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Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz's Portrait of America in the Age of Enlightenment

Portret Ameryki w Epoce Oświecenia wg Juliana Ursyna Niemcewicza

Abstract

In 1788, a Polish writer and important political figure, Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, made a trip to the United States where he spent several years travelling and observing American culture and society. At this time he wrote a collection of memoirs, *Travels through America*, which constitute a varied, illuminating, and albeit subjective image of America, its people, institutions, manners, and nature. The present study builds a 'composite' portrait of America through the prism of Niemcewicz's friendship with George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, his perception of females and their role in the society, as well as his images of he visited.

Key words: *Travels through America, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, American Culture, American Society.*

Abstrakt

W 1788 roku Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, polski pisarz i poeta, a także działacz polityczny, przybył do Stanów Zjednoczonych. Przez kilka lat podróżował po Ameryce, poznając amerykańską kulturę i tamtejsze społeczeństwo. Efektem pobytu pisarza za oceanem są *Dzienniki po Ameryce*, które ukazują zróżnicowany i choć subiektywny, to

prawdziwy obraz Ameryki – jej społeczeństwa, instytucji, obyczajów i przyrody. Niżej artykuł jest próbą uchwycenia tego niejednolitego obrazu Ameryki przez pryzmat przyjaźni Niemcewicza z Jerzym Waszyngtonem oraz Thomasem Jeffersonem. Autorka ukazuje również sposób postrzegania kobiet i ich roli w ówczesnym społeczeństwie, a także odnosi się do opisu miejsc odwiedzanych przez pisarza.

Słowa kluczowe: *Podróże po Ameryce, Jerzy Waszyngton, Thomas Jefferson, kultura amerykańska, społeczeństwo amerykańskie.*

Upon his release by Tsar Paul I, Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz arrived to the United States on August 19, 1797, swelling the ranks of political exiles in the Promised Land. Niemcewicz accompanied Tadeusz Kosciuszko. Both men were wounded and taken captive at the Battle of Maciejowice during the 1794 Uprising. Held in solitary confinement for two years and forced to make a vow of loyalty to Paul I, the two had no choice but to travel together to Philadelphia. (Budka, 2001, p. 261) Due to political reasons Kosciuszko had to return to Europe and Niemcewicz felt forsaken and, not having enough funds, appealed to Thomas Jefferson for financial support to tour the United States. (Jefferson, 1997, p. 984) During his journeys (1797-1799, 1805), Niemcewicz wrote his comprehensive *American Travel Diaries*, which while admittedly being biased, still stand as not only 'one of the earliest and most important documents in the complex, fascinating and still largely unexplored' (Lyons, 2001) 'portrait of the American life by the end of the eighteenth century', but also remain 'interesting in their own right (...), as Niemcewicz travelled widely, by eighteenth century standards, [and] had tremendous gusto for life and a keen eye for life's minutiae. Everything interested him: the prices of food stuffs, the conditions of prisons, specific fauna and flora of particular regions, (...) or the political climate of the country (...). Mostly on the move, always intellectually alert, curious about people, he had a great capacity for absorbing data. Thus, the diaries form an amusing, richly detailed, variegated, if not especially deep, chronicle of the American life'. (Lyons, 2001) The present study is an attempt to review a few aspects of eighteenth-century American life that stand out in Niemcewicz's travel journals and an attempt to cast light upon not only the early years of North America but also on the mutual goals of Polish and American culture.

There is no doubt that Niemcewicz's involuntary exile brought with it a number of small benefits, his friendship with members of the nobility, whom he valued for 'friendliness, hospitality and better education'. (Niemcewicz, 1965, p. 150) Particularly noteworthy is his friendship with George Washington. Nine months after his arrival in America, Niemcewicz stayed with

the Laws, who introduced him to George Washington. An account of this meeting reflects the intense feeling of excitement of the Polish fugitive. He writes: 'One can guess how my heart was beating. I was to see the man for whom since my youth I had great respect. (...) I sat down beside him; I was moved dumb, and could not look at him enough. It is a majestic face, in which dignity is united with gentleness. The portraits that we have of him in Europe are not like him at all. He is nearly six feet tall and very powerfully built; he has an aquiline nose and blue eyes; (...) He wore a tail coat, black stockings, satin waistcoat, and breeches of the same colour. (Krzyżanowski, p. 20, 1961)

Apparently, the encounter, full of mutual interests and shared values, provided the substantial framework for a long lasting friendship as Washington invited him to his Mansion at Mount Vernon, where Niemcewicz would spend thirteen days. (Budka, 2001, p. 261) Niemcewicz's depiction, encompassing every aspect of Washington's life at Mount Vernon, is a remarkable tribute to his host, presented as a 'generous, welcoming and gracious, business-minded, self-sufficient and well-organized' man, who also 'displayed a keen love of nature as well as a series of patriotic virtues'. (Trochimczyk, 2015) Thus, from this detailed and factual account one may learn that 'unlike Polish nobles, Washington took care of his own horse (...) and 'gets up at 5 o'clock in the morning, reads or writes until seven, goes on horseback to see the work in the fields, returns at two o'clock. In the evening, he visited his storehouses, or answered letters, read papers, and participated in discussions with guests'. (Tomczyk, 2015) Supposedly, Washington's favourite subject was agriculture. (Budka, 2001, p. 267) His estate consisted of 'vast fields covered with different kinds of grain, including rye distilled into whisky. The fields were divided into four farms, with a number of Blacks attached to each'. (Trochimczyk, 2015) Moreover, the account of the sojourn to Mount Vernon also contains a description of Washington's garden and the deer in the park and farms, where the author is particularly impressed by a certain plough of Washington's own invention. (Budka, 2001, p. 267)

The account of the Polish visitor to Mount Vernon also casts an illuminating light upon the subject of slavery. Struck by the miserable living conditions of Washington's enslaved labourers, Niemcewicz leaves a rather sobering account of the slaves' habitation. Once, after he visited the slave quarters, he writes: 'We entered one of the huts of the Blacks, for one cannot call them by name of houses. They are more miserable than most miserable of the cottages of our peasants. The husband and wife sleep on a mean pallet, the children on the ground; a very bad fireplace, some utensils for cooking, but in the middle of this poverty some cups and a teapot. A boy of 15 was

lying on the ground, sick, and in terrible convulsions'. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 26) Yet, it seems that the Polish traveller attempts to highlight the positive aspects of George Washington's disposition within the context of 'racial inferiority' as he comments that 'General Washington treats his Negroes far more humanely than the greater part of his Virginian countrymen'. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 26) Apparently, the discrepancies in the perception of human rights did not have a negative impact upon the friendship of the two statesmen as after the visit Niemcewicz wrote a letter to Washington, constituting a kind of heartfelt tribute to his hosts. 'Your hospitality and kindness, impress me with stronger sensation than my knowledge of the language enable me to convey' – wrote the Polish traveller. (Niemcewicz, 1798) Even more, the warm reception of his hosts inspired him to write a poem: 'I still recall the day-so dear to me / When Washington's abode I came to see / A man whose daring and whose spirit brave / to half the new world sacred freedom gave'. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 61)

Another noble and well-known figure that emerges from the portrait of America present in the diaries of the Polish beholder is Thomas Jefferson. Both men met in Philadelphia (though it was not their first encounter) soon after the arrival of the Polish exile on American soil. (Budka, 2001, p. 265) Jefferson was serving as the Republican vice-president at the time and many a time took advantage of his position in order to help Niemcewicz. It seems that the two men formed a close relationship, both professionally and personally. For instance, in his *Diaries* Niemcewicz mentions that owing to Jefferson's 'motion' he was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 18), a scholarly organization of the most prominent and influential cultural and political figures that undoubtedly strengthened Niemcewicz's position not only in America but also in Europe. Had it not been for the financial support of the vice-president, Niemcewicz would not have been able to travel across America. 'Having run out of money (...), he borrowed 200 dollars from Thomas Jefferson and later repaid the debt with funds received from Prince Adam Czartoryski'. (Trochimczyk, 2015) Moreover, from a letter to Thomas Jefferson written by James Madison on 22 April, 1807, we may learn that Niemcewicz obtained an American passport owing to Jefferson. (Madison, 1807)

Obviously, the two men shared 'the American enlightenment values on progress and human betterment, and were devoted to universal principles of liberty'. (Janicki, 2017, p. 22) It seems that Jefferson's engagement in the struggle for Polish Independence was supported by nonviolent strategic actions. In the Polish traveller's account, one may learn that Niemcewicz's

companion Tadeusz Kosciuszko was recruited by the vice-president on a secret mission, the goal of which was to improve Franco-American relations and 'bring to fruition the French Directory's and later Napoleon's promises to resurrect Poland'. (Janicki, 2017, p. 22) Undoubtedly, the hallmark of their friendship lied in an adherence to the same ethical code based on liberty and agrarian ideals. (Trochimczyk, 2015, p. 6)

The long-term, committed friendship between Jefferson and Niemcewicz flourished and was sustained by a substantial number of letters in which the two patriots discussed politics, philosophy, and literature. A good example of their cordial relations and mutual respect was when the Polish traveller left America and began a career in Warsaw as the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'remembering Jefferson's favour in nominating him a member of the American Philosophical Society, Niemcewicz returned the compliment by naming Jefferson to the Royal Society of the Friends of Sciences in Warsaw'. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 53)

A few notable entries also encompass Niemcewicz's reflection upon the social and cultural life of Americans. For instance, upon his visit to New Brunswick, he noted: 'In New Brunswick, as well as everywhere else in America, no poverty is visible. Everybody here, who wants to work has an assured income sufficient to live on and to enable some savings besides. I did not see a single person in rags in the church, as is usual in Europe, not even a person badly clothed'. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 12) Equally impressive to him was the 'degree of equality which existed among the various ranks of American society' (Szadkowska-Mańkowska, 2021, p. 228) Thus, with reference to this notion he noted: 'The equality provided by law exists to the greatest extent possible, i.e., that the law is the same for everybody; and so it should be. Wealth and office do create some distinction, (...), but in daily life all are on an equal footing'. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 12)

Also, a closer analysis of the descriptions and experiences of the Pole's travel diary allows one to reconstruct a picture of American women in the 19th century. In her review, Barbara Budka notices that Niemcewicz had a keen eye for feminine beauty. (...) He saw a young unmarried American woman as enjoying remarkably unsupervised liberty, gaiety, and happy days. But, once married, he observed, these pleasures ended and her sole concerns then revolved about her husband, housekeeping and the care of children.' (Budka, 2001, p. 261)

Among his rich, varied, and illuminating images of women there are several figures that stand out. There is no doubt that Mrs. Washington is one of them. Her image as a beautiful, charming, and devoted wife emerges from

Niemcewicz's account of his thirteen days in Mount Vernon. He wrote: 'She (Mrs. Washington) is the same age as the General; both were born in 1732. She is short, has bright eyes, and a gay and extremely kind manner. She had on a gown of white stuff, drawn very tight, or rather attached on both sides with pins; a bonnet of white gauze with ribbons of the same colour, showing the outline of her head distinctly, leaving the forehead uncovered and only partly hiding her white hair, which was done up in a little pigtail. She was one of the most beautiful women in America, and even today she has something very charming about her. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 21) Another passage also contains a remarkable tribute to Mrs. Washington merits as Niemcewicz relates: 'Mrs. Washington is one of the most delightful person one can meet. Good, sweet, and exceedingly pleasant, she likes to talk and talks well of old times. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 27) Apparently, Mrs. Washington truly appreciated the Polish traveller's company as at the end of his visit she presented him 'with a china cup bearing her initials and the names of the States of the Union'. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 28)

Another important American female figure recorded in great detail is the writer's wife. On July 2, 1800, Julian Niemcewicz married Susan Livingston Kean of New Jersey – 'the widow of a former Congressman John Keats who represented South Carolina in Congress'. (Trochimczyk, 2015, p. 6) The Pole's memoirs containing descriptions of Susan Kean reveal his admiration for her charm and beauty and thus it is difficult to resist the conclusion that they shared a tranquil and virtuous life only 'disturbed by sad thoughts about distressed Poland that called him from the pure joys of married life'. (Trochimczyk, 2015, p. 6) Also, it should be no surprise that in his extensive passage about Susan Livingstone the author does not only identify the lady's appearance and traits with great spirit, but he also encapsulates her beauty as strongly rooted in the standards of the age of Enlightenment. As he noted: 'Mrs. Kean (...) was tall, blond, with blue eyes, of light complexion, more lively and comely than beautiful; she was well-read and had a very good memory, was pleasing in conversation and witty in her answers. (...) She was a woman of uncommon intellect and of excellent heart'. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 34)

It is also worth following the trail of the Pole's American peregrinations in the context of the beauty of the landscape and architectural treasures. For instance, Niemcewicz's description conveys an image of Philadelphia as, 'the city well planned by William Penn, the vertical streets bearing the names of various American trees, the horizontal streets being numbered 1, 2, 3, etc.' (p. 8) with 'numerous villas, built mostly of wood, and distinguished by graceful and elegant architecture. All are painted white and have green shut-

ters, which gives them a cheerful appearance. (...) The houses are surrounded by lawns which border directly on fields covered with grain, buckwheat or other seed plants'. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 10)

Captivated by the charming town of Bristol, the Polish exile noted: 'Nothing could compare with the beauty and cheerfulness of the location of Bristol, where the Delaware flows in its full majesty' (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 10) Equally interesting is his account from his journey to Bristol, 'through a flat country covered with farms' where the gigantic primeval forests are replaced by cedars and where the oaks and chestnuts are 'wreathed with wild vine'. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 10) In addition to this, the author manages to capture the unique spirit of Boston, as prosperous, lively, with many bookstores, witty conversation, and friendly and hospitable inhabitants. (Budka, 2001, p. 268)

Upon his visit to General White's estate, Niemcewicz provides another factual account of the state of New York, pointing out that 'the whole State abounds in iron ore and the earth is dark red' (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 11), and while traveling to visit General Gates reveals another means of transportation – a sailboat, which 'cost ten shillings'. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 13) Apart from a detailed description of General Gates's 'magnificent residence' with a green house, fruit and vegetable gardens, and meadows (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 14), one might also learn about the Livingstones, who 'occupy the same position in the State of New York as the Potocki family in Poland' and what the author finds particularly striking, that their homes were 'managed in the European style: nice carriages, magnificent horses, servants in livery – every luxury not at all democratic'. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 14)

The diary also records his arrival at the Capitol Building and in spite of the fact that he was not enchanted by the building itself, considering it 'too heavy and massive', the Polish traveller was undoubtedly under the spell of the atmosphere of the place and of 'the enthusiasm and pride of a people'. (Budka, 2001, p. 266) Also, from Elizabeth, where Niemcewicz lived with his wife, he travelled with his English friends to Niagara Falls and he underlines 'the journey was undertaken in great comfort: a fine carriage, two good horses, a reliable servant and a good hunting dog.' (Budka, 2001, p. 269)

Moreover, a few notable entries encompassing the writer's life as a 'gentlemen farmer' provide a valuable insight into the life of the American agriculturist at the end of the 18th century. In 1800, the Polish political exile became a landowner on American soil, by virtue of his marriage to Susan Kean (although he formally, renounced all rights to her fortune). From that time on, the alluring prospect of a tranquil life on his own property lay before him in the New World. Thus, through the following years Niemcewicz would wake up after ri-

sing, say his prayers and, as Krzyżanowski (1961, p. 35) says, he used to take a basket and go to the market to buy meat or fish. In his journals, he mentioned that for the first year he cultivated his own garden and 'raised corn, potatoes and pumpkins'. (Krzyżanowski, 1961, p. 39)

As far as cultivating the land is concerned, particularly noteworthy is the fact that the physical labour of farmers working on their own lands was identified by Niemcewicz as 'a core of American virtue, essential for the meaning of life'. (Trochimczyk, 2015, p. 20) The agrarian ideals of Thomas Jefferson, indicated in his correspondence to the Polish exile, seem to provide a tantalizing concept for Niemcewicz. Moreover, equally impressive to him was meeting Jonathan Trumbull, the former governor of Connecticut. Pleasantly surprised by seeing the ex-governor work in the fields, cutting grass and making hay, Niemcewicz asked him about the reasons for engaging in physical labour. The answer identified work as a core virtue, essential for the meaning of life: 'How would I live if I did not work?' Apparently, Mr. Trumbull 'did not consider himself too elevated above the ordinary residents of his state, or above his staff, so he could work with them in the fields as their equal'. (Trochimczyk, 2015, p. 20) Fascinated not only by this equality, happiness and freedom, but also by 'the energy that flowed through the nations', Niemcewicz 'formulated the idea that the fate and character of nations depend on their political system and the measure of a civilisation's development of states depends on the scope of freedom that an individual can exercise'. (Mańkowska, 2021, p. 226)

In conclusion, from the research conducted, it turns out to that Niemcewicz's *American Travel Diaries* cast an illuminating light upon the early years of America. There is no doubt that the Polish writer's factual account of American life, individuals, locations, and nature remains an impressive and useful source of information for historians. (Janicki, 2017, p. 17,18) Barbara Budka seems to confirm this statement claiming that 'As a historical document, the *American Diaries* have proved to be of major importance in many areas. Their accuracy and the precision of detail seen and recorded by a painterly eye have provided a wholly dependable and, on occasion, unique resource. (...) The work has been cited by scholars, local historians, geographers and biographers'. (Budka, 2001, p. 269)

Moreover, the research conducted on the United States in the late 18th century by Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz has turned out to be a beacon of hope for persecuted people across the world and a model for other countries. The Polish traveller was not only impressed by American freedom, happiness, and equality, but also by the energy that flowed through the na-

tion. (Szadkowska-Mańkowska, 2021. p. 226) Despite his criticism concerning the treatment of African Americans, Niemcewicz saw great potential for the country to become a leader in the world. Even more so, the friendship between Niemcewicz and many important American figures, based on a shared commitment to democratic ideals, is remembered as being an important part of the history of both Poland and the United States.

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