Death as the UnRead Writing in the Poetry of Cyprian Kamil Norwid

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n this essay I treat the word *death* as a sort of writing: a sequence of signs, the meaning of which is not always obvious and therefore permits various interpretations. Understood in this way, death, through its ambiguity and "multi-interpretativeness," opens the perspective for reading in the direction that is a priori always indefinite. However, regardless of various interpretations it can be assumed that understanding the writing of death requires three basic abilities. First, noticing the sign character in the fact of dying, due to which it is not treated as something that simply happens and exhausts itself in its hastiness. Second, regarding the immanent interpretation of death, correctly decoding its deep sense. This is a result achievable only through the third ability: placing the writing of death in the appropriate context, explicating its meaning to the fullest and in the most versatile way.

The opinion presented above may seem inspired by such methodologies as semiotics and post-structuralism that emphasize the textual character of reality and the inevitable entanglement of its phenomena in sign relationships. However, such an approach is, primarily, very Norwidian and also very Romantic.

In the dialogic poem "On History" Norwid shows the tragic consequences of misinterpreting the martyrdom of the first Christians.

Why is it Norwidian? In Norwid's poetry one can find metaphorical connections between death and writing. This connection does not merely appear in accidental poems or in an accidental scene; it is prominent in Norwid's most significant poem, *Quidam*. Its nameless protagonist, the son of Alexander of Epyr, dies from an axe blow in the market square as the result of an incidental quarrel. His death does not evoke any strong emotions among the staring spectators. In contrast, the Gardener, who is a Christian, first blesses the soul of the butchered man and then addresses the crowd as follows:

I bless

Your soul, and as for you, what the death Of this youth means, you'll learn someday— You who are blind Cains, Demolishing brotherhood, setting up on the world Figures of your own derangement With deeds, each of which uncovers you— And as theatrical scenes teach, As if searching for keys to hidden truths. God, when a knife was upraised Over an offering of a young man, Put forward a sheep, caught in thorns, Not wishing that He be praised with human blood; But you, missing the bull with your axe,

But you, missing the bull with your axe, Cool yourselves in human blood—insane people! With this, I say, when you begin to read the pattern Of writing, which reddens in the air, You will fall to your faces.¹

Błogosławię

Duszy twej – a wy! co znaczy skonanie Młodzieńca tego, kiedyś się dowiecie – Którzy jesteście ślepi Kainanie, Rozbijający braterstwo na świecie, Obrazy stawiąc własnego zbłąkania Czynami, z których każdy was odsłania – I jako scena w teatrum naucza, Do prawd zakrytych by szukano klucza – Bóg, gdy ofiarę nożem czynić miano Na niewinnego młodzianka wzniesionym, Nasunął owcę w ciernie uwikłaną, Krwią ludzką, nie chcąc, aby był chwalonym;

Ale wy – byka minąwszy toporem, W człowieczej krwi się chłodzicie – szaleni! Tym, mówię, czytać gdy poczniecie wzorem Pisanie, co się w powietrzu czerwieni,

Padniecie na twarz $-^2$

The above lines show the specificity of Norwid's poetic imagination. It can be called semiotic because the artist is especially sensitive to the sign character of reality, incessantly searching for the traces of transcendence in the earthly here and now. Such a perspective was not uncommon in Norwid's time. It can be regarded as a typical trait of romantic epistemology, prone to perceiving the world, history, and man as a book.³ However, among the Polish Romantics this tendency is probably the strongest in Norwid. In all his works the author of *Vade-mecum* "czytał żywotów i skonań księgę"⁴ (was reading the book of lives and deaths)⁵ and criticizing the inability of his contemporaries to do this kind of reading both in history and in the present. This inability to "read" death is the subject of analysis in the remainder of this paper.

Norwid subtly comments on this matter in the poem titled "Death" (Śmierć) in which he also presents his own Christian understanding of death connected with his conviction that man is "older" than death-he is able to overcome and outlive it.⁶ The poet presents this view in the context of the pre-Christian attitude to death typical of ancient philosophers: the inclination to avoid eschatological reflection, to flee from memento mori. Such an escape resulted from "tough faith" that death "touches people, not situations," thus being the ultimate end to human existence. This inappropriate-according to Norwid-interpretation of death, preferred in ancient times, results in an immature attitude toward the end of time.

Once you hear a woodworm drilling a bough Intone a song or hit the kettle-drums; Don't think that somewhere there are full-grown forms; Don't think of death now...

Pre-Christian and blissful it is a way To make one's own easy recreations Tough is the faith that death touches people Not situations—

But still wherever his touch has fallen Substance—not essence in it—he rents Nothing but moment he has stolen Man as his elder stands!⁷

Skoro usłyszysz, jak czerw gałąź wierci, Piosenkę zanuć lub zadzwoń w tymbały; Nie myśl, że formy gdzieś podojrzewały; Nie myśl – o śmierci...

Przed-chrześcijański to i błogi sposób Tworzenia sobie lekkich rekreacji, Lecz ciężkiej wiary, że śmierć: tyka osób, Nie sytuacjiA jednak ona, gdziekolwiek dotknęła, Tło—nie istotę, co na tle—rozdarłszy, Prócz chwili, w której wzięła—nic nie wzięła: —Człek—od niej starszy!⁸

In one of his best-known poems "What have you done to Athens, Socrates" (Coś ty Atenom zrobił, Sokratesie), the poet uses the motif of the misunderstood and misinterpreted "transcript of death" in the context of tragic relations between eminent individuals and their times. In the burials of Socrates, Dante, Columbus, Camoes, and Kościuszko that hid the shameful truth about the actual circumstances of these great men's deaths (dying in oblivion, rejection, or as a result of unjust punishment), Norwid saw not an accident but historical regularity. Society is unable to recognize and accept truly eminent persons during their lives; they are often recognized properly only after they die:

What have you done to Athens, Socrates, That people gave you a golden statue, Poisoning you first?

Each one, like you, the world cannot Admit right away to a peaceful plot Nor, old as it is, has it ever, For clay unto clay seeps unceasing, While opposing bodies are nailed together Later. . . or sooner. $...^{9}$

Coś ty Atenom zrobił, Sokratesie, Że ci ze złota statuę lud niesie, Otruwszy pierwej?...

Każdego z takich jak Ty świat nie może Od razu przyjąć na spokojne łoże, I nie przyjmował nigdy, jak wiek wiekiem, Bo glina w glinę wtapia się bez przerwy, Gdy sprzeczne ciała zbija się aż ćwiekiem Później... lub pierwej...¹⁰

These poems to which I have just referred are examples of Norwid's usage of the motif of the "un-read writing of death." I restrict myself to presenting the problem of death of a martyr, seen, first of all (but not only) from the perspective of Norwid's nineteenth-century Poland.¹¹

One of the most important subjects of conversation presented in the poem "On History" (O historii) is the martyrology of the Polish nation which is, for the predominant group of interlocutors, the reason for idealizing national history and equating the Poles with the first Christians: "among whom one after the other fell dead every day,/ And no one asked what is to be left after them" (U których co dzień padał trup po trupie,/ I nie pytano, co po nich zostanie).¹² The juxtaposition of the repressive measures of the invaders after the Polish risings with Christians prosecuted in Rome allows the creation of the vision of "radiant history" that justifies every suffering and apparently relieves it from the need for deeper reflection on the purposefulness of the sacrifices. Such a view is most visible in the words of one of the protagonists:

out of our [Polish¹³] crosses Another history seems to be composed Perhaps less politically correct, but radiant!

z naszych krzyży Zda się układać historia odmienna, Mniej literacka może, lecz promienna!¹⁴

This conviction predominates among the interlocutors. Only Jerzy, a figure that could be Norwid's *porte-parole*, opposes it. He responds to the words about history written with crosses in the following way:

Indeed—*Jerzy replied to it*— The illiterate do write with the signs of crosses.¹⁵

No, przecież – Jerzy na to – jużci piszą
Znakami krzyża pisma nie znający.¹⁶

The proper sense of Jerzy's response is difficult to understand in all of its dimensions. The reference to the well known fact that those who cannot write put down crosses instead of their names cannot be viewed as Jerzy agreeing with the previous speaker. He seems to say, "I agree, the simpletons who cannot write sign documents with crosses instead of their names." In such an observation one can see a certain symbolic regularity, making the idea of the Polish crucifix less likely and ordinary history more probable.

However, the undertones of the phrase "write with the signs of crosses" point to a more complicated meaning. This phrase is a graphic procedure typical of Norwid, and it suggests a deeper significance of the expression. Jerzy's answer is marked with irony that results from juxtaposing the national crosses, the symbols of suffering (Passion) with the crosses used as a mechanical way of notation. His words should thus be understood as a polemic retort. Moreover, the whole first part of the poem is filled with divagations about the condition of historiography, especially in its national variant.

In Norwid's view, in modern Poland citizens have to seek fulfillment through life rather than through thoughtless suffering and death.

In this context Jerzy's statement ironically reveals the way of thinking about history that makes the national crosses the indicators of subsequent epochs and the criteria of taxonomizing the history of Poland. According to Jerzy, this way of thinking is characteristic of those who "do not know the writing," which should be understood in its metaphorical meaning, referring to the writing of history. Lack of awareness of the deep sense of history is shown by a vast majority of participants in the conversation, which results in elevating the idea of the history of the crosses. What Jerzy says about writing with the signs of crosses can therefore be understood as a tragic diagnosis of the Polish nation and a model of its historical existence. In such an interpretation, the nation itself becomes that illiterate who, not knowing the writing of history, records the story of his life with crosses. What is more. misunderstanding its mission, it adjusts the martyrological interpretation to historical facts and then this interpretation further becomes a specific instruction, determining the direction and purpose of national perseverance. However, it is a destructive instruction, because it has been written by an illiterate, "not knowing the writing."

Thus in the dialogic poem "On History" Norwid shows the tragic consequences of misinterpreting the martyrdom of the first Christians. Interpreted within the framework of the modern history of Poland, such misinterpretation can lead the nation to destruction. What is criticized is the lack of understanding of the deep sense of martyrdom and imitation of only its external form, as expressed in the calls for blood sacrifice (a characteristic element of the Polish Romantic thought in its predominant stream). However and this is especially important for Jerzy—the typical Christian readiness to sacrifice one's own life was, paradoxically, combined with "blood meanness," or the attitude in which no sacrifice is needless or ill-considered.

Norwid's polemics with an erroneous vision of martyrdom was also a polemic with Andrzej Towiański's destructive calls to martyrdom.

In expressing his opinions on the situation of the Polish nation in "On History," Norwid pays a great deal of attention to differences in the historical conditions of martyrdom. Referring to the examples of martyrs for the faith in the first century A.D., he seems to state that a different historical context requires a different formula of action and a different formula of martyrdom. The first Christians gave testimony to truth and faith through their physical martyrdom, but in modern times what is required is action. One has to fulfill oneself first of all through life, rather than through thoughtless suffering and death. In the political conditions of the mid-nineteenth century, death frequently turns out to be, in Norwid's words, "martyrdom without faith" deprived of deep justification.

Thus the inability to decipher the writing of death involves the inability to comprehend its meaning and/or the invoking of death in the wrong context. Such a double mistake is addressed in the poem "To A. T." (Do A.T.), of which Andrzej Towiański is the poetic addressee and in which the figure of Socrates is referred to. The Greek philosopher was very important to Norwid as one of the great individuals able to confirm the truth they preached with their lives and also with their deaths. This segment of Socrates's biography-the conscious choice of imprisonment and rejection of the possibility of avoiding unjust punishment-is used by Norwid in his discrete polemics with Towiański. The poem has as its subject the national bondage; however, an awareness of the consequences of Socrates's choice (drinking hemlock) also

introduces the way of death as the ultimate confirmation of one's way of life.

The figure of Socrates could serve the supporters of Towiański as a heroic example, idealizing their ideology, explaining—through actualization—the contemporary situation of the Polish nation. In the perspective of the confessors of Towiański's "God's Cause," the martyrdom of the oppressed nation was something justifiable and even purposeful. It was a kind of penance for sins committed and as such—should be willingly accepted. Up to this point, the views of Towiański's supporters coincide with the choice made by Socrates, but it is a superficial affinity, as Norwid reveals in the key fragment of the poem:

For what didn't Socrates flee from his prison We—we should flee.... The spirit and blood order us to do so.¹⁷

Dla czego Sokrat nie uszedł z więzienia, My - ujść winniśmy...Duch, krew, każe to nam¹⁸.

For the same reason that Socrates chose prison and death, "we"—the Poles—should avoid imprisonment and death. Any imitation of Socrates' attitude, if it is to be mature and profound, should not be based on merely copying its external manifestation. It must reach the essence of Socrates' choice that expresses faithfulness to the truth he preached and is its incarnation. By deciding to die, Socrates made this truth immortal. This is the very reason why he did not flee from prison.

In the situation of nineteenth-century Poland the same goal, to give testimony to truth, required an entirely different strategy than one used by Socrates. It involved rejecting consent to slavery that corrupts and exterminates nations, and leads to their demise literally and metaphorically. In contrast to Socrates' case, the choice of death would be an unnecessary and unjustifiable sacrifice. This is what the poem "On History" tells us so emphatically.

Norwid's polemics with an erroneous vision of martyrdom—one that lost its previous meaning because it involved a thoughtless imitation of martyrs' deaths in the past—was accompanied by the poet's search for a formula that could turn out to be functional in nineteenth-century Poland. In the poem titled "To Walenty Pomian Z." (Do Walentego Pomiana Z.), Norwid defined a correct (in his view) perspective of martyrdom, indicating that the ways to achieve it are dramatically different from what was then advocated by the likes of Towiański:

Martyrdom is a testimony to truth No matter how it is marked: an axe? blood? an interrogation? Or—taking insults serenely—

Męczeństwo prawdy jest świadectwem,

Bez względu, czy toporem? krwią? czy jakim śledztwem? Znaczone – czy? obelgi pogodnym prze-życiem –¹⁹

It seems that the last of the above-mentioned aspects of martyrdom that could be called "ordinary martyrdom," is Norwid's especially valuable new concept, an original idea in the context of romantic understanding. Presenting heroism as faithfulness to noble ideas in spite of adversity, Norwid connects it with common human experience and opens up the perspective of available martyrdom to each man or woman who is not in a position to perform heroic deeds or devote his life to an abstract cause. Thus Norwid makes heroism more mundane, yet without any detriment to its value.

In nineteenth-century Poland the same goal, to give testimony to truth, required an entirely different strategy than one used by Socrates. It involved rejecting consent to slavery that corrupts and exterminates nations, and leads to their demise literally and metaphorically. It involved living.

Among the many fictional and authentic protagonists of Norwid's works who represent the poet's view we can find Jan Gajewski, an émigré of noble birth and an engineer and employee of the Southern French Railway Company who, together with several workers, tragically died in Manchester in 1858 as the result of a steam kettle explosion during a factory test.²⁰ Gajewski's death was both tragic and prosaic. It can be surmised that many people died in similar circumstances in the rapidly modernizing Europe in the "age of steam and iron." Such a perception of Gajewski's death seems to have prevailed: like many others, it was merely a fatal accident deprived of any deeper sense. In such an interpretation Gajewski's death is neither a sign nor "writing"—nor does it deserve to be read because it can be totally explained in the context of an ordinary course of events.

However, Norwid's perspective is different. In the poem "On the Death of Jan Gajewski" (Na zgon śp. Jana Gajewskiego), the poet perceives in the circumstances of the engineer's death a symbolic completion of what determined the value of his life, the situation when "life still takes advantage of death." Gajewski dies working together with the simple workmen, just as he worked with them during his life, thus contributing to the progress of civilization. The of his death reveal circumstances the significance of Gajewski's life. It is his participation in the strenuous process of developing all of humanity, as well as- and this emphasis is very strong in the poem-aiming at overcoming class divisions, advancing the attitude of social solidarity. That is why in Norwid's poem the metaphorical "banner of brotherhood" flutters over Gajewski's death, the banner of the cause of which he turned out to be the martvr. The acceptance of Norwid's perspective allows for idealizing and sacralization of Gajewski's death. When the protagonist's death is juxtaposed with the martyrdom of John the Evangelist who, according to a medieval legend allegedly "died from a cauldron"-thrown into a tub of boiling oil. An echo of the Promethean myth also appears here, since Gajewski's sacrifice and solidarity with simple laborers pays for the "fire of progress" "stolen" by means of human thought.

All the poems discussed above touch on the problem of "reading," or deciphering, the meaning of death. Norwid uses the motif of the unread writing of death (*Quidam*) first for polemical purposes. Reinterpreting the patterns of death fixed in history and placing them in appropriate contexts (in "Death," "What have you done to Athens, Socrates," "On History," and "To A. T."), Norwid opposes the fascination with death so characteristic of Polish Romanticism and related to the call to shed

blood for the fatherland. He criticizes thoughtlessness and prematurity of actions that often lead to tragic effects. On the other hand, in making an effort to read the unnoticed, silent, and forgotten deaths ("To Walenty Pomian Z." and "On the Death of Jan Gajewski"), Norwid brings out their symbolic meanings and their hidden but significant and valuable subtexts. Both these ways of "reading" death, the polemic and the postulative, demonstrate the originality of Norwid's reflection in the context of Romanticism and emphasize his uniqueness as a Polish poet-thinker. Δ

(Endnotes on Page 1793)

Carpe diem

Jan Twardowski

Love while we can people are soon gone leaving empty shoes and unanswered phones only the trivial drags its bovine hooves what's important happens so fast it catches us out the ensuing silence so normal it's unbearable like innocence born of sheer confusion thinking of someone who's left us Don't be sure you've time, for unfounded certainty Robs us of our awareness just as all happiness Comes at once like pathos and humour

Like two passions always weaker than one Fleeting as a thrush's song in July Like a slightly harsh sound or a stiff bow In order to see aright eyes are closed Though being born is a greater risk than dying Yet we still love too little and always too late Don't write of this too many times rather write it once and for all And you'll be gentle yet strong like a dolphin Love while we can people are soon gone And those who don't go don't always return

And speaking of love you never know Whether the first is the last or the last is the first

Translated by Patrick Corness

Intermarium The Land Between the Black and Baltic Seas

By Marek Jan Chodakiewicz. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2012. vi + 568 pages. Index, bibliography. ISBN 978-1-4128-4774-2. Hardcover. \$59.95.

Karl A. Roider

n 1962 Oscar Halecki published a book entitled Limits and Divisions of European In this work he divided Europe History. geographically into four zones: Western Europe, which comprised Britain, France, Netherlands, Spain, Portugal; West Central Europe, which consisted of Italy and Germany; East Central Europe, made up of Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, the Baltic States, and Slovakia; and Eastern Europe, which comprised the Ukraine and Belarus. Everything east of that was Asiatic barbarism. Chodakiewicz's work is reminiscent of that book. For Chodakiewicz the Internarium includes the Baltic States, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova. It is hard to pick out the primary theme of the book-there are manybut one of them is that the struggle for the soul of the Intermarium is between the Polish model, prosperity, which represents tolerance. parliamentary democracy, intellectual achievement, and freedom, and the Russian model. which represents totalitarianism. corruption, cronvism, atheism, and moral relativism.

Chodakiewicz declares early on that the audience his book seeks to capture is an American one, particularly Americans who can influence foreign policy. He wants Americans to be more aware of Polish history as part of Western civilization, and voices the old complaint that America did not do enough to assist Poland in resisting communism between 1945 and 1989. But the book demands that the reader know a good deal about Polish and Eastern European history. The author mentions a number of historical events, organizations, and movements without explaining what they were; he assumes that the reader will know. The *Tak wiele miejsc* so many smiling faces *Tyle uśmiechniętych twarzy*

I remember

pamiętam so many students tak wielu uczniów so many smiling faces Tyle uśmiechniętych twarzy

I came searching for my Grandfather *Przyszedlem szukać mojego dziadka* I came searching for my past *Przyszedlem szukać mojej przeszłości* I found my future in you *Znalazłem moją przyszłość w Tobie*

What a wonderful discovery! *Co za wspaniałe odkrycie!*

I sit in my library Siedzę w mojej bibliotece this cold winter day W ten zimny zimowy dzień sun low on the horizon Niskie słońce na horyzoncie

I remember pamiętam Because of you Dzięki Tobie I remember Białystok! Pamiętam Białystok! Not my Grandfather's Białystok... Nie Białystok dziadka... But... My Białystok! Ale... Mój Białystok!

(Continued from Page 1776)

NOTES

¹ Translated by Charles Kraszewski in "Norwid's 'Quidam' as heroic literature," *Polish Review 36*, no. 3 (1991): 317–18.

² Cyprian Norwid, *Pisma wszystkie*, vol. 3, ed. Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki, 212 (Warsaw: PIW, 1971).

³ Maria Cieśla-Korytowska, *O romantycznym poznaniu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997), p. 116.

⁴ Norwid, vol. 3, 212.

⁵ Unless stated otherwise, fragments of Norwid's poems are given in Agnieszka Mizera's translation.

⁶ Stefan Sawicki "O "Śmierci" Cypriana Norwida," in Norwida walka z formą (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1986), 83–92; Agata Brajerska-Mazur, "O przekładzie na język angielski wierszy Norwida 'Śmierć,' 'Do Zeszłej,' 'Finis'," Pamiętnik Literacki 97, no. 4 (2006): 230–32.

⁷ The translations by Brajerska-Mazur were done especially for this article.

⁸ Norwid, vol. 1, 116.

⁹ Danuta Borchardt *Cyprian Norwid: Poems.* Translated in collaboration with A. Brajerska-Mazur (New York: Archipelago Books, 2011), 105.

¹⁰ Norwid, vol. 1, 236.

¹¹ To date the problem of martyrdom in Norwid has been studied most extensively by Beata Wołoszyn in *Norwid ocala. Heroizm, śmierć i zmartwychwstanie w twórczości postromantyka* (Kraków: Collegium Columbinum, 2008) and Jacek Salij, "*Problem męczeństwa u Norwida*," in *Norwid a chrześcijaństwo*, eds. Józef Fert and Piotr Chlebowski, 31–51 (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2002).

- ¹⁵ Translated by A. Brajerska-Mazur.
- ¹⁶ Norwid, vol. 1, 164.
- ¹⁷ Translated by A. Brajerska-Mazur.

¹⁸ I use Stefan Sawicki's redaction of Norwid's poem "Dla czego Sokrat nie uszedł z więzienia" in the chapter titled "Czy Norwid sławił mistrza Andrzeja? O wierszu 'Do A.T.'," in Wartość – sacrum – Norwid 2. Studia i szkice aksjologiczno-literackie (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2006, 231); it is significantly different from the one presented in Pisma wszystkie edited by Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki (Cyprian Norwid, vol. 3, 519). In the subsequent part of my essay I also use Sawicki's interpretative findings. ¹⁹ Norwid, vol. 2, 156.

²⁰ Juliusz W. Gomulicki, "Dodatek krytyczny," in C. Norwid, *Dzieła zebrane*, vol. 2, ed. Juliusz W. Gomulicki (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1966), 340.

¹² Norwid, vol. 1, 165.

 $^{^{13}}_{14}$ My annotation – ŁN.

¹⁴ Norwid, vol. 1, 164.