

Balloons over Puławy. Eighteenth-century rituals of skyward expeditions in a poetic description*

WOJCIECH KALISZEWSKI

ORCID: 0000-0002-6814-2158

(The Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw)

Faraway oceanic journeys, requiring courage from the navigators, were to the beginnings of the modern world what attempts at flying hot air balloons became to the eighteenth century (or, specifically, to its second half). This is because hot air balloons not only designated new, skyward routes but, most importantly, changed human thinking about space. It was a revolution, remodelling mentality and modifying the order of things to date as if following Horatio's line of *nil mortalibus ardui est* ('nothing is impossible for humankind'), which was, however, complemented by the final couplet of the same song, warning all careless daredevils dreaming of taking celestial expanses by storm:

» our constant crime will never let
Jove lay his anger, or his lightning, by.¹

Therefore, the poetic caution, condemning human insolence, clearly demarcated the field of confrontation of the opponents and supporters of skyward experiments. This confrontation should be viewed in the context of desacralising actions, taking the right to exclusive jurisdiction over extra-terrestrial space away from God. Taking into consideration the magnitude of the challenge, however, one should notice that transgressing the boundaries of *sacrum* at the time called for actions defined by the lofty tone of the linguistic description of the proposed endeavours, as well as assigning them high axiological importance from the per-

* First printed as "Balony nad Puławami. Osiemnastowieczne rytuały wypraw ponad chmury w poetyckim opisie" in: *Napis* issue 16 (2010), pp. 513–526.

1 Horace, Ode i.3 *Sic te diva potens Cyprī*, transl. Ch. Childers in: *Literary Matters*, vol. 11.1 (Michigan: The Catholic University of America, 2018).

spectives of the plans of civilisational undertakings. A rebellion against the barriers limiting man's epistemic freedom, like that of Icarus's at its roots, therefore takes on the form of a new lifting up of the attack on the hitherto prevailing structure of the world's order. One should add that dreams of flying constitute only a part of the wide current of rebellious projects which shaped the modern realm. It is, still, a part that bears significant importance, as if completing the most daring of human ideas; it is a part which, it could be said, is the most spectacular, and apotheosises the possibilities of human development.

Taking an enormous shortcut, we must move from Icarus's romantic wings to the 'bubbles' elevating baskets with daredevils. As an aside, let us notice that the hot air, which once led astray the reckless son of Dedalus, melting the wax holding his wings together, will now be lifting the balloons above the clouds, helping man to conquer new spaces of the world.

Experiments in skyward sailing cast humankind in an entirely new role. This is because no one can tell what the behaviours associated with this pioneering activity should look like and what should be especially accentuated in aeronautic facts.

The Montgolfier brothers' first canvas-and-paper hot air balloon soared in June 1783. One can imagine the concentration of the spectators of the flying 'bubble', their delight and the need to repeat the experiment. News of the flight echoed all across the contemporary world, of which the capital of France constituted the cultural centre. Some time after the event, Goethe wrote:

» Anyone who has witnessed the discovery of air balloons will testify to the worldwide movement this brought about, what concern surrounded the balloon navigators, what longing surged up in so many thousands of hearts to take part in such sky wanderings [...].²

The previously unknown work of human ingenuity started to generate mass interest. Without question, this required the shaping of the right forms of perception and behaviour and a new style of relaying information on such unusual events that happened because of them. The new phenomenon needed to be defined in a clear way, fulfilling the role of both presenting and building of a modern model of a human. This is because balloon flights 'lifted' man off the ground and away from his experiences to date, to such an extent that a need was clearly felt to emphasise the value of this event.

2 J.W. Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, maxim transl. E. Stopp, edited with an introduction and notes by P. Hutchinson (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 58, maxim 402.

Now is the time to introduce an important ordering of the types of behaviours within the contemporary aeronautic experiences. Firstly, one should not forget that, from its conception, it was an endeavour situated within the field of scientific, empirical and practical inquiry, based on consistent studying of the laws of physics, and like many other activities carried out from as early as the seventeenth century. Thus, it belonged within the history of science and was presented according to the requirements of the rules of technology. The realm of contemporary science, built on the foundations of experiment, was, however, inclined to shelter within the academies and researchers' corporations. In laboratories and workshops, away from the eyes of curious observers, models striving to create a modern technological civilisation came into being. The balloon, however, had to go outside and appear on a public square, arousing public interest. It is, therefore, not surprising that there was an almost instant surfacing of popular descriptions or even handbooks devoted to the art of constructing balloons, which satisfied the interest in the practical sphere of hot air ballooning.³ It was precisely the certain borderland of scientific and popular knowledge, a 'visual' version, that tellingly attested to the broad social (and not just elitist) meaning of the experiments undertaken with aerostats. The second issue relates to locating such a sensational event in the order of unusual phenomena. Goethe adds:

» every successful attempt found quick and extensive reflection in the newspapers and encouraged the creation of numerous pamphlets and illustrations, with which, with gentle compassion, the tragic victims of these endeavours were honoured.⁴

It was evident that balloon flights sparked sensation and attracted hordes of spectators, giving a pretext for comments, correspondence and discussions.⁵ A bal-

3 See: J. Osiński, *Robota maszyny powietrznej Pana Montgolfier* [The work of the air machine of Mr Montgolfier] (Warsaw: 1784); idem, *Gatunki powietrza odmiennego od tego, w którym żyjemy* [Types of air different to the one we live in] (Warsaw: 1783). These were handbooks presenting detailed rules of construction of balloons.

4 J. W. Goethe, *Reflections and Maxims*.

5 Cf. sizeable correspondence on this topic published in *Gazeta Warszawska* [The Warsaw Gazette] in the autumn of 1783. Between October and December 1783, twelve articles devoted to balloon flights were published in *Gazeta*. This is telling of the level of interest in the skyward experiments at the time. It is worth quoting here a news piece from issue 105 of *Gazeta Warszawska* from 1783: 'Her Royal Highness Duchess de Villaroy suffered a great malady. The reason for this illness is persistent agitation. The reason behind this persistent agitation is that the Duchess wanted very much to fly with our mechanics in the air bubble during the recent experiment, but they did not let her. The regret of the Duchess is greater still, as that flight in the air was very successful indeed', quoted from I. Stasiewiczówna, B. Orłowski, *Balony polskie XVIII wieku* [Polish balloons in the eighteenth century] in: *Studia i Materiały z Dziejów Nauki Polskiej* [Studies and materials from the history of Polish

loon launch, therefore, gained the status of a ceremony, which allowed for a common celebration of the achievement of human reason. It can, therefore, be stated with certainty that balloon shows in the last two decades of the eighteenth century combined (paradoxically) the latest achievements of science with elements of a marketplace show. The soaring 'bubble' epitomised the human longings and emotions stemming from different sources. Some of them were rooted deeply in the structure of humans' eternal dreams of conquering the skies, while others (the mental ones) nourished human energy, indispensable for any kind of technological experiments. Others still manifested themselves as fear of something that negated the everyday experience. Thus, the complicated, archetypal-intellectual way of reacting to changes in the world was being born.

A flight demonstration was a spectacle unfolding according to the mostly predictable and fixed script. Such a spectacle needed space. Its stage was, therefore, usually a public square or garden. At its centre was the vessel and those who would release it into the skies, but the main role was assigned to the daredevils who decided to take part in the skyward escapade. Further back were the crowds of spectators and ordinary gawkers, who would come from far and wide to witness the extraordinary event with their own eyes. The 'bubble', filled with warmed air or hydrogen, made a great impression. The ropes tying down the vessel seemed to struggle to contain its energy, and the flame of the air blower reminded one of the rare and awe-inspiring might of the element. Perhaps it was just that despite this, a man attempted to control its forces and decided to harness them, overcoming the resistance of nature, which generated great contemporary interest in aircraft.⁶

A balloon gliding through celestial routes, flying over cities and villages, was observed from a literal and symbolic perspective. It became a sign and a harbinger of man's entering onto the routes of modernity. It was an image wholly new and never known before. Observers lacked the experience needed to assign an aerostat to the order of reality. They faced an incredibly difficult interpretative task; they were pioneers, getting their minds accustomed to the new and unknown phenomena. The image of a balloon was something of a visualisation and a realisation of an idea which had never previously gone beyond the sphere of dreams. The realisation of these dreams now triggered attempts at imagining the perspective of the future. Such a perspective, however, remained open and forever unfinished. A balloon floating above the earth, therefore, signified a symbolic image of humankind's

science], ed. E. Olszewski, series D: *Historia Techniki i Nauk Technicznych* [History of technology and technical sciences], vol. 2 (Warsaw: 1960), p. 8. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations in English translated from Polish editions.

6 For interest in aeronautics and Polish hot air balloon experiments see: I. Stasiewiczówna, B. Orłowski, *Balony polskie...*, pp. 3–49.

eternal dream of conquering the skies coming true. It meant a courageous flight towards eternity. The balloon, therefore, became an important part of modernity, open to the future tense. A balloon flight was no longer just a challenge and proof of human rebellion but also a choice that changed the world dynamically and passed it wholly into the hands of mankind. The launch of the 'bubble' initiated a celebration of modernity in an egalitarian dimension every time. It was an event for everyone. Every witness of a flight became in some way also its participant, as they could not remain indifferent to this experience. In this way, a process was started to create a modern society that trusts in reason. A balloon launch and its flight, therefore, performed a function that was ritualistic-symbolic and social in nature.

It is worth noting here the testimonies, descriptions and depictions, literary as well as graphic (mostly French), recording aerostats' flights. The heroisation of aeronautical feats was not always in line with the initial scientific objectives of the pioneers of hot-air ballooning:

Osoba aeronauty budziła jednoznaczne skojarzenia mitologiczno-alegoryczne, skoncentrowane na temacie przezwyciężania śmierci bądź uzyskania nieśmiertelnej sławy. Po pokazie bohater mógł podziwiać swoje popiersie w teatralnej Świątyni Pamięci.

The figure of an aeronaut evoked unequivocal mythological-allegorical associations, concentrated on the theme of conquering death or gaining immortal glory. After a show, the hero could admire their bust in the theatrical Temple of Memory.⁷

Magdalena Górka points out, writing further on the recurrent 'theme of heroisation of a hero' who dared to enter a gondola and on the symbolism of the balloon ornamentation. All these elements, without doubt, built the context appropriate for ritual activities, allowing humans to get closer to that which is mysterious and supernatural.

The possibility of travelling by 'flying wagons' seemed – until the brothers Montgolfier's successful attempt – pure fantasy, intertwining with the utopian visions of interplanetary travels. After this milestone experiment, it started to be treated very seriously, and those involved in aeronautics were regarded as extraordinary heroes worthy of the highest praise. On the other hand, one can safely say that the phenomenon started to gain the characteristics of a cult, aiming to glorify the might and courage of the human mind. A balloon flight dismantled the prevailing, hierarchical order of nature, dividing the universe into two spheres: lower and higher, changeable and unchangeable, and transgressing the lunar boundary that ran between them, a boundary in keeping with Aristotle's concept of cosmic order. On the other hand, experiments with the 'bubble' proved modern

7 M. Górka, *Balon* [The balloon] in: *Czytanie Naruszewicza. Interpretacje* [Reading Naruszewicz. Interpretations], ed. T. Chachulski (Wrocław: 2000), pp. 178–179.

philosophy's fundamental assumption that the world is a homogenous space, which is, therefore, open to all of humankind's epistemic activities.⁸ A full discussion of this issue, which is also the source of many philosophical disputes significant at the time,⁹ lies beyond the scope of this article. It should, however, be noted that the shattering of the old image of the universe, inaccessible to studies, closed and embedded in the sacral order, called for being exalted according to the new laws. What was becoming an open side of scientific inquiry and was publicly demonstrated was now gaining a somewhat sacred form, satisfying the human need to be near a mystery. Such celebrations were eagerly awaited, and there was a strong willingness to be a part of them. These types of shows, demarcating the aims and rules of participation, belonged to the sphere of activities close to a ritual in character. In the public sphere, a significant shift took place: the religious ritual to date has started to be replaced by the lay ritual. At the time, no one could predict the consequence of such a shift. The effect of any aeronautic experiment carried out in public was also certainly strengthened thanks to the method of preparing a launch and flight itself, set out by the precursors. The launch and flight marked the most critical moment of the ceremony of man-taming the elements. Observers could then admire the effects of actions that were thought-through and repeated every time by the constructors and aeronauts. Although the act of constructing the balloon was a task freed from belonging to the category of magic acts, it did not fit into the category of ordinary acts, either. It took a central position between these two perspectives. A significant role in this case was played by the awareness of risk-taking and breaking of the hitherto agreed internal boundaries of the universe. In this context, man stood solitary in the face of perilous and hostile elements. This is because both air and fire, as well as water, were a grave danger. Often, taking the risk of fighting them was treated as a sign of human pride and a mistake from improper assessment of the situation. Eighteenth-century poetry commented on these controversies in many ways. Aside from the numerous and interesting testimonies, especially from the years 1784–1789, of not only the attitude of various poets to the issue of ruling over the elements but also the ways of a poetic shaping of these reflections, one has to say that the 'issue of the role and possibilities of human reason as a cognitive power that directs human action' was certainly not unknown to contemporary poetry.¹⁰

8 Cf. E. Coreth, H. Schondorf, *Filozofia XVII i XVIII wieku* [Philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth century], transl. P. Gwiazdecki (Kęty: 2006), pp. 7–9 (*Fundamenta*, vol. 51).

9 Cf. Voltaire, *Elements of the Philosophy of Newton*, transl. H. Konciewska, ed. B. J. Gawecki, with preface by: A. Teske (Warsaw: 1956), pp. 13–21 (*Biblioteka Klasyków Filozofii* [The library of philosophy classics], vol. 28).

10 Cf. T. Kostkiewiczowa, *Klasycyzm, sentymentalizm, rokoko. Szkice o prądach literackich polskiego Oświe-*

After 1783, and thus after the successful aeronautical experiment by the Montgolfier brothers, the philosophical-moral reflections on man's attitude to the elements gained a new factographic context. The emphasis shifted from the purely philosophical sphere to a moral one. Questions around the point and consequence of actions inspired by reason crossed the boundaries of general discussion and pertained directly to specific events.¹¹ Poets joined in in the shaping of the image of the flights adequate to the ritualised aeronautical endeavours.

Taking into parenthesis the poetically formulated reservations and warnings against undertaking such escapades, remaining in accordance with the previously quoted verse from Horace, I would like to highlight two favourable perspectives of a poetic framing of balloon flying. Both belong to the genre of Classicist poetry, and each reacts to skyward endeavours differently. Their fundamental difference proves the existence of interpretative possibilities hidden within the balloon experiments. The first piece is *Balon* [The balloon] by – which should not raise any more doubts today – Adam Naruszewicz, and the second is *Balon czyli wieczory puławskie* [The balloon, or Evenings in Puławy] by Franciszek Dionizy Kniaźnin.

The poem by Naruszewicz was written just after the famous balloon flight show the inhabitants of Warsaw could admire in May 1789. This is what was soon written in *Pamiętnik Historyczno-Polityczno-Ekonomiczny* [The historical-political-economic diary] on the feat by Blanchard:

Puścił się on dnia 10 maja w balonie z kitajki gumowanej zrobionym, obwodu mającym 90 łokci, z Ogrodu Foksalowego na Nowym Świecie o godzinie pierwszej z południa. Sznurki zwieszone od sieci, która wierzch balonu pokrywała, utrzymywa-

He set out on 10 May in a balloon made of rubberised thin silk, 90 cubits in diameter, from Foksal Gardens on Nowy Świat, at one o'clock in the afternoon. Strings hanging from the net that covered the top of the balloon held the flimsy boat, to which

cenia [Classicism, Sentimentalism, Roccoco. Drafts on literary genres of the Polish Enlightenment] (Warsaw: 1975), p. 101. The first balloon expeditions were also commented on through numerous poems. Many of them were humorous in nature. Here is an example of a four-line commentary on the unsuccessful flight by Blanchard. A translation from the French was published on 3 April 1784 in *Gazeta Warszawska*:

Podniósłszy się do góry na Polu Marsowym,
Spadł wkrótce obciążony pełnym workiem owym,
W który kładł panowie, damy i hałastra;

Lifting himself up off *Champ-de-Mars*
He soon fell, weighted down by this heavy bag
Filled by the gentlemen, the ladies and the
masses;

Owóż, mościpanowie, *sic itur ad astra*.

With the mighty *sic itur ad astra*.

A caustic allusion is obvious here to the collection of money led by Blanchard among the gathered spectators. It is worth noting that the author treats all participants of the events at Champ-de-Mars equally, and regards them at the same level irrespective of background. It is a good example of the egalitarian character of ballooning shows. The annals of *Gazeta Warszawska* are an invaluable source of poems devoted to ballooning experiments. Cf. also: I. Stasiewiczówna, B. Orłowski, *Balony polskie...*, pp. 43–46.

- 11 Many valuable notes and analyses on the topic are to be found in the work by Barbara Wolska *W świecie żywiołów, Boga i człowieka. Studia o poezji Adama Naruszewicza* [In the world of the elements, God and man. Studies on the poetry of Adam Naruszewicz] (Łódź: 1995).

ły łódkę blahą, której wspomniany nawigator wraz z jedną towarzyszką tej powietrznej podróży życie swoje powierzyli. Wiatr wschodnio-południowy sprawił, iż balon, wzbijając się do niezmierniej wysokości, szedł zawsze prawie wzdłuż Wisły i mógł być widziany z każdego prawie miejsca stolicy, na koniec po 45 minutach żeglarze powietrzni spuścili się bez najmniejszej szkody w Białolekę, za Wisłą.

the aforementioned navigator and one lady companion of this skyward travel entrusted their lives. South-eastern wind led the balloon, soaring to a great height, almost always along the Vistula, and could be seen from almost every corner of the capital, at the end after 45 minutes the sky sailors came down without the slightest harm in Białoleka, across the Vistula.¹²

Naruszewicz described this feat in a much loftier way, in keeping with the poetics of an ode immortalising a grand event worthy of praise. His *Balon* [The balloon] is a hymn depicting nature on the one hand, and man standing against it as if against a great, extraordinary and demanding opponent on the other. The challenge thrown to the skies is an act transgressing the boundaries of courage: it is impertinence. The air element is a divine realm, closed off to ordinary mortals. The mythological thunder-wielding Jove does not invite Earthlings into his abode, he wants to clearly maintain the distance separating him from them. Thus, the expedition into the unknown appears even more strongly as a mad and rebellious idea:

Niezwykłych ludzi zuchwała para,
Zwalczywszy natury prawa,
Wznawia tor klęską sławny Ikara
I na podniebiu już stawia.

A bold pair of extraordinary souls,
Having fought the laws of nature
Re-embarks on the course made infamous by Icarus's defeat,
And stands at the sky's threshold.¹³

This is what it looks like from the point of view of the curious but also slightly worried observers. In the collective feeling, the brave souls entering the 'light boat' become (despite their audacity) a pair worthy of immortalising. From a wider perspective, their feat is understood as an effect of the power of the abstract 'human reason' operating causally, which gains a real form in a specific event.

Naruszewicz took the show by the French aeronaut very seriously. This is because he could take the opportunity to take the side of those who supported the experiments and believed in the eventual overcoming of nature. A balloon floating above Warsaw was depicted on a symbolic plane as a sign of the conscious use of the fruits of human thought. The ode by Naruszewicz, therefore, sounds like a hymn glorifying science and vouches for its possibilities, which are ultimately supposed to serve the good of humankind. The poetic elevating of the flight, performed through, among other things, enriching the description by circumlocution, questions and apostrophes, thus contributing to the ritualisation of the aeronautic experiment.

12 Quoted from: *Warszawa wieku Oświecenia* [Warsaw in the age of the Enlightenment], selected and edited by J. Kott, S. Lorentz (Warsaw: 1954), p. 186.

13 A. Naruszewicz, *Balon* in: idem, *Liryki wybrane* [Selected lyrics], selected and with an introduction by J.W. Gomułicki (Warsaw: 1964), p. 190.

Its success and good luck portend a future free from many woes, a victorious future serving man. Naruszewicz also highlights the role of individual courage and will when undertaking man's challenges. In this context, only those who try to respond to them are humans fully aware of their time. *Balon* by Naruszewicz can therefore be read as an instruction delineating the trajectory of change not only of the individual but of the collective. The image of daredevils being swept off the ground, oblivious to Icarus's tragedy, marks a modern type of hero. Apart from bravery, this hero should be characterised by a trust in rational methods and a courage to take on challenges that have not been posed before. The image of Icarus is therefore merely a stylistic broadening of the portrayal of real aeronauts; the mythological hero does not complete the model of the modern hero, and that is because there is no direct relationship between him and the new heroes, there is simply a poetic similarity: he is not a true role model. Thus, the new hero does not inherit tradition, does not stand in front of those who preceded him, and, theoretically, is really the first. In an ideal setting, his feat is reminiscent of a jump into the unknown abyss and holds something of a superhuman power. His eagerness and boldness, in turn, are to translate to the bravery changing the shape of the entire reality:

Choć się Natura troistym grodzi
Ze stali murów opasem,
Rozum człowieczy wszędy przechodzi,
Niezlomny, pracą i czasem.

Though Nature fences herself in
With a thick wall of iron
The human mind crosses all defences,
Steadfast, with work and with time.¹⁴

This process cannot now be stopped. New tools for exploring and behaving will give rise to a new imagination, a new style for describing the world. This is how the faith in progress serving humanity, ritualising new formulas, slogans, signs and symbols, will be born. It will rule human imagination for many decades to come. This ritual could be named celebrating the present through the perspective of the future order¹⁵. The balloon floating above the capital of Poland wrote it into the network of places, constituting a cultural oneness. The Vistula and the Seine symbolically converged into one current, flowing towards the future together. Warsaw was (also thanks to King Stanislaus August's great interest in aeronautics) open to this future. A balloon raised to the clouds was becoming something of a contemporary totem pole, expressing the spirit and mind of, if not yet, the whole society, certainly its significant proportion. A person watching a balloon launch and experiencing its flight undoubtedly felt a connection with his fellow observers, rendering their social ties closer, regardless of background, and (very importantly) bringing them

14 Ibidem, p. 191.

15 For the relation between tradition and modernity, cf. E. Shils, *Tradition*, transl. J. Szacki in: *Tradycja i nowoczesność* [Tradition and modernity], selected by J. Kurczewska, J. Szacki, introduction by J. Szacki (Warsaw: 1984), pp. 30–90.

closer to nature itself, gaining a new identity.¹⁶ Therefore, the ritual accompanying balloon launches undoubtedly influenced building a new social quality.

Balloon flights also ignited the imagination in another way, becoming the pre-text to undertaking activities analogous to the form of lofty acceptance, ritualising modernity, but not identical to them. One could count the creation of the Balloon Association in Puławy, in the court of prince Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski, as one of such activities. Involved in its founding was Franciszek Dionizy Kniaźnin, who devoted the long poem in ten songs, entitled *Balon czyli wieczory puławskie* [The balloon, or Evenings in Puławy] to the Society and its undertakings. Balloons did not appear above Puławy by accident. Their flight was an effect of joining in the current of modernity, but on special terms. Kniaźnin preceded the long poem with an introduction to the reader, in which he explains the circumstances around the creation both Society, and of the literary piece itself:

Lat temu cztery, jak wynalazek balonu pierwszy raz gazeta po świecie rozniosła. Ucieszna wszędy ciekawość widzenia tej maszyny dała pochop do robienia jej w Puławach. Chwile na ten czas wieczorów zimowych (zwłaszcza pod nieobecność samych Książąt Generalstwa Ziemi Podolskich) żądała właśnie takiej zabawy, która by dzieciom ich uciechę z pożytkiem uczynić mogła. Stąd urosło tam Towarzystwo Balonowe; towarzystwo tym słodsze i zabawniejsze, że i pleć piękna wdziękami je swoimi uzacniła.

Four years ago, the press invented the balloon around the world for the first time. The omnipresent, joyous curiosity to see this machine gave the impulse to make it in Puławy. The time of the then wintery nights (especially in the absence of the Princes of the Generalship of Podolia themselves) called for precisely such an amusement, which would entertain and benefit their children. Hence the Balloon Association came to be there; an association even more sweet and amusing, as it was ennobled by the charms of the fair sex.¹⁷

Reports of skyward flights also moved the minds and imagination of those who stayed far away from the capital. The idea to found a Society 'sweet and amusing' was an interesting testimony to the reactions to great and important events. The style and character of this response, as well as its poetic framing, which the author calls a 'light picture', allow one to see a humorously composed interpretation of aeronautic feats in these activities. According to Kniaźnin's narrative, each member of the Society had their own chosen name and a defined function. The undertakings were therefore thought-through and coordinated, much like in a circle of a real community of scholars. Being a member of the Society meant a certain initiation, even though everything took place according to the rules of entertainment. One should note that the boundary between the serious and the light-hearted is not

16 I assign this situation to the portrayals of culture proposed by Durkheim, who was very interested in the relationships between the individual and the community. According to the scholar, the latter influences the individual and imposes on them forms of behaviour based on a super-instinctive moral system.

17 F.D. Kniaźnin, *Balon czyli wieczory puławskie. Poema w 10 pieśniach* [The balloon, or Evenings in Puławy. A poem in 10 songs] in: idem, *Dzieła* [Works], vol. 3 (Leipzig: 1837), p. 7.

clearly visible here. It was not just the case in Puławy, however. It is worth looking into *Pamiętniki czasów moich* [Diaries of my times] by Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, to find out that the author was an eyewitness to a certain 'balloon joke' made during a ball thrown in Vienna by a Spanish envoy, margrave d'Aguiar.

Ten w podeszłym już wieku do hiszpańskiej powagi łączył dzieciinną niewinność i prostotę. Właśnie w tym czasie pokazały się balony Montgolfier i wszystkich zajmowały ciekawość. Pamiętam, iż raz na wielkim u posła tego balu, gdy przyszła godzina wieczery, obślupieliliśmy wszyscy widząc starego margrabię wchodzącego do tej sali i na małym sznurczku trzymającego unoszący się do góry balonik, na którym w przezroczyści napisane były słowa: *on a servi*. Margrabia najszcześliwszy był z tego konceptu.

He, in his older age, combined a Spanish seriousness with a childlike innocence and simplicity. At the time, Montgolfier's balloons came to be and occupied the interest of everyone. I remember that once, at the envoy's grand ball, when it was time for supper, we were all astonished to see the old margrave entering the hall, and holding, on a little string, a small balloon floating upwards, upon which in transparent lettering such words were written: *on a servi*. The margrave was most pleased with this concept.¹⁸

Balon... is a poetic story of the planning and building of the flying 'bubble' and, finally, of the realisation of these endeavours. While in *Balon* by Naruszewicz (impossible to compare with Książnin's text in terms of genre), the omniscient narrator commented in general notes on the topic of civilisational progress and development, dependent on the power of the human mind, in Książnin's poem, the equivalent narrative voice does not maintain such distance. The ever-present and almost-visible narrator constantly highlights that he plays the role of a poet, like Orpheus, among members of the Argonaut expedition.¹⁹ These similes and self-comments ascribe the long poem to a specific, one could say, ironic character. This is not surprising given that Książnin's reflection on the courage of the aeronauts was articulated in a tone different to that of Naruszewicz, and more appropriate to mock-heroic depictions, mixing pathos with low-brow style:

Dokąd ci, proszę, nie posięgną ludzie.
Ufni aż nazbyt w zuchwałości samęj?
Piekła przebyli w bohaterskim trudzie:
Nie masz odwadze ni prawa, ni tamy.
A teraz w jakiejś papierowej budzie
Przedrzeć się myślą do niebieskiej bramy [...].

What heights will humans not reach.
Trusting too much in impudence alone?
They went through Hell in their heroic struggle:
There's no law, nor dam against the courage
And now, in some paper rattrap
They want to break through to the Heaven's gate
[...].²⁰

These words, full of outrage, by Eol, 'king of the winds', whose image Książnin borrowed from Virgil's *Aeneid*, perfectly present the direction of changes taking

18 J.U. Niemcewicz, *Pamiętniki czasów moich* [Diaries of my times], edited and with introduction by J. Dihm, vol. 1 (Warsaw: 1957), p. 166.

19 For the roles of narrator and poet in *Balon...* by Książnin, see: T. Kostkiewiczowa, *Książnin jako poeta liryczny* [Książnin as a lyrical poet] (Wrocław: 1971), pp. 70–97 (*Z dziejów Form Artystycznych w Literaturze Polskiej* [From the history of artistic forms in Polish literature], vol. 25).

20 F.D. Książnin, *Balon...*, pp. 74–75.

place in the world. 'The righteous monarch' sees that the ancient, holy order is being subverted by human impertinence, and therefore decides to punish the dare-devils. Ultimately, however, the 'light goddess' Fama persuades him that 'nothing will come of the innocent play'. The 'bubble' will therefore be able to soar freely above Puławy:

Eola pošły, w snadnej lećąc sforze,
Gęste skrzydłami rozpędzają chmury
Fama tymczasem trąbi na wsze strony:
Balon w Puławach dziś będzie puszczone!

Eol's envoys, flying in effortless formation,
Disperse the dense clouds with their wings
While Fama announces it all around:
A balloon will be launched in Puławy today!²¹

In the text by Naruszewicz, the opposite is true – the stylistically rich, lofty, and serious circumlocution describes the balloon unambiguously. There is no room for jokes here:

Nabrzmiały kruszców zgorzałych duchem,
Kąg lekkiej przodkuje łodzi.

Swollen with the spirit of burnt ore,
A circle leads a light vessel.²²

He calls the daring aeronauts 'extraordinary' and, therefore, worthy of accolades, truly rising above the mediocrity of the masses of onlookers. These differences reveal the existence of two separate perspectives of the description of balloon flights: the lofty one and the humorous, almost low-brow one. They are undoubtedly brought closer together by the fact that the performance takes place on the border between the worlds that are accessible and inaccessible to humans, and this is a liminal experience.

The long poem by Książnin depicts carefully and in detail the preparations for a balloon journey. Everything happens, as is appropriate for a secretive association, in the night-time, in an extraordinary atmosphere and arousing emotions. The meeting of the initiated has a ritualistic character, unfolds following a pre-planned script and belongs to a whole cycle of such meet-ups. The following days introduce the members of the society deeper into the rules of the art of building hot air balloons:

Już drugi wieczór na Puławy spada:
Ucichło wszelkie dokoła stworzenie,
Iskrzyć gwiazdami poczęła noc biała,
Księżyc po śniegu roztrąca promienie;
Gdy swoim trybem na nowo zasiada,
Czekając pracy, nasze zgromadzenie.
Z narzędziem każdy, jak jeno mógł który:
Są w rękę szale i cyrkle, i sznury.

The second evening falls on Puławy:
All of creation is silent all around,
The pale night begins to sparkle with stars,
The moon casts its rays across the snow.
When, as per its way, convenes again,
Awaiting the work, our society.
Each with a tool in hand, whatever they could bring:
There are scales, and compasses, and ropes.²³

21 Ibidem, p. 78.

22 A. Naruszewicz, *Balon*, p. 190.

23 F.D. Książnin, *Balon...*, pp. 16–17.

The idea of constructing a flying ‘bubble’ meant to, as written by Książnin himself, both amuse and educate.²⁴ It was, therefore, an aim that was pedagogic and technical, which also served entertainment. Książnin told this story using the format of a mock-heroic long poem, thus touching somewhat the two possible interpretative sides of the experiment. On the one hand, he saw it as belonging to the category of epistemic seriousness, and on the other, he accentuated the aspects that could cause laughter and amusement. The latter element is emphasised and eventually wins over the history of the Puławy flight and the choice of the aeronaut. A cat, Filuś, becomes the successful candidate. It is he, instead of the ‘steadfast’ heroes, who takes the space in the gondola of the vessel. The mood of amusement is brilliantly conveyed by the eight lines telling of the launching of the ‘air bubble’:

Owóz i bania idzie znamienita.
Czterema poważnie wzniesiona ramiony
Lud ją z okrzykiem i klaskaniem wita,
We dwa szeregi dla niej ustawiony.

There goes the exquisite bubble.
Lifted in earnest by four arms
The people greet it with calls and applause,
Lined up in two rows to see it.

Kępa pospółstwem, jak mrowiem, okryta;
Pełne są chłopców dęby i jesiony.
Filusia każdy z nich oglądać drze się,
Co go na barkach Klidora niesie.

The greenery is covered with the crowds as if with ants;
The oaks and the ashes are full of boys.
Every one of them climbs up to see Filuś,
Carried on Klidora's shoulders.²⁵

Unfortunately, the escapade of the ‘bubble’ ended in tragedy, and Filuś, the cat, was ‘torn up on a dead ash tree’. This sudden conclusion of the journey in a mock-heroic tone counterbalances the gravity and heroisation, which usually accompanied balloon flights. Using simple phrases borrowed from the vernacular, but at the same time full of expression, is a tool which allows to position the event in the sphere of spontaneous experiences, singular and virtually inimitable in their nature. In contrast with this event, big-city balloon launches were further ‘replicas’ of the original flight. Farewell gestures and speeches, creating an atmosphere of an extraordinary feat, repeated the same moment of the first ‘bubble’ flight by the Montgolfier brothers. Everything was decided by the atmosphere surrounding the event. The balloon was an object that was admired and feared, accessible only to the chosen ones, while everyone else was subjected to this peculiar, mysterious aura.

The ‘bubble’ above Puławy was a certain mimicking of a real air vessel gliding along the Vistula and landing happily on its other side. It was the result of endeavours which, from their conception, aimed at realising a project parodying activities undertaken in the spirit of gravity. It was there to, let us repeat, amuse and educate,

24 For handbooks containing the rules of constructing hot air balloons see: I. Stasiewiczówna, B. Orłowski, *Balony polskie...*, pp. 34–38.

25 Ibidem, p. 78.

it removed the unusual and serious aura accompanying the prestigious balloon launches. It was decidedly the first element that dominated in the whole project. However, the ritual of meetings, councils and tasks (undertaken in line with the function assigned to each member of the Society, as mentioned before) went on mostly according to the rules of play. This was the main objective of the Puławy experiment. Thus, that which, in the realm of ritual gravity and an experiment taken seriously, was surrounded by an atmosphere of mystery, became play and a breaking of the serious rules of ritual under the Puławy skies. Książnin did not hide his intentions:

że zaś ta uciecha maskę ma wielkości; podług tej i urząd każdego wielkości tytułem jest obciążony. Dzieło, nader lekkie i najmniej poprawne, dlatego przyłączam, ażeby i tę rozrywkę dał poznać, która w tym Towarzystwie była najokazalszą.

as for this amusement bearing a mask of greatness; according to it, every office is burdened by the title of greatness. Therefore, a work very light and not at all proper I share, so that that entertainment can be known, which was the greatest in this Society.²⁷

The ritualisation rendered some of the human activities and behaviours a structure closed and permanent, excluded from every-day processes. It even placed it outside of historical time. De-ritualisation, stemming from the embracing of the convention of play, returned these behaviours to the every-day, opened and included them in the course of history, brought down to the level of the profane. In this context, the balloon gained the characteristics of a 'tamed' object, accessible to everyone, and became part of culture, thus falling under the idea of development and change. Książnin's piece introduced the hot air balloon flight into the sphere of precisely such cultural dynamics, which, through irony, enriched the idea of modernity.

*Translated by Maria Helena Bryś
verified by Jerzy Giebułtowski*

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26 F.D. Książnin, *Przestroga* [A warning] in: idem, *Gala Wielka czyli przydatek do Balonu. Dwie pieśni* [The great gala, or an appendage to the balloon. Two songs], p. 86.

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses literary testimonies of balloon flights in the 18th century, which in the eyes of the people of the time rose to the rank of a kind of ‘secular ritual’. The analysis of two texts – Adam Naruszewicz’s poem *Balon* [The balloon] and Franciszek Dionizy Kniażnin’s poem *Balon czyli wieczory puławskie* [The balloon, or Evenings in Puławy] – makes it possible to distinguish two ways of perceiving the groundbreaking event. The first work is characterised by admiration and a solemn style, while Kniażnin’s text is humorous, which results in the desecralisation of the flight it describes.

KEYWORDS: occasional literature, Polish literature 18th century, hot air balloon, Naruszewicz Adam (1733–1796), Kniażnin Franciszek Dionizy (1750–1807).