

Hanna Malewska

“Opowieść o siedmiu mędrkach” [“The Tale of Seven Wise Men”]

Cracow: Znak 2012

The “Re-Mythologizing” of Wisdom  
on the Margins of the New Edition of Hanna Malewska’s  
“The Tale of Seven Wise Men”

The number “seven” is symbolically rich, and even richer when connected with the theme of “wisdom.” In the “Arthurian Encyclopedia” (ed. N. J. Lacy, 1986) we can read Joseph Palermo’s contribution saying that “The Seven Sages [of Rome] legend is a frame-story, into which are interpolated a series of tales and counter-tales told, on the one hand, by the wicked empress, condemned to death for having attempted the seduction of her princely stepson, to avert her execution, and, on the other, by each of the seven sages, preceptors of the innocent prince, to seal and hasten her doom.” Versions such as the Old French “Les Sept Sages de Rome” or Italian “Sette Savi di Roma” refer, among other cultural traits, to Arthurian elements, such as the character of Merlin.

But the story, sometimes retold as “The Seven Wise Masters,” is of more distant, e.g. Sanskrit, Persian, or Hebrew origin (“the widely diffused Indo-European legend of the Seven Sages, a combination, essentially, of the story of Potiphar’s Wife with the storytelling device of Scheherazade in the ‘Thousand and One Nights’” – Palermo, 1986, *ibid.*). Another narrative combining “seven” and “wisdom” is that of The Seven Sages of Greece, or Seven Wise Men, which was ancient Greek tradition referring to the 6th century BC historical sages (actually more than seven, of which the seven were differently chosen by the different storytellers). The Greek version is rarely seen as a tale or narrative cycle.

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In the Warsaw coffee-bookstore Wrzenie Świata [“Upheaval in the World”] overseen by reporter-reportagists in the backyard of the Nowy Świat Street, non-fiction literature is mostly on offer. However, in an exposed location at the bartender-cashiers’ counter one can find a copy of “Greek Mythology.” Here, too, could – and rather should – also stand the recently published “Opowieść o siedmiu mędrkach” [“The Tale of Seven Wise Men”]. This is because “The Tale” can be read as a collection of insights, discussions, and explorations between the spheres of values and spheres of fact, between spheres of myth and spheres of non-mythical – philosophical – thinking. It is thus a collection of tales that can be regarded as representing both Greek categories: “Mythos” and “Logos,” respectively. Thus Polish writer Hanna Malewska combined the Indo-European

storytelling approach to the "Seven" with ancient Greek tradition of the "Seven" philosophers. This led her to "apocryphal" narrative of some well known (and some fictive) Greek philosophers.

This is not a new book, as it was first published over a half-century ago, in 1959. At the same time it is new, insofar as it has not been republished (and thus discussed) for around forty years. Its author, Hanna Malewska (1911-1983), was a writer and editor, and for many years editor-in-chief of Polish intellectuals' influential Catholic monthly "Znak" and collaborator with the famous "Tygodnik Powszechny." But in 2012, neither "Znak" nor "Tygodnik Powszechny" noticed the reissuing of "The Tale of Seven Wise Men." Paradoxically, a small article published in the "Metro" popular daily seems to be the only one that took note of this long-awaited republication (Toczyski Piotr, "Gdyby filmowcy znali Malewską..." ["Would the Filmmakers Know Malewska?"], "Metro Daily," 5 July 2012). The main argument of that newspaper article intended for a wide spectrum of readers is that Malewska's books thematically preceded bestsellers such as Ken Follett's "Pillars of the Earth" or multi-season television shows such as "The Tudors" by Michael Hirst. The process of building medieval cathedrals or Sir Thomas More's imprisonment followed by his consequent rejection of Henry VIII's offer were the subjects of Malewska's novels and short stories many years before these Western books and films were released. Thus, too Malewska's (or a Malewska-like) presentation of Greek antiquity and philosophy could be on filmmakers' lists one day, given that her books will not always be forgotten, as they currently seem to be.

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One who would like to initiate a debate around "The Tale of Seven Wise Men" ought to begin at its starting point, which is the year of the first edition in 1959. At that time two critical reviews of "The Tale" were printed. One, entitled "U korzeni drzewa genealogicznego naszej kultury" ["At the roots of our culture's genealogical tree"], was written by then 33-year-old Jan Józef Lipski (and can be found in his posthumously collected works "Słowa i myśli" ["Words and Thoughts," Biblioteka Więzi 2009]). The second text, "Mądra opowieść o siedmiu" ["Wise Tale of the Seven"], was written by then 35-year-old Marcin Czerwiński and published only in "Przegląd Kulturalny" ["Cultural Review"]. Thus attention to Malewska's book, newly published at that time, was paid mainly by two authors who had similar generational experiences of war and European disunity; fifteen years earlier they both had fought in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising against German occupants. As their later biographies revealed, they were both authors who had similar academic aspirations. They both defended their doctoral theses almost simultaneously: in 1965, Jan Józef Lipski, whose thesis advisor was Kazimierz Wyka, a famous Polish literary critic and historian, and one year later Marcin Czerwiński, whose thesis advisor was Nina Assorodobraj, one of the leading sociologists of the pre- and post-WWII period in Poland. Both were then connected with institutes of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN). Jan Józef Lipski achieved *habilitation* (an advanced post-doctoral degree) at

PAN's Institute of Literary Research, although he had to wait six years to have it finally accepted due to his involvement in anti-regime political opposition; he was one of the co-founders of the Komitet Obrony Robotników [Workers' Defense Committee]. During the martial law period he was fired from PAN's institute. Marcin Czerwiński was professor at the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences since 1983, and earlier at PAN's Institute of Philosophy and Sociology. The names of the institutes are mentioned here on purpose: the content of "The Tale of Seven Wise Men" can prove interesting for both researchers of literature and art as well as for readers interested in philosophy and properly construed sociology.

### Moral power seen for the first time, and the heartrending massacre of the Pythagoreans

Jan Józef Lipski saw Malewska's book as an attempt to search out the "birth of separate elements of the value system which for millennia to come would influence the culture of Europe." He compared Malewska's novel with other literary searches for universal values in Polish historical prose that were written by Polish authors of that time such as Iwaszkiewicz, Parnicki and Gołubiew. However Lipski considered Tadeusz Zieliński, a classical philologist, to be the great conceptual patron of the novel, as he had "looked for the birth of Christian ethics rather in Hellas than in Judea." The moral system of "The Tale of Seven Wise Men" Lipski sees as being "almost an outline of the Gospel" – "although not yet baptized."

Lipski reads "The Tale" especially through the moments when something happens "for the first time": when grace turns out to be better than punishment (e.g., Pittacus frees Alcaeus), when moral power is able to counteract ruling power (the tyrant Periander wants to step down), when impractical knowledge proves to have value (Ismenios searches for answers from Thales of Miletus), and when the social contract is accepted – also for the first time (in Solon's Athens). These half-mythical tales point at a greater reality of civilization: in the Hellenic world appears a "powerful cultural factor, which until the present day lives in the circle of our civilization."<sup>1</sup> Jan Józef Lipski interpreted these proto-beginnings of Europeanness in categories of social consciousness. He wrote of moral reflexivity, which generates a norm, which in turn becomes a "property of social consciousness." He also wrote of moral power that can be "in social consciousness" a power capable of winning power in a new dimension. Thus the literary researchers read Malewska's book in the year of its first publication mostly from the sociological perspective.

There is not so much difference between literary research and the sociological approach as is usually assumed. Marcin Czerwiński, later professor of sociology, saw "The Tale" in a manner complementary to Lipski's approach. He wrote: "Malewska's protagonists *modo homerico* are transferred from herding

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1 Translations from Polish throughout the article by Author [ed. note].

pigs to sword, lyre, or book" and "against the old beliefs of naïve peasants an interrogative curiosity counteracts." Czerwiński noticed different unifying elements in ancient Greek wisdom: engineering curiosity, the philosophy of fate and humanity, and the inventiveness of reformers. "In this the charm of this book certainly lies – the charm of that world and this kind of multi-aspect sensitivity, this kind of – often – omni-skill, which later, in effect, led to dilettantism, at that time bore the highest social responsibility and bathed in glamour" (M. Czerwiński, *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1959).

But Czerwiński – already as one of the first readers of "The Tale" – paid particular attention to the massacre of the Pythagoreans: "Of all the tales my attention was seized especially by the tragic fate of the Pythagoreans from Croton. This Order of the Wise – partially savants, partially moralists, somewhat contemplators – falls victim to a massacre that was aimed at vicariously fulfilling the grievances of different interest groups acting in the town. The Pythagoreans become the symbolic guilty party, found among the defenseless. I noted with sorrow that this episode seemed to me far closer to modernity than any other" (Czerwiński, 1959, *ibid.*).

### From mythical and non-mythical Antiquity to Europeanness

Taking place at the seashores and isles of Greece, Libya, and Asia Minor, "The Tale of Seven Wise Men" – as is well illustrated by the modest map included in new edition – is thus a special form of literary and ethical expression mediated by Antiquity, or perhaps by quasi-Antiquity.

This is because with the development of knowledge and appreciation of wisdom, Rudolf Bultmann's "Entmythologisierung" does not happen. This ambiguous German-language "demythologizing" is usually translated and understood literally as "demythologization," or sometimes – by Marcin Czerwiński himself in his works on the anthropology of modernity ["Przyczynki do antropologii współczesności," PIW 1988] – as "desymbolization" or "discoursivization." This "soft" observation of the interlacing the mythical and the non-mythical rises especially from Malewska's insightful book. Illustratively, colorfully, and with the true conventions of mythical content, Malewska writes of moral and social development, precisely about the rise of what we would name "Logos," but also about its further interlacing with "Mythos."

After more than a half century from the first appearance of the book, we can begin reading with our own current dilemmas, fascinations, and disturbances. Unfortunately, this new edition from the series of five Malewska books that has been chosen for republication omits, for unknown reasons, the original critical reception. The introduction by Władysław Stróżewski included in the book is also interesting and important, but Lipski's and Czerwiński's texts from a half-century ago should have found a place in the new edition, at least as afterword. Although since the first publication of "The Tale of Seven Wise Men" the center of Europeanness, rooted in Hellas, is readily seen as closer to North than South, both the current geopolitical situation and the one from fifty years

ago constantly provoke us to the same reflection on Europeanness to which Malewska's book inspired at least two aforementioned readers already in its year of first publication.

The cultural source of Europeanness is in Antiquity, and in our new situation an urgent task is not only the constant redefining of Europeanness but especially approaching these values which constitute Europeanness. This is difficult, mainly because of the fact that self-questioning is one of the qualities of Europeanness. Thus the republished "The Tale of Seven Wise Men" opens a space for broader reflection about the contemporariness of the tradition of the European Antiquity. Any Antiquity other than the one of mass cinema is often only found deep in research centers into which mostly classical philologists are admitted. If we suppose that we are losing something, then let us look first into Malewska's book.

Hopefully, a belated English translation of the initial critical reception received by Malewska's book will be followed by the translation and distribution of the book itself among the contemporary European community of readers. The case of Hanna Malewska's worthwhile writings clearly shows that any convergence of a pan-European culture is a slow process, especially when it comes to shifting the direction of literary exchange so that the thought of authors like Malewska can move from unknown, semi-peripheral, non-Anglophone and non-Franco-phone territories towards the continental and global mainstream.

ptoczyski@aps.edu.pl