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## Imagination and Memory

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Literary Studies in Poland 18, 91-98

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1987

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Marta Piwińska

## Imagination and Memory

I am not sure that what we find in Juliusz Słowacki's mystical poetry can still be regarded as imagination. Let us first consider that "something" which is the object of imagination. How can that "something" be defined in space and time? Can it at all? It cannot, for it embraces everything: all the universe, all history—cosmological, natural, human, and, within it, all of Poland's national history. What can be grasped intellectually is less the object of that imagination than its constitution—the fact that it is, of course, cyclical in its pattern and that this cyclicity is so persistent as to become monotonous. Whether Słowacki talks about slugs paying homage or about blind Ziemowit or pyramids or a Promethean Rze-Pycha, it is always part of a cycle for which a counterpart can be found in another cycle, which makes it easier to comprehend and interpret. In other words, whatever Słowacki says, apart from having its specific meaning there and then, is also a recollection of something (or, more precisely, its record) as well as a sign of a future event.

This all-embracing interconnection of events in time, which imparts meaning to all of them, is a distinctive feature of that part of Słowacki's poetry which is referred to as mystical verse. Another distinctive feature of that poetry is his refusal, as a matter of principle, to take a detached look at those events as writer. To safeguard himself against taking such a detached attitude, he devises unusual modes of narration: he speaks in the first person singular as the chief actor or witness of hundreds of events at different periods of time, he speaks as a non-human person, or else he speaks "to himself" in letters which recount previous lives.

In other words, Słowacki writes a mystical history of the world and a mystical history of Poland as his own biography. Or, to

put it differently, he writes a biography of the spirit which took its temporary abode in him—in Juliusz Słowacki. Or, in a different formulation still, the spirit is reading its memoirs amidst cosmological, natural, human and national history, and Słowacki is either taking down what he hears (because he is an inspired poet) or else is translating into words what the spirit has meanwhile recorded in other forms (because he is an initiated “interpreter of the word”). These three possible explanations are by no means mutually exclusive. They reflect the same mysticism from different angles—from inside, from outside, and from the angle of a poet’s function. But can this be called imagination? At least in the Romantic sense of the word?

In his pre-mystical period, Słowacki gave different meanings to imagination. Here are a few brief examples. In his *Kordian* imagination is “speaking with the eyes” pointing out hideous and fascinating things. Imagination is hostile towards the protagonist, even though, like Fear (*Strach*), it is a projection of his inner power—an upsetting power which “conjures up nightmares” in a sleeping mind. Such a demonic view of an aggressive imagination was not uncommon among the Romantics. Nevertheless, their view was generally positive. The Romantics viewed imagination as a genial power, because it furnishes the fullest possible insight into the nature of things and presupposes freedom. For, if an artist stimulates his fantasy and at the same time is aware of doing this, that is, when he puts on his own awareness to that process, what ensues is a free interplay of imagination with reason and reality, and the world is being grasped in its entirety, as a unity in duality. This particular idea was close to Słowacki’s own view when he wrote, in his dedication letter to *Balladyna*,

And if all this does have an inherent viability, if all this is born in a poet’s mind according to divine laws, if inspiration was not just a feverish condition but a fruit of that strange power which whispers into the ear words you never heard before and unfolds before your eyes images you never even saw in your dreams; if poetic instinct was something better than common sense [...] then *Balladyna* [...] will be Queen of Poland.

But in the mystical period everything is different. Słowacki hurries to assure readers he is writing only what he sees and recalls. He does not give a damn for that “strange power” which

conjures up things that never existed. Indeed, Słowacki renounces fantasy (maybe even denies it exists at all?) and, in its stead, he puts memory—a peculiar kind of memory which is inextricably bound up with the universe's dynamical mechanism. He also renounces all free play. All that remains from his previous irony is the duality—because form is a record of a spirit's progress—but freedom disappears. However, Słowacki not so much destroys as transforms his previous style. To be true, everything is essentially ambiguous, yet everything can be unequivocally evaluated from the standpoint of efficiency in pursuing a poet's final goal. Free play is replaced by rigid rules of a system, which is a Romantic variation on the theme "Man as a microcosm embraces a macrocosm." But that system, originally, is illuminated from inside by memory (the same memory, incidentally, which mirrors the Romantic idea of correspondence elevated to the value of a sacrum). Reality becomes a system of mnemonic signs to which corresponds an inner book of reminiscences. Like in hieroglyphs, "genesiac" memory (Słowacki's version of the Romantic idea of metempsychic memory unfolded in his *Genezis z ducha—Genesis out of Spirit*) is rooted in forms and facts. It takes the shape of metaphors, material and historical alike. When it articulates itself it does so in visions, dreams, fits of inspiration, that is, when what is static and finite is put into motion again, replayed in one's mind.

What consequences does this recognition of "genesiac" memory as the carrier of creativity have? What benefit does it produce, and at what cost? The benefit is that poetic creation then becomes an absolute value—if memory is no fiction but truth. The cost is that a poet forfeits "his own self." Słowacki would probably have said a poet sacrifices his own life, that is, his individuality.

"Genesiac" memory puts aside all relativity and distance, for there is no one who could take such a distance. Only the truth remains, the record, an echo of a spirit's roamings, an instance of inspiration. But, inspiration is impersonal. Subjectivity disappears. The "I" is no less than the voice of the spirit, but it no longer is the voice of a person. Słowacki, in a sense, cancels his own biography in that he interprets it symbolically many times—also in a letter to his mother. Heidegger calls this process "de-essentialization" for the purpose of

displaying existence.<sup>1</sup> In Słowacki's case you can witness such "de-essentialization" in the literal sense, for his childish plays as priest, knight or artist appear to have had profound meaning, but ceased to be his own games. Contemplation of his self is contemplation of history and *vice versa*. Man and universe penetrate each other. The boundary line between what is external and internal is obliterated. The poet ceases to exist autonomously—he becomes just a moment of a universal and final process. Poulet found a similar experience in Victor Hugo. He called it a primary experience of the self's solidarity with the outside world: "In a way, all I comprehend is me, and, conversely, all my visions exist outside me."<sup>2</sup> In Słowacki's case, that experience seems to have been hoisted to a higher level of awareness than in Hugo, and it was carefully ordered and arranged into a hierarchy of Platonic, mystical and hermetic values—and, of course, in line with the entire Romantic concept. It involves a great endeavour to rationalize something Słowacki is determined never to forget, something which has eclipsed all other ideas and the claim of exclusiveness which Słowacki accepted. Something that Słowacki—like Nerval the visions in *Aurelia*, like Chateaubriand his *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*, like Proust later—based on memory. Słowacki often—but discreetly and as though shyly—recalls that sensual memory which leads to an emotional resurrection; he writes not about the memory of the eye, for that was known very well, but about the memory of "inferior" senses: like Proust, who developed his "time regained" from taste, Słowacki writes about "smells."

What was in then that he remembered after the "curtain of the body" and the "veil of matter" had moved aside? We know—it was a revelation. We have to define our attitude towards this phenomenon if we are to talk about what is called Słowacki's mystical poetry. We have to answer for ourselves the question of whether Słowacki did experience a revelation or deceived us with that excellent idea of beginning one day to present the products of his imagination and readings without any distance, as absolute truths (as some others had done before him). Basically, this makes

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. M. Heidegger, *Wozu Dichter?* [Polish translation in:] *Budować, mieszkać, żyć*, Warszawa 1977. I refer to this text as a whole; on "de-essentialization" see p. 170.

<sup>2</sup> G. Poulet. "Hugo," [in:] *Metamorfozy czasu*, Warszawa 1977, p. 176.

no difference as long as the prophet is consistent, and Słowacki was consistent. But I am not going to demand a vote of confidence for Słowacki. I take it for granted that something was revealed to, him, and I do not care if that happened in a single vision or in many visions if it happened suddenly or gradually, or if that was just a case of self-deception. In other words, I do believe in what he said, and all psychological and technical circumstances are his personal business. So now I can proceed to the question of what it was—the something which thenceforward began to work in the stead of his own imagination, that revelation and its constant presence in his memory? A fideistic answer is possible; to Słowacki was revealed the motion of a spirit which explains the world fully from creation to final destinations, which, incidentally, is perfectly in line with Romantic philosophy of history. But, we can also try to find an answer in his texts. It can be argued that in *Genesis* Słowacki describes a creative process he recalled because he had been its author and actor, and in that text he recounts to himself—and to the Creator—how all was born, that is, he reconstructs from memory how the things described in the text were being born. This looks like a fair summary of *Genesis* and *Król Duch*—as it would be in any case of a work which deals with itself. So, if we strip it of those mind-twisting metaphors, *Genesis* appears to be a record of a creative process. Maybe that was what actually was revealed to Słowacki: a creative process which is not something that “does not exist” but something which is, something he can personally testify to as the author and actor of that process. Maybe that is what he remembers since that moment—and so he insists that this is the truth, that it is no fiction or fantasy, that this is how the “work of creation” is proceeding, namely through painful and difficult changes of forms? Indeed, it should not be surprising that Słowacki chose to present the non-material and abstract process of creation as a creative process “in general,” that he followed its greatest models from the past—the Book of Genesis, evolution theory, or catastrophism.

So, if we substitute memory for imagination and say that what he remembered was probably the creative process, we land as though back at the beginning. The creative process, it would appear, is the same as imagination. And yet it is something different.

(1) It is imagination virtually obsessed with the question of existence, exerting itself to grasp the true meaning of being by recalling the "work of creation." Such an interpretation will permit to move Słowacki's mysticism away from spiritualism and bring it closer to metaphysics; to look for a key to that poetry also beyond the limits of his epoch; in other words, to read Słowacki's later poetry not merely as a literary relic. This is why I refer, by way of terminology, to Heidegger's idea (as a general pointer rather than as a specific interpretive suggestion).

(2) It is an imagination that is localized one step lower, as it were, than the Romantic "imagination," which watched itself in the making and tried to discover its own rules of work as well as its own movement. This perhaps suggests that Słowacki's later works should be read in a dual manner—as a revelation about Genesis and as a work about a work. Admittedly, this is very difficult to do. But perhaps certain benefits for research might result from a literal interpretation of the sentence: "We, the spirits of words, demand shapes." What exactly does "literal" mean here?

At one point in the "Triple Dialogue" Słowacki explains in detail why and when poets become revealers.<sup>3</sup> He quotes examples of metaphors: birchtree as peasant woman, "column head," "palm tree's hair," "fields gilded with ripe rye" (quotations from Mickiewicz), and tells readers to see in the column head the eyes of a Greek as indeed of all antiquity, that is, its "essential being"—to paraphrase Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, who also was a metaphysical writer (among other things). If metaphors—and I quote Słowacki—"are evidence of a poet's metempsychic cognition which manifested itself in revelation," that is, if metaphor testifies to revelation, does then the opposite also hold? After all, the spirit, assuming in its progress different forms and speaking through those forms, manifested himself in metaphors both in the material world and in history. It may be that poetic metaphors are revelations because they bring together two languages: the non-verbal language of forms with poetic language, both of which are essentially metaphorical, which in Słowacki's view seems to amount to saying that both

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<sup>3</sup> J. Słowacki, "Dialog troisty," [in:] *Dzieła wszystkie*, vol. 14, Warszawa 1954, p. 302.

record the movement of change. The poet, making a cluster of these two images, "reveals" the passage from form to form which has actually taken place. This brings us to the question of whether or not it is justified to read *Genesis* "upstream," as a record of metaphors in the making, metaphors in the process of metamorphosis, metaphors as though in "unfinished" form? Słowacki seems to have had in mind that "unfinished" state of metaphors; even before Brzozowski, Słowacki wrote in a letter to Czartoryski: "An idea which has materialized is dead to me."<sup>4</sup> What he was after was probably an "unfinished" mode of writing.

I think two mystical acts should be distinguished in Słowacki's poetry: reading non-verbal messages and writing. True, Słowacki in that period was writing one work as it were; its fragmentariness, accordingly, is different in character from the "stylized" fragmentariness, for example, of Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (*Forefathers*) or even from that in his own *Beniowski*. That other kind of fragmentariness was presupposed, it had already become a literary convention. In his mystical period, Słowacki writes pieces of his work, which spills boundlessly in all directions. But unlike other students of this matter, I do not believe it is just a single-level work. As the author of the "Dialogue," Słowacki was—and wanted to be—just an "interpreter of words." As the author of *Król Duch*, he was also a poet. In the former case, he was just a reader of "non-verbal messages." What this means can best be seen by answering the question about who, and with whom, usually communicates in this fashion. Those who know no words. Those who are pre-human and those who are post-human. This is, as it were the case of a spirit communicating with itself across time, a voice heard from one cycle to another. It can be put roughly this way; living and dead nature, which expresses itself through forms and bodies, is the domain of memory. Culture, on the other hand, is the domain of presentiment. Here are three examples. Statues, myths and prophets' parables are presentiments and auguries. Słowacki gives a genesiac interpretation of Saturn's statue which turns out to be the final image of the spirit engulfing matter. Next, there is the myth about immaculate conception,

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<sup>4</sup> J. Słowacki, "Second Letter to Duke Adam Czartoryski," [in:] *Dziela wszystkie*, vol. 15, Warszawa 1955, p. 315.



which had lingered in pagan mythology for a very long time until it materialized in Christ's birth—according to Słowacki—after which it ceased to upset people's imagination. Lastly, the “woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars” in the Book of Revelation turns out to be Poland, whereas the prophetic picture is an augury in the making (Copernicus' discovery and the 1683 victory in the battle of Vienna account for the Sun and the Moon in that picture). Because the system of non-verbal communication is cyclical, this distinction cannot be drawn very accurately. Nature is also presentiment, culture is also memory. That much then about reading and interpretation. How about writing?

An inspired poet performs temporary revelations in metaphors. But if the poet is initiated, he cannot content himself with this. He is to “copy” two books—one external and another internal—to produce a third, the book of the Word; he is to be not just “interpreter” but also creator. Can he write that book in the same language which literature has been using up to now? Not likely. A metaphor-revelation cannot appear just as a fortunate coincidence. It must be a rule. It seems Słowacki was looking for a new language which would be an analogue of the spirit's metaphorical self-creation *via* changes of forms. Słowacki was looking for a more pliant and fluent language which would send signals to memory and to presentiment in order to touch off an echo in the reader's heart, a language which would have the same effect on readers as “non-verbal communication” has on the poet. In other words, reading mystical works “upstream” would be a trick similar to the one Słowacki himself is applying to crystals, leaves, or—in an incomparably more intricate fashion—to Polish history. If the operation of putting things into metaphorical shapes could be grasped, then perhaps something like an alphabet of his new style could be obtained?

Transl. by Zygmunt Nierada