

Wacław Borowy

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When you immerse yourself in Cyprian Norwid's poems, you almost feel the winds of history blowing through it. In fact, next to "truth," the words *historia* or *dzieje* (history) themselves, along with their derivatives, are among his favorite words which he charges with more poetic meaning than any other ones. A reader of Norwid's poems will certainly recall lines such as "From the heights of history / I look down on the human condition" ("Human Condition"); "History like a lioness in labor" ("To the Ruler of Rome"); "You can sense history, as it moves forward like an old clock on a spire" ("To Bronisław Z."). He will recall quips such as that about "history's great insult" (*On the Art for Poles. A Dedication Letter*); about "history's sweeping floods" (*Promethidion*); about "history's labors" (*Times*), "history's levy" ("The Hero"), "history's applause" ("The Polish Woman"), "history textbooks turning into marble" ("Yesterday-and-I"), or the "Mass of history" ("What to Do?"). All these are accompanied by different degrees of emotion. Some are pervaded with pent-up feelings, as those lines about Dembiński, who stands "where history's watchful eye will find no blemish," or those in "Sariusz" which end with the words, "And whining wind from Asia barks: History is alive!" But elsewhere you will merely find a philosopher's skeptical smile, as in "The Ripe Laurel," "And what in life were wings, history often shows to have been heels"; or in the bitter words of "Our Epic":

A śmiech? – to potem w dziejach – to potomni

Niech się uśmieją, że my tacy mali,

A oni szczęśni tacy i ogromni.

[Laugh? This will come later, with our successors. / Let them laugh heartily that we were so puny / And they are so happy and confident.]

Norwid devoted many poems to great figures of his own epoch—Pius IX, Botzaris, Abd-el-Quader, John Brown, Mickiewicz, Chopin, Bem, Adam Czartoryski, Dembiński, Władysław and Andrzej Zamoyski... Indeed, his poetry reverberates with echoes of many movements and events, ranging from the 1848 Springtide of Nations to the French-Prussian war. This is true of works such as "Psalm on Christmas Eve," "Amen," "Socialism 1848," "To the Ruler of Rome," "A Song of Our Land," "Reply to Italy," "Shall I Apply for Amnesty?," "John Brown," "Yesterday-and-I," "Improvising on a Question about News from Warsaw," "Polish Jews 1861," "Answer to a Question about Why I Wear a Confederate Cap," "Holy Peace," "Siberias," "Meanwhile," "In Memoriam Albert Szeliga," "Chopin's Pianoforte," "A Dedication," "A Besieged Man's Encyclical," "To My Contemporaries," "France Is Not Yet Lost," "What to Do?," or "The Dismembered" (to mention only the best pieces). Very many of his poems are about prominent historical personages or at least include numerous references and allusions to such people. In Norwid's verse you will come across Moses, Homer, Socrates, Plato, Spartacus, Caesar, Cicero, Paul the Apostle, Marcus Aurelius, Columbus, Adam Krafft, Raffaele, Michaelangelo, Kościuszko, Napoleon... Some of these names crop up repeatedly in Norwid's poems. Most of his longer works, including his only long poem *Quidam* or his plays *Krakus*, *Wanda*, the lost "Patkul," *Tyrtej*, "Cleopatra and Caesar," are historical in character.

When it comes to articulate emotions which were specific for a given historical moment, Norwid's power of expression is overwhelming as well as convincing. Take for example a poem of his series called *Salem* of 1852:

Apokaliptkie spięty się rumaki,
A od narodu lecą do narodu
Spłoszonym stadem legendy i znaki.

[The steeds of the Apocalypse balk / While legends and signs, in a scared flight, / Travel from nation to nation.]

These words express the atmosphere of frustration following the Revolution of 1848. Or take the following words said by a Pole

about his country a short time before that event (from "A Song of Our Land"):

Więc mamże nie czuć, jaką na wulkanie
 Stałem się wyspą, gdzie łez winobranie
 I czarnej krwi?

[So I am not to feel that I am now an isle / upon a volcano where tears and black blood are the harvest?]

These words, remarkably enough, were written by a poet who was often accused of overindulgence in abstractions. But he was able to describe excellently changes in social mores or historical climate; recall the introduction to his "Emil na Gozdawiu," for instance.

Norwid's presentations of social mores or historical climates are designed to have much more than merely decorative value. It is typical of Norwid, even when he refers to great historical figures, never to keep his artistic attention confined to those people's personal experiences. In all of Norwid's poetry you will sense the presence of huge masses, powerful social forces, and great currents of civilization. His "Cleopatra and Caesar" used to be compared with Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*. What is the chief difference between the two works? Shakespeare describes the tragedy of several great historical figures entangled in historical processes; Norwid presents above all the pressure of tradition, customs, beliefs, political interests, social aspirations etc. on the masses and on great individuals alike. In his *Quidam*, each character stands for one form of civilization of his times. A reader of *Quidam* gets the impression of witnessing primarily movements of large groups, while individuals' actions are of secondary importance. The same is true of *Tyrtej*. Norwid imparts a new significance to the legend about Wanda, as he builds her personal life into the great process of transition from paganism to Christianity. Rytygier, Skald and the Jew-like the characters of *Quidam*—are spokesmen of different currents of their epoch in *Tyrtej*. Rakuz and Krakus, the protagonists of the other mythical play, are also presented not only as two different individuals but also as two different strains of culture. Much the same holds for those of Norwid's works which refer to his own times; human emotions are indigenous to all mankind, but situations and conflicts are determined by the moral atmosphere of the epoch.

This can be seen in *The 1002nd Night*, in *Pure Love*, in *The Ring of a Great Lady*, in *Behind the Scene*, indeed in most of his lyrical and epic poems in both verse and prose. Norwid's own definitions of tragedy and comedy are telling enough. Tragedy, says Norwid in his annotations to *Krakus*, is "a visualization of historical or social fate which is peculiar to a nation or an epoch." *La haute comédie*, you will read in the preface to the *Ring*, is a work in which "a society, as a civilization, is looking at itself in an act of soul-searching." In a *buffo*-type comedy, Norwid remarks, the difference is that one group is looking at another. There is no point in discussing at this place the adequacy of these definitions, but let us realize how strongly Norwid emphasizes the historical aspect in them.

In general, Norwid's poetic world hardly ever leaves one free of a sense of the past. It bears out the assertion that "the past is now, only somewhat further back" (poem "The Past" in the collection *Vade-mecum*), that "for things of some remote past / the present is hurting us like a cilice" (*Christmas Eve*); that those who scream about their own day are hanging like Absalom on their hair held by hands "which died long ago" ("Great Words"). Many more such instances could be mentioned in which the author's poetic emotion focuses on the same awareness of continuity of all human things in history.

Even the most intimate emotions, which often push other poets away from society and towards nature, do have historical undertones in Norwid's poetry. This happens not only to friendship but also to love, as readers of *Assunta* (Song IV ll. 7-8) may recall.

Even in his nostalgia of certain places Norwid makes some historical accents. Warsaw, for example, is presented in symbols which function as monuments; you find these in descriptions of a parish church, or of "burghers' mansions," or of "Sigismund's sword in the clouds," or of streets ridden by Cossack regiments ("Chopin's Pianoforte"); or, elsewhere, Warsaw shows its face in the strange symbol of the mermaid, or in the bewildering appearance of cobblestones without a trace of blood and tears on them. All these are pictures not of a Warsaw known from view-cards but of a city which was the scene of great historical events.

But that pervasive presence of history has never been regarded as a deterministic factor by Norwid. The importance of human will

is never obscured in his poetry. In Norwid's world, human beings carry the burden—good and bad alike—of the past. It is up to man to realize the existence of that heritage and to do something about it. It does not imply a resigned acceptance of all inexorable consequences of things which happened a long time ago, but the partaking of the experience of a great drama involving both individuals and entire nations, indeed all of civilization. French poets contemporary with Norwid often extolled history as a spectacle meriting close attention. So did Tyutchev, an outstanding Russian contemporary of Norwid's. In his poem *Cicero*, Tyutchev says, "Happy is he who watched / the world in times of change and breakthrough: / the gods called him to their home / to partake of their feast / to attend their sacred council / to watch their noble games / and, a living human in enrapture, / to drink from their cup of immortality." Now this kind of contemplatory attitude towards history is imponderable in Norwid's case. If he extolls a great man, than only to express his solidarity with the idea behind the man's act, to make the reader cry out in an irresistible urge towards apotheosis—"On and on," as he does at the end of his "Mourning the Memory of General Bem."¹ To be true, you have got to be an actor, also in a theater" ("On Freedom of Expression" II). That was what made Norwid praise John Brown, a heroic figure of American Blacks' liberation movement. That was what made him pay tribute to emir Abd-el-Quader, a noble Moslem who stood up in defense of people who shared neither his religion nor his nationality. That was why Norwid devoted a rhapsody to Bem, who "caught up with spears many ideas." Norwid paid tribute to Czartoryski for his relentless and patient work (*kolodziejstwo*) to reassure Poles. Indeed, that was always his reason to write about great men in history at all. His heroes were great not only on account of their courage or scope, but also their resolve and will. Abd-el-Quader's greatness, according to Norwid, was that he knew "when to mount his horse." And, for the same reason, Bem's accomplishments are symbolized by his "steed"; and, again for the same reason, that "steed" can be

¹ With a different purpose in mind, K. W. Zawodziński, "Uroczystości Norwidowe" (Norwid Festivities), *Mysł Współczesna*, 1947, no. 7/8, p. 149, compares Norwid's poetry with the universal philosophical poetry of Tyutchev and some others.

goaded with a spear like with “an old spur” on mankind’s difficult road even after the hero’s death. Even Pauf the Apostle is presented as “a rider in clear fields / bowed on his horse, in a beam of light” (*Salem*). The hero of the future, too, appears to Norwid as a similar rider, “The knight will again put on a new cloak, / and will embrace many Nations with his Love” (*ibidem*).

“He will embrace many Nations with his Love”—these words are also typical of Norwid’s attitude towards history. In Norwid’s poetic world, readers constantly feel that history has its own “conscience” (*Times*); that—as he puts it in *Salem*—“history writes wise equations”; that (“Polish Jews 1861”) “history is a mess only apparently / for there is wide strength and order in it.” So, man is obliged to acknowledge his history. This truth is whispered by sand in the sand-clock to the narrator of the short-story *A Handful of Sand*.

Pray know that it is tradition by which man’s majesty is distinguished from field animals, and that he who has stifled the conscience of history becomes a savage in a remote island and is gradually becoming an animal himself.²

In history conceived of this way, the respective positions of men of action and of artists appear to be closely similar. Chopin was a great man not because he gave expression to Polishness in his works but because he gave expression to this Poland, “the Poland of ennobled wheelwrights” cast against a backdrop of history’s “omni-perfection.” Mickiewicz was a great man not only on account of his masterful use of language but also because, being a master of words, he cast “a rainbow of pearl-like seeds,” of “Love and Faith” (*Salem*), and that he left this world saying “Let’s love each other.” Referring to Lord Byron, in his “Conversation of the Dead” Norwid recognizes Byron’s personal involvement in Greece’s war of national liberation as a greater accomplishment than his writings (not worrying about comparing two areas of work which are really incomparable).

² M. Jastrun writes interestingly about this in his Preface, [in:] C. Norwid, *Wiersze wybrane (Selected Poems)*, Warszawa 1947: “Norwid has a close sense of each moment’s historical significance [p. X; but] historical moments are interesting for Norwid only insofar as they stand for a moral truth” (p. XI).

Norwid, accordingly, is pervaded with a profound sense of history's presence. He is truly exceptional in this. His repeated complaints about the "unhistoricity" of his own times may seemingly disprove this view. Which of Norwid's readers will not recall his references to that "nominal" epoch (in "A Dorio ad Phrygium"), to his times being "without history and colorless" (*Salem*) or many similar formulations, beginning with his early poetic letter "To My Brother Ludwik," where he said:

I w doczesności pijanej się gubię,
Nie śmiejąc wiekiem nazwać – i osądzić,
Że taki ogrom czasu można – błędzić.

[I am confused at these times / Which I do not dare call a century. / Nor can believe that one can roam aimlessly for so long.]

It was that opposition to his own epoch which made him coin a whole array of poetic invectives, a host of sarcastic poems, indeed his quite many satires. That attitude of protest, too, accounts for some other works having been produced at all, e.g. those which express the pain of looking forward to things which may happen only in historical perspective. Norwid excelled in expressing this particular pain. Indeed, the entire effect of his poem "Yesterday-and-I" derives from that peculiar pain—you should hide your face behind a coffin cover and wait to see "history textbooks turning into marble." In "Meanwhile," Norwid says, "My days are delays, my years a long waiting." His personal life appears as just an "interlude" in the continuous stage play of history. This drama of waiting for history to arrive at a certain point is among Norwid's most original poetic motifs.

This specific dramatic experience brings also a specific type of hero on the stage. The knight of "the new weapon" is not necessarily one who fights in the literal sense—he may also be "the one who is waiting," as Norwid puts it in his half-jocular poem "Answer to a Question about Why I Wear a Confederate Cap." And, as you may read in "The Hero," "Christian sweetness," accompanying valor, "partakes in the victory by its spirit."

Never, though, does his sense of alienation from his own epoch, his opposition to its main currents, lead him to despair or doubt in the profound meaning of history. He concludes his very somber

letter "To My Brother Ludwik" (1844) with shaking off his pessimism, "And yet I will not condemn this world," whereas later in *Salem* Norwid compares that "epoch without history" to the time of the Gospel story about a master who leaves his house in the care of a bad keeper—the day will come when the master returns and will demand of the keeper to show all accounts. The same motif, though in a different picture, recurs in "A Dorio ad Phrygium."

So, notwithstanding all his grief, his outrage, his protests, Norwid pervades his poetic world with a certainty that actually no epoch is "without history." The unhistoricity of some periods is only an illusion. Even in an epoch which appears to be merely "nominal," history now and then reminds people of its course: a Jew is standing in front of a hut "like an ancient obelisk"; a plough now and then brings to the light of day an old armor; a portrait now and then falls off the wall... All that pertains to the ultimate reckoning of history. What is nominal is less significant than what is essential, even though by its commonness it may appear to be something beyond the scope of history. 19th-century Poland is "dismembered" (as Norwid describes it in one of its strangest late poems called "The Dismembered: A Ballad"; so what? Aren't the Vistula, the Warta or the Nida flowing as ever? Isn't the plowman plodding along behind his plough? Aren't children going to school in the morning?

The progress of history is visible everywhere. Also in ruins, which are among the most frequent motifs of Norwid's poetry ("Human Condition," "In Verona," "Old Graves," "A Prayer," "White-Marble," "Pompei," "Ruins," *Quidam*, and others). One of the most significant features of Norwid's poetry stands out when his poems about ruins are compared to analogous poems of others. Naturally, the first poem to come to mind is Goethe's *Traveller*, which was known in Poland owing to Mickiewicz's translation. As is known, Goethe sings the praise of Nature, which tells a swallow where among fine sculptures of mouldings it should build itself a comfortable nest, which tells people how to put "tiny homes" in openings between magnificent buildings of "the previous century" and thus to "live on upon a grave." Another poem about ruins that comes to mind while reading Norwid's own is *The Italian Villa* by Tyutchev. That poem shows ruins which look majestic by their emptiness and peace, and slowly and soundlessly melt together with the mild nature around them.

Tourists enter the yard, and something like a stir moves the ruins. "What's that? Is that what the evil life with its endless feverishness has carried out across some secret threshold?" In contrast to Tyutchev and Goethe, Norwid presents an entirely different picture of ruins. For him, ruins are primarily convincing pieces of evidence of history's presence, of man's creative will (as in the concluding lines of his poem "On Freedom of Expression," chapter XIV, showing the columns of Palmyra).

Ruins of buildings remind him of the nation's life which is also in ruin. All of the nation's rights may have been destroyed. Yet public opinion still remains; despite its trite and uninspiring designation, it is as powerful as before, always looming dangerously over tyrants, those who violate the law, and renegades. Norwid had no qualms about using what were called prosaic words. But he was able to impart great poetic power to such words. It took a poet of Norwid's posture to put down (in part two of *Promethidion*) these words, "Oh opinion, thou art the homeland of homelands—your power / Comes from the people's own voice," and to show that this voice's power comes precisely from the fact that it is just a voice, something like the voice of prophets who wore no arms or any kind of material back-up; nothing, it would appear, and yet such a might.

Thus, what appears to be an absence of history turns out to be just one of many varieties of history's presence in people's lives.

2

Just as no periods without history exist, in Norwid's poetic realm you will never find people or matters without significance. Almost all of his poems open great historical perspectives. But great historic figures do not always appear in the forefront. Norwid says this explicitly in his letter "To Walenty Pomian Z.":

Owszem więc, mój bohater i jeden, i drugi
Wielkich nie czynią rzeczy, to zaś ich spotyka,
Co ludzi miernych albo małożnaczne służy.

[True, this or other of my heroes / Are doing no great deeds, and their lives / Are lives of puny people or dispensable servants.]

These words refer above all to his *homo quidam*, a man without

even a name, who moves like a ghost through the pages of this great historical poem. But these words also hold for other of Norwid's poems. In *The Ring of a Great Lady*, perhaps the best of his plays, you find a very insignificant protagonist, called Mak-Yks. In the short-story "The Stigma," a vista opens to a boundless universe of history, but the story begins with a truly trifling point. Even when he introduces great historic figures into the scene of his works, they are not always shown in what are "great actions." No single battle nor a single major diplomatic dispute takes place in "Cleopatra and Caesar." Such things do happen, but only somewhere in the background, and Norwid draws the reader's attention to things which are much closer to everyday concerns of his epoch. This is even more true of works concerning contemporary events. "A Dorio ad Phrygium" has as its plot just a Gypsy woman's funeral; "Emil na Gozdawiu" deals with the painful disenchantment of an old forgotten wet-nurse. The plots of poems such as *Szczesna* or *The Wedding*, or even *Assunta*, which is longer than the two former ones, can be told in a few simple sentences without high-flown words. Minor and commonplace matters are used as plots in many minor poems.

But what is apparently a trifling matter can be presented in a manner which changes entirely the actual dimension of things. A colonel may not be an athlete at all but only a cripple. A hero is not necessarily a famous warrior, sometimes he may be just an obscure workman, like one Jan Gajewski killed by a boiler blast in a factory. Not only your mother but also your wet-nurse deserves love. This is why the "map of life" is so dissimilar to the map of the Earth; if someone tried to draw that map, then "mountains and deserts," as you will read in "A Dorio," "would swap places in a twinkling of the eye, and the ocean would dry to barely a tear."

When you look at things in this way—as if through the poet's microscope—the boundary line between uncommon and common things fades. It turns out that "ordinary people have extraordinary things in them" ("To My Brother Ludwik"), that commonness hides many "things mystical and inscrutable" ("Amidst This Common Life").

Indeed, ordinary clean water appears as truly precious; water which people tend to forget in their affluence, but water which proves more valuable than anything when a fire breaks out.

O! wodo czysta... bardzo zapomnieli ciebie,
 Służebnej, cichej, prostej, szczególnie ubogiej,
 W której jest błękit niebios i która jest w niebie.

[Oh clear water... they forgot you, / The patient, the quiet, the simple, the poor, / Water in which there is the blue of the sky and which is in the sky.]

Water is praised in different manner in *Assunta* (this time along with the glass, like in "The Toast" where it gets praise along with a pail):

Wody nie piłem na życiu tak czystej
 Ni łza mi kiedy obila się skorzej
 O szklanki gminnej kryształ przeźroczysty...

[Never have I drunk clearer water / Nor has my tear as merrily bounced off / The clear crystal of an ordinary glass...]

Or take the frequent pictures of dust, sand or cobbles in Norwid's numerous similes and metaphors, particularly in *Assunta* (I) or in *Quidam* (XI). Recall the faintly lyrical tone in "The Dedication" where a cobble-street in Warsaw "on which no blood or tears are shining" is remembered. Or recall the handful of sand from a poem in prose under this title. Or his words about "dust stirred by feet from the floor" ("Fame"), which has something of "human remains" in it.³

Norwid's poetry also shows repeatedly how very significant minor events and minor things may prove to be in a person's life— words which are being uttered too loud or inaudibly, a cup of tea which interrupts a conversation, a fan, a bracelet, a cap with a sheepskin rim. One recurrent motif are flowers thrown carelessly or sent to someone with a card. One such flower turns out to be an un-

³ This particular predilection brings to mind yet another of Norwid's favorite manners of writing about art (and he wrote about art frequently). Norwid is fond of using images of creative or recreative artisanship to present artistic emotions. When speaking about the fine arts, Norwid usually introduces chisels, brushes, paints gravers, etc. Addressing the outstanding violinist N. Biernacki, Norwid spoke above all of the body of his violin, the strings, the horsehair of the bow. "Chopin's Pianoforte," a poem devoted to the great composer, is significant by its very title. Even two early poems devoted to literary work are entitled with technical words, "Print Characters" and "The Pen," apart from using numerous technical words in the text. This series of motifs was discussed by K. Wyka, *Cyprian Norwid. Poeta i sztukmistrz*. 1948.

suppressable, haunting and obsessive recollection of the chief character of *The 1002nd Night*.

A “flower sent with a letter” appears later, in a dramatic and ironical presentation, in *Szczesna*. In “Man,” studying his hero’s potentials, Norwid refrains, as it were, from asking some questions, such as “Will the womb which is dearest to you and not of your kin— shower you with jasmine blooms?”; and later he speaks of “beautiful and charming lassies” who know how “to throw cabalistic daisies in your face.” The unnamed man from Epirus, the chief character of *Quidam*, mentioning a laurel leaf thrown by Arthemidoros the philosopher and instantly “torn apart” by his disciples, reminisces about his own youth, “this is what I once did to a cornfield flower.” In “A Dorio,” this motif dominates the unforgettable series of loose-end comparisons. “Like when one hurls a bunch of violets / At a man in his face, saying nothing.”

In this, Norwid is undoubtedly a continuator of 18th- and 19th-century realism, a literary current which fully acknowledged and confirmed the significance of detail, and which began with Sterne. Indeed, Sterne himself was the first to show that tiny, apparently accidental movements, words, even gestures are indicative of more profound psychological, moral or social meanings. Relying on Sterne’s observation, subsequent writers developed an entirely new literary current. The great Balzac, Norwid’s own contemporary, was a prominent representative of that school of literary creation. The Polish poet, who was very contemptuous of his contemporary novelists, sparing no caustic remarks about them, did have certain common features with them. He absorbed them at a very early stage of his work. All poetic motifs of his youthful poems are borrowed from a common and direct observation of life. Their comparisons and metaphors are also usually in this range. You will find in those poems common plants, common birds, “counted eggs being put into the basket,” a feather used in inoculation against smallpox. Thoughts are compared to “hired villains” demanding to get paid, letters of the alphabet to a bird’s wing with which you sweep off crumbs. Even the most imaginative of all his juvenile poems, “An Evening in the Wilderness,” is a conversation between real ordinary objects. The only personified abstraction to be found in the poem is Calm (indeed this fact itself is telling enough).

From his earliest period the poet was aware that all those "short-lived bubbles" have their meaning "and each trifle thing has consequences, each wise remark has consequences" ("Meditation" II). Norwid owes many components of that belief of his to the literary current initiated by Sterne. It is not important whether he drew that knowledge from the original master's own works or from those imitating Sterne, who were numerous early in the 19th century, viz. Xavier de Maistre, Washington Irving, Thümmel, Bestuzhev-Marlinsky (whose works were translated into Polish when Norwid was young), or perhaps from Józef I. Kraszewski's first strongly Sterne-like novelettes.

But this philosophy of the specificity of detail, which in his predecessors did not go beyond the psychological or social framework, was soon given a more comprehensive, universal perspective by Norwid, who elevated it to the religious sphere and pervaded it with powerful emotions. It was only that development which explained Norwid's sarcasm towards people who imagine that "immortality is just a Sunday break to interrupt the all-pervading prose of life" ("Fame"). It is this which explain his words, "miracles happen even today, but you must be able to see them" (*Psalm of Psalms*), or even the view expressed in "What Shall I Tell You, Madam?" that "there are no graves except in one's heart or conscience."

There are no graves, for nothing ever really dies—in the realm of the spirit and in the realm of matter alike. Here is what Norwid says in "Fame,"

[...] onej ćmy zielonej atom,
Co wleciał oknem ledwo dostrzeżony,
I dyjamentom, i we włosach kwiatom
Szepcząc coś znika... myślicieź: stracony?

[... this green moth's atom / Which came in through the window barely noticed, / Whispering something to diamonds and to flowers in the hair / Disappears... you think it is lost?]

Hardly anything is more typical of Norwid than the poetic significance the word "atom" is given in his poetry. Many examples could be quoted to show this. In his youthful poem "To My Brother Ludwik," people are referred to as "rulers of atoms" while thought is compared to a "divine atom." In his "Pompei," you can read about "marble's rigid atoms." His character Szeliga in *The Ring* speaks of an "atom of fatalism" (Act II, Sc. 3), while Maria Harrys

admits she might once have had "some tiny atom" of feeling for him (Act II, Sc. 6). In an 1873 poem, those huge flowers were "a green atom amidst pots with earth." In *Quidam*, the man from Epirus mentions "loud systems of atoms" (XIII) and Arthemidor's disciples say he is "as free as atoms" (V).

A further aspect of atoms is shown by Norwid in the passage from his letter "To Walenty Pomian Z." where Norwid puts himself in opposition to Mickiewicz's Konrad:

Bo jam nie deptał wszystkich mędrców i proroków...
Ale mię huśtał wicher, ssałem u obłoków
I czułem prochów atom na twarzy upadłej.

[But I did not defy all wise men and prophets... / I was swung about by the winds, I sucked from clouds / And felt atoms of dust on my prostrate face.]

This is no longer just a hyperbolic detail or a symbol of freedom, as it was in the previously quoted lines; here it expresses the entire drift of civilization Norwid senses so profoundly.

In one of his last poems, "To Bronisław Z." (1879), Norwid says, "Didn't Newton's apple reveal great truths?"⁴ Indeed, small things sometimes open great truths to us. And great truths often do without many words. Sometimes a word or two suffices,

i ponoć to zwie się: Epoka,
słów dwa, a z których jest potem treść ciągła,
jak te nieliczne: Ziemia jest okrągła.

[and this is what they call an Epoch / two words, which later produce lasting truths / like these few words: The Earth is round—*Assunta*, IV, stanza 4).

In a world where this happens, man's designation as ruler of atoms or Jehova's dusts ("Prayer") is no exaggerated description.

Undoubtedly, Norwid can be regarded not only as a poet of history but also as a poet of the atom.

Whenever he speaks about the "atom" Norwid constantly reminds us of its role in the universe. "Atom" or "dust" are frequent motifs in his poetry, but so are "the Earth's globe," planets, stellar space,

⁴ The same motif performs a different function in Part II of *Behind the Scene*, where Omegitt says, "A child, seeing a falling apple, reaches its hands out for it as if it would like to cling to its mother. But the same incident held a different message for Newton, pushing his thoughts in another direction."

"wind which embraces the Globe and sings God's praise," and so on. This particular combination of these two series of motifs is typical of Norwid. In such combinations, minor things and matters grow big, huge things come closer, and distances between them disappear.

In *Assunta*, you can find several instances of stellar contrasts combined with one another in the presentation of love. Having told about his first encounter with Assunta (II, 9), Norwid says, "Only the two of us were in the garden—in the world." When Assunta, dropping a tear on an ivy leaf, runs away, Norwid thus describes his emotion (II, 17): "Only this leaf and I were there—all alone in the world, big and serene as it is."

His sense of the enormity of the universe is a precondition for realizing the value of a trifle or a brief moment. This truth is expressed, Sterne-like, by Szeliga in *The Ring* (Act I, Sc. 6), for example.

Just how characteristic such experiences are of Norwid can be seen in the very expressive symbols used in a little poem concluding his essay on "Critics and Artists" (1849) in which he paints a vision of the arts in the future as a "temple of the covenant."

Occasionally Norwid imparts a slightly satirical or jocular tone to this very typical motif, as he does in "Marionettes," in "Painter of Necessity," or in "What Shall I Tell You, Madam?" or in similar trifling verse, where Norwid puts on airs of a man-of-the-world and, in this role, complains "How can you avoid getting bored—if there are a million silent stars above the Globe?" Or, when he tries to start a drawing-room conversation "about the rhythm of forces which make the planets move around," or "that the seasons are more than just the freezing and thawing of water," all he gets in reaction from the party are remarks about how to bind a bowtie properly or about latest fashions in clothes or hairstyles.

But more often this particular voice of Norwid's throbs with emotion. This happens when he addresses Pope Pius IX with the words, "It's you who stand alone in this world!" This happens when he pays tribute to a fighter for Blacks' liberation ("To Citizen John Brown"), who is reported to have kicked away a box from under his feet on the gallows, and with it also "the disgraced planet." This happens when Norwid speaks about the Savior's feet

having been pierced with nails and “running away from this planet,” (“To a Dead Person), or when (in his later poem “To the Most Honorable Lady I.”) Norwid says he would like “to see the Savior’s feet rested more firmly.”

3

The atom and the universe, then, are the two bounds of Norwid’s poetic world. They encompass the chief realm of his observation as poet—the realm of man.

In his “Unknown Author,” Norwid of course means himself when he presents a poet who began “to sing man’s duties and pursuits,” which alienated his potential audience. In this unconventional pick of words, he presented himself in the style of a Delille or some other moralizing rhymester. Generally, however, the word “man” in the sense of “human being” is used by Norwid in a highly emotional context (even though it is always a restrained kind of emotional expression). Next to “truth,” “history,” the “Globe” or the “atom,” this is one of Norwid most favorite words. Acknowledging Lenartowicz’s long-standing friendship in an 1856 poem, Norwid thanks him in this way: “Let the Lord confer His grace upon you / not for caring for me, but for a human being.”

The hero of *Szczesna* concludes his last letter, which he writes in despair, with the words, “Just two more words: I do care... I love... man.” He strikes a satirical and ironical tone in his “Epimenides,” where he describes an archaeological expedition digging up an ancient tomb, taking all necessary measurements, deciphering inscriptions, studying pots, fragments of nails, traces of laurel etc.—forgetting nothing at all, “nothing except the man” Paul the Apostle was among those historical figures Norwid esteemed most, because he was jailed by some pagans, proclaimed god by others, and yet he kept to this humanity, “to this consciousness of being a human being” (“The Martyrs”). To be human is no easy thing; it is “virtue,” as Caesar says in “Cleopatra and Caesar” (Act II). It is this particular “virtue” which Norwid himself aspires to above all in his poems. In his “Reply to Deotyma” (1858), comparing himself

with other poets he says the following words which later became quite popular: "Let others crave laurels and honors, / I have one honor: to be human." He signs one piece in his important cycle of gnomic lyrics, *Vade-mecum* (XCII: "Finis") as "A Mortal."

His overriding ambition, then, is not so much to individualize himself, to become different from others, as to stand for humanity in a most general sense of being human.

When speaking about humanity, Norwid often uses almost Horatian abstractions, although his power of emotion is different than Horace's (e.g. in *Vade-mecum*, XVI).

Many of his poems, especially those in *Vade-mecum*, can be viewed as illustrations of different aspects of abstract paradoxes — "The Pilgrim," "The Sphynx," "Tenderness," "Narcissus," "Nerves," "Fate," "Harmony," "Holy Peace," and many others. He frequently presents situations in which humanity faces a test of its inherent strength.

Almost all poems about poetry or art in general are just new essays in his continuous poem about being human. Readers may recall his "Essays," for example, where after a mock praise of "raspberry" and "cranberry" songs Norwid proceeds to an honest praise of authentic human emotion as the only truly living poetry.

Indeed, his definitions (in *Promethidion*) of beauty as "the shape of love" or "the profile of truth and love" are significant in themselves.

Critics who compare Norwid with great poets of nature, such as Fyete (and dismiss the Pole as incomparably inferior to the Russian) are totally wrong because they are trying to find in Norwid something he deliberately shunned.

It is not true that Norwid had no sense at all of the beauty of nature, or that he was unable to express it. Recall the picture of the countryside in "A Dorio" with the lines about the song sung by "a beetle intoxicated with flowers' sweetness" or about that "tipsy song, carried from calyx to calyx" which I am sure neither a Fyete nor a Keats would be ashamed to write. Or take the pictures of scenic beauty in the opening stanza of chapter XI in *Quidam* or stanza VI of the poem "To L.K." Those are all magnificent hymns on the beauty of nature. But Norwid sings a different song—that of the

“realm of mankind” as he puts it in his “Essays”; he addresses the Muse which is the “pillar of an invisible church / Standing upon a sapphire pedestal.”⁵

As Kazimierz Wyka pointed out in reference to this matter (cf. his article “The Absent Norwid,” *Odrodzenie*, 1945, no. 19), it is “the objective world of culture” which is Norwid’s “indigenous poetic world.” This remark is probably shrewder than attempts to compare Norwid with Fyot or Tyutchev. A great many of the motifs Norwid used in his poetry fall into the category of objectively existing culture, and his metaphors and similes are all drawn from this realm. It is particularly striking that this type of metaphors and similes are used by Norwid to describe natural phenomena. Already in his youthful poems you will find “the bed of an ominous cloud” (“The Orphans”) or a “silky leaf” (“A Dream”) lying by a poppy-head. A village is looking like “a flute which holds many songs in it” (“Recollection of a Village”): a nightingale is “entangled” in “veils” of fog (“The Nightingale”); the Moon paints things on trees and trunks “with its soft white beam” like a priest on Twelfth Night does with “consecrated chalk” (“An Evening in the Wilderness”), or it pulls a cloud upon it “as though wiping her tears with her sleeve” (*l.c.*). You will come across many such pictures in his later poems too. In the “Essays,” for example, trees “grow up like columns from the ground,” while against the sky the poet sees “bows of soft branches—like in harps.” In the poem “To L.K.,” nature is said to embrace a woman’s waist with emerald moss as if with a robe while little birds floating above make up something like a diadem. In *Quidam* (XVI), the Moon “was putting her broad beams into the open hall—like pages of an absorbing book.” Even more frequently, Norwid uses metaphors and similes to link human problems with the world of objective culture. For example, in *Assunta* (I) the narrator telling the story of the monk says “I was standing before Lesueur’s painting,” whereas in song IV describing the beauty of his beloved woman he says, “I watched her like Phidias his Diane,” meaning of course her statue.

⁵ Jastrun, *op. cit.*, points out that “Norwid has come to be regarded above all as a philosopher, a thinker. That is wrong. Norwid is primarily an artist, but an artist who finds the most interesting kind of material in thought, in reflection, in mankind’s cultural heritage” (p. XII). I fully agree.

This shows Norwid's preoccupation with the meaning of humanity. Indeed, humanity often even eclipses nature itself. This holds even more for human experiences. Even in his pictures of love, the human being eclipses the lover in man. When Norwid speaks of unhappy love (and he almost always speaks only of such love), we hear less from him about an unfortunate lack of symmetry of feelings than about sins against being human—feigned feelings, heartlessness, contempt. You will find this in "Trylog," in *Szczesna*, in *The 1002nd Night*, in *Pure Love*, in *The Ring of a Great Lady*.

Recall those pusillanimous matrimonial projects in *Assunta*, the falshness, the cynicism, the calculation, the contempt, the brutality which pervade those plans. Harmonious love is rare, and it is either doomed to fail (*Wanda*, "Cleopatra and Caesar", and probably also in *Tyrtej* which is no longer extant in its full version) or cut short by early death (as in *Assunta*).

But even in happy love the human element predominates. Whereas Mickiewicz could write, "My love, what's the use of talking to each other?," such words would be impossible to use, even as a joke, for Norwid in his erotic poems. Again like in Balzac, in Norwid's poems conversation is the most essential part of a relation between man and woman, even if it is, paradoxically, a conversation without words (*Assunta*). The tragedy of love, for this reason, often finds expression in Norwid's poetry in an inability to communicate with each other. He attains a particular power of poetic expression when he presents a man who in the course of a conversation sees the truth clearly and sharply, and yet succumbs to his fascination, at does the "Painter of Necessity," for example.

Szeliga's case in *The Ring of a Great Lady* is another example, and similar situations are presented in the poem "What Shall I Tell You, Madam?" and elsewhere. This is the true message of most of Norwid's poetry in which this poet of the human element is being described as a poet of the salons, of social life and romance. This attitude gives birth to his most penetrating poems of character, as the one about those close acquaintances (*Vade-mecum*, L) who

znają cię, jak się litery
Zna, pókiś ku nim zwrócony...
I póki twarzą w twarz przestajesz z nimi,
Zaś ani chwilę już potem.

[They know you like typed characters / As long as you face them directly / And as long as your face is before his, / But not for a second thereafter.]

Or recall the people Szeliga mentions in *The Ring of a Great Lady*, III, 1. In the "Sonnet" addressed to Gujski (1871) Norwid advises the artist to paint a woman in such a manner as to give a slight illusion of something masculine in her portrait: she should be "herself and somebody else, as you saw her: / a constant process, herself and not herself."

Being human, then, is a quality to which Norwid imparts different aspects and dimensions. It is the same vein that he ironically remarks in "A Dorio" that the word "man" became used disparagingly to denote somebody who is dependent and inferior to others. In his poetry you can also see a civilization condemn itself to death by confining the sense of community of all human beings to one's own nation alone, which induces all peoples to regard themselves "as first among all others" ("Vanitas," in *Vade-mecum*, XXXVI). Brockhaus *Encyclopaedia's* biographical note on Norwid, which was consulted with the poet himself, says that "his first reflex is one of a human being, and one of a Pole comes only second." Norwid devoted many of his works to his own people: its heroic deeds, its cultural legacy, its suffering, its dignity. But, in Norwid's understanding, a Pole is primarily a human being, whereas the Polish question is part of the general cause of all mankind. What does his poetry say about mankind's hopes and future?

The general tone is far from what is usually referred to as optimism. Norwid begins one of his poems with the words, "A sad song will I sing" and these words can justifiably be regarded as a motto of most of his works. Such words are by no means encouraging, as can be seen from what he says about "perpetual future" in the 1844 poem "In L.A.'s Album."

Norwid's lyrics are basically pensive. One word which evokes sorrowful tones is "orphan," which he uses frequently. Nonetheless, Norwid's poetry is never really one of desolation, and has nothing to do with despair. It rests on a solid foundation of a rigorous kind of Stoicism and on his Catholic faith, which give him a lot of confidence. Even the most painful reflections in his poetry end up as noble resignation or spiritual elevation in prayer.

Ludzie kiedy mię mylili,
Było mi zawsze tym rzeźwiej do Boga
I rozpiórzały się ramiona moje,
Patrzyłem w zawrót gwiazd, w wieczne spokoje.

[When people let me down, / I always confidently turned to God / And I spread my arms like wings, / And watched the stars above, the eternal peace.]

These words are taken from the afore-mentioned elegy sent as a letter from America to Maria Trębicka ("A Sad Song Will I Sing"). In a poem written much later (in 1861), "To L.K.," Norwid says:

Gdzie nie ma oaz, oazą ostrogi,
A wiatr gdzie palmy poruszyć nie może,
Bo palmy nie ma, tam oczy zwróciwszy
Do gwiazd, wystarczy raz zawołać: Boże!
I wiedzieć, że jest w niebie step szczęśliwszy.⁶

[Where you do not find an oasis / Your spurs will lead you to one, / And where the wind cannot move a palm / Because no palm is in sight, turn your eyes / To the stars, and cry out just once, Oh Lord! / And you will know that happier pastures are in heaven.]

This is Norwid's reaction to the bitter truth of human existence. More or less the same message is conveyed in poems such as "For Teofil," "Man," "The Rainbow" and many others; God rules over the Earth, and even His wrath reminds the orphaned human being of his "neighbors" and the "Father of Fathers."

That particular attitude is accompanied by an awareness that man must keep to rigorous moral standards in everyday duties. Few people ride to the "heavenly vault" like the prophet Elijah on a chariot of fire, and therefore everybody must oil the axles of their own chariots; this, incidentally, is one of the most typical images in Norwid's early poem "To My Brother Ludwik." Elsewhere ("In L.A.'s Album") there is the image of a cross each human being has to chop into shape for himself before they "put it into his dead hands." This is not to say, of course, that death is the only craving of human beings. Critics construing Norwid's poetry as allegedly indicative of a death wish are wrong. There is a world of difference between Norwid's poetry and poems by other poets who praise

⁶ A lot has been written about Norwid's religiousness, most of it mistakenly however. His religiousness, for instance, was wrongly put in the line of mysticism.

death, such as *The Hymns to the Night* by Novalis. It was Norwid, after all, who contemplated writing the fourth part of *La Divina Commedia*, which would be called Earth. Indeed, he wrote some lines for that projected poem.

The Earth exists tangibly in Norwid's poetry, and man, living in it, must live up to his duties. Death by itself is not the end of everything, because it may be noble or despicable (the poem "The Hero" is a poetic meditation on this matter). Death may frighten man because of its semblance to annihilation, but it may also take the shape of a dignified and calm fulfilment, as it did in the case of Józef Z., "an officer of Napoleon's Great Army," who parted with life "with that royal calm and serenity / with which a priest puts the host back on the tabernacle" ("On the Death of the Late Józef Z.").

This way, man as an atom, who creates human history, elevates himself above death which (as you will read in *Vade-mecum*, LXXXII), only "touches situations," but not the "human person." It is man's destiny to brave misfortune. Misfortune just turns up on man's way, as Norwid puts it in the poem "Fate" in *Vade-mecum*, XXX. It turns up, and waits to see "whether he sways of his course." When he does not, misfortune disappears, ceasing to be itself.⁷ (This, incidentally, is the only case of aestheticism in Norwid's verse.)

Having developed this particular attitude towards life, Norwid's Cleopatra says that "true love is always / happy—because it is!" ("Cleopatra and Caesar," Act II, Sc. 3). This attitude enables one to find serenity and calm in life, like those Norwid presents in his strange poetic letter where he describes a party at an orphanage. In that letter Norwid combines melancholy with a smile, grief changes into calm, and his irony, initially biting, becomes benign. The children are snatching oranges, which are still too large for them to hold in hands.

Szczęście, widzisz, mój drogi, jest – i Ojczyzna – i Ludzkość
(Z pomarańcz bierz dowód... azali Newtonowe jabłko

⁷ S. Szuman has provided a sophisticated study of this poem in his book *On the Art and Essence of Lyrical Poetry*, 1948, pp. 113–120.

Prawd nie pouczyło znamienitych?...) jest i potęga istna sztuki
Żywej wtedy, gdy bliskie umie idealnym znamienować.

[So you see, my dear, that happiness—and the Motherland—and Mankind—exist / (These oranges prove this... didn't Newton's apple / Reveal great truths?...)—and art proves to be powerful / And living, when it knows how to touch the near with the ideal.]

In this succinct yet excellent hexameter, Norwid conveys what is probably the gist of all his poetry, indeed of his mind. Miriam-Przesmycki, a great popularizer of Norwid's poetry (whose stylistic mannerisms should not make us forget his merits), justly pointed out the poet's "spiritual consistency [...] which took increasingly many tones, to develop eventually as [...] a great and natural seriousness of a man for whom 'the entire firmament is his own land'." This is the essence of greatness of Norwid poetry⁸.

Transl. by *Anna Nierada*

⁸ This paper was originally a lecture delivered on October 1, 1947, at the Cracow seat of the Adam Mickiewicz Literary Society.