

Michał Mencfel, *Atanazy Raczyński (1788–1874): Biografia* [Atanazy Raczyński (1788–1874): A Biography], Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 2016, 532 pp., *Historia Sztuki*, vol. 42

Picking up the book by Michał Mencfel one may quote the Polish national poem *Pan Tadeusz*: ‘Ah, he may be the last! Watch, watch you young men, perhaps he is the last one who can lead the polonaise in such fashion’. It is very rare to get a biography so ‘full’ — so comprehensive and so perfectly documented. The author has set himself an ambitious and risky task. And at the same time he has made this

task even more difficult by selecting such a controversial person as a hero of his research. Among researchers, even several decades ago, there was hardly anyone, who would mention the brother of the generally known Edward Raczyński¹ — Atanazy. If someone did, he was mentioned as the black sheep of the family, who denied his origins and became almost fully Prussian, or as a collector famous at that time, who bequeathed his entire collection to the Prussian conqueror.

Mencfel's book, although it is published thirteen years after the full catalogue of Raczyński's collection,² following which nothing has happened in the state of research, almost completely fills this gap. It is worth stressing here that Mencfel, who is from the same circle of Poznań art researchers, has stepped out of the tradition of his environment. This is a very ambitious but also a desperate step. The researcher is absolutely successful in this struggle, which is confirmed by the nomination to the prestigious Tadeusz Kotarbiński Award (granted by Łódź University), the success of the book (reprints) and the opinion of many specialists on this period that the subject can be considered exhausted.

All that has been so far written puts the reviewer in a difficult situation, because sharing the high evaluation of this monography he should send to the editors the shortest review yet written: 'A perfect book!'. A review, which should be the evaluation of a book, seems useless in this case. Finding minor shortcomings, such as that before the Poniatowski family the Sobieski family also obtained the title of prince from the Polish parliament after the election of Jan III as king, will look like searching for a needle in a haystack. So it seems that the comments on the margin of the book and, first of all, presenting these conclusions of the author, which supplement the image of Raczyński and the political elite of the Polish lands in the first half of the nineteenth century with new elements, is much more interesting.

The value of Mencfel's book is not only the fact that the portrait of Atanazy Raczyński as a collector, which we have known so far, has been balanced by his image as a politician (how powerful is a different matter), but also the fact that consciously or unconsciously this reasoning fits into a great debate on Poles' choices in the *belle époque*. Choices which did not lead all of them to the Belvedere in November 1830 and to the forest in January 1863. Many of them went through the offices of the conquerors, but most were tipped by public opinion into the abyss of national infamy. In this situation, the size of the book becomes understandable, since only through balanced and perfectly documented reasoning may the author secure himself against the charge of apotheosizing 'the traitor', a charge — especially in the face of polarized evaluations of the past — is so easily formulated today. But anyone who expects a marble bust

¹ Edward Raczyński (1786–1845) — Polish politician, defender of culture and Polish language in the Grand Duchy of Poznań.

² *Galeria Atanazego Raczyńskiego*, ed. Piotr Michałowski et al., Poznań, 2005.

image of Raczyński, will be wrong. The unbiased, nuanced narration does not omit the psychological side of the count and his vices.

A careful reader will notice significant details already on the cover of this book, since we see a thirty-eight-year-old Raczyński, in the best period of his life, immortalized in the portrait painted by Karl Wilhelm Wach. The Prussian order of the Red Eagle hangs on his neck, and below it, a Polish Virtuti Militari Cross. The first order, which belonged to the most important distinctions in the state of Hohenzollerns, was granted for loyal service; the second — for heroism in battle. For representatives of the domestic political elite of the first half of the nineteenth century such a juxtaposition caused not the slightest surprise. Especially if we realize that the same honours were worn by Prince Józef Ponia-towski, Prince Antoni Henryk Radziwiłł, Prince Józef Zajączek, Prince Ksawery Drucki Lubecki and a distant cousin of Atanazy, Primate Ignacy Raczyński, and many other Poles. But from the 1840s showing off with them, or, especially, accepting them from the conqueror became an incriminating element. On the second preserved portrait of Raczyński as the deputy of Prussian Kingdom in Portugal dated 1843, painted by Auguste Roquemont, we not only see the same Red Eagle order on his neck, but his bust is decorated with a Star of this distinction and probably the Portuguese Order of Christ. There is no trace of the Virtuti Militari... In this context it is significant that on the contemporary lists of persons decorated with these orders we would look in vain for Atanazy. He is not placed on the list of Virtuti bachelors, although his brother Edward is there, and they both were decorated with it for participation in Napoleon wars. He is not present on the list of Poles decorated with the Prussian Red Eagle. This is the best symbol of, on the one hand, the dilemma of this man, his fate, and, on the other, his fate after death — almost total oblivion.

If Raczyński had been asked: 'who are you?' he would have probably answered — as Mencfel's book suggests — that he was a loyal subject of the king of Prussia. For some people this declaration would be clearly a confession of the national apostasy, for others this would be a definition of a statesman and cosmopolitan aristocrat. The author of monography indicates that his goal was to watch Raczyński's choices and to listen to the justification thereof. So little and yet so much. Mencfel is a patient and careful listener — down to the last page he does not formulate verdicts, does not justify, and even in extremely controversial situations he seems to say to the reader: You have all the documents on the table, it is up to you which of them you will use. Is it a good approach? It is surely substantively consistent and implements high standards which a biography of the outstanding or at least important people from the world of politics or culture of the past should be characterized with. But sometimes one would like to hear a bit more *off the record*: what he was really like. But the main character and his monographer do not apply any compromise here. This is why in many places this detailed description deprived of any evaluation loses the tragic fate of Raczyński. Maybe we will see such Raczyński in the announced edition of selection of his journals, which is being prepared by Mencfel.

So who was Atanazy Raczyński, or, more precisely: what is his image that we get in Mencfel's book? First, it is certainly precise and almost complete. Historical precision makes me add the word 'almost', since we are never sure if there are no archives which can either change or complete our image. But even if any materials on Atanazy Raczyński were found, it seems that they would not change the researcher's conclusions, since he got through and looked through archives dispersed around Europe: in London, Copenhagen, Madrid, Lisbon and Berlin, not to mention the domestic sources in Poznań, Warsaw and other places. He got through to the first-class sources, which were not studied before him on such a scale — his huge memoirist and epistolographic heritage. Based on it he creates a 'Self-portrait of Raczyński', subjecting it to analysis and verification. It is the letters and diaries that show 'the last knight of the crumbling world of aristocracy'. In Mencfel's narrative this Polish aristocrat is a typical, and, at the same time, not typical child of his era, as a representative of Polish aristocracy and concurrently representative of the European *monde* of the first half of the century, which is illustrated by hundreds of pages of diaries and letters pages read and analysed by Mencfel.

The matters of politics and art — in this sequence — organize the arrangement of the book, because politics and art were Raczyński's equal passions. And Mencfel brings back these proportions. Moreover, the researcher manages to reconstruct Raczyński's political system, situating him among outstanding representatives of the conservative thought of the period. He describes him — rightly — as 'maybe a not very powerful but active and critical participant and commentator of political life [...], who can be placed among the most important and certainly the most interesting Polish political personalities of the nineteenth century.'³ Is it absolutely true? — we can discuss this with the author. Certainly his outlook was a cohesive construction, to which he was loyal until the end of life, in spite of (or maybe because of) events taking place in Europe. Raczyński defined himself as an absolutist. Loyal to the king, but understood not in the personal but institutional sense — as the foundation of justice and rule of law, as against the usurpation of the liberals, who led the crowds and bore revolutions and destruction. The point of reference for nearly all his choices was his conviction that it is the monarch, who, due to tradition and religion, has a licence to rule, not demagogues elected by the people. These views explain his uncompromising condemnation of all revolutionary movements, which were numerous in Europe during his life. Characterizing Raczyński Mencfel perfectly shows that such an extreme attitude and outlook had to lead to the state of internal conflict, 'a permanent dilemma' and to result in 'hopeless uncompromisingness'. Such an attitude had to lead to conflicts and Raczyński himself to alienation and defeat. It is interesting that this also relat-

³ 'może niezbyt wpływowego, ale aktywnego i obdarzonego krytycznym zmysłem uczestnika i zarazem komentatora życia politycznego [...], którego postawić można pośród najważniejszych, z pewnością najbardziej interesujących polskich osobowości politycznych XIX w.'

ed to his family life, which was evidenced by, initially, breaking relations with the family of his late brother (and excluding them from inheriting the newly created entail), and then, the breakdown of his marriage with Anna Radziwiłłówna and conflict with their only son.

Here I would like to file a firm *votum separatum* from Mencfel's opinion, who sees in this 'hopeless uncompromisingness' of views and attitude of Raczyński the elements of heroism. He may be presented as the last Wajdelota⁴ *à rebours*, who, convinced about defeat, and against pressure, stays at his position. But at his position, with a stable situation and financial abilities, it does not seem such a sacrifice as resignation from all these assets for the proclaimed views.

So the researcher first makes us face the portrait of Raczyński as a politician, who is subject to the greatest resistance, and only at the end he shows his positive image. Raczyński, as a historian, theoretician of art and one of the most outstanding collectors thereof – did not and cannot cause any objections. And we can see that in this respect self-restrictions which the biographer imposed on himself hardly keep such objectified form as before. The positive attitude toward the character is frequently seen. But for Raczyński – as it indirectly results from the book – art, beside its autonomous role, was also supposed to play the service role. And it does not relate to its direct form, that is, decorating residences, but – as we would say today – broadly conceived PR. The collections made available to the public in subsequent residences, which were situated in the representative places of the capital of the state, besides being an attraction were supposed to contribute to improving the prestige of their creator, and to help in his dreamy diplomatic career (but they did not play the key role in this latter case). This was confirmed by, for example, the time of opening the first art gallery in Berlin in 1836 on the birthday of Frederick William III – which was stressed by the researcher.

Finally art, in particular the estate in Gaj Mały (near the town of Szamotuły in Greater Poland), became the last enclave of his world. So it is not surprising that it was there that he located 'the sanctuary of the memory of his house' – a gallery of the portraits of the closer and more distant relatives in the building erected and arranged for this purpose, and he entered it in the statute of the entail. One can add in a small font that besides the description of the collector and historical-artistic passions of Raczyński, the author reconstructs, also in a very comprehensive way, the artistic and political world of the elites of the Hohenzollern state in the mid-nineteenth century. This is important because this area had been, until now, hardly known in the Polish literature on this subject, analogically to the Russian cultural world in Warsaw after 1830.

Last but not least, the problem which Mencfel repeatedly returns to in his book and which is of a key importance for the main character, is worth mentioning. Starting from the clear declaration by Raczyński from 1860: 'Anyone

⁴ Wajdelota – a pagan fortune teller from Lithuania, a hero of the romantic poem by Adam Mickiewicz *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828).

who states that I do not love my country [that is, Poland], lies or is wrong'⁵ he presents it as 'a stigma and obligation, as a burden and challenge'. His relation toward Poland changed according to the political situation and as a result of personal experiences. Passages relating to this question should be considered the most essential for the answer: who was Atanazy Raczyński? Mencfel returns to this problem also in the final part of the book, the punchline of which is the conclusion that one could distance himself from independence but at the same time one could not stop to feel being a Pole. Obviously, it should be added that the temperature of these feelings was sometimes extreme, and in the case of Raczyński it oscillated around the moderate or even very low.

Raczyński cut himself off his compatriots throughout his life. He even did not participate in the activities of the so called Polish Circle in the Chamber of Lords (Herrenhaus), considering it a suspicious company. He hardly maintained traditional contacts with other Polish houses, which — the same as him — loyally served the Berlin throne — not to mention his closest family.

The polarized picture of the nineteenth century as an epoch of sacrifice on the way to independence pushed out the characters from the borderland. These characters, ambiguous and not directly matching the martyrdom panorama of the beautiful century scenery, could not and cannot expect that Poles will remember them. Mencfel does not intend to change this situation with respect to Atanazy Raczyński. Such an endeavour would be difficult to conduct and doomed to failure. It is rather impossible to change opinion about him. And this was not the goal of the book. The author did not want to justify Raczyński, but to explain his choices. To give him the opportunity of, instead of a default judgment, a trial during which he could speak and present his arguments. This was realized completely. The character of Atanazy Raczyński, multivariate, complex and full of internal contradictions, which is visible in his diaries and letters, has found in Mencfel a decent and understanding researcher and biographer.

The book is perfectly documented. It refers not only to many source materials but also to rich literature on the subject and literature of versatile context, which shows an admirable erudition of the scholar. It is completed with superb iconographic material, sometimes from such exotic parts of the continent, to which only Michał Mencfel has followed in the steps of Raczyński. I believe that now I can present a review of this book simply writing about it: PERFECT!

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(Translated by Elżbieta Petrajtis-O'Neill)

⁵ 'Kto twierdzi, że nie kocham mego kraju [that is Poland], kłamie lub myli się'.