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Fortune-telling Predictions in the Light of Faith and Reason. Religious Aspects of *Informacya matematyczna* by Wojciech Bystrzonowski

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Abstract: This article is focused on the criticism of the prophecies presented by Wojciech Bystrzonowski, an encyclopaedist and populariser of science, in his work *Informacya matematyczna* [Mathematical Information] (1743, 1749). The author discusses prophecies of sorcerers, physiognomy, palmistry, prophetic dreams and astrological predictions. He examines the cases of magical practices combined with religious beliefs, which he regards as dangerous manifestations of superstition. He also demonstrates that fortune-telling cannot be compatible with faith or the fundamental principles of rational reasoning. Furthermore, he emphasizes that for a critical evaluation of such predictions, the Jesuit rules for the discernment of spirits can be applied. The issues addressed in Bystrzonowski's work are characteristic of the atmosphere of the intellectual change that took place in late Baroque and early Enlightenment.

Keywords: Baroque, Enlightenment, literature, predictions, prophecies, religion, rationalism

Aware of the widespread decline of “Latin-strewn” letter-writing at the time of the rule of the Saxon kings in Poland, Ignacy Krasicki wrote what follows in his essay *Listy* [Letters] (included in *Uwagi* [Remarks]):

At last, a propagator appeared, the author of the book: *Polak sensat, w liście humanista, a w dyskursie statysta* [A Wise Pole: A Humanist in his Letters, a Statesman in his Conversation].¹ The very title points to the quality of the book. It had once had its admirers, before good taste and common sense dispersed the darkness of the olden days.²

The above-quoted opinion on a once most famous volume by Wojciech Bystrzonowski, a Jesuit, proves the characteristic changeability of the

¹ All the titles and quotations from the original texts have been translated here by Piotr Cymbalista.

² The original text: “Znalazł się na koniec tego rodzaju rozsiewacz, pisarz księgi: Polak sensat, w liście humanista, a w dyskursie statysta; znać z samego tytułu, jakiej wartości dzieło. Miało w czasie wielbicielów, póki przecież gust dobry i zdrowy rozum dawnych ciemności nie przerzedził.” From: I. Krasicki, *Uwagi*, edited by Z. Libera, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1997, p. 75.

evaluation of literary works, which – with changes in the ideological and aesthetic canons – lose the status of the appreciated and widely-read books and become a witness to mediocre thought and bad taste, in Poland often associated with the time of the Saxon kings on the Polish throne.

The opinions formulated in the recent decades on the achievements of the above-mentioned Jesuit writer avoid any axiological extremes – which have been often voiced about the historical period in question – oscillating between anathema and utmost apology of that period.³ It has been emphasized recently that Bystrzonowski's activities as a theorist of rhetoric and style – presenting his views on the leaves of the above-mentioned *Polak sensat* (1730) – “should be assessed in a historical context”⁴ as a publisher of calendars and a propagator of science. His doings as an efficient college administrator, Jesuit school lecturer⁵ and promoter of theatrical life⁶ have been regarded as versatile, most evident from his compendium of knowledge entitled *Informacya matematyczna rozumnie ciekawego Polaka* [Mathematical Information for Inquisitive-minded Poles], published for the first time in 1743 (with the second, expanded edition in 1749). That opus, classified as a case of knowledge-promoting literature (popular until the late Baroque period) following the *scientia curiosa* convention, has been accused of excessive traditionalism, stemming from its affinity to the calendar-like style of knowledge presentation.⁷ Analyses of the wording of *Informacya matematyczna* have still proved that it is a rich source of specialist scientific vocabulary in various disciplines of knowledge. It has also been established that Bystrzonowski's book has contributed to the formation of the modern scientific Polish language.⁸ The comments on his vast encyclopaedic work also stress the fact that its author gave consideration the cosmological issues discussed in his times, including the concept of multiplicity of worlds.⁹ His openness to the newest developments in natural science has made it possible to identify him as a believer in “the idea

³ J. Tazbir, “Czasy saskie,” *Barok*, 1998, No. 1, pp. 15–24. Also, see: J. Pelc, “Literatura polska czasów saskich. Oczekiwanie – możliwości – spełnienia,” *Barok*, 1998, No. 1, pp. 59–85.

⁴ S. Dubisz, *Język i polityka. Szkice z historii stylu retorycznego*, Warszawa: Elipsa, 1992, p. 89.

⁵ B. Lisiak: *Jezuici polscy a nauki ścisłe od XVI do XIX wieku. Słownik bio-bibliograficzny*, Kraków: Ignatianum, 2000, pp. 29–30; *Nauczanie matematyki w polskich szkołach jezuickich od XVI do XVIII wieku*, Kraków: Ignatianum, 2003, pp. 67, 90, 114, 148.

⁶ J. Okoń, “Autorzy tekstów dramatycznych w rękopisie 182 Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej,” *Biuletyn Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej*, 1971, (XXI), pp. 122–124.

⁷ T. Bieńkowski, “Polscy przedstawiciele ‘scientia curiosa’,” *Rozprawy z Dziejów Oświaty*, 1987, (XXX), pp. 28–30.

⁸ A. Szczaus, *Leksyka specjalistyczna w „Informacji matematycznej” Wojciecha Bystrzonowskiego z 1749 roku na tle polszczyzny XVIII wieku*, Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2013.

⁹ M. Skrzypek, “Filozofia polska między późnym barokiem a wczesnym oświeceniem,” in: *Filozofia i myśl społeczna w latach 1700–1830*, vol. 1: *Okres saski 1700–1763*, edited by M. Skrzypek, Warszawa: IFiS, 2000, p. XXXI.

of progress and accumulation of the world's achievements," who spoke for the primacy of modern authors and artists over classical ones (which was an ongoing dispute at that time), whose works, to some extent, paved the way forward for a new period, i.e. Enlightenment.¹⁰

The religious aspects of *Mathematical Information* by Bystrzonowski have been given little consideration by researchers yet. It is hardly surprising, given the fact that his book is full of the information categorized into "cosmography," "astronomy," "chronography," "astrology," "geography," "architecture," "polemics," "tactics," "artillery," "elementary information," "hydrography" and, finally, a separate section on "the information on various interesting issues." Structured like this, the contents of the book are not suggestive of any religious subject matter. However, it is present there. Moreover, the information presented in the work is inscribed into the framework of a religious picture of the world, founded on the biblical message on the creation, integrated into a scientific description, including the mechanistic model of the order of the universe (very popular in the 17th and 18th centuries):¹¹ God's power created a complicated structure of the "celestial machine,"¹² in which "all the cogs begin to turn like in a clock machine, once wound up." A lecture on the creation of man and the fundamental principles of Christian anthropology – stressing the dignity of man-made in God's image, his rationality, freedom of will, immortality of the soul and the final things that await him – is incorporated into the explanation of the divine creation of the world. Thus, Bystrzonowski provides the readers of *Informacya matematyczna* with practical information on various fields of knowledge, expanding their cognitive horizon and its scientific dimensions. Simultaneously, he takes this opportunity to remind them of the fundamental religious truths about man, which are presented in the introductory sections of the book. Given the idea underlying the structure of his book, it is hardly surprising that the Jesuit author – faithful to the traditional principles of the Christian concept of man, but, simultaneously, emphasizing the advantages of scientific achievements – expressed his conviction about the current progress, both in the sphere of religion and in various practical areas of human activity:

It is true that this world is being improved in many areas. This is due to the discovery of new lands and islands, as well as their people's recognition of true God and conversion. This is due to the improvement of sciences. [...] This is due to the ever improved inventions in

¹⁰ J. Okoń, "Kompendium – czy tylko wiedzy? Wstęp do typologii gatunku," in: *Starpolskie kompendia wiedzy*, edited by I.M. Dacka-Górzyńska, J. Partyka, Warszawa: DiG, 2009, p. 27.

¹¹ See: M. Heller, J. Życiński, *Wszechświat – maszyna czy myśl? Filozofia mechanicyzmu: powstanie, rozwój, upadek*, Kraków: Polskie Towarzystwo Teologiczne, 1988.

¹² This summary pertains to: W. Bystrzonowski, *Informacya matematyczna rozumnie ciekawego Polaka, świat cały, niebo i ziemię i co na nich jest w trudnych kwestiach i praktyce jemuż ułatwiająca*, Lublin: Drukarnia Jezitów, 1749 (without pagination). Consecutive quotations have been taken from this edition.

manufacturing, the crafts, as well as other endeavours, whether in the field of architecture, music, artillery, warfare, navigation or medicine. The same applies to politics and making wild lands and uncouth nations more similar to the rest of mankind.¹³

Yet, this multi-faceted progress encounters obstacles. One of the most significant ones is the persistence of the illusory spurious knowledge published in the form of the highly-popular so-called predictions, filling numerous pages of the widely-read astrological calendars¹⁴ and found in other writings contributing to the literary culture of the olden days.¹⁵

In Bystrzonowski's book, the section entitled *Astrological Information on Predictions*, which contains a discussion and criticism of various methods of predicting the future, is worth noting. It is evidently marked by the attitude of "fighting the superstitions," characteristic of the atmosphere of the "intellectual revolutions" which occurred in the 18th century.¹⁶ Exposing various forms of fortune-telling, the Jesuit encyclopaedist argues that believing them goes against religion and is an insult to the basic principles of rational thinking. It is a combination of religious values and rationalism that determines his attitude. While discussing it, it is worth considering to what extent the views presented by the Jesuit writer can be associated with the atmosphere of the upcoming Enlightenment period, and how much they are related to certain ideological strains of former religious culture. So now, let us follow our encyclopaedist, who attempted a refutation of multifarious forms of predicting the future.

Disposing of them, the clerical author claims that a fondness for divination is caused by "the inborn inquisitiveness of the human mind trying to deduce future events." However, whatever "those who foretell the future" say must be approached critically, distinguishing the truth from the lies, being fully aware that paying heed to some visions of the future may expose us to serious spiritual risks.

For the readers of his book to be able to differentiate them correctly, the *Astrological Information on Predictions* is divided into seven sub-sections,

¹³ The original text: "I owszem z wielu miar doskonali się coraz ten świat. To przez znalezienie coraz to nowych krajów i insuł, jak też ich nawrócenie do uznania prawdziwego Boga. To przez większy co raz w naukach polder. [...] To przez nowe co raz doskonalszych manufaktur inwencyje i w sztukach tak rzemieślniczych, jako i wolnych ćwiczeniach doskonalenie. Jako to w architekturze, muzyce, artylerji, w wojennym trybie, żegludze, medycynie. To w samej polityi, cykurowaniu dzikich krajów i grubych narodów do ludzkości większym podobieństwem."

¹⁴ See: B. Rok, *Kalendarze polskie czasów saskich*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo UWr., 1985; M. Janik, *Polskie kalendarze astrologiczne epoki saskiej*, Warszawa: DiG, 2003; *Kalendarze staropolskie*, edited by I.M. Dacka-Górzyńska, J. Partyka, Warszawa: DiG, 2013; A. Arendt, *Archeologia zatroskania. Straopolskie kalendarze w działaniu*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa UW, 2019.

¹⁵ For comprehensive information on these issues, see: J. Krocak, *Jeśli mię wieźdźba prawdziwa uwodzi...*. *Prognozytyki i znaki cudowne w polskiej literaturze barokowej*, Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, 2006.

¹⁶ W. Smoleński, *Przewrót umysłowy w Polsce wieku XVIII. Studia historyczne*, Warszawa: PiW, 1979, pp. 118–119.

each of them concerned with a specific type of fortune telling. The last headline in this part of the book contains the lengthy *Detailed Information on the Unreliability of Astrological Predictions of the Events Dependent on Man's Free Will*, criticizing astrological fatalism.¹⁷ For the sake of clarity, let us add that as regards the types of fortune-telling discussed, references to astrology are made in different ways, related to various aspects once applicable to the study of human being's dependence on the changes occurring in the realm of planets. Hence, the title of this particular part of Bystrzonowski's encyclopaedic compendium is not exactly compatible with its actual contents, as analyses are made here also of predictions made without resorting to the theory of the influence of cosmic forces on the phenomena occurring in sublunary world, including human actions.

This may be confirmed e.g. by *Part 1. Information on the Predictions by Wizards or Sorcerers*, concerned with "foretelling the future impossible to perform through the normal action of human mind, revealed only by the devil's instruction, because of a pact made with him." Pointing to the means by which the devil may guess the course of future events (and, simultaneously, tempt people to undertake the actions which might help to make the predictions come true), the clerical author claims that although the predictions of wizards or sorcerers may go beyond those based on natural rational calculations, "it is only God who has the knowledge of the future events, and they remain hidden in the treasury of His inscrutable wisdom and will." Also, it is significant that the devil assisting the practice of black magic may not penetrate a man's "heart's secrets" or force his free will to perform particular actions.

In another part of his disquisition, i.e. *Part 2. Information on Practising Superstitions and Futile Observations*, the author discusses one particular form of "wizardly soothsaying," namely "superstitious soothsaying," defined as "foretelling future events due to some signs from the devil, based on a pact made with him, dependent on the use of specific words or rituals." The author refers here to superstitions, which – at the very first glance – seems to connect his observations with the atmosphere of the Enlightenment period, marked by the struggle against multifarious superstitions, evident in the steps taken in various field of human activity at that time.¹⁸ Bystrzonowski was a publisher of calendars similar to the political calendar type,¹⁹ without any sections on astrology and predicting

¹⁷ For a discussion of this part of the book in question, see: G. Raubo, "Ludzie się na górne zapatrują obroty." *Astronomiczne konteksty literatury polskiego baroku*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2011, pp. 51–58.

¹⁸ Note the interpretation of one of the most interesting pieces of writing in this respect, offered by P. Matuszewska ('Zabobonnik' – próba lektury, In: *Dramaty Franciszka Zabłockiego*, edited by M. Cieński, T. Kostkiewiczowa, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo UWr., 2000, pp. 29–44).

¹⁹ See: J. Weysenhoff, *Polskie kalendarzyki polityczne*, Lwów: Towarzystwo Miłośników Książki we Lwowie, 1926.

the future,²⁰ hence, different from the astrological calendars popular in the Saxon kings' period in Poland. Thus, his criticism of superstition may be perceived as ideologically related to the attitudes typical of Enlightenment, which were manifest, *inter alia*, in the transformation of the calendar convention in the 18th century.

Besides the above-mentioned affinity, equally important are the general analogies between Bystrzonowski's comments and the motifs typical of the old anti-superstition literature, critical of a wide range of the activities combining the elements of the official religious worship with the practices magical in character, such as soothsaying, astrology, as well as folk rituals and beliefs accompanying the annual cycle. Such practices, present in popular religiousness (criticized as early as *Kazanie o zabobonach* [A Sermon on Superstitions] by Stanisław of Skarbimierz, the landmark of Mediaeval Polish anti-superstition literature) were characterized by many-century-long continuity, as confirmed by the ethnographic sources from various historical periods, from the Middle Ages to the 19th century.²¹ Elements of magic sometimes were a typical component of the collective religious attitudes of traditionalist Polish gentry, as documented in e.g. *Skład albo Skarbiec znakomitych sekretów ekonomiej ziemiańskiej* [Repository or Treasury of Exquisite Secrets of Manorial Economy] (1693) by Jakub Kazimierz Haur.²² Examples of a symbiosis between religious attitudes and magical practices are provided by old Polish sources describing epidemics.²³ Understandably, combining religion with magic must have been definitely alarming to Bystrzonowski, and called for a decisive critical diagnosis and counteraction, as the resulting phenomenon undermined the uniqueness of religious faith. The author of *Informacja matematyczna* characterized this type of superstition as follows:

²⁰ See the preface to the edited excerpts from Bystrzonowski's writings included in the anthology *Filozofia i myśl społeczna w latach 1700-1830...*, p. 242.

²¹ M. Olszewski, *Świat zabobonów w średniowieczu. Studium kazania "O zabobonach" Stanisława ze Skarbimierza*, Warszawa: Semper, 2002, p. 175.

²² J. Partyka, "Czarty, gusła i 'święta katolicka wiara': katolicyzm ludowy - katolicyzm sarmacki na przykładzie 'Składu albo skarbcza' J.K. Haura," *Teksty Drugie*, 2003, No.1, p. 51-57. On the subject of the elements of magical thinking present in Haur's writings, see: P. Kowalski, *Theatrum świata wszystkiego i poćwiwy gospodarz. O wizji świata pewnego siedemnastowiecznego pisarza ziemiańskiego*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2000, p. 232-236. The presence of the attitudes marked by a magical mentality and an inclination to superstitions in the collective religiousness of traditionalist Polish gentry should not lead to any generalizations to the effect that Polish noblemen's religious attitudes were superstitious in character. This has been recently argued, *inter alia*, by J. Kowalski, *Niezbędnik Sarmaty. Poprzedzony obroną i uświetnieniem Sarmacji Obojej*, Poznań: Fundacja Św. Benedykta, 2006, p. 23-40. The traditional religiousness of Polish gentry has been characterized aptly and synthetically by A. Czechowicz, "Katolicyzm sarmacki," in: *Humanitas i christianitas w kulturze polskiej*, edited by M. Hanusiewicz-Lavallee, Warszawa: Neriton, 2009, pp. 191-222.

²³ J. Kracik, "Praktyki religijno-magiczne na Górze Witosławskiej w czasie epidemii 1708 roku," *Roczniki Teologiczno-Kanoniczne*, 1975, No. 4, pp. 149-158. Also, see: Sz. Wrzesiński, *Oddech śmierci. Życie codzienne podczas epidemii*, Kraków: Egis, 2008, pp. 145-157.

In such superstitions, words are often used which do not make sense in any language, but also sacred words. Actions are involved, not only unusual, such as drawing various figures, turning oneself in various directions, breathing out, whispering, but also apparently sacred ones, such as crossing oneself, making the sign of the cross or kneeling down. The devil wants to associate himself with such actions and words, sacred as they are, in order to sneer at sanctity, make a pretence of faith and thus encourage apparently godly people to believe in superstitions and make that belief even stronger.²⁴

The clerical author points emphatically to the need for increased vigilance against the behaviour disguised in religious forms, but actually resulting from anti-sacral, satanic inspiration. Such behaviour – which acquires the status of a superstition if “anyone uttering such words or performing such actions experiences their effects,” and the results are not explained by natural reasons – stems from common superstitions. That is why the Jesuit writer enumerates it, in one go, together with the convictions or practices that have nothing to do with the rational and empirical explanations of everyday situations:

Thus, futile are the observations that an itchy hand will count money, that when your ear is ringing you are being talked about, that when you hiccup, a friend mentions your name, that if you carry unusual objects, knots, etc., on you, you will protect yourself from an accident, illness or unhappy love. It is futile to drop a statue of a saint into water to make it rain, to say certain prayers hoping that the Virgin Mary or a saint of God will appear in your last hour or that you will know your last hour beforehand, to put a belt or string around your head to ease the pain, to nail a scarf at the crossroads or to wrap it around a Christ on the cross to get rid of one serious illness or another.²⁵

Those and other superstitious practices prove a syncretic character of magical culture,²⁶ which – absorbing the element of various origins (including those derived from religious worship) – may aspire to be a form of “alternative religiousness,”²⁷ located definitely beyond the area of orthodoxy

²⁴ The original text: “Częstokroć te zabobony nie tylko w słowach nieznanym i żadnego sensu w językach nie czyniących zawisły, ale też w słowach świętych. Nie tylko w akcjach niezwykłych, jako to kryśleniu różnych figur, obracaniu się w różne strony, chuchaniach, szeptach; ale zawisły w akcjach niby świętych, jako to żegnaniach, charakterów krzyżowych czynieniu, klękaniu. Do których akcyi i słów lubo świętych bies w kontrakcie raz na zawsze uczynionym obranych chciał swoją przywiązać kooperacyją, to dla wzgardy tych świętości, to dla pozoru i wiary większej uczynienia zabobonom i ludzi niby świętych do nich zachęcenia.”

²⁵ The original text: “Jako próżne obserwacje są, że gdy ręka świerzbi, pieniądze liczyć będzie. Gdy w uchu dzwoni, że o nim gadają. Gdy się szczka, że go przyjaciel wspomina. Nosić przy sobie jakie charaktery niezwykłe, węzłki, figury dla uchronienia się z przypadku, choroby, amorów utrzymania. Świętego jakiego statkę dla sprowadzenia deszczu rzucać w wodę. Pewne modlitwy mówić tą intencją i ufnością, aby się NN. Maryja albo który z Świętych Pańskich przy śmierci pokazał, albo że godzinę śmierci wiedzieć będzie daleko przed śmiercią. Pasmem albo nicią mierzyć głowę dla uspokojenia bólu. Na rozstajnych drogach przybijając chustę jaką albo nią obwiązywać Bożą mękę, aby wielka albo inna choroba ustała.”

²⁶ See: P. Lombardi, *Filozof i czarownica. Rozum i świat magiczny*, translated by A. Dudzińska-Facca, Warszawa: IFiS PAN, 2004, p. 113.

²⁷ P. Zambelli, *Mit hermetyzmu i aktualna debata historiograficzna*, translated by P. Bravo, Warszawa: IFiS PAN, 1994, p. 47.

outlined by the Church. One may suppose that it is in such categories that the clerical author perceived the final effect of the practices integrating magical elements with religious ones, so it is hardly surprising that he considered them to be a mortal sin “unless ignorance could liberate someone from sin”. By referring to the circumstances mitigating the harshness of the moral assessment of superstitious behaviour, Bystrzonowski must have certainly intended not to generate excessive feeling of guilt in those readers of *Mathematical Information* who did perform such activities, though not deliberately. Such a preoccupation was probably motivated by the intention – typical of former confessors, such as himself – not to exaggerate the scale of the sin, which required a reasonable approach, especially when it was necessary to define the difference between mortal and venial sins.²⁸

As regards the above-discussed aspects of the subject, as well as those addressed in the following part of this article, the intention of the Jesuit author was to provide the readers with clear principles of recognizing spiritual risks inherent in foretelling the future. Such an argument structure may be associated with Jesuit monks’ characteristic preoccupation with the appropriate discernment of spirits, which required special vigilance when, *inter alia*, the devil’s cunning assumed the shape of the sacred. These issues were described by St. Ignatius of Loyola, who – in his *Exercitia spiritualia* [Spiritual Exercises] (1548) – formulated one of the rules for the discernment of spirits in this way:

It is proper to the evil Angel, who forms himself under the appearance of an angel of light, to enter with the devout soul and go out with himself: that is to say, to bring good and holy thoughts, conformable to such just soul, and then little by little he aims at coming out drawing the soul to his covert deceits and perverse intentions.²⁹

Since pious words and gestures may camouflage magical and superstitious practices, the ability to penetrate their essence is indispensable. As regards the predictions discussed by Bystrzonowski in *Part 5. On Physiognomic Predictions* and *Part 6. On the Predictions Derived from Dreams*, it is also necessary to discern the lies hidden under the guise of religious practices.

The ambitions of physiognomics to foretell people’s fates were high. They stemmed from its immemorial links with fortune-telling,³⁰ as well as the affinity between physiognomics and astrology – in both fields the interdependencies between the microcosm of human being and the macrocosm of celestial phenomena were stressed.³¹ In Bystrzonowski’s book, the

²⁸ J. Delumeau, *Wyznanie i przebaczenie. Historia spowiedzi*, translated by M. Ochab, Gdańsk: Marabut, 1997, pp. 71–78.

²⁹ I. Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, translated by E. Mullan, New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1914, p. 71.

³⁰ J.J. Courtine, C. Haroche, *Historia twarzy. Wyrażanie i ukrywanie emocji od XVI do początku XIX wieku*, translated by T. Swoboda, Gdańsk: słowo/obraz–terytoria, 2007, pp. 27–28, 30.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36. Also, see: J. Białostocki, *Teoria i twórczość. O tradycji i inwencji w teorii sztuki i ikonografii*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo PTPN, 1961, pp. 71–76.

relatedness of physiognomics and astrology is suggested in the synthetic description of the methods of reading human faces and the signs of four temperaments to be found on a face, the astral motivation of which used to be emphasized very often.³² As for the issues discussed above, a more important consideration is, however, that from the detailed description of physiognomic theories offered by the Polish Jesuit one learns that “the very Holy Scriptures seem to confirm that physiognomists may infer such connections from a man’s constitution and various circumstances,” which is documented by him with appropriate verses from the Bible and a subsequent comment that the legitimacy of the predictions discussed seems to be confirmed by everyday experience. Still, the analysis of this question leads to the conclusion that physiognomy-based predictions “are not infallible” and, more importantly, “they cannot have any reliability with respect to the actions dependent on human free will.” Actually, the art of deciphering the signs recorded on the face may reveal only the “inclinations” or predispositions to certain types of behaviour, which are *nota bene* modified by our habits, good or bad upbringing and – especially – by subjecting our lives to the principles of the faith. The best proof of this observation are the biographies of the saints “who enslaved their bodies. Many cruel and quick-tempered lions became quiet lambs, many facetious revellers became abstaining anchorites, angels pure in flesh.”

The ability to discern spirits is no less important in the evaluation of the predictions based on the interpretations of dreams. Since the rules on how to interpret dreams were presented in popular dream books,³³ this part of *Mathematical Information* addressed the issue that was dealt with in popular old Polish writings. Pointing out that a dream is “a representation of a certain thing in the imagination of one who is asleep,” Bystrzonowski states that dreams come mostly from three sources: “by the order of the Lord,” “from a devil-created illusion” and “from natural reasons.” Since the majority of dream visions may be explained with natural reasons, the author expounds the mechanisms underlying them in detail. The reason for such visions are stirred emotions, and they depend on the diet and the disturbances of the equilibrium between the cardinal humours (four human body fluids, the arrangement of which determines individual people’s temperament, their health or illness). In consideration of these factors, the meaning of the images evoked by the imagination of a sleeping person should be explained in complete disregard of the “drivelling predictions,”

³² A great example here are the thoughts of old thinkers, scholars and artists discussed in the classic work: R. Kilbansky, E. Panofsky, F. Saxl, *Saturn i melancholia. Studia z historii filozofii, przyrody, medycyny, religii oraz sztuki*, translated by A. Kryczyńska, Kraków: Universitas, 2009.

³³ See: H. Kapeliś, “Senniki staropolskie. Z dziejów literatury popularnej XVI–XVIII wieku,” in: *Studia z dziejów dawnej literatury czeskiej, słowackiej i polskiej*, edited by K. Budzyk, J. Hrábak, Warszawa–Praha: Ossolineum, 1963, pp. 295–306.

which derive their gravity from the unsubstantiated associations of the contents of dreams with the changes in the position of the Moon in relation to the zodiacal constellations. Such predictions do not stand a chance before the court constituted by our “common sense.” However, “one should pay particular heed to the dreams through which God dissuades us from evil or attracts us to a certain virtue.” The above-mentioned rules for the discernment of spirits have to be applied to dreams if – after a thorough examination – the “participation of the devil” may be found in them.³⁴ Hence, to protect oneself from his slyness, it may be necessary to cease one’s own investigation and entrust the matter to an authority on religion:

Also, it happens that the devil assumes the shape of an Angel of Light and deceives human imagination with apparently sacred apparitions. This applies especially to women since he knows that they often believe anything and trust dreams, so he flatters their vanity or beguiles them with lies so that hell may benefit from their souls. Hence, to be able to judge on the merits of such apparent revelations, you should turn to wise and devout people, rather than women friends or storytellers, and should be guided by their opinion, rather than your own feeling.³⁵

In *Part 3. On Genethliac Predictions*, arguments are applied known from the traditional anti-astrological polemics to prove that the statements “about all aspects of human life” thus inferred are burdened with arbitrariness and flexibility, which is typical of fortune-telling astrology. Predictions of this type should be brought to the tribunal of reason, and the verdict is that the habit of ascribing male or female characteristic to celestial bodies is “unreasonable.” Astrologists’ teaching on the reign of planets is tainted with “deep irrationality” – how should a man, “a rational creature, ever assume that any power is wielded by planets, which are neither rational nor alive?” In this line of argument, the reservations of a rationalist are supported by a theologian, reminding the readers that “the knowledge of the future things that depend only on human free will” is available only to God, who conveys it in His revelation or in the prophecies referred to in the Holy Scriptures.

Why do the events foretold in the “genethliac predictions” sometimes come true then? Coincidence is the explanation here, since “if someone takes a thousand shots at the mark, he will hit it once or twice by chance, even though he cannot aim at all.” Still, even more important are the explanations of a theological nature, in the light of which this happens due to three reasons:

³⁴ See: D. de Rougemont, *Udział diabła*, translated by A. Frybes, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Wodnika, 1992.

³⁵ The original text: “Trafia się i to, że bies przemieniając się w Anioła Światłości, czasem i świętymi niby apparycjami ludzi imaginatywę ludzką. Osobliwiej niewiasty, o których wie, że łatwiej lada czemu wierzą i snom jakim takim wiarę dają, aby tak przez zjawienia czyli w próżną chlubę ich wprawił, czyli jakiegokolwiek fałsze i omamienia wprowadziwszy zysk jaki piekielny z duszy pozyskał. Więc do rozeznania takich snów i niby objawienia, czy są z Pana Boga, nie kumoszek albo bajaczów, ale ludzi roztropnych świętych zażywać trzeba i ich zdaniem, nie swoim rządzić widzi mi się.”

Firstly, God allows particular harmful consequences of such predictions in order to punish those who put undeserving faith in them. Secondly, the devil often plays a part in it – having had thousands of years of the experience as a student of all the minute aspects of the things created and natural processes, he suggests his own associations to people in order to divert their minds from putting their only hope in God and His providence. Thirdly, God's providence sometimes wants such predictions to come true. If fortune-tellers were always wrong, and only events contrary to their prophecies happened, people would thus have reliable information on future things, whether unpredictable and dependent only on God's will alone, or those dependent on human decisions.³⁶

In *Part 4. On Palmists' Predictions* – as well as in other parts of his book – Bystrzonowski does not shun acerbity towards fortune-tellers, this time mocking those who foretell the future “inspecting someone's hand” and “who, in time, will prognosticate reading the teeth, nose, hair, moustache and, finally, the sole of the foot.” Condemning palmistry, he emphasizes that such “vain inventions” are unhesitatingly repudiated by “any sound mind.” Chiromancy is unacceptable also because it claims to predict “the events ruled only by God's will or the determination of a human being.” Incidentally, it may be added that the impudent and far-reaching activities of such fortune-tellers had been criticized for a long time then. It was already the “very first Polish palmistry textbook intended for the mass reader”³⁷ – i.e. Jan Kalkowski's *Chiromantia abo Praktykowanie z rąk człowieczych z starych filozofów i nowych inszych autorów pilnie i porządnie zebrane (1618 ?)* [Palmistry or the Practice of Reading Human Hands, Diligently and Thoroughly Explained by Old Philosophers and Other Newest Authors] – that warned the readers against the necessitarianist or fatalist conclusions derived from interpreting the signs found on human hands:

Hence, apply your reason to this issue so that you may never claim that something is necessary to happen; you may only claim that there is an inclination, which may be changed by man's will if he chooses to fight against evil. But if he lets his will follow such an inclination freely, then he will not avoid what the fate has promised.³⁸

Part 7. On Astrological Predictions, condemning greed as the motivation of the “calendar makers” who publish them, informs the reader that astrology

³⁶ The original text: “Pierwszej, iż Bóg dopuszcza osobliwie nieszczęśliwe prognostyków skutki dla ukarania tych, którzy wiarę niegodziwą w nich pokładają. Z racyi drugiej, iż biesowska częstokroć do tego się przymieszuya kooperacyja, który jako wszelkich kompleksy i natur stworzonych rzeczy badacz tyłą tysięcy lat eksperyencyją wyuczony naturalista, swoje koniektury poddaje ludziom, aby tak umysł ludzki prędzej od jedynej nadziei w Bogu i Jego providencyi odwiódk. Z racyi trzeciej, że osobliwsza providencyja boska chce, aby czasem sprawdziły się te prognostyki. Bo gdyby wieszczbiarze zawsze fałsz przepowiadali i przeciwne iściły się skutki ich prognostykom, tym samym by ludzie mieli pewną wiadomość o przyszłych rzeczach, czyli przypadkowych i od samej woli boskiej zawisłych, czyli woli ludzkiej przyzwoitych.”

³⁷ R. Bugaj, *Nauki tajemne w Polsce w dobie odrodzenia*, Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1976, p. 104.

³⁸ The original text: “Przeto umiej roztropności w tym używać, abyś nigdy żadnej rzeczy nie twierdził, jakoby się co *necessario* stać miało, ale tylko to twierdzić, że taka inclinatia w nim jest, którą wola człowiecza odmienić może, będzie li się ze złym mocował. Bo jeśli za inclinatią wola swą wolno puści, nie minie go, co mu *fatum* obiecało.” See: J. Kalkowski, *Chiromantia abo Praktykowanie z rąk człowieczych z starych filozofów i nowych inszych autorów pilnie i porządnie zebrane*, [Raków]: Drukarnia Krzysztofa Schedela, [1618?], p. 9.

talks about the events that are “unfailing,” “circumstance-dependent” and “accidental.” Reliable are only those predictions that refer to solar and lunar eclipses, sunrises and sunsets, phases of the Moon, changes of the positions of the planets or the seasons of the year, since “God Himself, the architect of heaven and its revolutions, has provided for the unfailingly regular changes of the position of the sky and its revolution at a given time.” Many reservations and doubts are raised by the predictions distinguished and discussed in the following sections of Bystrzonowski’s text, namely those on: “storms and wind,” “rain, snow or good weather,” “thunderbolts, lightning and thunder,” “good harvest,” “epidemics and illnesses.” Such predictions are far from precise, since the “naturalists” who study them – though less mercenary than calendar publishers – have not fathomed many natural phenomena yet. Notably, making comments on the above-enumerated types of predictions, the writer explains that it is the natural reasons that cause such phenomena as storms (in folk wisdom, it was the devil that was thought to spark them off)³⁹ or epidemics (whose origins and multiple negative consequences raised concern in old-time communities).⁴⁰ The author of *Mathematical Information* also states that farmers’ knowledge of the laws of nature is a source much more reliable than calendar-derived predictions of a good harvest. He perceives the predictions made using the popular theory of climacteric years⁴¹ as an expression of an objective reflection on the periodical patterns in human life. The theory of the critical days, which suggests when the relapses of illness symptoms occur, has been explained by him in a similar spirit.

However, a critical opinion of the theologian is aimed at the predictions on the deaths of monarchs, rebellions, war and peace, theft or happiness in marriage (discussed in a separate section of the book). Such auguries should be discarded because they pertain to the events dependent on the free will of a human being, and because they oppose the Holy Scriptures, the teachings of the Catholic Church and “common sense and truth itself” in that they attempt to learn about the course of the events known to God alone. It might seem that such predictions – condemned also by ancient critics of astrological fortune-telling, referred to by our Jesuit author – could not hope for any positive reaction. Still, despite being glaringly nonsensical, they

³⁹ A. M. di Nola, *Diabeł. O formach, historii i kolejach losu Szatana, a także jego powszechnej a złowrogiej obecności wśród wszystkich ludów od czasów starożytnych aż po teraźniejszość*, translated by I. Kania, Kraków: Universitas, 2001, pp. 299–306.

⁴⁰ For more on this subject, see: A. Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem. Epidemie chorób zakaźnych w Rzeczypospolitej w XVI–XVIII wieku i ich następstwa demograficzne, społeczno-ekonomiczne i polityczne*, Warszawa: Neriton, 2000; J. Kracik, *Staropolskie postawy wobec zarazy*, Kraków: Petrus, 2012.

⁴¹ Interestingly, that theory was resorted to by authors so different in their intellectual formation as Wespazjan Kochowski, a poet of the traditionalist Polish gentry, in the so-called *Klimaktery*, i.e. a historiographic work entitled *Annales Poloniae ab obitu Wladislawi Quarti* (1683–1698), and the outstanding astronomer Johannes Hevelius, in his *Annus climactericus* (1685).

do attract readers' interest, who – failing to be cautious enough – sustain the demand for them: “Although many people consider such predictions to be fairy tales and lies, they are still willing to acquire and read them, so swindlers are eager to devise even more of them.”

Both the above-quoted observation and other opinions of Wojciech Bystrzonowski prove that in seeking to correct the mental habits that he deemed detrimental, he realized that what is instrumental in moulding and cherishing them are astrological calendars, i.e. a popular and widespread form of the contemporary literature. Being critical of them is what he shares with many Enlightenment writers and columnists. He fought against such predictions as manifestations of superstitions. He did so from a fideistic position, using the proven rules for the discernment of spirits and exercising the type of sensitivity reminiscent of the so-called anti-superstition literature, which pointed to the anti-religious core of superstition and, simultaneously, exposed its irrational nature. Such a combination of rational criticism and religious principles makes Bystrzonowski's attitude somewhat similar to the one expressed – more than two decades later – by Jan Chryzostom Bohomolec in his treatise *Diabeł w swojej postaci* [The Devil and His Form] (1772 – 1777).⁴² That publication clearly testifies to the grip taken on the Enlightenment period by the remnants of magical thinking, and proves that “the strongest attack [at that time] on superstition was launched not by atheists, but Catholic intellectuals.”⁴³

* * *

Summing up, we can notice that the criticism of prediction-making expressed on the pages of Bystrzonowski's *Informacya matematyczna* does not introduce any novel or original strains into the polemics against the concepts to which religion has objected for centuries. The Jesuit from Poland presents a lucid recount of the arguments found in the old-time discussions on astrology and other forms of fortune-telling.⁴⁴ The cognitive value of his text lies in the fact that it is an intellectually

⁴² For more on that treatise, see: D. Kowalewska, *Magia i astrologia w literaturze polskiego oświecenia*, Toruń: WN UMK, 2009, pp. 69–115; B. Marcińczak, “Między łącznością i niewiernością”. *Diabeł, magia i czary w “Nowych Atenach” i “Diabłu w swojej postaci”*, Warszawa: DiG, 2014, especially pp. 72–99.

⁴³ D. Kowalewska, *ibid.*, p. 343. In relation to the above-quoted observation, it is worth noting that an uncompromising and very well-argued study of the presence of superstition in various areas of modern culture was presented not so long ago by an eminent Dominican scholar, J.M. Bocheński, *Sto zabobonów. Krótki filozoficzny słownik zabobonów*, Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1987.

⁴⁴ Interesting documentation is offered, e.g., in this volume: *Staropolskie przepowiednie i mirabilia*, edited by J. Krocak, Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, 2007. Also, see: S. Poklatecki, *O snach i czarach*, edited by J. Krocak, E. Madeyska, Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, 2011; F. Birkowski, *Kazania o naukach tajemnych*, edited by J. Krocak, Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, 2012.

disciplined, holistic presentation of various reservations which used to be formulated with reference to the practices of foretelling the future. The writer makes it absolutely clear that the visions offered by such predictions cannot be reconciled with either religious faith or scientific approach to the world, which he set out to promote in his compendious encyclopaedia of knowledge.

It is worth stressing that the historical significance of Bystrzonowski's book consists also in the fact that by promoting a critical attitude to prophesies and predictions, it advocated defining the way of perceiving curiosity – the stand, which within the *scientia curiosa* current was of particular importance. It was curiosity that the main motivation of the human urge to know the world was seen in. It frequently turned human attention to what is unique and strange, natural curiosities in particular, but it also motivated humans to try to penetrate the domain of divine mysteries, unreachable for the human mind.⁴⁵ An interesting aspect of Bystrzonowski's *Informacya matematyczna* is the fact that it stresses the necessity to submit curiosity to rational rigours, and ultimately to rational limitations, which mean that we should exclude from our considerations too far reaching investigations concerning the future, presented in the popular predictions.

Translated by Piotr Cymbalista

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⁴⁵ J. Partyka, *Między scientia curiosa a encyklopedią. Europejskie konteksty dla staropolskich kompediów wiedzy*. Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2019, pp. 15–39.

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