

The modernity of the Enlightenment

A study of Polish literature and culture
from the second half of the 18th century

Summary

The book takes up issues related to the emergence of modernity in Polish literature and culture. In general, those analysing modernity agree that its beginnings can be traced back to the 18th century. However, in studies on the Polish Enlightenment the category of modernity is used sporadically, and as yet no proposition has been formulated that could be applied to the model of the epoch used in research procedures. This book seeks to fill this gap.

This book therefore aims both to expand knowledge on the process through which modernity emerged in the Polish context and identify and verify the usefulness of this category as an instrument for discovering and describing eighteenth-century events here. The principal thesis can be split into two mutually determined and complementing statements: 1) the Enlightenment epoch was a time that brought Polish literature and culture into the *modernitas* orbit, a time when modernity gradually emerged in the Polish reality and crystallised into a system of cultural and historico-literary phenomena that endured long beyond the eighteenth and early 19th century. 2) The category of modernity might constitute an effective instrument for discovering and describing Polish literature and culture from the Enlightenment, and is also useful in processes of conceptualising the whole picture of the epoch and interpreting particular constituent phenomena.

The book is divided into two parts. The first is cross-sectional and structural; its aim is to describe a coherent conceptual framework which, based on the concept of modernity, might be capable of organising ideas on the cultural and historico-literary reality of the Enlightenment. The second part changes the focus on the Enlightenment and is based on close observation of a selected fragment; here the category

of modernity is used as a tool for interpretation, allowing a fresh look at selected aspects of the work of Poland's finest eighteenth-century writer, Ignacy Krasicki.

Part One comprises two chapters. In the first, titled *Modernity as a category for literary research on the Polish Enlightenment*, a new theory of eighteenth-century literary processes is outlined. The primary novel aspect here is conceptualisation of Polish literary history of the 18th and early 19th century as a shift within the formation of the Enlightenment from the neo-classical paradigm (the classical *sensu largo*) to that of modernity. The second chapter, titled *The Sarmatian Enlightenment and the beginnings of Polish modernity*, proposes a model of relations between the two most important phenomena co-existing in Poland's eighteenth-century cultural sphere: the Enlightenment and Sarmatism. This model is in line with the current state of research and is an inference model, which assumes the possibility of both these phenomena permeating and influencing each other. Apart from the Enlightenment and Sarmatism, hybrid fields are also distinguished, which are the consequence of partial overlapping: Enlightened Sarmatism and Sarmatian Enlightenment. This chapter closes by indicating that allowing the possibility of non-antagonistic relations between the Enlightenment and what preceded it in Polish culture impacts on the relations between Polish modernity and the course of the modern-day debate on Polish identity.

Part Two comprises two chapters, in which the category of modernity is used as an instrument for interpretation. The issues dealt with here were selected in order to reflect what is significant for an understanding of this epoch. This allows extrapolation of conclusions with a broader scope than merely dealing with a particular author. In this sense, the method used in Part Two of the book is something akin to that of *case studies*. The first chapter is titled *The Philosophy of Antiquity as a figure of modernity in Ignacy Krasicki's discourse*. It presents the way Krasicki makes use of "Diogenesan text", "Senecan text" and "Platonic text" in order to critique the *public intellectual* figure typical of modernity that emerges before his eyes. It is also shown how this critique emancipates some aspects of 20th-century criticism articulated by writers such as Julien Benda, Raymond Aron and Czesław Miłosz. Chapter Two, titled *Ignacy Krasicki's religious consciousness in dilemmas of faith and intellect*, proposes a reconstruction of an algorithm governing Krasicki's attitude to God and religion. This chronicles his transition from acts of faith rooted in metaphysical emotion to the transcendental critical function of accepting meaning emerging out of manifestation and tradition. It is shown how Krasicki legitimises this transition by means of a set of sceptic instruments in order to reconcile, within a coherently constructed world-view, approval for the message of faith as revealed in the Bible and invested in the teachings of the Church, with a full acceptance of the message derived from the Enlightenment's cognitive discourse and justified by means of its empirical tools.

The analysis presented in Part Two of the book leads to the conclusion that Krasicki's attitude to his own epoch should be viewed in categories of reflexivity, which many writers treat as a *sine qua non* condition of modernity. This reflexivity expresses an ability to criticism that becomes self-criticism through its use of *stricte* modern tools and reference to the premises of modernity itself. Comparative analysis of the meaning and course of the self-criticism formulated by Krasicki leads to the conclusion that eighteenth-century Polish literature's peripheral position in Europe does not necessarily translate into a low evaluation of its involvement in common cultural sphere of early Modernity.

Translated by Rob Pagett