ed. by Lidia Ciołkoszowa, Londyn 1974, 4; also Jan Białostocki, *Hogarth*, Warszawa 1959, 44. A 1764 etching "Finis—The Bathos" was his last work, he died on 25 October. He is buried at the cemetery in Chiswick.

is a bit kitschy. Apart from the motifs listed by Stempowski, we can also see a ruined building, an hour-glass, a lopsided emblem of an inn "The World's End" and a slightly singed etching with the barely visible word "Time"

Hogarth inherited the symbolic treatment of reality from Puritan moral literature. But the symbolic objects in his works are not only symbols; they are simultaneously real objects, the existence of which is justified in an obvious and reasonable way. [...] these are allusions, metaphors, at times as clear and readable as proverbs or everyday fixed verbal collocations.¹⁷

wrote Jan Białostocki in an exquisite essay. And he added:

Hogarth is to a large extent a representative of the age of the Enlightenment. He believes in reason, progress, nature; he abhors fanaticism and priests, fights with poses and pretending. There is, however, one feature he lacks; the feature which was inextricably connected with the picture of the world in the age of the Enlightenment. He lacks optimism.¹⁸

The concentration of themes, objects and ultimate, final symbols in this etching seems to suggest that Jerzy Stempowski found in it the confirmation of his convictions about the decline of European cultures, which started exactly at the time of the Enlightenment breakthrough. In 1947 in Switzerland it appeared that the great fire had been finished. Stempowski wrote about this great fire in the autumn of 1945 when he visited Austria and ruined Germany. The ways of his thinking at that time were clear, and his predictions and political insights truly outstanding.¹⁹

In August 1945 he wrote to Halina Micińska that in the existing circumstances

¹⁷ Jan Białostocki, op. cit., 31.

¹⁸ Ibid., 35.

¹⁹ Cf., observations in a book: Paweł Hostowiec, *Dziennik podróży do Austrii i Niemiec*, Rzym 1946.

the best solution is to behave like during a great fire, which could not be extinguished with our jar of water. One needs to stay away [...] the best option is to avoid unnecessary conversations [...]. In order to do it, a month ago I hid in a little mountain village, in the mountains which are a bit similar to the mountains of my youth. Nothing of importance has changed here since the eighteenth century and simple people speak the language of the Enlightenment. There is even no inn in this village, but there is an archive with hundreds of acts from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century. Now I am reading the village's chronicle.[...] In front of my window there is a gibbet, which was used for the last time at the end of the eighteenth century to hang the last culprit.²⁰

It is not surprising, therefore, that Stempowski was so eager to buy this etching of Hogarth from an antiquarian in Bern.

3

The culture of the Enlightenment, and, up to a point, of the Polish Enlightenment—its language, customs, circles of interests, themes of literary works—is connected in many ways with Kresy Wschodnie (the Eastern Borderlands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). Perhaps for historians and literary scholars dealing with the Enlightenment of Toruń, Gdańsk or Silesia, this connection is not so clear as to the researchers focused on the most distinguished writers of this period: Karpiński, Książnin, Niemcewicz, Naruszewicz, Beniśawska, Stanisław August. Yet, even in linguistic features there is a certain cant in the direction of Eastern dialogues. Of course, such important writers as Trembecki, Wybicki or Węgierski were not from Kresy, but even Trembecki ended up in Granowo and Tulczyn. It is not typology or statistics that are crucial here, but the awareness of numerous points of interest, places marked with the multinational

²⁰ He wrote about this in a similar way in his letter to his father, 5.09.1946. Jerzy Stempowski, *Listy*, op. cit., 146. Cf. Bolesław Miciński, Jerzy Stempowski, *Listy*, ed. by Anna Micińska, Jarosław Klejnocki, Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk, introduction Halina Micińska-Kenarowa. Konstancy Régamey, Warszawa 1995, 281–282.

Commonwealth of the end of the eighteenth century, the last version of a state which, at least at the level of ideas, suited Stempowski and to which he would return on many occasions with peculiar consistency.

The predilection for small forms of literary expression was not characteristic only for the Enlightenment; they were successfully used by writers of different periods. But there is something in Stempowski's style of writing—slightly ironic, subtle, but at the same time focusing so neatly on the heart of the matter—when without the appropriate seriousness in treating serious issues he reached for small forms, and in the manner of the eighteenth-century writers he approached philosophical issues or issues of social pacts in a philosophical fairy tale, a letter, or in forms closely related to essays. The impression gets stronger when we get deeper into the nature of his observations as a writer. A careful outlook, which, after all, has one's own reaction to the surrounding world as a starting point, was the form selected by Stempowski. It is characterized by a studious rationalization of any judgement about the world. In this situation the essay is akin to epistolary writing, the critical sketch is akin to the letter, and all these texts are "essayistic"—such were the opinions of many scholars writing about Stempowski, while, in their assessment, thoughts uttered by Stempowski were carefully balanced and had classical reserve. Stempowski himself recollected a few times: "The measure which I later used to gauge novels I was reading had been given to me through reading French naturalists, Cervantes and Voltaire".²¹

Stempowski had coined the formula of 'a pilgrim to better times' back in 1924. Eleven years later he wrote:

A new wanderer did not come to impose upon mountains and forest his own hysteria of fight, work, ambition. On the contrary, he came to put down the burden of his thoughts and endeavours without any perspective. [...] Searching for an recognition of new values is, in a way, a natural function of educated people. That is why new

²¹ *Felietony dla Radia Wolna Europa*, op. cit., 157.

pilgrimages [...] started from the intelligentsia, and this movement [...] has already acquired [...] full literary history.²²

And a little later Stempowski refers to an American economist, who after a careful analysis declared that in comparison with citizens of the highly industrialized countries of Europe and America, poor farmers-peasants belonged to the aristocratic civilization, which is gauged by an uninhibited use of free time. The characteristic system of their values is known to Europeans only from books.²³

Nowe marzenia samotnego wędrowca (*New Dreams of a Lonely Wanderer*) published in 1935 undoubtedly introduced a process of easy-going reflections on the last, autobiographical book of Rousseau. The introduction, essays and journals brought a series of formulae, which Stempowski later converted into concrete pictures of the lost Ukraine. In the meantime, in *New Dreams of a Lonely Wanderer* Stempowski presented his readers with the beauty of the shepherd's life: free, happy, independent. He assessed that it was only the eighteenth century which found real pleasure in discovering the pastoral mode of life.

4

For Stempowski the eighteenth century was a specific time watershed. In one of his most famous essays, "W dolinie Dniestru" ("In the Dniester Valley"), written in 1942, he wrote about the twilight of the popularity of the Latin language in the Old Poland and the career of the French language. And it is the fact that the decline of interest in the Latin language and its disappearance from the teaching programmes offered by schools of Komisja Edukacji Narodowej (Ministry of Education) as well as from the social and political life of the gentry, was one of the phenomena which marked the end of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was in this very period that the career of conversations in French began, which lasted well into

²² Jerzy Stempowski (Paweł Hostowiec), *Nowe marzenia samotnego wędrowca*, in Idem, *Od Berdyczowa do Rzymu*, Paryż 1971, 52.

²³ Ibid., 54.

the nineteenth century and even to the middle of the twentieth. When Stempowski was writing about these changes, the age of Rousseau and Delille was in front of him in the form of the French book store in Odessa,²⁴ the presence of which could have been explained only by the terrific career of the French language in Russia, and in the Eastern Borderlands, in the still present reminiscences in the form of trees, lines of trees along the roads and parks of Ukrainian aristocrats and gentry. Stempowski wrote about old farming and pastoral traditions, which were blended with gardening fascinations and the madness of the Branicki or the Potocki aristocratic families; great projects like Sofiovka and small parks of the gentry were scattered in their thousands in this area. As if it were parallelly to these parks and gardens which at that time were no longer looked after, the bookshelves of a manor house in the Dniester valley at the end of the nineteenth century were filled with old French editions of Voltaire and Rousseau. Readers of "In the Dniester Valley" might get the impression that for Stempowski historical time could be divided into two periods: from Virgil to Rousseau, and from Jacques Delille to Sartre, and writers as well as painters contemporary with him, whom Stempowski always read and watched so carefully. This impression was stressed by Stempowski himself, who several times used such periodization himself: from Virgil to Sartre²⁵ and on many occasions starting "measuring the time", for example, from Delille. But he did it not only in this essay. Writing about the house of Igor Stravinski in Uscilug, Stempowski, although starting from pre-history, quite quickly returned to this well-known motif:

The life returns back to Uscilug at the end of the sixteenth and at the beginning of the seventeenth century. [...] Some of the wooden buildings, manor houses, cottages, inns are the remnants of the eighteenth century. These buildings, erected in times of peace,

²⁴ Jerzy Stempowski, "Epitaphium", in Idem, *Szkice literackie. Klimat życia i klimat literatury. 1948–1967*, 327.

²⁵ *Listy*, op. cit., 53. Letter to Józef Czapski, 3.06.1953.

were freely scattered on the hills alongside the Bug river. [...] People of the Enlightenment travelled a lot on uncomfortable roads.²⁶

Strangers were very rarely forced to visit Uscilug after the eighteenth century.²⁷

Alongside observations of the little town Stempowski included a description of a palace of the Lubomirski family, which was built, of course, in the eighteenth century.²⁸ The case was presented in *Ziemia berneńska (The Region of Bern)*, although it was not the case of the transfer of earlier judgements onto other buildings, from Polish Eastern Borderlands to Swiss cantons. Certainly, if the cultural reality described by Stempowski is connected with the tradition of the seventeenth century—in Poland, Ukraine or in the region of Bern, Stempowski did it justice, particularly in the later fragments of “The Region of Bern”, where he dealt with Baroque traditions. However, the constant presence of the motif of the eighteenth century in his writings was the result of his convictions about the universal nature of the Enlightenment, about its spread over the whole of Europe at that time, and about a fundamental breakthrough the Enlightenment brought to all aspects of life. Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk wrote that Stempowski did not measure time in years or generations, but in layers,²⁹ that he was not interested in the mythical or sacred time of the beginning, that he did not mention the Golden Age, that he did not complain about the destructive flow of time (the Horatian devourer of things), that “he did not seize the day, did not wait till the next day, that the only thing he believed was duration, flowing time, bringing new layers of generational accomplishments.”³⁰

I think, however, that we can find in Stempowski’s writings a turning point of historical time, and simultaneously a point from

²⁶ Jerzy Stempowski, *W dolinie Dniestru. Listy o Ukrainie*, ed. by Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk, Warszawa, no year given, 69.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

²⁹ Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk, *Labirynt, palimpsest*, in Jerzy Stempowski, *Od Berdyczowa do Lafitów*, op. cit., 17.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

which Stempowski started diffidently to draw the outline of the ideal Golden Age. The eighteenth century. "Each period, for example, has its own recipe for the recreation of the Golden Age"³¹ as Stempowski himself wrote, reminiscing about the interwar period in Poland with detachment. It is not necessarily the world which was fully realized in any particular moment in history. To a large extent this world remained mostly in a circle of ideas and works of literature, longings for tolerance and peace, the domination of an Ancient tradition, freedom of individuals, respect for the individual conscience, rational scepticism and aristocratic behaviour. This unusual ease with which Stempowski got close to people from extremely different social and professional groups was grounded—judging from Stempowski's own statement—in something akin to the behaviour of an eighteenth-century aristocrat, who was not afraid to lose his authority, simply because such a loss was not possible at all. Analogically, Stempowski's scepticism was grounded in Montaigne and Voltaire, it gave a sense of support and even of strength and heroism.³² Stempowski would return a few times to Voltaire's heroism, which he analysed using the example of *Candid*, contrasting it with the knowledge about post-Enlightenment things, the ruin of the world, the myth of great redevelopment and its consequence, known, or more probably only sensed, by Voltaire. Reading these sketches devoted to various writers may create the conviction that Stempowski was writing about himself, about his problems and choices as a writer, and that many references he was making—to the Enlightenment, the Renaissance and Ancient tradition—were made for this reason. In his analysis of Herling-Grudziński's *Wieża (The Spire)*, Stempowski, while contrasting it with contemporary French prose, wrote about his ideal of style: that of the beginning of the nineteenth century. This style was based on reading writers from the seventeenth and the eighteenth century (La Fontaine and, of course, Voltaire), of encyclopaedists and sentimental

³¹ Jerzy Stempowski, *W Turynie*, in *Idem Od Berdyczowa do Lafitów*, op. cit., 471.

³² Jerzy Stempowski, *Sceptycyzm w twórczości Berenta*, in *Idem, Szkice literackie*, op. cit., vol. I: *Chimera jako zwierzę pociągowe. 1926–1941*, 198.

writers of the end of the eighteenth century. This style was devoid of all embellishments and references, to which there was no return. “The chaos of experiences resulted [...] exclusively in negative truths”.³³

To speak about these experience a new language was needed: clear and solid.

The peculiar literary language of this period was the result of such needs and circumstances. We will not find in it: the striking abbreviations of Saint-Simon, the laconic style of La Fontaine, the elegance and wit of Voltaire, or the light volubility of *abbé* Prévost. This is a serious and slow language, as if a bit concerned, of incomparable clarity and precision, clinging closely to all described objects. This language exudes confidence as a tale of a man whose experience outside the literary life is huge. The very circumstances in which this language began point to its topicality for witnesses of similar events which happen these days.³⁴

Stempowski never tried to rationalize or describe these convictions. However, they can be traced in many places within his texts, mentioned, shown loosely, unwittingly, at times even in reference to other people.

Let us try to summarize them: Firstly, Stempowski was glad of the period which cherished the Ancient tradition and Greek and Roman classical traditions. Secondly, it was the period of the triumph of culture over nature, which allowed, in a paradoxical way, to give back to nature its autonomous values; to perceive it as true and unspoilt. Stempowski, in the manner of Jan Potocki, although not on horseback or in a balloon, but on foot, equipped with remarkable erudition, set out on a journey which was not only to understand his own period, but the goal of which was to learn about an old pastoral and agricultural culture and to learn about any culture, particularly the culture the duration of which allowed for the development of many

³³ *Eseje dla Kassandry*, op. cit., 168.

³⁴ Jerzy Stempowski, *Po powodzi*, in Idem, *Szkice literackie*, op. cit., . II: *Klimat życia i klimat literatury. 1948–1967*, 198.

aesthetic values, the culture of continuity and longevity. One of its features was the full use of personal freedom and excess of free time, which was used to elevate aesthetic sensitivity and was a true source and engine of culture.

Stempowski was in favour of the lay vision of the world, although his membership in Freemasonry and his attitude to religion were far more complex than his emigrant colleagues tried to present. It could be said that it was so ambiguous, grounded in scepticism and hope, as was the attitude which Tomasz Kajetan Węgierski or other Polish writers of this period (but also Rousseau) showed in their writings. He was, however, truly happy when during one of his pre-war travels in Hutchulshchyna he saw a strong connection between the pastoral culture of the highlanders, so close to him, and the rational and lay thinking of the world. When he saw highlanders' scepticism of religious ceremonies, the world made a full circle, and his favourite agricultural and pastoral tradition turned out to be congruent with the rational tradition of the Enlightenment.

In one of the best pieces of prose Stempowski ever wrote, in the lately discovered, translated and published *Zapiski dla zjawy* (*Notes for a Phantom*) on 18 October 1949, he stated:

Yesterday I spent the whole day in Chasseral. In the morning Mister von Erlach took me in a car and left me on the brink of the forest, twenty minutes away from the hotel in Chasseral. We arranged to meet in the evening in Prêles.

There are very few places in Europe in which the imprint of the eighteenth century was preserved so well as the region of lakes Morat and Bienne. The houses, trees and gardens hear breathe the sweetness of the Enlightened Age. As if one was watching etchings from the times of Rousseau.³⁵

And in a different place:

³⁵ Jerzy Stempowski, *Zapiski dla zjawy*, ed. by Jan Zieliński, foreword: Wojciech Karpiński, Warszawa 2004, 59.

Once it was believed that magicians could conjure spirits in fountains: if a spirit had been conjured in the fountain of Wattenwyls, then it must be *animula pallida blandula*, one of those sweet eighteenth-century little souls, enemies of everything which is cruel and violent. While reading in de Brosses's book a chapter devoted to the fountains of Rome, one might think that the spirits of the Enlightenment, which were so much in love with waterspouts, were particularly predestined to inhabit fountains.³⁶

Stempowski's Ukrainophilia, which was connected with his interest in the old agricultural and pastoral culture of Wolynhia and Polesie, or even the inhabitants of the Kurpie regions he referred to on several occasions—had yet a different dimension. Stempowski, on several occasions, stressed his strong connections with various parts of Eastern Europe—Podolia, Hutsulshchyna, but also with the whole region between two seas, the Baltic and the Black, between Odessa and Riga. He wrote about the voices of such rivers as the Dniester, the Prut, the Cheremosh, the Daugava. As is known, he travelled there with his father, Stanisław Stempowski. Later he would connect his interests with phenomena which could be discerned in the texts of such writers as Theocritus, Virgil and Rousseau.³⁷ Stempowski was a polyglot, and he was absolutely convinced that for man closeness with a place is absolutely fundamental: with rivers, hills, plains. For a disciple of the great empires of the end of the nineteenth century it was not a language that really mattered, but people and places, a derivative of free choice, as if he had inherited from his eighteenth-century ancestors an attitude of aristocratic belonging to the elite, whose sense of being at home is very remote from the nature of the twentieth-century nation states. Maybe some traces of such a phenomenon can be found in his biography, his path to becoming a Swiss émigré, who, after all, had also lived in Bern earlier, leaving Poland many times during the inter-war period, as he had moved freely from Cracow to Odessa and Warsaw, and French and German towns and

³⁶ Ibid., 49.

³⁷ Jerzy Stempowski, *W dolinie Dniestru. Listy o Ukrainie*, op. cit., 205.

cities. His Ukrainophilia, requiring sufficiently rational arguments, at times coincided with his predilection for Enlightened references. Irritated by the lack of understanding for the cause of Ukrainian emigration both after the First and after the Second World War, after the death of an émigré poet and essayist and a friend of his, Yevhyn Malaniuk, in 1968 Stempowski wrote about the narrow-mindedness of contemporary encyclopedism, which was limited to individual nation states and individual political options.

Voltaire, while writing his *History of Charles XII* two hundred years ago, had surprising knowledge of Ukrainian issues. He was writing for the whole world and he paid attention to universal information.³⁸

5

Of all writers of the Polish Enlightenment Stempowski referred most often to two poets of the Enlightened gardens: Franciszek Karpiński and Stanisław Trembecki—despite the radical difference between them. Karpiński translated Jacques Delille's *Gardens*, and in this way he entered the territory of Stempowski's interests. Karpiński was never interesting for Stempowski; we can see no common ground between them. Stempowski referred to Delille on all possible occasions—no matter if he had been writing on eighteenth-century Ukraine, the Dniester valley at the beginning of the twentieth century, or on the Bern region. Stempowski turned Delille into the main architect and the main initiator of the garden fascinations and garden madness of the Enlightenment.

Trembecki wrote *Sofiówka (Sofiovka)*, the long poem which for Stempowski was only "a belated monument of Baroque court poetry."³⁹ Stempowski knew the real Sofiovka, that is the park of Szczęsny Potocki. He saw it in the first years of the twentieth

³⁸ Jerzy Stempowski, *Wspomnienie o przyjacielu*, in Idem, *W dolinie Dniestru. Listy o Ukrainie*, op. cit., 118.

³⁹ Jerzy Stempowski, *Słowo między zdobnictwem a służbą*, in Idem, *Szkice literackie*, op. cit., vol. II: *Klimat życia i klimat literatury. 1948–1967*, 311.

century—deserted and partly ruined, a park which had much earlier been turned into an experimental garden of a Russian agricultural school, but despite all this, it was magnificent and able to compete with the grandest parks of Western Europe.⁴⁰ In an essay, “Słowo między zdobnictwem a służbą” (“Words Between Ornaments and Service”), written in 1964, Stempowski wrote: “Petrarch would have described Sofiovka in a much more accurate and ‘topographical’ manner [than Trembecki].”⁴¹

6

The essay *The Region of Bern* should be approached with a key which Stempowski placed in the opening, introductory paragraph:

Since Ancient classicism not a single period brought more changes in European landscapes than the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries.

And then he added:

In the Republic of Bern the representatives of the Enlightenment was the whole race of medium and small landowners, who, thanks to the prolonged effort of many generations, created a rural civilization, flexible and strong enough to survive through the great crises of European history. The Republic of Bern, placed in the centre of Europe, adapted various elements of the cultures of their neighbours and most of the ideas which form a joint Western heritage. [...] Bern villages have been saved by modern wars, and many old buildings have survived. Trees also usually grow in the places where they were planted by the people of the Enlightenment. When asked, they tell their stories, composed not only of events, but also of the hopes, dreams and emotions of the people who lived in those times.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid., 310.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² Jerzy Stempowski, *Ziemia berneńska*, transl. and ed. by Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk, Warszawa 1990, 7, 8–9.

A leisurely stroller, who is our guide in the canton of Bern, seems to be entering straight from the pages of Rousseau's notes.

In "vicinities of the town" to which he devoted two fragments of his booklet, his attention was drawn by a parkway of plane-trees, going in the direction of Muri—a testimony of the eighteenth-century "fad for classical Antiquity."⁴³ Plane-trees— as Stempowski wrote—surrounded the Athenian Academy; Socrates lectured under plane-trees. "The Enlightenment fascination with plane-trees"⁴⁴ was a derivative of the presence of intellectuals and educated people, many of whom inhabited Bern in the second half of the eighteenth century, when plane-trees were introduced into this canton, together with the fashion for Classics. The roads there, which criss-cross the canton, followed the old paths; they were also built in the eighteenth century, and regulations forbidding the planting of trees close to roads come from this century, and the tradition of breaking these rules which turned out to be going against common sense and the real needs of people also started in the eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century linden trees were planted on hills in the canton in place of the gallows which had stood there before. Great public works carried out in Bern in the eighteenth century changed the appearance of roads so much that they erased traces of Medieval communication routes. Landscapes created in the times of Theocritus, Ovid and Virgil were only slightly changed till the period of the Enlightenment. Landscapes were filled with the fear of the unknown in the Middle Ages, and they became a 'humanized' space in the seventeenth century, when attempts were made to make him like paradise on earth, like in *Gofred* or in *Jerusalem Delivered* by Tasso-Kochanowski. The project of humanized nature could end in success: "It was from these hopes that the gardening madness of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries was born; a madness which reached the furthest corners of our continent and profoundly changed its landscapes."⁴⁵ It is not

⁴³ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 44.

necessary to add that these furthest corners of our continent are located in the valleys of the Cis, the Prut and the Dniester.

In order to make this portrait complete, Stempowski himself “lived in the old house, with the internal design from 1774, in the main street of the old town”⁴⁶ of rococo décor. He wrote to Wittlin in a similar vein:

Now I live in an old house built by aristocrats of Bern in the fourteenth century, which was rebuilt partly during the period of the Enlightenment and partly one hundred and two years ago. In this way [...] I found myself in the period of powdered wigs and white stockings. The old town is still full of such houses, but local pragmatists do not respect them [...] [...] in the whole district only one merchant called Pijatowski, who had come from Berdychev, renovated the house he built according to the best style of the eighteenth century.⁴⁷

When in December 1967 Diemek and Henry Tzaut, the landlords of Stempowski, moved to another house built around 1900, they took him with them. It took Stempowski a long time to get used to it.

Walls preserve something from the life of generations. In my old flat people listened to Vivaldi, Schütz, Mozart, read Shaftesbury, Voltaire.; in the new flat people read Nietzsche, D’Anunnzio, Barrès. The leap is too big.⁴⁸

Clearly, it was too late for another relocation. Stempowski died two years later. During the funeral ceremony Georg Friedrich Handel’s sonata was reputedly performed, and “Lamentoso” by Christoph Willibald Gluck—a favourite composer of the Enlightened.

⁴⁶ Jerzy Giedroy, Jerzy Stempowski, *Listy 1946–1969*, ed. by Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk, Warszawa 1998, part II, 418–419. Letter to Jerzy Giedroyć, 10.12.1967

⁴⁷ Jerzy Stempowski, *Listy*, op. cit., 169–170. Letter to Józef Wittlin, 25.09.1954.

⁴⁸ Jerzy Giedroyć, Jerzy Stempowski, *Listy 1946–1969*, op. cit., 419.