

Classic Poetry Series

# **Mikolaj Sep Szarzynski**

## **- poems -**

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# Mikolaj Sep Szarzynski(1550 - 1581)

Mikolaj Sep Szarzynski (1550-1581) was a Polish religious poet remembered for writing metaphysical sonnets with inverted word orders.

A forerunner of Baroque poetry, he wrote predominantly religious poetry akin to that of the English Metaphysical poets. In this period satire and pastoral were the most popular forms.

Szarzynski was a full-fledged baroque poet avant la lettre. His only collection, *Rytmy albo wiersze polskie* (Polish Rhythms or Verses; published posthumously in 1601), has been rediscovered only in recent decades, after centuries of oblivion.

Szarzynski did not write much, but what he wrote reveals an extraordinary personality, a profoundly metaphysical poet. In particular, a handful of his religious sonnets, in which tortuous syntax, violent enjambment, and oxymoronic imagery portray a mind torn asunder by spiritual torment, bear comparison with the best of John Donne or George Herbert.

# Cupid's Statue

He's but a child, tho  
Unscathed he'd not be  
Who despiseth him.  
Gods so pompous  
Were made to cavort  
Where they wanted not;  
When he wished it,  
A king, his own  
Estate fast forgot;  
A lord of lords, he!  
Foul, beasts and fishes  
Ever do serve him;  
'Tis each man tho,  
His ruin can cause,  
If idle he lays not.

Mikolaj Sep Szarzynski

# Epitaph To Rome

If midst Rome you wish to see Rome, pilgrim,  
Tho in Rome naught of Rome might you see,  
Behold the walls' ring, the theatres, temples  
And ruptured pillars, to rubble all turned,  
Rome be these! Mark how the corpse of a city  
So strong still past fortune's pomp exudes;  
Subduing a world, herself the city subdued  
Lest yet more to subdue might there be.  
Today in broken Rome, Rome unbroken  
(A substance in its shadow) lies entombed.  
Within all's changed; alone past change  
Tiber remains, that to sea runs mixed with sand.  
See what Fortune plays: 'tis wasted away,  
What was unmoving; what moved, yet remains.

Mikolaj Sep Szarzynski

# Fortune's Statue

She's mistress of all:  
Rule of this earth  
To her is entrusted;  
Fortune she's called.  
But for her, Maia's son, whom  
She grants gifts, be naught.  
Man, living for gain,  
Mars, fast to shed blood,  
Stand both in her hand.  
He fears her even  
Whom Yenus enflames;  
He praises her too,  
Who lives by his toil,  
In sweat and in thrift.  
Kindly at her he'd look,  
Who mocks her in word;  
For wise deliberation,  
Wishing, she'd turn to dispute.  
Of a king, a pauper,  
Of a slave, a king,  
Should she will, she'd make.  
She's heedless on whom  
Her gifts she bestows,  
In which no trust  
Is she wont to keep.  
So doth she sport!  
Through inconstancy alone  
She endures unchanging,  
To wander hither and yon,  
Ruling earth with no rules.  
In this tho, she's less  
Unto virtue persisting  
Would she fast submit,  
With it forever in strife.

Mikolaj Sep Szarzynski

# Song I

Dear people, swelled in fool's wisdom  
And clinging to error so fanciful,  
To the skies, adorned in hosts of fair stars,  
Look up - and make bright your dimlit minds!

Know ye that 'tis a wise Lord, an eternal  
Lord there with palace midst fiery vault,  
Whereon airy voids He's fastened high  
And great waters freed of earth's pondrance.

Day, at times fixed, to night's shadow ceding;  
Night, at times fixed, ceding unto the day,  
Thus do testify with course so concordant  
That 'twas no mere chance earth came to be.

The sky's mechanics, fashioned in accord,  
Proclaim 'tis God's wisdom, His endless might  
That ever sways them, and o'er a vast  
Earth is this voice heard on all ears.

For in no haunt of the habited world  
Be there people so basely simple  
They'd mark not that a faultless law  
Sways the heavens, for no time doth it err.

Who, when a cloud veils not the heavens,  
Looks unamazed on the stars' bright lustre?  
Or when the sun doth his eyes assail with  
Light, whilst reeling in its flaming arc?

Rising forth from his bridesbed,  
Groom-like, adorned in raiments  
Of pure gold, a crown of priceless  
Gems glowing radiant o'er his brow,

From a full course not leastwise spent,  
Forceful he plunges! Well he's likened  
In his shape, strength, and speed,  
To the behemoth of a hundred limbs.

Soaring from the east to where dark night  
Ascends, light he adds to the stars;  
And whatsoever be on a low earth,  
He begets and nurtures by his flames.

But order in the lofty firmament  
Draws a viewers' thoughts less so,  
Than doth Thine own law, Lord, to propriety  
Turn the senses and lay waste desire.

No change do Thy promises know,  
And with truth's glow our hearts they affirm;  
Thou so dost punish should one offend,  
That in him Thy sacred suffering works gain.

Thy commandment delights our eyes  
With grateful bliss, O Lord, and forms  
Thy true glory which age injures not,  
Whilst with steely tooth it crumbles all.

In Thine Edicts, guarding them heedfully,  
Truth and piety all times abide;  
Sweeter they are than honey, greater  
Yet than gilded metal and rare jewels.

'Tis why, in his heart, Lord, Thy servant  
Shall ne'er cease minding them duly,  
Knowing the reward Thou hast readied  
For each who would keep them always.

Yet who is it marks all his failings?  
O God forever, cleanse me Thyself,  
Do away with my sundry misdeeds  
Whence unknowingly I am sullied.

And grant pride's force, hideous  
To Thee, would enter not in my heart.  
So wouldst Thou forever, with no travail,  
Cast off the fetters of my great impiety.

Words from my mouth, this meek thought

From an abased heart, deign accept,  
Lord, I beg Thee! For Thou art salvation,  
My God, my Hope, my Sustenance...

Mikolaj Sep Szarzynski



## Song II

Why flatter thyself, Tyrant,  
In ways great in evil?  
The Lord's goodness ceases not  
Keeping watch on the pious.

Keener yet than the keenest  
Blade, thy tongue watches  
To generate wild untruth  
And plot slander' gainst the good.

Evil's thy love, not sacred virtues;  
A liar's thy love, not a truthsayer;  
Thine own accursed eye in joy  
Gazes at treason most infectious.

For this the Lord God shall fling  
Thee from the midst of His people;  
Grinding thee to dust, aye, thy home  
He'll rend asunder from the very earth.

Seeing this, he who was wronged  
Shall fear the power of the Lord;  
With the evil one swift dispensed,  
In safety shall he rejoice.

Saying: "So for him who in evil  
Lay his trust, in power, in clever device;  
Who mocked those lamenting in plight,  
Whilst his own God he'd forgot.

But I, like unto an Olive tree  
Grafted in the Lord's garden,  
Unfearing I'll blossom forth  
In my hope of heaven's defence.

And unto everyone, Lord, Thee  
Would I claim iniquity's slayer;  
And having in Thee my trust,  
All manner of afflictions I'll bear."

Mikolaj Sep Szarzynski

## Song Iii

Have mercy on me, my Lord,  
For a foe treds o'er me and strives  
Mindfully that time and again  
I be wearied by all adversity.

Cruelly he treds, proud in his throng,  
Stifling me with cruelty undue;  
Never's the day I'm free of him,  
Nor is my night empty of grim fear.

Yet, be it day, be it night when  
Pondrous fear doth oppress, kind Father,  
Thou, my Defender, art my hope,  
And in each need to the end shall be.

Whilst I, Lord, being assured  
In Thy promises, neither blind  
Human connivance, nor fierce threat,  
Nor battle's dread would I fear.

Whatever I say, they wrongly construe;  
To my each deed they give rebuke;  
Impious ones have turned all care  
To rendering me most loathful.

In temples by veiled treachery  
Or open offence they conspire  
To smite me; my every path they mark,  
No safety would they afford me.

And this Thou wouldst suffer, just Lord?  
Evil ones are to rejoice in such doings?  
Wouldst Thou waiver bringing unrising  
Ruin to a Temple of such calumny?

I know, verily I know, Lord eternal,  
That my every defeat Thou dost reckon,  
Tears from sad eyes Thou dost retain,  
And dread afflictions' cause Thou dost know;

Work of evildoers Thou turnst to naught,  
But to me a kindly ear dost lend,  
And brights signs of Thy benevolence  
And constant love to me Thou dost reveal.

Whilst I, Lord, being assured  
In Thy promises, neither blind  
Human connivance, nor fierce threat,  
Nor battle's dread would I fear.

And ever to Thee, fatherly guard  
Of my being, full praise I'll offer  
In fitting song; unhindered, I'll feign  
Not giving, free by thy grace, my avowed

Sacrifice. With Thine aid, my feet  
Shall stray not from Thy sacred path,  
For such time as my spirit's abode  
In this frail body be, O my Lord!

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## Song Iv

Downcast midst vile sins,  
From my innermost heart  
I cry out, God unbounded!  
Hear the mournful plaints  
Of my grievous voice,  
And in Thy compassion  
Lend an ear of mercy!

Wouldst Thou our evils  
Weigh, kind Father,  
On Thine own justice's scale,  
Who'd know such fortune,  
Who in virtues be so firm,  
That coming for true judgment,  
Would not be condemned?

But Thou, gracious judge,  
Punish not our erring ways  
With deserved severity;  
Thy law, with mercy filled,  
And Thy faithful words, O Lord,  
That wouldst pluck me from this ill,  
Inspire in me certain trust.

'Tis why, whether roseal dawn  
Brings forth a beaming sun,  
Or night, arrayed in darkening clouds,  
In darkness doth lead on,  
Let doubt not dissuade  
Those people so chosen  
From resolute trust in their Lord.

For a treasure inexhaustible  
Is His eternal compassion;  
He'll idle not in healing wounds  
Or raising one who's stumbled;  
He, past all measure of doubt,  
Shall forget not His own people,  
And to salvation shall lead them.

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## Song V

To Thee, eternal Defender of all creation,  
I call, frail, commiserate, nowhere secure.  
Keep me in close watch, and in my each anxiety,  
Hasten to bring aid to my wretched soul.

With Thy rod, do but quell the blind flesh  
So laden with vain, lowly, ill-working lust;  
For shame it seeks sway o'er its own soul:  
Fairer if what's to decay serves what's forever!

And ye, cov'tous hosts (Lord God, my Defence),  
Show your heels and take your infamy unending,  
Ye who deny God's creation the wealth (whence you  
Were forced) and the praise to thine own Maker.

My Bliss, my Praise, let them fast feel shame  
Who sing me sweetness of other praise, not Thee.  
What hath man not Thine? Yet who in Thy gifts  
Be vain, eternal King, Thy gifts would he lose.

So happy, so jubilant they who confess  
That the good be Thine, who seek Thee  
And adornment unending, who take pains  
To love Thee alone full-willing, O Lord.

Aye, reckon me in that count, kind Father,  
Whilst here, grant me but mark I'm lowly dust  
And, unmatched for a tempest's heavy ordeals,  
May I know as my strengths thy great mercies.

Still who's content, arrayed yet in mail  
Of adamant, if war long and hard he endures?  
So I beg: Thou who in battle art Defender,  
Tarry not, Peace redeeming, giving unto us Thyself!

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# Song Vi

Our almighty Lord, eternal, unfathomed,  
To Thee Cherubin proclaim "Holy, holy, holy!"  
To Thee too, Seraph, true love's pure brand;  
A fiery firmament tho marks Thy glory's stead.

And tho Thou art in all, 'tis there my teary eyes  
I lift, and there doth my longing heart sigh;  
For my senses' strengths match not their afflictions,  
Like servants of masters, Thy mercies they crave.

And my will, to Thy will no whining slave,  
Like a lowly maid of a lady, awaits Thee  
To fast lend her a hand, and in Thy just  
Compassion, alleve the burden's force.

O compassionate Father, whose fontheads  
Of goodness no weir of sin car divert,  
Have mercy on us, have mercy:  
Long we overflow in infamies of our wrong!

No more doth the heart pang, it dies forthwith,  
As force of ingrates tears our allotment and honor,  
As lofty pride casts a downward eye on us,  
Not marking that Thine eyes scorn us not.

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# Sonnet I

Alas, hardpressed the whirling orbs  
And swift Titan hie fleeting hours,  
And cleave delights with woe avid  
Death might - fast on us, she strides!

Whilst I, onward, mark more the deep  
Shadow of my wrongs that prey untold  
On a heart cowed now by constant woe,  
And with tears, my youthful faults I rue.

Power, delights, wealth, such ado,  
Tho ne'er for naught, 'tis ill they work,  
For our desire they turn astray  
From its rightful bliss (God we name).

Brief gains! O blissful a hundredfold  
Who knows quick these shadows' true shape!

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## Sonnet II

In shame is man conceived, through pain is born,  
And brief the time upon this earth he goes  
In life inconstant, full of fears and woes.  
He dies, a shadow by the sun forlorn.

And yet from such a man (O Endless God,  
Within Thyself glorified and blissfully  
Living through Thyself) almost wistfully  
Dost Thou desire--from him!--both love and laud.

Wondrous the works of Thy charity are,  
At which Cherubim (comprehension's crest)  
Wonder bemused and righteous burns afar  
The flame, the Seraphim, in love's sweet zest.

O most Holy Lord, would that we too had,  
To give thee back, that which thou have hast bade!

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## Sonnet Iii (To The Virgin Mary)

Unequalled Virgin, the second ornament  
Of the human race, whose dignity has not diminished  
Her humility, nor has humility lessened her generosity of heart,  
O rare Mother of her own Creator!

You have crushed the head of the serpent whose venom  
Has poisoned the entire world.  
You assumed your place in Heaven above the angels' choir  
And there, glorified, you partake of eternal joy.

For our souls you are like a moon  
Which reflects the rays of eternal  
Charity, as our grievous sinfulness

Descends on us like a night's dark shadow.  
Lead us to the morning dawn  
And show us the light of your Sun which we all desire.

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## Sonnet Iv

Peace is happiness, but war is our plight  
Under the heavens. He -- prince of the night,  
Severe captain-- and the World's vanity  
Work for our corruption diligently.

Not enough is this, mighty Lord of all!  
The Body, our home for fleeting pleasures,  
Envies heedlessly the Spirit's treasures  
Constantly craving our eternal fall.

How shall I wage a battle so terrible,  
Frail, yet headstrong, a soul in isolation?  
King Universal, Peace most veritable,  
In Thee alone is hope of my salvation!

Do Thou, Lord, place me safely next to Thee  
I will battle and win decisively!

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## Sonnet V

'Tis hard to love not, whilst to love  
Be sad joy, if by lust misled,  
Thoughts too sweetly gaze on things  
That perforce must change and decay.

Who's the man could savour his fill  
Of gold, fame, sceptre, delights, false  
Count'nance fair, that a heart he'd  
Have sated and all cares might allay?

Love's surely our being's just course,  
Aye, but 'tis flesh, from matter wrought,  
Praising what knows like inception,  
Guiles the soul, for which all's little

If Thee, Beauty real and e'erlasting,  
It sees not, its love's true object.

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## Sonnet Vi

Tomicki, if they'd not chide him  
Who lights a praising lamp to Light  
Praised, sacred and boundless Itself,  
Whence every light's glow doth stem,

Then by none I'd be called fickle  
If I sing virtue's beauty in thee  
That's enlightened all. But learned,  
Water I've sipped little, so daren't try.

Take well my wish, God marks it so;  
Should the Muses tho with my lack comply,  
Thy pluck, firm'ty, wisdom and manners,  
Which thy state (high itself) far excede,

Shall for my verse sport unending  
Be. What? True glory they'd be!

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