

Zofia Stefanowska

Norwid's Romanticism

Literary Studies in Poland 18, 69-89

1987

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Zofia Stefanowska

Norwid's Romanticism*

Most of Cyprian Norwid's portraits show a man at an advanced age. Pantaleon Szyndler painted a majestically-looking bearded old man when he portrayed the poet shortly before Norwid's death. Indeed, Norwid depicted himself in a similar way when he described an incident during the 1870 siege of Paris, "Deaf, ill, despondent, lost in thoughts, I walked, notebook and pencil in hand, into some corner, and somebody cried 'espion prussien'."¹ When thinking of Norwid one is therefore induced to envision him precisely in this way, that is, as an old man lost in a big busy city.

But when he died at St. Casimir's Home in Paris Norwid was not yet 62. Today, he would not even have reached retirement age. When he was put up in that poor-house he was only 55. Even considering the longer life expectancy now and prolonged average periods of professional activity by modern standards, it is really striking that Norwid grew old extraordinarily early, certainly before his time. One acquaintance of his who had known Norwid from Warsaw said about the poet who was then thirty-odd years old, "He is a sorry ruin of what he used to be—his old pride, his self-assurance having crumbled under his misfortunes and toil."²

* The original Polish version of this article appeared in *Pamiętnik Literacki*, 1968, fasc. 4.

¹ Letter to L. Mierosławski, [in:] *Wszystkie pisma po dziś w całości lub fragmentach odszukane*, ed. by Z. Przesmycki, Warszawa 1937–1939 (henceforward WP), vol. 9, p. 230.

² J. B. Dziekoński in letter dated March 5, 1855, quoted by P. Wilkońska in her memoirs, *Moje wspomnienia o życiu towarzyskim w Warszawie*, Warszawa 1959, p. 319.

“Ruin” was a word which came to be used more and more frequently about Norwid. Norwid himself used it as early as in 1853, when he wrote in a letter from America, “I am talking to you from a heap of ruins of my own self.”³ And after his return from America his verse and letters abound in confessions indicative of a sense of frustration, and awareness of his own anachronism, of his failure to find bearings in the new times and among the new people, a sense of belonging to a time which had passed.

But only a short time before Norwid had made a brilliant debut in Warsaw where, praised by critics and popular in society, he seemed to be in for a glamorous literary and artistic career. What happened that his brilliant youth was almost immediately followed by so early an ageing? Why was his initial success followed by such a tragic desolation? Why does Norwid’s biography contain no period of mature creativity—not for later generations but for his own contemporaries? Why did Norwid, the moment he stopped being a “promising” talent, immediately take on the role of a “has-been,” of someone who frustrated hopes and is a wreck? Why is his biography composed only of his youth and his old age? I am asking the question Norwid himself expressed in dramatic brevity: “Youth— are you grey-haired?” (“Tymczasem”— Meanwhile).

Different replies can be supplied to this question. Some facts from his own life may perhaps provide an answer—his disastrously misplaced love, his personal temperamental features, the overall political situation. Each possible answer will contain a grain of truth. But here I would like to raise a slightly different question—does his biography, composed as it is of a youth followed by old age, perhaps reveal a more general process?

Norwid’s literary youth creates basically no problems as far as classification is concerned. Now that we have Makowiecki’s and Szmydtowa’s studies and Przesmycki’s and Gomulicki’s commentaries, his place on the map of Polish poetry presents no problems at all. In his Warsaw days he was just one of a generation of young Romantics, a generation for whom memories of the 1830/31 November Insurgency were childhood memories and who made their debuts

³ “Pierwszy list, co mnie doszedł z Europy” (The First Letter to Reach Me from Europe). [in:] *Dziela zebrane*, ed. J. W. Gomulicki, Warszawa 1966 (henceforward DZ).

somewhere about 1840. Norwid was by all accounts the best of those who made their debuts then, but his verse of that time obviously reveals his affiliation with that generation of poets.

So, he embarked on his poetic career along with a whole group of writers who had their own program as well as a sense of their literary mission. I do not mean groups such as the *Bohème* or the *Enthusiasts*, for Norwid cannot possibly be regarded as their member. I mean the common program and pattern of poetic creation which brought together the entire "writing youth of Warsaw" at that time.

Norwid's earliest works, accordingly, reveal not only flashes of his original talent but also features common to all his generation. To recall them briefly— their poetry was unmistakably epigonic in character, a poetry which imitated situational and illustrative clichés of early pre-November (1830) Romanticism. It was from that early Romanticism that Norwid's generation borrowed their main motifs, say a poet's conflict with the world around him or the conflict of idea with reality. But the young Romantic generation of poets, although venerating their great predecessors, began—at first tentatively—to transform the inherited patterns to make them more suitable as expressions of their own problems. They did that by setting up new frames of reference, which were wedged between the inherited extremes as intermediary components, thereby weakening the conflict between those extremes and altering its character. One factor performing such an intermediary function is the call for action, for work, for doing something, which was expected to bring the hopelessly remote ideal closer. The call for action is endowed with different meanings, but it is often accompanied by patriotic allusions which imparts to that call to hammer the idea into a reality a dimension of a political program.

Another common feature of that poetry is its demonstrative fascination with folk and lore, an echo of early Romantic love of the countryside. It usually finds expression in an opposition between town and countryside, the latter being presented as a domain of authentic values— honest work, sincerity of heart, communion with Nature and with God— and also, of course, as an abode of national tradition and inspirations. This reveals a desire to rehabilitate the existing reality, the day-to-day life of common people. In the poetic techniques they

apply, poets of that generation reveal a latent desire to boost the significance of ordinary detail, which finds expression in what initially are low-profile attempts to enrich the traditional stock of literary symbols. The alien heartless world those Romantic individualists are standing up against is usually associated with urban life, in particular with the salons, which are excellent illustrations of all that is but illusion, mystification, or insincerity. Needless to say, the censorship at the time only helped that stylistic convention to take deep roots and checked the described process of transforming the young generation's poetic identity.

Some of the motifs briefly outlined above later came to recur frequently in Norwid's verse. For example, Norwid remained a lifelong admirer of Antoni Malczewski, who, as a poet his contemporaries failed to appreciate, played the role of patron saint for the latter generation of Romantics. Briefly, then, in his youth Norwid is far from being a unique and solitary figure; indeed, he fits neatly into a definite stage of development of Polish Romantic poetry.

His first significant rebellion against the older generation's authority came with his clash in Rome with Adam Mickiewicz, the then leader of what was called the Italian Legion of Poles. Norwid came forward with a declaration of his own ideological independence. "I have no choice but to tell a few words of truth to this great national celebrity despite his grey hair."⁴ However Norwid himself may have interpreted it, that particular episode can clearly be construed as evidence of a conflict between two contemporary political orientations—an internal conflict of Romantics, so to say. In his attitude Norwid was not standing alone, indeed his reaction can largely be explained by his being influenced by the "Resurrectionists" (*zmartwychwstańcy*, the Polish missionary order founded in Rome in 1842), and by ideological inspirations he drew from Zygmunt Krasiński and August Cieszkowski. The same holds for Norwid's critical remarks about Mickiewicz's messianic faith in Norwid's letters, political pamphlets and in his *Zwolon*.

Norwid's interpretation of Towiański's ideology as a kind of "mystical radicalism," "Communism", "Panslavism", or a "Synago-

⁴ Letter to J. Skrzynecki dated April 15, 1848—WP, vol. 8, p. 41.

gue” is essentially in line with Krasiński’s and Cieszkowski’s views.⁵ Commentators have demonstrated beyond doubt links with Cieszkowski’s philosophy and Krasiński’s influence not only in style but even in rhyme patterns in Norwid’s political columns of that time („Wigilia” – Christmas Eve, „Jeszcze słowo” – One More Word, „Pieśń społeczna” – Social Song of 1849, or in „Niewola” – Slavery which was published only in 1864). That was the kind of patronage under which Norwid began his émigré life. His statements then include calls echoing Cieszkowski’s to launch a critique of Hegel’s doctrine. Above all, there was the call for action (but not for mindless “Tatar” actions), for restoring the dignity of man (“to humanize philosophy”⁶), for a turn to reality, to down-to-earth life, to everyday practice. However, all those calls, which were virtually identical with those characterizing Polish national philosophy, in Norwid’s own writings become self-sustaining and begin to be connected with other matters and to perform new functions. While Cieszkowski took Hegel as his point of departure, Norwid started with a rebellion against Polish Romanticism, Mickiewicz’s Romanticism—and this particular process only strengthened as time went by. Characteristically, his critique of that brand of Romanticism was launched regardless of Norwid’s high esteem of Mickiewicz as a person and even of the great historical significance of Mickiewicz’s writings. The keywords of Norwid’s critique, namely “action,” “reality” and “man” are extremely ambiguous. In Polish minds they may evoke different contexts signalling opposition both to Hegel and to Romanticism in his own interpretation.

Remarkably enough, Norwid himself was to some extent aware of the inherent dual critical function of these keywords. In his “Letters on Emigration” of 1849 he embraced both German philosophy and “Poland’s mystical interpretation” (that is, Messianism) to submit them to the charge of historical fatalism saying,

German philosophy, having arranged the past in a logical sequence on the strength of its excessively critical spirit, stopped where it did, obliging the reader to do nothing save closing the book—“That is, it contends, how it all had

⁵ These expressions are used in the above-mentioned letter to Skrzynecki and also in a letter to J. B. Zalewski of April 24, 1848—WP, vol. 8, pp. 42–44.

⁶ “On Juliusz Słowacki,” WP, vol. 6, p. 143.

necessarily to be, and that is, too, how it necessarily came about." The mystical interpretation of Poland (in the mistaken approach), although it is fiercely opposed to rational criticism, nonetheless arrives at the same conclusions. That is why I keep saying it is erroneously or unsoundly conceived—and hence it obliges no one to anything. It is also out of date, as well as futile (PP, p. 25).

The brand of Romanticism Norwid opposes is not identical with what we today regard as Mickiewicz's idea and Mickiewicz's practice. Norwid lashes out at a Romanticism which is composed of Messianism along with a call for martyrdom (amounting to a violation of Providence), of national egocentricity and ignorance of universal human concerns,⁷ of contempt of individual human lives

⁷ Letter to W. Zamoyski of February 1864, WP, vol. 8, pp. 481 ff.: "All Poles have all along regarded, and still do, Mickiewicz as a national writer—the same Mickiewicz who was just an exclusive writer, but not a national one! Being a national writer does not make you an exclusive writer, it only indicates your ability to assimilate all that is necessary and indispensable for a progressive expansion of the nation's indigenous forces." At about the same time Norwid defined nation in the following way (in a letter to M. Sokołowski, WP, vol. 8, p. 480): "A nation is composed not only of a spirit, which is different from those of other nations, but also of what unites it with other nations." If you compare these two definitions, it is clear Norwid had in the meantime shifted the main emphasis somewhat from what distinguishes nations from one another to what they have in common. Indeed, in his writings during the Revolution of 1848 Norwid defended the autonomy of the nation as the proper subject of history, pitting his concept both against Hegliism and utopian socialism on the one hand and against Mickiewicz's Messianism on the other. Norwid accused Hegliism (as did representatives of nationalist philosophy) that nations that "live, suffer, feel" are superseded in that doctrine by an abstract idea of mankind ("Rasa, naród, ludzkość i życie"—Race, Nation, Mankind and Life, [in:] *Pisma polityczne i filozoficzne* [referred to as PP], compiled by Z. Przesmycki (Miriam), ed. by Z. Zaniewski, London 1957, pp. 35 and 39). "And that is why ignoring time—that is, dismissing the nation in favor of plunging oneself into Mankind's ultimate destiny—is tantamount to preaching German philosophy or doctrinairism, or perhaps a madness becoming Frenchmen alone." Interestingly, Norwid deemed this particular historiosophical principle as fit to apply to as an argument against Messianism. Towiański's following, according to Norwid (letter to Skrzynecki, WP, vol. 8, p. 42), "mistake the nation for the tribe," but, as he wrote in the treatise on race, nation and mankind (PP, pp. 39 ff.), "the tribe (from the moral point of view) is a rejection, a separation, a negation—[...] it is because it differs from others, but it cannot carry an unifying force under a threat of capital punishment." In later years, his charge against Mickiewicz of "exclusiveness" In later years, his charge against Mickiewicz of "exclusiveness" gradually lost its historiosophical justification in favor of a social and civilizational one.

and refutation of the continuity of existence of an enslaved nation, of a remoteness from reality and from the present, of a one-sided spiritualism along with contempt for the human body, for shapes, for matter. Whatever one may think about these particular charges against Romanticism, they no doubt must have rung a bell in readers' minds at that time.

Opposition to Mickiewicz is a starting-point for unfolding a positive program both ideological and literary. It is remarkable that Norwid tended to regard Polish Romanticism as a closed and finished epoch, and therefore placed his own person and his program outside the domain of Romanticism. This feeling of being alien to Romanticism can be clearly seen in his 1848 description of the state of Polish literature in his foreword to "Slavery," when Norwid said.

Since the notorious clash between so-called Romantics and so-called Classicists, or, more properly perhaps at that time, between inspiration and formalism, Polish literature at home moved closer to the common people, producing collectors of legends, proverbs and customs; one would think it noticed something like a living Pompei beneath the feet of freely roaming people. But abroad, the same literature focused its attention on the human spirit, scrutinizing its strange interior, thus engendering a philosophy; but surrounded by societies which, shaken in their very foundations were asking the most vital questions, it withdrew into mysticism and became silent, like its sister at home, which had picked all pearls it could find among the common people. But now, after that spiritual, antiformalistic experience, I am sure this literature will embark on an active course of conduct.⁸

He further said,

So, if Polish literature is to go on forward and not to grind to a halt due to a surfeit of its inherited one-sidedness before degenerating into mannerism, [...] if it is to enter stage two (on the brink of which it is standing today), namely the stage of literature-as-action, it must immediately revise the overall shape of the obligatory heritage (PZ, vol. A, p. 225).

Norwid is even more outspoken in his program in his note to *Promethidion* where he says, "I have come to the conclusion that a sense of harmony of substance and form of life will be the foundation of art in our nation," adding that Classicism stands for form and Romanticism for substance (PZ, vol. A, p. 168).

This suggests something like a triadic view of literary develop-

⁸ *Pisma wybrane*, ed. Z. Przesmycki, Warszawa 1911 (henceforward PZ), vol. A, pp. 223–224.

ment—from a thesis, in this case Classicism, or form, *via* negation, or Romanticism, or substance, to a “harmony of substance and form,” or synthesis. Synthesis, of course, was another fundamental keyword of programs developed at that time.

This particular view of Polish Romanticism, which in 1851 was seen as the struggle of Classicists with Romantics, seems rather outdated. A long time before that Mickiewicz wrote to Kajsiwicz.

At any rate, let me warn you to cancel in your foreword whatever smacks of the struggle of Classicists with Romantics, Osiński etc., for all such things are trifles and past their time—dead and buried.⁹

But it must be pointed out that Mickiewicz, of all people, had a scope which enabled him to take such a historical distance towards events in which he acted as a protagonist. When Norwid took up the motif of Classicists vs. Romantics as the determining feature of the situation in which his own generation found itself, he acted the way all his generation would have acted, for that particular direction of seeking their own identity appeared perfectly natural to them.

It is thus no coincidence that the concept of Romanticism as a reaction to Classicism is voiced by Norwid. This concept reflects the poet's desire to view Romanticism as something alien to him—an approach to Romanticism which places it not in the present but in the past. It is remarkable that this endeavour to go beyond Romanticism is accompanied by an attempt to reach over the heads of the great Romantic fathers to the heritage of Classicist grandfathers. This particular call, even if it had no significant effect on Norwid's own poetry, was all the same significant for his literary program. But I think (although this is not the place to show that) it did have an effect on Norwid's own poetry.

A next major motif in the above-mentioned foreword to “Slavery” is the belief that something had irrevocably come to an end in Polish literature, which, unless it wanted to slip into futility, mannerisms or epigonism, had to take a new road. But that thought was accompanied by an awareness of how difficult it was to say exactly which road should be taken to rejuvenate Polish literature—if

⁹ Letter dated October 31, 1835, [in:] *Dziela*, vol. 15, Warszawa 1955, pp. 150 ff.

a marriage of Classicism with Romanticism was expected to produce such an effect.

But the foreword to "Slavery" is not the only presentation of a new poetic program or the only manifesto of a new school. Indeed, Norwid can be said to have published such manifestoes several times in his career. *Promethidion* (1851), the treatise "O sztuce (dla Polaków)" (On Art for Poles, 1858), his lectures "On Juliusz Słowacki" (1861), as well as an avowedly program-setting text which did not reach his contemporaries, namely his foreword to *Vade-mecum* (1865), can all be viewed as manifestoes of his program. The last-named of these titles is a manifesto in the foreword and in the book alike, intended as it is to induce "a turnabout the Polish literature so badly needs."¹⁰ apart from the call made in the very title, which means "Go with me" reader, go with me, Polish poetry.

All those manifestoes are in one way or another critiques of Romanticism, all of them insist on overcoming its intrinsic antinomies. In *Promethidion*, Norwid entrusts this role to the fine arts. The fine arts, Norwid argues, represent shapes, embodiments, concrete details, and this is why they should bring about a synthesis of ideas (which are "phantom-like thoughts about thinking"—PZ, vol. A, p. 146) with real life. Setting up a link between creative arts and human labor, and imparting a creative dimension to labor itself, is to overcome the Romantic opposition between artist and audience, because thereby the artist would assume the role of the audience while the audience would take on the artist's role ("hence a listener and a spectator is an artist, but one of them is the protagonist, while the other is just a chorus-singer; but that chorus-singer will be a protagonist in another opera"—PZ, vol. A, p. 141). The arts are to perform various mediating functions—between man's earthly existence and his Divine calling, between intellectual endeavor and manual labor, between a specific national culture (as manifest in folklore) and a universal culture of mankind. The arts are to be an element integrating whole civilization, which "nowadays is [...] a rift between soul and body, that is, death" (PZ, vol. A, p. 178).

So, in contrast to Romantic aesthetic theories, the arts are being brought down to earth and linked up with artisanship and

¹⁰ Letter to K. Ruprecht of November 1868. WP, vol. 9, p. 146.

industrial manufacture. But the arts in that concept are simultaneously elevated—in a typically Romantic fashion—as an absolute supreme value independent of everything else and free of any obligation to teach or delight (“neither entertainment nor instruction”—PZ, vol. A, p. 150). But the urgent call for practical action in *Promethidion* makes only sense in an eschatologically interpreted human history and amounts in fact to a program for restoring to human labor its expiatory function.

Although these remarks refer to *Promethidion*, this question has a broader validity. It is actually the most fundamental feature of Norwid’s philosophical reflections—the tension between the practical real-world orientation of his views on the arts, on society, on civilization, and the symbolic significance imparted to practical action in the Romantic system of historiosophy. Norwid continually tried to go beyond Romanticism but never actually did. Here are a few examples.

Norwid depicted his heroes in deliberate opposition to the model of Romantic individualism; he made them deliberately nameless, each of them just one among many, an everyman, a *quidam*, an X. But Norwid unfolded his heroes’ stories in a fashion which moved him inexorably towards what was typically a Romantic conflict with society.

Norwid’s insistence on sober thinking, on practical action, on modernizing Polish life-styles, was in its formulations often convergent with Positivist programs for engagement in public life. But at the same time he subordinated this call to an eschatologically-interpreted history, which rendered this call liable to interpretation both as a program for reform and as an injunction to seek a total renewal of man.¹¹

¹¹ This particular attitude of Norwid is typically reflected in his poem “Praca” (Labor, 1864), in which Norwid joins in a polemic against L. Powidaj’s article “Poles and Indians,” which won some renown as one of the first manifestoes (1864) of “work at foundations.” Norwid ironically remarks, “You are telling a nation put down completely how it can grow rich very quickly.” He contrasts that particular vision of labor with a paraphrase of a verse from Genesis 3, 10, “in the sweat of thy face shalt thou toil.” The essential meaning of work is its effect of expiation: “A voice is telling you in your heart, ‘I forfeited Eden!’” Echoes Powidaj’s article caused, among them Norwid’s poem, are discussed in detail by S. Sandler, *Indiańska przygoda Henryka Sienkiewicza (H.S.’s Indian Adventure)*, Warszawa 1967.

Norwid had a sensitive ear to current events, always anxious to keep in touch with what was going on around him at the moment. At the same time, however, he inevitably deprived the present of its current dimension by putting it in a typically Romantic "perpetual" historicophilosophical perspective.

Norwid was strongly oriented towards commonness, towards everyday life. But at the same time he presented everyday life in a way which showed that "there is a lot of out of the ordinary things among the ordinary" "Do mego brata Ludwika"—To My Brother Ludwik). He had a knack for what can be called a "cult of concreteness," a "care for details," while at the same time constantly cancelling the concreteness of concrete things, the essence of individual details, by discerning in them some more supreme meanings, by engaging in symbolizing and generalizing reflections.

Despite his declared anti-Romantic commitment to overcome the opposition between ideals and real life, he actually lapsed into what was a spiritualization of real life. Indeed, that was a foregone conclusion for Norwid, since the very starting-point for his planned synthesis—namely his acceptance of Romantic antinomies—was in itself Romantic. After all, his attempt to overcome these antinomies implied a belief in their validity; it was tantamount to recognizing Romantic motifs as authentic questions. Norwid kept asking himself Romantic questions and tried to find new and better answers to those questions. However, his answers could never really be new answers, for the Romantic set of questions itself channelled his intellectual quest in this particular direction.¹²

It is not true, as one might surmise, that Norwid's dilemma boiled down to the fact that, as a religious person, he was preconditioned to construe the world and human history as a series of signs drawn in the hand of the Everlasting. Many Positivist Polish writers were religious persons in their private lives. But

¹² WP vol. 8, pp. 203 ff.: "In a word, protest makes sense only when you are standing on the same ground as your adversary—that's a commonplace truth. Elevate yourself higher than your adversary, and then you won't need to protest—but elevating yourself above him means precisely saying 'Yes', and not 'No'," Norwid wrote in 1856. In reference to that profound observation, one can say that Norwid was standing on the same ground as the Romantics, and that is why he said "No".

Norwid's religiousness was different from theirs, it was Romantic in character. Romantic religiousness could not be suppressed to exist only in private life; expansive and possessive, it claimed all areas of reflection on the world—ranging from politics to railroad development, from the arts to *faits divers* columns in newspapers. That particular type of religiousness, which sought a totally divinized vision of the world, was perhaps the most deeply Romantic feature of Norwid's, although it should be made clear here that he remained within the bounds of orthodoxy and his own religious beliefs changed little or not at all. His religiousness is more static, so to say, than that of the great Romantics of the previous generation, who constantly leaned towards heterodoxy.

Just what kind of man was Norwid, if he so outspokenly stood up against what he considered to be the essence of Polish Romanticism but what was actually his own interpretation of the works of the three greatest Romantics (Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Krasiński), above all of Mickiewicz? To judge by the frame of his mind, he was, in a way, anti-Romantic—a continuator through rejection. But his rejection always stopped short at some point or another, while his opposition to Romanticism inexorably drifted towards a Romantic view of the world.

So, just who was Norwid? What place should he be accorded in 19th-century literature?

He was a Romantic, but of a different make than his great predecessors. If he does not easily slip into the common model of Polish Romantic poetry, it is not because he is a bad Romantic but because the model of Polish Romanticism is bad. Instead of classing Norwid outside any of the adopted epochs of literary development, we should expand our view of Romanticism so as to embrace Norwid too. A literary context must be found in which he will cease being a solitary phenomenon and will prove to have been a spokesman of some more comprehensive tendency. For the case of Norwid, I think the most suitable such context is provided by the second generation of Polish Romantics, the same generation who made their debuts simultaneously with him and with whom he shared a common program during his Warsaw years.

It was to that generation that Norwid addressed his manifestoes, it was to them that he called out "Go with me." It was for that

generation that he spoke to émigrés, it was as a spokesman of that generation that he initiated "a new art in Poland." Norwid, who penned articles about "the latest generation of émigrés," developed a strong sense of community with his own generation.¹³

If so, then why did Norwid's program for a new poetry fail to become the program of his generation?

First it should be pointed out that Norwid's generation was treated extremely cruelly by history. Arrests, bannings into exile, premature deaths, frustration following the Spring of Nations, miserable life in exile, terror at home—all these contributed to the physical destruction of that potential "new wave" of Polish Romanticism.

Just imagine—of my friends, pals, mates and what you call them from my Warsaw period twenty or so have died since then. I could easily mention twenty names in a breath of people who are buried, live in remotest corners of the world, live as exiles in Siberia. As to those who survived that sweeping flood—good Lord, maybe it would have been better for them to have died,

wrote Bogdan Dziekoński shortly before his own death in 1855.¹⁴

But although that generation's fate explains a lot, it does not explain all. If there were possibilities for Polish Romanticism to develop freely—and Norwid himself is best evidence of such a potential—then why did those of his peers who continued to write fail to live up to their possibilities? Why did they lapse into secondariness, why did they emulate worn-out patterns, why did they waste their talents in futile epigonism?

That was a singular moment in history. The ideas Polish Romantic poetry used to draw its strength from exhausted themselves during the Revolution of 1848. It is true that years later the January Insurgency of 1863 restored the topical character of those ideas, but that was no more than a remote echo of the once brilliant heritage. The great topics of poetry of the three great poets lost their rationale after 1848. But at the same time, the authority of that poetry, its significance in the enslaved nation's life were incomparably more

¹³ This matter was pointed out and supported with evidence by Z. Trojanowicz, *Rzecz o młodości Norwida (On the N.'s Youth)*, Poznań 1968, who also pointed out certain similarities between Norwid's earliest verse and that of his contemporary poets.

¹⁴ In a letter quoted by Wilkońska, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

powerful than the possible impact any literary school could have had. To live up to that authority meant living up to the code of conduct of Polish patriotism, to the very foundation of Poland's existence as a nation. That was no good time for fighting that particular tradition.

To be a patriot without following in Mickiewicz's footsteps was a formidable challenge indeed. It meant taking a different angle to look at the nation, to become aware of facets of the Polish question Mickiewicz failed to notice. Even more, that meant overcoming that propensity to absolutize the nation which had formed Mickiewicz's vision of the world. It was only the fall of the January Insurgency that gave an impulse for such a fundamental painful revision. The period between 1848 and the January Insurgency—from this vantage point—was a blank spot in Polish history. Poland's history during those years itself was epigonic in character and nourished an epigonic kind of poetry.

So, why did Norwid, a spokesman of a non-existent generation of Polish Romantics, manage—occasionally—to prevail in his struggle against a danger of epigonism, against the ever-present impact of the great tradition (a fact, incidentally, he was perfectly aware of)?

There is of course no answer to this question, for whatever you might say about genius or talent, about originality or unconventional intellect, you are bound to end up asking one question in the stead of another. Norwid's success was no doubt a partial one, and his desire for poetic autonomy always carried the risk of lapsing into eccentric idiom. It looks as if he constantly feared to lapse into epigonism, and realizing that he had to be original at any price he now and then fell into eccentricity.

If there is no answer to the question of why Norwid managed to be a different brand of Romantic than his great predecessors, then perhaps there is an answer to the question of how did Norwid's own Romanticism differ from the Romanticism of Mickiewicz? A great deal has been written and established about this. Let me point out several differences. From what has been said above it follows that those were no differences in poetic idiom. What I have in mind is a novel approach adopted by Norwid which accounts for his view of the Polish question, of his contemporary history,

of the Polish poet's true role, differing from those implied by Mickiewicz's Romanticism.

Norwid was that Polish Romantic who managed to shed the haunting *szlachta* (gentry) problem, all the dilemmas the preceding generation of poets found so difficult to answer. What part did the *szlachta* have to play in the struggle for national liberation? What mission does it have in Poland's national life? What place does it hold in a future independent Poland? None of these questions ever appear in Norwid's texts. (Later I will point out some departures from that particular attitude and some consequences of it.)

Norwid regards the *szlachta* as something anachronistic and exotic, and the only problem was no longer what place it could have in the future but what hold the *szlachta* mentality still had of Polish minds at that time. Norwid proved to be an acute critic of the *szlachta* mentality as a model of backwardness, of an out-of-date mode of thinking. In his fight against Polish parochialism he displays a democratic frame of mind not in the political but in the socio-historical sense of the term.

Let me cite one example. In a letter to Zofia Radwanowa written in 1868, Norwid recounts the story of two noblemen's "sacred brotherhood." This is what he said,

When I was in Northern America, I met two noblemen, formerly army captains, each wearing large moustaches. They made a democratic deal to live together in a sacred brotherhood, so that while one would be working downtown the other would cook him his lunch. Both knew a lot about cooking but both—the whiff of America's democratic air notwithstanding—were *szlachta* at heart, after all. So after they made their brotherly deal and took cordially leave of each other, one captain went out to town, while the other took to cooking lunch, rejoicing at the thought of their mutual household alliance becoming fact soon. [...] So at a proper hour the other comes home and sees the table ready. He sits down, while his brother, the other captain, serves the soup... The one behind the plate no sooner touches the soup with his spoon and tastes it then he turns to his pal saying "What's that? Isn't it burned a bit?" Upon which the captain-cook slaps the other in the cheek... and that was how the first and last common lunch of those two gentlemen ended. Living at the other end of the world, they were unable to forget each of them the once had a cook of his own. This is difficult to render in words, it would be easier to show it on stage. Here is how quickly it all was done, how excellently prepared and with great mutual sentiment:

[here comes a drawing in the letter with the following caption:]

burnt? the other slaps his head—and that's how their mutual brotherhood came to an end (WP, vol. 9, pp. 113–114).

Suppose Mickiewicz would have written this anecdote, as he by all means could. The story about the two *émigrés*' quarrel could be included, for example, in the article on "Quarrels among Our Emigrés," where Mickiewicz recounted another anecdote. It could have been included in that article, but its form and message would have been different. Mickiewicz had a sharp eye for *szlachta* customs, but he watched *szlachta* men and criticized them from inside as a man who regarded himself as one of the *szlachta* and sharing the ideas and habits of his social group, which, while it no longer had anything in common with the gentry's style of life, still cherished a strong sense of affiliation to Poland's *szlachta* traditions. That found expression not only in abiding by a *szlachta* attitude but also, and perhaps more vocally, in the struggle for transforming, for redeeming the Polish *szlachta*. And I do not mean just outward manifestations of this desire, such as polemics against the Sarmatian tradition or the commitment to the abolition of serfdom.

For *émigrés* who left Poland after the November Insurgency, the *szlachta*'s historical role, its share of responsibility for the fall of the Polish statehood and of the insurgency itself, its place in a future new Poland and in a new Europe were all pivotal questions. This problem united left-wing and right-wing *émigrés* in their fierce polemics with each other. All *émigrés* were experiencing this as their own personal problem, as the question about their own place in a future Poland. In this sense, not only champions of the tradition or liberals from the Hotel Lambert group belonged in the *szlachta*, but also democratically-minded *émigrés*, who remained so even in their most ferocious attacks against the *szlachta*. The same is true, in a sense, of members of Polish People's Groups (Gromady Ludu Polskiego), for they were entirely absorbed in the same questions and envisaged a future Poland in the aspect of the same conflicts, so that the question of patriotic forces and liberation possibilities amounted in their view to the same peasant–*szlachta* dilemma.

I suppose that had Mickiewicz described the quarrel between the two *szlachta* men, he would have linked the story to the *szlachta*'s own self-image as being cantankerous but able to unite in the face

of enemies. That particular self-awareness was very important for a generation which experienced dramatically the sin of its own *szlachta* character and was unable to abandon its hope for an inner transformation, for a patriotic redemption of the *szlachta*'s sins. A quarrel lends itself easily to humorous descriptions, but was the utopian idea of a "sacred brotherhood" and its quick fall really liable to a detached ironical treatment? This story about two *szlachta* men in emigration, who are already remote from the gentry's life style and filled with ideas about equality, but carry with them their old habits to the New World and destroy their union as they cannot forget they once had their own cooks—this story is just too acute a presentation of the particular *szlachta* mentality to be rendered by someone who was himself free of such habits or hopes.

Norwid's anecdote about the two *szlachta* men is not the only such story in his writings. Suffice it to mention another similar story about "one *szlachta* man, a very respectable citizen and good neighbor, as well as good patriot," who said, "hand me a book, any book in your reach, for I'm retiring to take a nap in the garden." In the same passage of his „Pamiętnik podróznego” (Traveller's Diary, 1857), Norwid tells his encounter in Paris with one "descendant of that citizen" in the following manner:

I do like music (he tells me). I like music, so when I'm back from the fields and a servant pulls off my boots, I like sitting back musingly and keep my feet in water listening to my wife playing Chopin on the piano...! I also used to like painting, before I got married (WP, vol. 5, pp. 69-70).

His letters are the most abundant source of information on his attitude towards the *szlachta* question—ranging from malicious remarks about "a community resting on their sabers and deeply asleep in this position,"¹⁵ through that "comical sauerkraut-based patriotism,"¹⁶ to his campaign for a modernization of Polish society he launched in his correspondence at the time of the January Insurgency.

Norwid's critical remarks about the *szlachta* are not necessarily political in character. It is primarily a critique of a specific cultural formation in which deeply entrenched serfdom-determined patterns

¹⁵ In a letter to J. B. Zaleski dated May 10, 1851, WP, vol. 8, p. 88.

¹⁶ In a letter to W. Bentkowski of May 1857, WP, vol. 8, p. 252.

of thinking turn out to prevail eventually over the “peasant question” (about which Norwid wrote in 1865 that it was “in a sense, resolved now”¹⁷), and keep weighing heavily on different areas of public life.

Norwid’s remarks betray a certain ironical distance, something only a person who has shed the specific mode of thinking about the *szlachta*-and-peasant nation can afford, a person who is neither defending himself nor repenting for sins of his own social class, a person who is not involved in the conflict and only stands by watching it from outside. Emigrés of the preceding generation sometimes took entirely different views of the *szlachta*’s role and of its place in the future liberated nation, yet both those on the left and those on the right remained deeply rooted in the same social formation, being incapable of moving outside it and take a bystander’s look at it. You can say that for post-November Romantics the *szlachta* was primarily a historicophilosophical and political category, while for Norwid it was no more than a sociological category.

But this is not true of the period of the 1848 Revolution, when Norwid, involved in political disputes among Polish émigrés, defended the historical role of “Polish clans” and *szlachta*’s ownership of land in his “Social Song” and “Slavery.” As late as in 1852, after his relations with Hotel Lambert group cooled down a bit, he addressed Władysław Zamoyski in words of homage and confidence in the *szlachta*’s historical mission (“This is how I envisage the future of all Polish *szlachta*”¹⁸). That faith of Norwid also flares up later, when in his “Sariusz” (1862) he proclaims the appearance—in person of Andrzej Zamoyski—of a Polish *szlachta* representative whose existence was denied by Słowacki in his *Odpowiedź na psalmy przyszłości* (*Reply to Future’s Psalms*). Two years later, when he published his early “Slavery,” Norwid was assuming the role of defender of the *szlachta* tradition.

So Norwid used to be (and perhaps was now and then) a participant in the Romantics’ debate over the *szlachta* dilemma. His writings are also pervaded by this particular line of thinking. It looks as

¹⁷ In the foreword to *Vade-mecum*, DZ, vol. 1, p. 538.

¹⁸ C. Norwid, “Salem,” [in:] *Reszta wierszy odszukanych po dziś, a dotąd nie drukowanych*, ed. by Z. Przesmycki, Warszawa 1933, p. 21.

though the two attitudes—that of the defender of the *szlachta*'s tradition and of its outside critic—coexisted or competed with each other in his writings. As early as at the time of the 1848 Revolution — in the “Social Song,” “Slavery,” as well as in his “Memoriał o młodej emigracji” (Memorial on the Latest Wave of Emigration) — Norwid tended to present the *szlachta* as a class of landowners. That tendency to regard the *szlachta* from a sociological point of view grew stronger in later years, and the *szlachta* dilemma actually turned out to have played no major role in his philosophy of history.

Norwid was also a poet of cities. This is meant not only to say that he often made cities a topic of his poetic reflections, that he wrote “Larwa” (The Larva), “Stolica” (The Capital), “Grzecność” (Courtesy) or described that *café chantant* in the Prologue to the play *Za kulisami* (*Behind the Scene*), to mention but a few examples. What is more important than the topic of his literary productions is that Norwid unfolded a vision of an urbanized world in his writings.

For Mickiewicz, the big cities his vicissitudes brought him to—Petersburg, Moscow, Paris—were always places of exile, a Babylon, a rather exotic milieu for human beings. Provincial village was probably the most indigenous natural environment for man in Mickiewicz's eyes throughout his lifetime.

But with Norwid the situation is different—you live in town, and you go to the countryside (or else to health resorts). The town is a natural abode of human activity as well as a backdrop for poetic reflections. The countryside is something exotic and external, a recreational margin of normal life, the “realm of rest” immune to the course of history. Norwid dreamt of “one moment of rest on Polish grass,”¹⁹ and that is a dream to expect only from somebody who is deeply rooted in urban life, from a poet whose verse reverberates with the rattle of cobblestones of many European cities. Norwid discovered, in a sense, that towns are simply quite suitable for habitation.

In the *Dictionary of Adam Mickiewicz's Vocabulary*, the word “machine” is only once used in its strict sense of a manufacturing

¹⁹ In a letter to J. Koźmian of October 1852, WP, vol. 8, p. 134.

tool, namely in a letter of reference for a young émigré who “wanted to become an engineer of machines.”

Please tell me if it is possible to find shelter with some well-to-do manufacturer in London, that is, boarding, clothes and opportunities to learn, say at some mill making steam engines or arms or something like that. I am no good at defining an engineer’s wants, but perhaps you out there in that super-engineering and super-machining city are able to understand them better than I.²⁰

That was the only “machine” of Mickiewicz’s. It looks as though only an urgent need on the part of his émigré brother made the poet notice he was living amidst an industrial revolution.

How very different Norwid’s writings appear in this respect! His writings are full of mills, factory workers, steam and electricity, telegraphs and railways. This holds above all for his letters, but also in his verse you will come across a steam engine that killed a Jan Gajewski, there is a “rail car on the station” (in the poem “Rzecz o wolności słowa”—On Freedom of Speech).²¹

Industrial civilization is an inalienable component of Norwid’s vision of the world and his historiosophy, and Norwid’s attitude towards it is certainly not as negative as some people believe it is. With poignant irony, Norwid wrote about men of letters who thoughtlessly “on the one hand, are scoffing at other nations’ industrial idolatry, while on the other are embellishing poetically our sacred traditions...”²²

As he lived in an industrial age, of which he was perfectly aware, Norwid was perhaps the first Polish poet to view an author’s relation to his audience in terms of literary production and literary market. The social situation of writers became a haunting topic for reflections, occasionally even an obsession. Let me briefly point out that Norwid’s writings reveal a very interesting rivalry between a Romantic concept of the poet as harbinger and leader on the one hand, and a quite modern concept of the literary profession of people earning their living by writing. The latter idea involves an antinomy, namely while a poet earns his living using his pen, he is not really writing

²⁰ Letter to H. Błotnicki of March 22, 1833, [in:] *Dziela*, vol. 15, p. 63.

²¹ In: C. Norwid, *Poezje wybrane...*, ed. Z. Przesmycki, Warszawa 1933, pp. 205 ff.

²² In a letter to T. Lenartowicz of June 1866, WP, vol. 9, p. 26.

only to earn money; to put it differently, a writer is bound by his audience's expectations and dependent on that audience, yet his dignity as a writer requires that he should not bow to that pressure but remain independent. It should be remarked that for Norwid readers were indispensable elements of literary work; literature, in Norwid's understanding, was not a one-way affair but an act being played out between author and reader. That particular view is especially significant in the sense that Norwid had no appreciable audiences and his productions were usually written only for the shelf.²³

I indicated several areas Norwid travelled as a solitary explorer. He took up great topics, which could have become topics to study for the second generation of Polish Romantics. But that generation did not follow Norwid's example, and therefore Norwid's literary output actually lacked a natural context. Such a context has to some extent be reconstructed by ourselves, by picking from writings of Norwid's contemporaries just occasional sorties into the realm of new possibilities which Norwid's literary work alone disclosed. Tracking possible influences is no promising job, since Norwid was practically absent from the cultural stage of his times. What does make sense is to try to disclose such analogies which may help us restore to Norwid the place in history he deserves to occupy.

So, what is the meaning of Norwid's biography, deprived as it is of middle age and composed solely of his youth and his old age? His biography shows that Norwid shared the fate of his generation, who after a confident young age virtually disappeared from the Polish scene, ceasing to play any autonomous part in it, forfeiting its identity as a generation, melting with the preceding generation, and growing old prematurely—because émigrés of the period immediately following the November Insurgency had grown old by that time.

Transl. by *Zygmunt Nierada*

²³ Norwid's attitude towards modern civilization and his views of a man of letters' social situation are presented in my article "Norwid – pisarz wieku kupieckiego i przemysłowego" (N. as a Poet of the Age of Commerce and Industrialism), [in:] *Literatura, komparatystyka, folklor*, Warszawa 1968, which presents the necessary evidence.