
Mystery Play on Birth, Life and Death.
Marcolf by Jan Kasprowicz*

Misterium narodzin, życia i śmierci. *Marcholt* Jana Kasprowicza

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Abstract. The article is devoted to *Marcholt* [*Marcolf*] by Jan Kasprowicz, which is an important work for the Polish drama of the first half of the 20th century, and at the same time it is a relatively poorly known work. As the poet's last and most personal theatrical statement, it is set in the context of his life and work and especially in the framework of his dramatic works. The problem analysis of the work, which considers biographical sources, aims to show that *Marcholt* grew out of a deep need to grasp the entirety of existential experiences and reflections, and to reveal the essence of the human condition. This is reflected in the structure of the work, subordinated to the dramatic convention of mystery and morality features, with syncretic treatment of the genres of medieval religious theatre that is typical of the Young Poland and the interwar period. The story of the eponymous protagonist, an allegorical Everyman, divided into four scenes, presents the major stages of the human journey from birth to death. The key to reading the "tragicomic mystery play" about *Marcolf* is to treat it as a synthesis of the author's worldview changes and dilemmas, an attempt to holistically depict the dramatic antinomies attributed to the existence of the human.

Keywords: *Marcolf*, Jan Kasprowicz, mystery play, morality play, allegory, Everyman

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Abstrakt. Artykuł jest poświęcony ważnemu dla polskiej dramaturgii pierwszej połowy XX wieku, a zarazem stosunkowo słabo znanemu utworowi, jakim jest *Marcholt* Jana Kasprowicza. Jako ostatnia i najbardziej osobista wypowiedź teatralna poety, osadzony jest on w kontekście jego życia i dzieła, zwłaszcza twórczości dramatycznej. Uwzględniająca źródła biograficzne analiza problemowa utworu ma na celu ukazanie, że *Marcholt* wyrastał z głębokiej potrzeby ogarnięcia całokształtu egzystencjalnych doświadczeń i przemyśleń, wydobycia kwintesencji ludzkiej kondycji. Ma to swoje odzwierciedlenie w strukturze utworu, podporządkowanej dramatycznej konwencji o cechach misteryjnych i moralitetowych, z typowym dla epok Młodej Polski i dwudziestolecia międzywojennego synkretycznym traktowaniem gatunków średniowiecznego teatru religijnego. Ujęte w czterech odsłonach dzieje tytułowego bohatera-Everymana obrazują węzłowe etapy człowieczej wędrówki, od momentu narodzin aż do śmierci. Kluczem do odczytania „misterium tragikomicznego” o *Marcholcie* okazuje się potraktowanie go jako syntezy światopoglądowych przemian i dylematów autora, próby holistycznego zobrazowania dramatycznych antynomii przypisanych istnieniu człowieka.

Słowa kluczowe: *Marcholt*, Jan Kasprowicz, misterium, moralitet, alegoria, Everyman

Published in 1920, *Marcholt* has a special place among the literary achievements of Jan Kasprowicz (1860–1926), an artist with extraordinarily broad intellectual horizons, who was both a copious user of the motifs provided by tradition and a bold trend-setter for artistic exploration – which had impact in his own times as well as for future generations. A poet, playwright, literary and theatrical critic, translator from a number of languages (his extensive translation portfolio includes, *inter alia*, approximately eighty theatrical works from various periods and nations, from Ancient Greek tragic dramatists to latest modernist plays), and finally a Professor and Rector of the University of Lviv where he lectured for several years at the Department of Comparative Literature, which was created especially for him. None of his literary or scholarly projects, however, absorbed so much of his attention and commitment as the “tragicomic mystery play” about *Marcholt*, the last and most personal link in his theatrical oeuvre, which consists of seven works in total, written over a period of nearly thirty years.

Kasprowicz used the dramatic form almost from the earliest days in his literary career, sensing its potential for externalization of the existential problems that he was analysing, and treating it as an irreplaceable medium for exposing the roots of the anthropological impasse which dominated *fin de siècle* culture. His dramatic work (and all his work in general) absorbs the stratification of the axiological and metaphysical concepts of the *fin de siècle* generation and, with perspicacity typical for Kasprowicz, expresses the spiritual ferment of the age which was both entangled in a pessimistic world view and in search of effective ways to overcome the decadent anthropology manifesting itself by a crisis of values and a limited vision of Man who has lost touch with transcendence. His oeuvre, closely related to his personal experience, constantly oscillates between rebellious negation of tradition and a pursuit of its new, sustainable meaning, focusing on the relation of Man to

God, the nature of love, sin, meaning(lessness) of suffering, the mystery of death. This open space of reflection houses all of Kasprowicz's plays, starting from his early works inspired by folk culture – a naturalist peasant tragedy *Świat się kończy!* [*The End of the World is Near!*] (1891), and *Bunt Napierskiego* [*Napierski's Revolt*] (1899), a historical play saturated with poetic symbolism. The next stage in the existential discussion about the fundamental truths of Christianity – not in terms of chronology, but rather in terms of the inner dynamics of Kasprowicz's work in which expressionist traits emerge – is a biblical dilogy based on evangelical motifs: *Na Wzgórzu Śmierci* [*On the Hill of Death*] (1898) and *Uczta Herodiady* [*The Feast of Herodias*] (1905). A separate place is occupied by *Baśń nocy świętojańskiej* [*A Midsummer Night's Tale*], a prologue prepared for the inauguration of the Lviv City Theatre (1900), and *Sita*, which is interesting for its Oriental inspirations and was intended as the libretto for a future opera (completed in 1907, printed as a whole in 1917).

Nearly all of Kasprowicz's dramas that are known to us were written before 1908, with the exception of the first part of *Marcolf*, which was intended as the *opus vitae*, a breakthrough project stretching between two poles, from the horizon of the past to the anticipated, barely sensed new paths. It took Kasprowicz several years to find the final shape for his work – he was “tormented, fighting, struggling with himself”, as reports the poet's wife Maria Bunin in the daily entries in her *Diary* (Kasprowiczowa, 1932, p. 273), which is regarded by researchers as a reliable account of the successive stages of his writing process (cf. Loth, 2016, pp. 164–165). Kasprowicz's “tragicomic mystery play” achieved the status of a synthesis, both as his dramatic *pièce de résistance* and, or perhaps above all, as a reflection on his changing outlook in the lifetime-long process of discovering his own creed. The author was aware of the degree to which his work was a summary of his own life. He reportedly said “I am Marcolf”, in order to emphasise the autobiographic provenance of his protagonist (Kasprowiczowa, 1932, p. 201), a fact which is referred to even in the earliest monographs on his oeuvre and analysed in later studies (cf. Kaczyński, 1990, pp. 89–102).

While the first indications announcing the play appeared around 1900, it took a number of years for them to materialise in the form of the publication of the first part, entitled *Narodziny Marcholta* [*The Birth of Marcolf*] (*Chimera* magazine 1907, vol. 10). In the broad context of Kasprowicz's artistic achievements, one may conclude that the germ of the play crystallised somewhere along the way from the rebellious *Hymny* [*Hymns*] to *Ballada o słoneczniku i inne nowe poezje* [*The Ballad about the Sunflower and Other New Poems*] (1908), a volume regarded as a state of transition, “the beginning of a new philosophy which would determine the last stage of Kasprowicz's artistic activity” (Igliński, 1999, p. 102). The draft

framework of the play was completed between 1913 and 1914, but it was not the final version of the carefully perfected work, under the multiplex title of *Marcholt gruby a sprošny. Jego narodzin, žycia i śmierci misterium tragicomiczne w obrazach czterech zamknięte* [*Marcolf Fat and Bawdy. A Tragicomic Mystery Play on His Birth, Life and Death in Four Scenes*], signalling meaningfully the scope of the problems captured in dramatic form. Contrary to the original plan, no publication in book form followed, and the manuscript was re-shelved. In the meantime, the poet's intimate communing with nature in the Tatra Mountains gave birth to *Księga ubogich* [*Book of the Poor*] (1916), a poetic presentation of new tones marking a deep spiritual transformation, quenching of the fires of inner rebellion, and reconciliation with God. At the same time, the author maintained his artistic struggle in order to fulfil his self-declared ambition: to present life "in all its manifestations, from the finest to the most trivial and grotesque ones" (Kasprowiczowa, 1932, p. 192). "Possessed by Marcolf", having ironically made a confession of his life, Kasprowicz wrote endless revisions, always in doubt whether what he had created was indeed a work which would be both up-to-date and everlasting, timeless in its message. He regarded these modifications as vital, especially in the context of the social and political developments after World War I and Poland's regained independence, and from a broad perspective, with the idea of staging the play, which he, however, would not live to see. Kasprowicz died on 1 August 1926 in Villa Harenda, his house in Zakopane; his play would not be staged until the world premiere at the Lviv Grand Theatre on 3 October 1934.

The arduous maturation process of the play, which would absorb Kasprowicz virtually to the end of his life, shows that *Marcolf* was for him a unique attempt to capture the whole of his existential experience and considerations; it was rooted in a profound need to extract the essence of the human condition. The poetic world of his plays delineates the horizon of primary and final matters, and it integrates a specific story of "here and now" into a universal scale of "everywhere and always", "anywhere and anytime". The multi-layered topic of *Marcolf* is subordinated to a dramatic convention of a mystery and morality play, showing a syncretic approach to the genres of mediaeval religious drama, typical for the turn of the 20th century. These concepts would usually be applied interchangeably, in various contexts and meanings, in search of drama and theatre providing insights into the mystery of the human soul; into the metaphysical aspects of existence (cf. Popiel, 1995, pp. 89–91).

The story of the eponymous protagonist, divided into four scenes, presents the key stages of the human journey from birth to death, oscillating between hope and doubt, triumph and fall, dream and the laws of reality. The central event in the first scene of the play is the birth of a child, awaited amidst the hustle and bustle of revelling neighbours. "Life's weak – / nothing goes without fear..." (Kasprowicz,

2002, p. 11) – says prophetically the Beggar, the first of the guests to appear at the cottage, who foretells the coming of a prince and then reveals a face of the ancient Faunus/Pan as he accompanies Marcolf through vital life situations as a partner for existential discussion, stirring up the latter’s metaphysical fear and making him aware of the conflict between the elevation of the spirit and the physicality which pulls one down to earth. Yet the baby’s first life experience is his mother’s death in childbirth, which symbolically expresses the eternal course of nature as part of the cosmic order of the rotating circle, and at the same time provokes philosophical questions on the logic of the universe, inconceivable to the human mind:

what’s more important: death or life?
 And is this fat Marcolf
 worth his mother’s doom?
 (Kasprowicz, 2002, p. 59)

The joy of new life is tainted by an inseparable shadow of death, which accompanies the poet every step of the way, in the spirit of the mediaeval *ars moriendi*, which required acquainting oneself with imminent end. It is a paradox, one not necessarily resulting from the artistic design itself, but also from the author’s close affiliation to the peasant custom and mentality where the beginning and the end coexist in a natural, eternal manner. There are also clear indications of the coexistence of two interacting worlds, the real and the irrational one. Marcolf’s cradle is surrounded by apparitions of Angels/Carollers, who arrive as heralds of Christ’s Birth. They are soon to be replaced by a procession of the Funeral Brethren. The envoys of death reappear in the final scene of the play as Marcolf’s life draws to an end, as if binding human destiny: “we do no harm to any one / we fulfil the human fate!...” (Kasprowicz, 2002, p. 279).

Is death to be understood as an end to everything, or rather a passage into another plane of existence? The extraterrestrial dimension of reality is evoked from the earliest scenes of *Marcolf*, certifying to the existence of a sacral order by integrating the mystery play of a peasant’s birth with the coming of God’s son. The perceptible two-level approach to the story of Kasprowicz’s protagonist is emphasised by elements prefiguring the redeeming Passion, which are elaborated on in the third scene of the play. Therefore, the life of Marcolf is not only indicative of the horizontalism of worldly aspirations, but it keeps intersecting with the vertical plane, which is related to the acceptance of Christ’s idea and restoration of the lost relationship to God. The experience of birth and death, which is rendered symbolically by blending the motif of a cradle with death surrounding it on all sides, and by ascribing sin and suffering to the human condition, also connotes another link in the chain of existence, i.e. the Christian soteriological perspective

challenged in Kasprowicz's earlier plays. The vision of paradise is depicted in the spirit of folk philosophy, in the form of the arrival of otherworldly characters who once awaited Marcolf's birth, and who, in the final scene of the play, attempt to atone him to eschatological matters. This aspect would usually be omitted by modernist writers – not least by Kasprowicz himself – who responded to existential, metaphysical and moral dilemmas of their time by multiplying apocalyptic images of catastrophe in numerous variations of the motif of *dies irae*, the last Judgment and the end of the world.

Although still distant from an affirmative philosophy of life – which would gradually manifest itself in Kasprowicz's later lyrics – *Marcolf* contains certain intuitions related to going beyond the pessimist anthropology, as it counterpoints the vision of Man lost in suffering and fear, spiritual loneliness and void. The evil and sin accumulated in this world no longer thwart God's plan of redemption. The final overtone of the play contains a positive eschatology, which manifests itself in the form of hope for every human being, in statements such as "a sinful woman shall be saved, too...!" (Kasprowicz, 2002, p. 16). This approach is indicated, with a significant measure of theatrical expressiveness, in the scene of the revelry accompanying Marcolf's birth and in its grand finale, a spontaneous, Dionysian dance. The image of inebriated merrymakers has an additional undertone: it implies the need to suppress the worldly worries and the metaphysical angst triggered by the awareness that "time is short", life is overshadowed by death from the very beginning, the tragedy of existence comes close to being comic. Humour in *Marcolf* is far from any carefree, light-hearted cheerfulness; it calls for caution and a watchful focus. The poet plays fluently with contrasts; never shying away from plebeian tomfoolery, satire or grotesque, he exposes the world's absurdities and provokes laughter overlaid with fearful overtones.

Human existence is shaped by the tension between life and death, between spirituality and physicality; this is accompanied by the issue continuously probed into by Kasprowicz: the ambivalent nature of love, torn between the ideal of a transcendent emotion and destructive sin-love. This is the direction of the shift manifested in the second scene of the play, entitled *Forest-Church, or the Story of Marcolf's Love and Wedding*. Sacralised nature, which is the scenery of the young man's erotic initiation, emanates the power of sensuality, which mixes with spirituality to release a stream of primal instincts. Thus, we are entering the sphere of typical modernist metaphysics of love, entangled in lust, sin and suffering, which absorbs the misogynous clichés of the age together with ramifications of the poet's private tragedy (above all, the breakup of his marriage to Jadwiga Gąsowska, who left Kasprowicz and their two little daughters for his friend, Stanisław Przybyszewski). It is no coincidence that Marcolf, the idealist, acquaints himself with the material

world under combined influence of Faunus/Pan and the Princess. “Faunus is something out of Marcolf’s league, something that dominates him, something that directs his actions”; Faunus incites in him the desire for great things and then makes him aware of his limitations, thus serving as the source of all tensions and antinomies present in the play (cf. Igliński, 1999, pp. 216–217). Marcolf’s “rootedness” in existence is strengthened by his relationship with a woman, who eventually drags him deeper into the forest, fettering him with the biological laws of life and hence suppressing the sphere of his spiritual aspirations.

The main character’s life story is spread between a spectacular career, connoting the well-known “peasant-into-king” literary model, on the one hand, and a complete devastation of his ideals on the other. Scene three, presenting “Marcolf’s triumph and fall”, is split by the author into a number of threads, in an attempt to capture a wide range of social and political topics (in their up-to-date and universal manifestations). Marcolf’s rise to the status of a royal son-in-law and heir to the throne is connected with a vision of a moral order introduced in a world that has been plunged into axiological chaos and cultural erosion. Kasprowicz places strong emphasis on the importance of those individuals who serve as the germ for the revolution; those who “have ferments inside them / which burst worlds apart!” (2002, p. 275). Destruction is a prerequisite of new creation; it is only by annihilating a degenerated world that a new structure may come into being. Therefore, the play includes metaphorical images of ploughing the weedy soil of the soul, and the symbolism of a bloody gale, fiery flood and ashes is combined with expectation that “some new world shall be born” (Kasprowicz, 2002, p. 216). The idea of “grandeur” in the imagination of the age, influenced, *inter alia*, by Nietzschean inspirations, was closely related to the projection of “Man as Creator”, who shapes both himself and his environment, and at the same time goes beyond what has been built so far, thereby broadening the expanse of the existing order. The attitude proclaimed by Marcolf the King, his opposition to all things small and to temptations of conformism, may be traced back to the philosophy expressed in the motto of the eponymous character in Ibsen’s *Brand*: “All or nothing!”. This parallel is not coincidental – Ibsen’s play, translated by Kasprowicz in late 1911 (or more broadly: the oeuvre of this Norwegian playwright) is a vital context for the maturing process of *Marcolf*’s ideas (cf. Godlewski, 1958, pp. 185–196).

The idealism of the individual implies at the same time a conflict situation with the collective. The same crowd which demanded a change of government amid cries of “Le roi est mort! Vive le roi!” (a traditional proclamation made following the accession of a new monarch: “The king is dead, long live the king!”) (Kasprowicz, 2002, p. 177) will soon realise that the established cultural model is jeopardized. Marcolf’s dethronement, inevitable under these circumstances, brings to mind

associations with the fate of Christ who was derided and sentenced to death on the cross. It dispels all illusions that the collective, with its prosaic yearning for “bread and games”, might be possessed of any higher awareness. Eventually, Marcolf fails to live up to the mission of God’s son, having dissociated himself from the Christian attitude of mercy and charity towards the weaknesses of the human condition. The result of the protagonist’s ruthless radicalism and pride, of his “inhuman schemes” to build a new reality on spiritual foundations only and elimination of the laws of the flesh, aggravate his inner conflict and the gap between him and the world. From the moment of his birth, the creation of Marcolf is marked by incompatibility of the grandeur of the spirit and the worldly needs and temporariness of existence, from which a constant dramatic conflict arises. Marcolf’s struggle against fate, against life with its inherent contradictions, is, at the same time, a part of his incessant dispute with God who:

knows all
and senses all,
but pays no heed to fools,
and sneers instead
(Kasprowicz, 2002, p. 33)

The philosophical message of Kasprowicz’s play is interpreted by Konrad Górski as a “solitary struggle of an individual, with great plans, against the ordinary world, but also against demonic powers whose supernatural being and role in the structure of the universe is unfathomable to Man”. Furthermore, a human being is left to its own devices, and no heavenly assistance will be offered to it (Górski, 1977, pp. 81–82). While the heaven in *Marcolf* is not empty, Man’s relationship to the Creator, who keeps himself in the background, is marked by a certain distance, mistrust, and tainted by doubt and rebellion. God never reveals himself fully, but is sensed always in the form of certain intuitions, and remains beyond the reach of the mortal Man’s cognitive capacity to the very end. Struggle is the key element of the final scene of Marcolf’s death; it is an allegoric reference to the biblical story of Jacob’s wrestling with the Angel, which is paramount to a final attempt to solve the riddle of human existence. Eventually, death turns out to be his liberation; it restores the lost unity and peace, appeases the conflict between the flesh and the spirit, and allays all fears. The sense of an inner conflict has many different aspects in Kasprowicz’s works. *Marcolf* is conclusive proof that he never ceased to struggle with the mystery of Man’s existence; his vocation and his journey from birth to death, the concept of being created for good but at the same time plunged into sin, the contrast between “high” and “low” instincts, the conflict between spirituality and physicality, between idealist desires and lust, between the need for freedom

and the enslavement of illusory happiness. Kasprowicz does not solve the antinomies inherent to the human condition. A characteristic signature of his perception of reality is that he remains helpless against the metaphysical presence of good and evil, and against the triumph of death over life. The hopelessness of human struggle against fate intensifies the unsatisfied yearning for spiritual balance, for pacification of internal conflicts.

In 1912, shortly before starting to work intensively on *Marcolf*, Kasprowicz announced: “I am going to write plays now, I have the necessary experience” (Kasprowiczowa, 1932, p. 121). He did not manage to fulfil his dramatic and theatrical ambitions in his “tragicomic mystery play” about *Marcolf*; he seems to have stopped mid-way, slowly maturing, until he could reach a point at which he could summarise his existential experience. Kasprowicz’s last play – which is still an intriguing riddle for the interpreters of his life and work – fails to provide a comprehensive answer to existential dilemmas, but instead it reveals that there might be a path toward Christian order, a process of maturing towards an attitude of humbleness and trust in Providence. And while *Marcolf/Everyman* is eventually defeated spectacularly by forces greater than himself, his end-of-life failure provides a tiny gleam of hope. Later in his life, in a cycle of eleven sonnets entitled *Na marginesie „Marcholta”* [*On the Margin of “Marcolf”*], Kasprowicz attempts to elaborate on the concepts put forward in the play by confronting us with a mystery which can only take place between Man and God: “Wait, He himself shall help you soon” (2002, p. 521). A true atonement will take place in the poetic *Book of the Poor* (1916), to which *Mój świat* [*My World*] provides a coda. From the model embodied in *Marcolf*, who clings to the rationalism of modern civilization and fails to accept his finiteness, Kasprowicz moves on to the affirmation of life in tune with nature, reconciliation with his Creator, and attainment of the much coveted harmony with the universe (Podstawka, 2016, p. 183).¹

¹ The paper focuses on selected aspects of the topic of *Marcolf*. For broader suggestions on the interpretation of the play, see, for instance, my monograph entitled *Świat, który się nie kończy. Człowiek i transcendencja w teatrze Jana Kasprowicza* [*A World Which Does Not End: The Man and Transcendence in Jan Kasprowicz’s Theatre*] (2014) and the study entitled *Antynomie ludzkiej kondycji w „Marcholcie” Jana Kasprowicza* [*Antinomies of Human Condition in “Marcolf” by Jan Kasprowicz*] (2016).

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