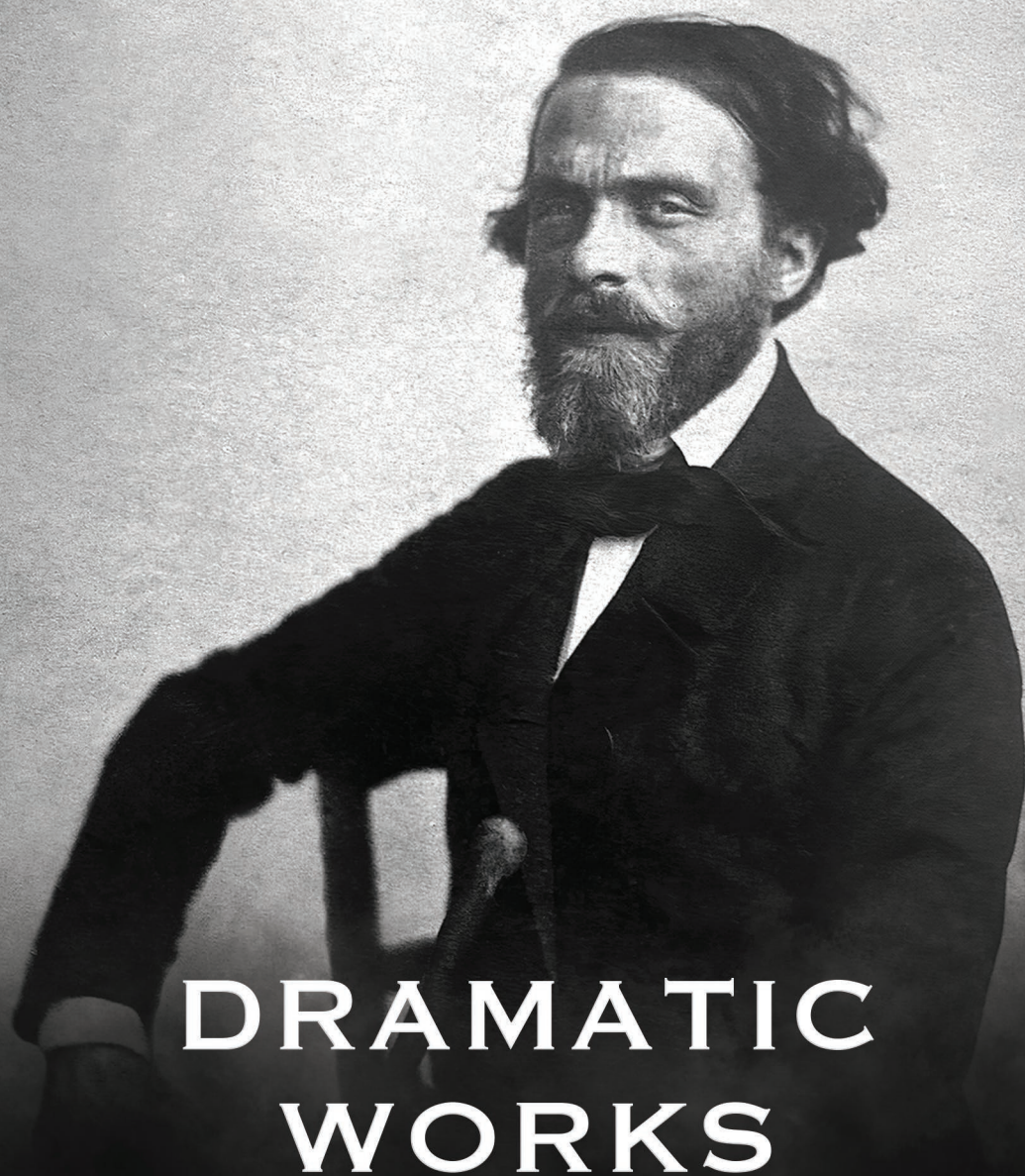


CYPRIAN KAMIL NORWID



DRAMATIC WORKS

TRANSLATED BY
CHARLES S. KRASZEWSKI

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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by Cyprian Kamil Norwid

Translated from the Polish and introduced by
Charles S. Kraszewski

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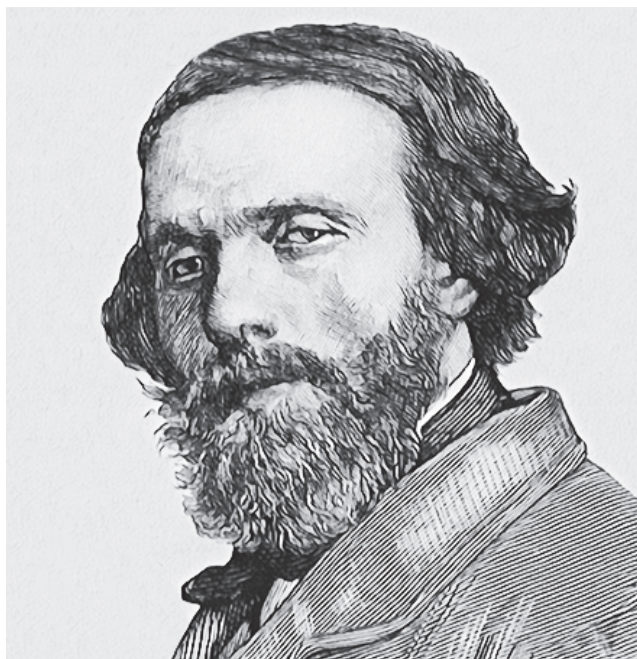




CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: INFURIATING AND SUBLIME. NOTES ON CYPRIAN KAMIL NORWID AND HIS THEATRICAL WORKS	7
A MOMENT OF THOUGHT	55
SWEETNESS	62
AUTO-DA-FE.	69
CRITICISM.	75
THE 1002ND NIGHT	80
ZWOLON	108
WANDA	169
KRAKUS, THE UNKNOWN PRINCE	196
IN THE WINGS	257
PURE LOVE AT THE SEA BATHS.	334
THE RING OF THE GRANDE DAME, OR <i>DUREJKO EX MACHINA</i> . . .	357
CLEOPATRA AND CAESAR	485
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 656
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	659
ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR	660





CYPRIAN KAMIL NORWID

(1821-1883)



INFURIATING AND SUBLIME

NOTES ON CYPRIAN KAMIL NORWID AND HIS THEATRICAL WORKS

Charles S. Kraszewski

Several weeks ago, when I was nearing the end of this translation, I met a friend of mine for coffee. As he too is a poet and translator, and above all, a Pole, he smiled knowingly when I mentioned that I was working on Cyprian Kamil Norwid's dramatic texts in preparation for the bicentennial of the poet's birth.

'What do you think of him?' he asked.

'I find him by turns infuriating and sublime,' I said, although, admittedly, I used some rather less diplomatic language in place of that first term, which I choose not to repeat here.

'Exactly,' he replied, with a laugh.

And this is the general reaction of Poles when confronted with Cyprian Kamil Norwid, the great, quirky, lonely individual talent of the second generation of Polish Romantics. He is a genius — there are moments... check that... actually hours or days of magnificence and brilliance in his work; there are also moments... or, to continue with the metaphor of time, let's say uncomfortable minutes, when his sublime genius outsoars our ability to follow. Norwid has a tendency to twist the Polish language into a form that, while it may — to him — more closely approximate exactly to what he wants to say, can be so strange that — to us — it becomes incomprehensible or (what is worse), cute.

The English reader thus has a firm walking staff with which to steady his tread as he sets out to cross the elevated, yet uneven terrain, of Norwid's poetic highlands — he already knows someone quite like him.

CYPRIAN KAMIL NORWID:
POLAND'S GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

When Robert Bridges brought out the collected poems of his deceased friend Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844 – 1889) in 1918, he did so, courageously, with a true poet's intuition for great writing. He also did it with trepidation. Bridges was the poet laureate — a position not attained by going against tradition — which is exactly what Hopkins did. Although he was blamed by some of the younger generations of early twentieth century poets for 'suppressing' Hopkins' work for so long, one cannot fault Bridges for his sensitivity to the capabilities of the wider public to digest the exotic fare prepared by the Jesuit poetic genius. One has grown accustomed to smirking at Bridges' apologetic warning to the reader concerning 'The Wreck of the Deutschland,' traditionally printed at the very beginning of Hopkins' works, as a 'dragon folded at the gate to forbid all entrance,'¹ but that is patently unfair. To switch to a culinary metaphor, Bridges is following soberly in the footsteps of St Paul, who in his letter to the Hebrews warned his auditors that they 'are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.'²

Again, our reference to Hopkins is not random. In nineteenth century Poland — or, rather, in the nineteenth century Polish diaspora — Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821 – 1883) traversed an artistic arc quite similar to that of his British near-contemporary. A serious Catholic, Christianity so forms the basis of Norwid's writings that, as Jan Ryszard Błachnio notes, he 'significantly influenced ... both methodologically and conceptually,' the formation of John Paul II's personalistic philosophy.³ As an artist, he was ahead of his time, departing from tradition, coining words as well as using words well-known in startling new contexts, just as Hopkins did in England.

In order to describe the world more precisely, the poet coined new words, or extracted latent meanings from words that already exist,

1 Cited by William Henry Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1844 – 1889: A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1948), Vol. 1, p. 40.

2 Hebrews 5:12.

3 Jan Ryszard Błachnio, *Polskie inspiracje i wartości w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II* [Polish Inspirations and Values in the Teaching of John Paul II] (Bydgoszcz: WSP, 1995), p. 68.

breaking them down into constituent portions or ‘coping’ words that were previously separate. As some scholars see it, Norwid was to the Polish language what Dante was to the Italian: ‘a translator of a theological language’ before professional theologians even set themselves to the task.⁴

The statement comparing Norwid to Dante may be true enough as far as their ‘theological’ content is concerned, but it would be an overstatement to carry the comparison into the literary field. For Dante, known and appreciated in his own time, whether loved or hated by his contemporaries, is also the chief creator of the modern Italian literary idiom itself. Norwid, on the other hand, like Hopkins in England, is indeed of seminal importance to the development of the contemporary poetics of his native speech, but only belatedly. Just as Hopkins had to wait, so to speak, nearly two decades after his decease to join the literary conversation in England and the English-speaking world, so Norwid, though befriending earlier poets of the Romantic generation such as Zygmunt Krasiński and Juliusz Słowacki and corresponding with Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, was generally unknown to the wider public in Poland until the chance discovery in 1897 (and thus, fourteen years after his death), of his work in a Vienna library by Zenon Przesmycki, who first went on to champion it. Ever since his adoption by the poets of the ‘Young Poland’ movement at the turn of the twentieth century, Norwid’s star has been in the ascendant. He is the darling of all aficionados of ‘challenging’ poetry; those who are fond of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, or the afore-mentioned Gerard Manley Hopkins, will probably be attracted to Norwid’s work; fans of the (forgive me) undemanding sort of poet like William Wordsworth or Robert Frost, or the Beats like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, will most likely find him a bit too arcane.

The above is not at all intended as a dismissive statement. There is much to be said in favour of clarity and simplicity in poetic expression; Pound himself once stated that ‘poetry must be as well written as prose,’⁵ and for those who see the Apollonian, or classical, approach to poetry

4 Szymon Babuchowski, in a promotional brochure on Norwid prepared by the Book Institute (Kraków, 2021).

5 Ezra Pound, *Selected Letters, 1907 – 1941* (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 48.

as something of an eternal standard, Norwid's approach could only be taken as a fad, or an aberration. This reputation has dogged Norwid since his earliest years. The neoclassical poet Kajetan Koźmian, who hosted Norwid in 1842 during the latter's trip through Kraków, noted this summation of the younger poet's talents in his *Memoirs* (posthumously published in 1865):

Carried on the winds of popular opinion [Albert Szeliga Potocki] raved about Norwid, a good and pleasant young man, whom I met personally, in my own home, where I hosted him for several days. But although he drew very prettily, he wrote in too incomprehensible a way. Warsaw was echoing at the time with cries such as 'Norwid, you eagle, your age is approaching!' Potocki sent me his poems, completely incomprehensible, along with effusions of praise. When I charged him with levity in his judgement [*płochosc w sądzie*] he began to squirm like a snake, admitting the justice of my charge to my eyes, while behind those eyes saying something else.⁶

The sort of thing that Koźmian finds 'incomprehensible' and many readers today find irritating, at least, is Norwid's penchant for creatively deforming the Polish language by the creation of new words, such as we find in his lyric poetry, like *wszechdoskonałość* ['universalperfection'] *niedośpiewana* ['unsungtotheend'] and *ożałobione* ['mourningshadowed'] all of which occur in one of his most famous poems, 'Fortepian Szopena' [Chopin's Grand Piano], being a lament for both Chopin's death, and the martyrdom of Warsaw at the hands of the Russians. Norwid gives free rein to his imagination in lyric poems — something that might be expected, taking into consideration the intimate nature of the genre, which, given the way communication occurs between poet and reader, may well embolden creative minds to striking linguistic experimentation shunned in other forms of literary composition. Readers of English poetry might be reminded here of E.E. Cummings at his best (or worst, depending on your point of view).⁷ In his dramatic works, Norwid

6 Cited by Kazimierz Wyka, *Norwid w Krakowie* [Norwid in Kraków] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1967), p. 71.

7 And not just in his poetry. Consider the following passage from his travel journal to the USSR, *Eimi*: hugest/(andtoadreamstreamlined)

coins words too. For one example, in Zwolon's poetic monologue in the play of the same name — modelled on the Great Improvisation from Mickiewicz's *Dziady* [Forefathers' Eve], Part III (and thus a lyrical monologue) the character employs the metaphor of multi-faceted life as a lyre, or chord, a metaphor which was a favourite of Norwid's. And here, the poet indulges in creative license with the phrase *pierwsza odśpiewa / całostrunna* (which we render as 'the former sings / striking all-strings').

The reader familiar with the Polish originals of these plays might well offer some other examples; the old-Slavic sounding title bestowed upon Prince Rakuz (in *Krakus*), *Władę-Tur*, a calque of ancient Slavonic roots signifying authority and the virile strength of a bull, is one that leaps to mind. However, in general, with a dramatist's intuition, Norwid eschews such verbal gymnastics in his plays. Drama is not only a collaborative genre, obviously, it also relies on the immediacy of verbal communication, and the natural tempo of stage action allows for precious little pausing on the receptors' part to puzzle out strange — if effective and rich — unfamiliar terms. As can be seen from his various introductions and initial *didascalia* to the plays, Norwid was concerned with their proper performance, whether he foresaw them as being staged, or read aloud by amateurs at social gatherings. In the introduction to *Cleopatra and Caesar*, he even goes so far as to warn the performers to pay special attention to the exigencies of metre, as in this poetic drama in blank verse they are deprived of the crutch of rhyme. Consequently, except where such was absolutely necessary — as in the case of the above-mentioned soliloquy from *Zwolon*, so strikingly similar, stylistically, to 'Fortepian Szopena' — I have generally smoothed over Norwid's coinages where they appear, for to retain them would run the risk of creating a preciousness not entirely present in the Polish originals.

As a matter of fact, Norwid himself realised the danger of too violent a racking of everyday speech. In *The Ring of the Grande Dame*, the rather unpalatable character of Judge Durejko is satirised by his grotesque devotion to 'purifying' the Polish language by replacing foreign loan-words, such as 'monologue,' with Slavic coinages like *sobo-słowienie*

locomotive-nakedly-floating-most-lazily- / who (throughhanoverstation) slid-whispering-extinction / and framed with / nie wychylać sie [sic] / omwierać [sic] drzwi / podczas biegu pociągu. E.E. Cummings, *Eimi* (New York: William Sloan, 1933), p. 3.

['selfspeaking'] — derived from the works of the 'national philosopher' Bronisław Trentkowski. Just as the fashion for re-Slavicising Polish ended almost as soon as it began (and Norwid knew this, and laughed at it), and Trentkowski is a rather forgotten figure today, so Norwid cannot be said to have had the same sort of linguistic impact on Poland as Dante had on Italy. What characterises much of his poetic idiom — such quirky word-builds as described above — was not accepted into common parlance, except for a brief, though marked, influence on poets of the Young Poland period. And this influence was indeed brief; it did not extend much past the *słopienie* ['wordcrooning'] of Julian Tuwim, and generally grates on the Polish ear today.

Despite all the boldness we usually associate with Cyprian Norwid, as a poet and a man, his great characteristic is modesty. He did not consider himself to be a lawgiver. In the strange unfinished drama *Za kulisami* [In the Wings], the play within this play, *Tyrtaeus*, written by the main character Count Omegitt, is whistled off the stage. Glücksschnell, the theatrical promotor who (for reasons unclear) accepted the drama for production, explains its failure as partially arising from the author's long absence from commerce with the living language of his nation:

In complete confidence, I would not conceal this from an interested party like yourself: by nature of his long and far-distant travels, he's lost the active native pulse that, on the one hand, lends a writer's language its peculiar strength, and on the other, incessantly fortifies his thought with the current needs of our society — and that is, I would say, what pleases... everyone.

If Norwid's poetic language — in these dramas or in his verse and prose — is taken into consideration, I feel that we would be hard put to consider it as a good example of the Polish current in his day. His older friend Zygmunt Krasiński, who most people would agree does not rise to the same level of poetic quality as Norwid, still has a rather limpid style in the prose he employs in his dramas. For example, consider this fragment from Krasiński's *Nieboska komedia* [Undivine Comedy] — an intricate condemnation of the Count's forefathers by the revolutionary Pankracy, as the two debate in the portrait-hung walls of the former's palace:

Oh, sure — praise to thy fathers and grandfathers on earth as in...
Yes, there's quite a lot to look at around here.

That one there, the Subprefect, liked to shoot at women among the trees, and burned Jews alive. — That one, with the seal in his hand and the signature, the 'Chancellor,' falsified records, burned whole archives, bribed judges, hurried on his petty inheritances with poison. — To him you owe your villages, your income, your power. That one, the darkish one with the fiery eye, slept with his friends' wives — that one with the Golden Fleece, in the Italian armour, fought — not for Fatherland, but for foreign pay. And that pale lady with the black locks muddled her pedigree with her squire — while that one reads a lover's letter and smiles because the sun is setting... That one over there, with the doggie on her farthingale, was whore to kings. — There's your genealogies for you, endless, stainless! — I like that chap in the green caftan. He drank and hunted with his brother aristocrats, and set out the peasants to chase deer with the dogs. The idiocy and adversity of the whole country — there's your reason, there's your power. — But the day of judgement is near at hand and on that day, I promise you, I won't forget a single one of you, a single one of your fathers, a single scrap of your glory!

Compare this to a direct address of similar length from the *Tyrtaeus* section of *In the Wings*. Laon, returning home, addresses his stepfather Cleocarpus:

To see you at rest, O my lord and my father, I don't know how fast I'd be able to urge my legs, but I was told at the Pnyx (something I might have surmised myself) that the debates at the Aeropagus on this pregnant night were to last long (as if they were ever any less weighty, any different). And so, in order not to be too far distant from your thoughts and wishes, I gladly accepted the call of my superiors to see to the men working at the port, to whom a free hand is proper, to the craftsmen who busy themselves with things which, if I may say so, are not completely unfamiliar to me. And there, like a fresh nut which, perfect in its roundness, sloughs off its heavy green coat when it is golden and ripe, thus did we slide into the waters of the sea a skilfully constructed, new Corinthian galley — not without the usual libations and the first gay turn around the harbour.

The first of these, that of Krasiński, reads smoothly, even in English translation, if I may be so bold to suggest; it is easy for us to suspend our disbelief and 'be there' in the chamber listening to the fierce exchange, following the ideas, not burdened at all by strained syntax. But Norwid's fragment? Did even the most pedantic son ever say 'Hi, Dad, sorry I'm late' with such density? In reading through this text we get lost among Laon's intricate tropes. It's a wonder that Cleocarpus knows what his stepson is trying to say, although he goes right on after this with a speech in praise of sailing and maritime commerce — which might well be placed exactly where it is in the play, and make just as much sense, if Laon's speech were completely excised. The reason for the discrepancy between these two works of the poet-friends? Krasiński, warts and all, has a fine ear for dialogue, and is able to create a believable, realistic verbal fencing match between the characters of Pankracy and Count Henryk (which we shall omit here, for considerations of space), no thrust or parry of which can be deleted without harming the whole. In Norwid's play, Laon and Cleocarpus deliver soliloquies, recognising the (unnecessary?) presence of one another merely by waiting for the other to finish his spiel before beginning his own.

Of course, it is not always thus with Norwid's plays. Passages from *Cleopatra and Caesar*, *Wanda*, *Zwolon*, *Krakus*, just about any of the plays here included, sparkle with polished repartee. We must also remember that *Tyrtaeus* is supposed to be a *failure* as a dramatic work, and whereas the conversation in the garden between Tyrtaeus and Egeina is brilliant, theatrically, the citation of Glückschnell's words above might well be a veiled 'note to self' by Norwid.

NORWID AND THE WORD

That said, one of the things that occurs to the reader of Norwid's plays is that there are few Polish poets, certainly none among the Romantics, who pay such close attention to the word and, what we might call for lack of a better term, communication theory. Before we make too great an authority of Glückschnell, we ought to remind ourselves what his character represents. Just as his name suggests, he is after fortune (*Glück*), and quick! (*schnell*). No artist himself, he is a promoter, eager to make money by pleasing the audience, hoping, for example, that the serious, failed tragedy of Omegitt's will not turn the audience away

before he can pull them back in with the snappy songs and witty sketches that are slated to follow it. He is not even a competent critic, since, as he admits to another character, he wishes to follow the vacuous popular French author de Fiffraque around a bit to learn from him ‘what we are to think and write’ about the play that he himself has chosen to produce. Glücksschnell sins at the other extreme: trafficking in pleasant banalities. Now, whereas plays, produced as they ought to be, on stage or in dramatic reading, do not afford the receptors much luxury to savour deeply every word presented by the *poeta doctus*, this brief exchange between Zwolon and a peremptory court official might be set forward as an example of the approach to the word that Norwid recommends:

GUARDSMAN

What do we have here? Are you casting spells,
Magician? Drawing runes and warlock wheels
On royal footpaths?

ZWOLON

With great calm.

Those are royal seals.

GUARDSMAN

What?!

ZWOLON

Royal seals. Look closely. Can’t you tell?

GUARDSMAN

No!

ZWOLON

The garden implements all bear that mark.

GUARDSMAN

Inspecting the impressions more closely.

Aha — I see...

ZWOLON

Like God's word. So it goes:

From quire to quire
It flows on ever higher,
And here it sparks, while there it bursts to flame,
And lower still, its fire
Cheers, and feeds the plain
Still lower with lush green.
And there's another might — of stone:
A stupid thing that hastes
About the ruts of waste
Where verdure is unseen
And so it mocks the truth with jibing splutter
And quire on quire slips down the crooked gutter.

Pause. He gazes at the sky.

It looks like we'll have rain again tomorrow.
Goodbye.

He moves off.

The Guardsman sees Zwolon standing near some odd impressions in the dust and jumps to a wild conclusion. Calmly, Zwolon has him look more closely; to pause, and consider the evidence presented before speaking; in short, to take the time to interpret the matter set before him, just as a reader, or critic, ought to bend over a text. The Guardsman — like most of Glückschnell's audience — is too impatient for that; he wants to consume and move on, not savour and delectate. The conclusion of this passage is a masterpiece of dramatic movement. Zwolon pronounces a brief sentence on 'God's word' — an example of dense, challenging poetry — and when he looks at the flummoxed face of the Guardsman, unable to deal with anything more complicated than pleasantries and hasty charges, he breaks off with a — banal — comment on the weather forecast and walks away.

Norwid is a poet who knows the weight of words. It is no coincidence that two of his most sympathetic characters, two queens: Wanda and

Cleopatra, in the plays that bear their names, have periods of silence, of keeping quiet, of not speaking, so long, as a matter of fact, that their subjects and intimates become unnerved. Sometimes, it is better to say nothing than to use speech improperly.⁸ In two of his plays, *Zwolon* and *Krakus*, the nineteenth-century Pole displays an uneasy sensitivity to the possible misuse of speech that predates George Orwell by over half a century. In the first of these, Zobor, a ruthless henchman of his absolute monarch, who hesitates not to bring negotiations to a satisfactory end by underhandedly slaughtering the other side, tells the scribe Stylec how he ought to approach recording what has just happened for posterity:

Describing victory,
Let your descriptions not be niggardly.
Use your imagination. Writing is
An art — these pages are clean canvases.
And as you write, show some liberality —
You are the one creating history —
Be as a trumpet: blaring, thundering,
And your inventions will become the thing
Itself. The writer's might is chthonic,
Creating... truth. Where would Achilles be
If not for some well-crafted histrionics?

He who controls the past, controls the present and the future as well — for sure. Rakuz, the brutal usurping prince of Norwid's retelling of the foundational myth of Wawel Castle in Kraków, establishes his own Ministry of Truth. First, he suppresses the historical record. When the cringing Szolom approaches him with his record of the final moments of the king's life, which contains no explicit decision regarding the succession to the crown of Kraków, Rakuz commands:

8 It is from here, I reckon, that we ought to start in any discussion of the silence of these two women, and not, as Kruszevska and Coleman (following Julian Krzyżanowski) suggest, from a far-fetched interpretation of 'Wanda's desperate plight [as] the plight of the artist in general, whom [Norwid] sees as eternally under bondage to Silence, forever unable to express the whole of what he feels.' Albina I. Kruszevska and Marion M. Coleman, 'The Wanda Theme in Polish Literature and Life,' *The American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1/2 (May, 1947): 19-35, p. 32.

You'll no more touch those writings. Give them here.
For all times in his treasury they'll be lain,
Despite the fact his will was none too clear,
And failed to indicate an heir by name.

Or, precisely *because* he failed to indicate an heir by name. If, in his *Undivine Comedy*, Zygmunt Krasiński predicted the class struggles that were to plague most of the twentieth century, in *Krakus* and in *Zwolon* Norwid prophesies the nefarious nature of totalitarianism. Consider how the exchange between Rakuz the usurper and his servile scribe develops following the lines just quoted:

SZOŁOM

When all a man's strength is well-nigh consumed,
He's like a candle as it's burning down —
By this you'll know the man who knows the runes:
For he can clarify, explain, expound —
O, for example, look here: see what I'd
Inscribed with my own hand next to those words:
'By this, clearly, Rakuz is signified,'
Although he was awaiting both young lords...

RAKUZ

Such things, if anyone, the runesman can
Unravel — false appearances from truth —
I do not seek the praise of any man.
The truth is my concern alone.

SZOŁOM

In sooth!

RAKUZ

And truth is...?

SZOŁOM

Ah, what is truth?

RAKUZ

Truth is a word.

Whatever you redact, don't hesitate
To bring to me...

Now, whereas Communism was little more than a word in the nineteenth century, totalitarianism has always been around, and the Warsaw native Cyprian Kamil Norwid was aware of how words can be used to affect, if not change, reality. Surely, the quip of Alexander Pushkin was known to him,⁹ who warned off Western Europeans from intervening in Poland's uprising against Tsarist Russia with his condescending description of the war for national liberation as a mere 'quarrel between brothers.'

But words can also be used as proper weapons, when they are in the service of truth. Krakus returns to Kraków and slays the dragon that Rakuz hardly dared approach, not with the strength of his arm, but by words, as the mystical Spring taught him during his rest in the Sapphire Grotto:

SPRING

Then no more sleep —
This wisdom keep
Ever present in your mind:
Poems can heal
And bite like steel.
Strike the dragon with such rhymes!

And here we have the true import of Norwid's writing: it is in service of something else, something beyond literature. *Chwila myśli* [A Moment of Thought], that early poem in dramatic form with which we open our collection, begins with a young man not understanding the anxiety that grips him. He wants to be a writer, but wonders if he has the talent to succeed as he would like, and if not, will he agree to be 'drawn and quartered' for money, writing the sort of things that the Glücksschnells of the world pay good money to produce, and good money to consume? What is he to do? The answer to his anxious queries in that cold garret comes with the cries of some children in the building: 'Mama, mama,

9 See T.J. Binyon, *Pushkin: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 2002), p. 364.

we're hungry! Give us bread!' Norwid is too good a writer to have light-bulbs popping over the character's head here; he is at first obtuse, responding to the cries of the hungry children with a clueless, self-centred thought: 'They suffer in the flesh, and I, in spirit.' Now, whether or not the sufferings of the soul can be as acute as those of the flesh, this is a rather cold and oblivious thing to say to the father of the children, who had just finished describing their plight in the winter. *A Moment of Thought* is exactly what its title suggests: a brief meditation that suggests rather than provides a developed answer to the dramatic conflict — in this case, what is the role, or even sense, of art in a world where hungry children freeze in winter? And although no definitive answer is given, one is certainly suggested: Whatever you do, whatever you busy yourself with, help others, if only you can. Norwid's youth is worried about becoming an author. But what does writing matter? What he should be worried about is being a good man.

In *Krytyka* [Criticism] another of these brief dramatic sketches in verse, a similar question is put to the eponymous character who has just denigrated the use of modern, northern European models for artworks depicting Biblical scenes. The Secretary of the journal for which the Critic writes counters with words that might be considered Norwid's own:

SECRETARY

One more question, if I may:

Now, is the goal of artworks to disguise

The word, or to reveal it to our eyes?

For truth is born each day; we're ever turning

A new page, and with care: we're ever learning

— Through nineteen centuries — that we're to seek

In each and every person that we meet,

Though they be deeply hidden — Cross and gall,

Nail-head and tomb and glory's ray, and all

The grand account of our salvation — stippled,

Shaded and bright, in both hale and cripple.

How else can virtue speak unto our heart?

Although the clueless Critic, satirised by Norwid, responds with his familiar 'What sense, in that case, has the critic's art?' the message of the

Secretary is as clear and simple as any parable from the New Testament: what is the 'truth' of an authentic setting, or a search for Middle Eastern / Semitic human types for Biblical paintings, in comparison to the truth defended by the Secretary: we are all of us children of God, and we are to see Christ in everyone we meet, not just those who look like Him on the outside. Norwid's critic would find a lot to object to in Gaugin's Tahitian Holy Families, while Norwid and his Secretary, on the other hand, would consider them greater than mere paintings: icons, which visually and immediately present a profound theological lesson concerning God's love for us, all of us, and the love and respect He expects us to have for one another.

NORWID, CRITICISM, AND TRUTH

Speaking of critics, in general, Norwid has few kind words to offer them. The master-builder Psymmachus sums them up thus in *Cleopatra and Caesar*:

O, there's no lack of critics, but the learned?
The competent ones? It's like aboard ship:
Those without sea-legs tumble to the rail
To bark into the waves... their morning meal.
So much for critics. They know how to clap
Or piss at one's foundations. Spasmatiks
With bladders full...

And in the play *In the Wings*, Norwid repeats the familiar canard of the critic as a failed writer — unable to be creative himself, he criticises the creativity of others. This argument, while it overlooks Samuel Johnson's *bon mot*, that one needn't be a joiner in order to tell when a table is crooked, is not the main philosophical reason behind Norwid's disdain for critics. It is, rather, their lack of charity. As he puts it in the brief introduction to *Krakus*:

Today's critics, dispossessed of that informality, simple, not to say Christian, which permits a person to respond directly to direct questions, are very defective in that first great virtue of brokering and mediating between works of literature and the readership.

One might think that they preserve unto themselves a mandate of *casual and persistent review and censorship*, at the cost, indeed, of readers to whom the chief principles and truth of the literary art are unfamiliar — and who thus are presented merely with the particular works or reputations of such persons as they have permitted to exist!

As Norwid sees it, the critic has a ‘sacred’ obligation to help those who need him, the readers as defined above, and not to use the texts they criticise in order to further their own agenda; pulling others down, so as to appear to be above them. It is the careful critic who is needed, one who patiently bends over the given text, and after sensitive study, is able to extract the one important thing from it, the truth, for those who can’t access it otherwise.

Here we find another point of contact with Hopkins. The critics castigated by Norwid are like the interpreters of Sibylline oracles: the truth is there, but they are unable to suss it out. In *Wanda*, after Rytyger tosses the chalice he’d been drinking from into the woods, and an aerie of eagles take wing, the German runesmen opine:

The queen shall fall in love, and with such might
Not seen since ages hoary.
Four eagles, at your throw, took flight.
Great shall be her glory.
She’ll fall in love, and bathe her body white.

Ironically, their interpretation is correct, but in the most essential sense, they get it all horribly wrong. Wanda shall fall in love indeed — but with her nation, not with Rytyger. She will bathe her body white, but not in preparation for her nuptials, rather, she will cast herself into the Vistula, self-immolating in Christ-like fashion, to save her people the Wiślanie, and, by extension, Poland, from becoming subsumed into the German element through an unconsidered marriage to the German prince.

The truth is a slippery thing, but it is perceptible to those who follow it with humility. This is effectively borne out in that scene from *Wanda*’s twin Cracovian tragedy, *Krakus*. When Krakus, spurned and wounded by his own power-hungry brother and left in the forest, returns incognito to deal with the dragon plaguing the royal castle of Wawel, he finds his

brother Rakuz, exhausted with watching, asleep in a chair. Gazing at him tenderly, from the new heights of his sublime, mystical enlightenment, Krakus whispers: 'Mere presence at the crucial hour — what dare / Man hazard without peace, conscience, and prayer?' Thinking to approach his brother, he decides better of it — let him rest, worn out, as Krakus mistakenly infers, with weeping for their dead father — and goes off to slay the dragon. The ironic thing is that these very same words were on the lips of Rakuz just before he dozed. However, he continues them, confessing that they are 'Three things, of which [he's] never had the pleasure / Of personal acquaintance...'

The truth, like our conscience, is inborn in all of us. That is what is suggested by this curious repetition. What we *do* with the truth makes all the difference, in our own lives, and in the life of the world, to say nothing of our eternal destiny. Norwid here is dramatically presenting the lesson given us on faith by St James. Faith? Without works? 'Thou believest that there is one God. Thou dost well: the devils also believe and tremble.'¹⁰

NORWID AND THE DANTEAN APPROACH TO LITERATURE

At the base of Norwid's writing is the Christian conviction that this life is not all there is, that happiness in this life is not man's supreme aim, and that the eternal destiny of man, which is a gift from God, also carries with it responsibilities. This is what, in shorthand, we might call the Dantean tradition, after its greatest literary practitioner, although it can be found, of course, before the *Divine Comedy* and after, as it stretches into our own day — in the works of T.S. Eliot and Jan Zahradníček, to give but two examples. And so, in *Zwolon*, while Norwid does not push aside ideas of justice here and now (his 'improvisation' on the two colours — red and white — is a yearning for a just and free Poland) it is not something that should be fought for at all costs. There are more important considerations. The character of Szołom, whom we meet up with in *Krakus* as well as here,¹¹ is a stirrer-up of strife, a person playing

¹⁰ James 2:19.

¹¹ More precisely, we meet up with the name, and a character so similar as to be the same person. For *Krakus* is set in the early mediaeval period, and *Zwolon* seems to have a contemporary, nineteenth-century setting. This makes the

two sides of the same game for his own benefit, or, worse, the benefit of the destructive powers of the air. It is for this reason that, after the defeat of the rebels, when Szolom is skipping round Zwolon, seeking to engage him in conversation, alternatively fawning over and tempting him (if subtly), Zwolon first ignores him, and at last asks him ‘what is your name?’ — approaching the character as an exorcist might. Szolom, ‘bound,’ reveals his name (he is a servant of Spirit — but which ‘Spirit?’) and disappears.

Again, it’s not enough to recognise the truth; one must also use it, correctly. Gaius Valerius, in the dramatic poem *Słodycz* [Sweetness] is not necessarily an evil man. He keeps Julia Murtia imprisoned not because he is a sadist deriving pleasure from tormenting her. Rather, he is busied with an experiment: he has heard of these Christians, and wants to find out what makes them tick:

Should I declare her Christian, she’s undone.
She’s executed and... what would I have won?
Will that in some way heighten my control
Over her? Or will it transform her soul
Into a flower (if Plato is proved
Correct) — and if so, can a flower be moved?
[...]
... Where do these Christians get that inner strength?
I’ve seen troops hopelessly beset, veterans
Of ancient legions; I’ve known gladiators...
It’s something more than bravery —

He’s not after her death, he’s after understanding. However, when that opportunity is presented to him, in a dream, when St Paul appears to him, he reveals his true colours:

Old man — you, in that cloak of red you wear,
Barefoot, with flashing sword there at your side

repeated use all the more intriguing, as it suggests a type of person — a family; in *Krakus* Szolom himself refers to the generations of his kind — and thus, the persistent endurance of evil and servility eating at society throughout all time, like a cancer.

Where we've but dark and empty pleats, who cried
That I might be entangled too — speak on!
I'm listening...

ST PAUL

In Gaius Veletrius' dream.

The grace over which none
Of your fierce tormentings can prevail
I can give you — and with it, you might heal.
But why do you seek it?

GAIUS VELETRIUS

Quickly, unconsciously.

So I might overcome
Her!

ST PAUL

Touching Gaius Veletrius' shoulder with the point of his sword.

Julia Murtia has died.

He sought it not for his own salvation, or to become one with her. He sought it as some unvanquishable talisman, with which he might overcome her — and in the end she overcomes him, by escaping in death to a greater freedom than he can imagine; a freedom he himself will never taste at his own passing, since he refused the one opportunity afforded him to grasp it. His death will lead to a deeper prison than hers in the Vestals' gaol. For we live in an eternal moment of decision — as Eliot will say, each of our acts, however trivial, is a moral decision, for good or evil, with eternal consequences. The thrust of Norwid's dramatic works, like the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, is to prompt us to choose wisely, so that we should not end up like his Roman high priest.

NOTES ON THE INDIVIDUAL PLAYS

Though I hope not to become another Glücksschnell, who would tell the reader 'how we are to judge and how we are to write about' the plays included in these *Dramatic Works* of Cyprian Kamil Norwid, I still would like to present a few short paragraphs on each of them, so as to set them in a more particular context than the general thoughts we have presented so far.

THE SHORTER WORKS

For most Poles, Norwid is above all a lyric poet. He seems to have approached the theatre with timid steps, as, in our chronological arrangement, we note that the first four plays are short sketches — scenes or tiny dramas (a genre initiated among the Slavs by Pushkin with his *Little Tragedies*), which can just as well be considered lyric poems in dramatic form,¹² as small dramas in verse: *A Moment of Thought*, *Sweetness*, *Auto-da-fé* and *Criticism*.

The Christian themes present in Norwid's poetry, which we have noted above, can already be found in these first tentative dramatic sketches. Not only is *Sweetness* a story of Christian patience *usque ad sanguinem*, but *A Moment of Thought* is as well, even though it does not end with a definitive picture of the Youth's next step, concludes with an expression of the sense of the universe, which indicates the path that will lead him to his answer:

We've still learned nothing. Nothing but the cross
That stretches wide its arms old folks to greet,
The youth to bless, and, bending through the rent
Clouds, peers to spell out from the children's eyes
Whether these ribbons, which so thickly flow
Will be worth anything? Or disappear?
No! They won't disappear. For deep inside
As long as — in thought, not in screams — grows

12 Or 'Romantic lyrical scenes' [lyrischen Szene der Romantik], as J. Łuczak-Wild terms them, following Gomulicki. See J. Łuczak-Wild, 'Polnische Norwidiana 1945 – 1969: Teil II,' *Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1971): 153-226, p. 159.

Pain, it shall burst into bloom, a thorny bow
To ply the heartstrings of all who live below!

As individual as Norwid is, he does emerge from a tradition that cannot but leave its mark on him. The tradition to which I refer here is not just Christian culture, but the works of the first generation of Polish Romantics. In Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve*, Part III, the Promethean hero Konrad learns that, even if we cannot fly before the throne of God to solve the problems of the world, we can make the world a slightly better place by small acts of charity. His selling of his signet ring as he heads off into exile in Russia, with half of the proceeds to go to the poor, and half for Masses on behalf of the souls suffering in Purgatory, is a concrete act of charity which outweighs by a thousandfold all the bombastic cosmic plans of saving his nation, which are doomed to failure from the start. Norwid learns from this, as here, his hero slowly comes to understand that our mere sensitivity to suffering prods us to ask questions and try to help others, and this, like Konrad's humble gift of his ring, is sometimes quite enough.

A Moment of Thought is a work in which the main character asks himself what can fame, and writing itself, be worth in a world so full of human suffering. This questioning of the sense of writing (when there are so many more important things to do) is part of a current of self-criticism that runs through Norwid's plays. It is taken up in *Auto-da-fé*, in which the main character, a writer named Protazy, uses books as kindling. At one point, considering the glut of printed works in the world (one can only wonder what he would think of our days of print-on-demand and electronic self-publishing!), he muses:

I don't understand
This strange world any more. Each writer sets
A pen in his wife's mouth; talking with friends
He thinks: 'There's a new page!' And off he jets
To write it down. Men are no longer ends
In themselves, but merely means to spill some ink!
And for what? For a plasma ball that sparks,
Spitting some dim electrodes in the dark.

Writers, he suggests, are so in love with writing, that it elbows out *living*. People are not to be loved, experiences are not to be savoured, they are all but the raw material of literature. It's hard not to agree that books written in this fashion are better tossed into the stove than set on the shelf.

This thought, too, is derived from an earlier work, the *Undivine Comedy* of Norwid's older friend Zygmunt Krasiński. There, Count Henryk, a poet, is so enamoured of the make-believe world of the poetic ideal, that he drives his real family — a real wife and a real son — into tragedy on account of his mania. Norwid's Protazy, unlike Count Henryk, is clear-eyed. Though he may have his own problems to deal with in respect to how he treats people (and how he thinks of himself) his burning of the books seems an almost subconscious desire on Norwid's part to put art in its place.

Yet it is not only poets and writers who are to blame here. In *Criticism*, Norwid sounds a theme that he will repeat in *Auto-da-fé*: critics and readers rarely approach a book on its own merits. Rather, they seek out works, authors, and themes which validate their own way of thinking. In the former, the critic responds to criticism of his assessment of a book, which he judged not on its artistic merits, but on the 'lesson' it presents:

CRITIC

What? Virtue

Is not sufficient for a worthy book?

SOMEONE

Perhaps, but, for a work of fiction? Look —

Would you call that a novel, or a chart

Of your own views?

CRITIC

What else is the critic's art?

And in the latter, Protazy, again:

As the lightning splits the air,
Leaping great distances to spread its light,
So, people say, is print. They may be right,
But when a person takes a book back home

And sits down on his chair or in his bed
To slice through page-ends with his knife, instead
Of reading, he but searches for his own
Thoughts in the author's words, which, should he find,
He's satisfied. This reader is a kind
Of writer, but a lazy one; from this,
It's plain to see that readers... don't exist!

In this, the little dramas are most similar to dramatised lyrics: there is not space enough for too many themes; most often, it is one thought, one idea, that the poet seeks to delve into with a pithy directness.

THE 1002ND NIGHT

This early play, a comedy, is one of Norwid's few completely finished works for the stage. With it, he introduces a motif that will accompany his dramatic writing to the very end: that of a hidden truth, masquerading, concealment. On the one hand, this reveals Norwid to be a very nineteenth-century artist, naively operatic, in the manner of Mozart/Da Ponte's *Marriage of Figaro* or Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

The Count (why are these people always counts?) believes that the mysterious woman who has arrived at the inn where he is staying in Verona is the same one who, as he understands it, rejected his proposal of love in a very insulting way — by sending him a letter that ends with 'and here's my reply —' which reply is his own letter, returned to him. (We pass by the fact that a proposal of love sent to a woman *by letter* is itself a rather clumsy thing, if not adolescent). The woman wishes to look out on a storm from the window of the room occupied by the Count, in which she once stayed herself, and the Count plans on taking his revenge by hiding in the closet and then leaping out to confront her and her supposed husband when they arrive:

I — shall emerge, calmly, coldly — no exaggerations — and ask her to introduce me to her husband. I'll fill in whatever she leaves out... with a smile... And then I'll wish her *bon voyage*...

We'll change the play into a still, deep, drama, or a casual comedy... at any rate... *alea iacta est*...

Some Caesar! At this point, we are beginning to wonder if the Count is fourteen...

He will confront her with... the second half of her letter, which she, distractedly, left in that very room, and which he — by improbable coincidence — found there... And yet Norwid shows a surprisingly mature theatrical sensibility by veering the story left at the very last moment. For when the Count leaps out crying triumphantly 'A masterpiece of recklessness...!' his voice dies off in embarrassment, for — the woman is a complete stranger. The masterpiece of recklessness turns out to be not the letter 'she' wrote him, but the *opera buffa* trap he laid. And thus, a play which seemed to be rolling in the well-oiled grooves of convention, with improbabilities that do not necessarily arise in a logical fashion, and melodramatic elements such as the closet-trap, are completely destroyed. Melodrama becomes absurdity, and in a way that underscores the primacy of unpredictable, real life over the contrived imagination that wishes to control it.

ZWOLON

If we were providing more than just the titles of the plays for dividers in these notes, here we would probably have something like 'Zwolon, or a Guided Tour of the Polish Romantic Stage.' For it is in this unfinished drama — still perhaps the most intriguing of Norwid's works for the stage — where the great, idiosyncratic poet uncovers to our eyes the sources of his inspiration. *Zwolon* contains so many palpable allusions to the theatrical works of Mickiewicz, Słowacki, and Krasiński, topped off with Byron, as to seem something of a show-piece of a virtuoso musician, setting forth the range and variety of his skills.

It is a veritable anthology of influences.¹³ We have a meeting of conspirators under the leadership of a timid *cénacle* chief such as we find in Słowacki's *Kordian*, a blind boy-poet of the Orcio type (an allusion to Krasiński's *Undivine Comedy* — although, it seems, this blind boy is not doomed to fade away; he triumphs in the end), a nod to the very roots of the great-souled Byronic traditions with the addition of a sardonic character named Harold, and — most tellingly — a long

13 Kazimierz Braun speaks of 'mannerism.' See Kazimierz Braun, 'Poetycki teatr Norwida' [Norwid's Poetical Theatre], in Ingłot, 359-376.

soliloquy spoken by the main character, Zwolon, which is a clear homage to the greatest improvisations of the Polish Monumental stage: Kordian's soliloquy on Mont Blanc and — of course, the greatest of them all — Konrad's fierce, despairing (and wrongheaded) diatribe against God in Part III of *Forefathers' Eve*.

However, Norwid's Zwolon differs from the romantic heroes such as Konrad and Kordian in this, that *he is not a rebel*. This should not be misunderstood as to suggest that Norwid was any sort of loyalist. Nothing can be farther from the truth. Norwid was no less an advocate of national self-determination, yearning after the independence of partitioned Poland, than the great Romantics, whose exile from the fatherland he shared. But whether it be because Norwid came of a later generation that witnessed (as a child and as an adult) two armed uprisings end in tragedy, or because of his authentic Christian faith, which, while not necessarily quiescent or pacifistic, preferred the arms of the Spirit to those produced by armament factories, he longs for the reconquest of Polish independence through victory in the moral struggle. And so, to give but one lyrical passage from Zwolon's 'great improvisation,' striking in its similarity to the more exalted bits of 'Chopin's Grand Piano' with its longing for a Poland of 'transfigured wheelwrights,' where Christ rules 'incarnate upon Tabor,' Norwid's hero exults in a mystical vision of his country:

From her I lived, and lived with her. Her I now wish to see
So perfect, and full of being, to be
Like the nation's eagle, in a flash, like a young thing
Of another world... leading the rushing throng,
And psalter-in-hand, leading the nation in song!
Like streaming choruses, with rhythm angelic,
Aquiline, lyric,
From Lech to Lech the national glory
And she, with outstretched hand, toward the wings falling there,
Gathering from the air
The echoes of history,
That might tangle-twine in wreaths, of this land!...

Again, this is not quiescence by any measure. Norwid castigates evil directly where he finds it, and the very fact that the revolutionary party

succeeds in violently overthrowing the unnamed, quasi-tyrannical king at the conclusion of the play is evidence enough of his understanding that, yes, at times, violence can be justified (as in a just war) to achieve moral aims. But just as the definition of a just war requires a careful ascertainment of war aims before the battle is joined, so in *Zwolon* Norwid cautions the hotheads against mistaking simple adrenaline and bloodlust for righteous ire. After the chilling character Bolej is introduced, who cannot sleep because of his desire to slash and kill and burn, Zwolon appeals to the crowd:

ZWOLON

Gesturing at Bolej.

This young man, nourished, as he says, on gore,
Is no son of freedom — he's nothing more
Than judgement's slave. And you, and those
Beneath that flag unfurled — which of you knows
Exactly what it means?

SZOŁOM

Traitor! Be gone!
His words would douse the ardour of the throng!

ZWOLON

Citizens! Citizens — but of what state?
The fatherland, or despair?

SOME

Ah — hear him prate!

ZWOLON

For I'm not sure — you're rushing off to die;
Is there any among you fit to seek
Life? Everyone would die for freedom's sake,
As if only the tomb were liberty,
And any sort of perishing, the gate
To immortality. Ah, but revenge

And liberty — these are quite different ends!
And often, when the two are so entwined,
And vengeance is achieved, avengers find
They've lost their freedom...

The argument is both practical and Christian. Practical, in that one can never tell whether violence may not lead to even greater oppression (of which the recent history of Norwid's Poland offered ample evidence) and Christian, in that it reminds the mob of the fact that their enemies are people too. The laws of God must always be respected, especially in cases where one finds oneself in a desperate situation that calls for violent action. In other words, there are things even more important than national independence. This sentiment veers quite near heresy in the ears of the earlier generation of Polish Romantics, and it is no surprise that Zwolon's words not only fall on deaf ears, they arouse the people against him — and this will eventually lead to his death.

Norwid's Zwolon, again, is no Byronic rebel. He is, rather, a prophetic spokesman of Christian truth — a representative of the King of Kings, the Order of all orders, against which Mickiewicz, boldly and beautifully, had his Konrad arise on behalf of justice for the nation he loves.

Zwolon's diametrical opposite in the play is the character named Szołom. Just as Zwolon's name suggests his character as one 'called, elected,' so does that of Szołom, from the verb *oszołomić* ['stun, bewilder,' by extension: 'lead astray by obfuscation'], aptly summing up the character of this figure, who appears in Norwid's works like the wandering Jew. In both this play and the later *Krakus*, Szołom is a servile tool of power, more than willing to set aside morality in order to serve a strongman. In *Zwolon*, his character is that of an agent provocateur: he stirs up the rabble to their rebellion in order to give the King an excuse to set his realm in iron order by moving strongly against an uprising. It is significant that, towards the end of the play, when everything seems to have gone wrong for him, the rat leaps from the sinking ship. Coming across Zwolon, he starts to skip round him with blandishments:

SZOŁOM

In travelling attire.

What have they won for us? Ruins on all sides,
Great man — blood, shame, and poverty, and waste!
In vain I begged, yes, in vain I cried
‘Brothers! I like not the look on their faces,
Those fighting boys!’ Destruction and disgrace!

Pause. He continues following the silent Zwolon, peering continually into his eyes.

There was more courage by far in negation
Than in stoking just ire into the elation
Of bloody vengeance! Knowledge directs lives
Better than swords — a mere temptation
For children! What are swords? Are kitchen knives
Not made of the same steel? And so, why not
Make flags of tablecloths, with which to march
To cheering crowds through a triumphal arch
For having nobly with a pork-chop fought?

Pause. Szolom continues to skip at Zwolon’s side, glancing up at his face beneath the brim of his hat.

Am I not right, sir? Wise men know it’s all
Spirit, yes, the Spirit’s what it’s all about!
But those men! They’re unlearned — like some pagan rout!
And in the end, upon the learned falls
The blame, and we, what can we do but bear it?

With a sad gesture, he halts Zwolon.

So let us suffer. Meanwhile, in that spirit,
I bid farewell to you.

ZWOLON

Tell me your name.

SZOŁOM

Dodging aside.

Szołom, a servant of the Spirit.

What is worth pointing out here is not so much the cringing nature of Szołom as Zwolon's calm, though stern, engagement with the lackey. As mentioned above, 'Tell me your name' is an allusion to the rite of exorcism. Commanded to reveal his identity, the demonic spirit (what 'Spirit,' indeed, does a wretch like Szołom serve?) falls under the control of the exorcist, who moves on to expel him. Szołom's sudden disappearance after telling his name — even though he previously announced his desire to leave, after his attempt at self-justification — sets this scene in the context of the exorcism of Mickiewicz's Konrad by Fr Piotr. And once more, the distinction between Norwid's Christian hero and the rebels of the earlier Romantics is set in high relief.

THE KRAKÓW PLAYS

In 1842, on his way to further artistic studies in western Europe, Norwid passed through Kraków. As Kazimierz Wyka tells us:

Such a journey of several months constituted the realisation of the programme of the Romantic grand tour [...] Due to different political conditions, this programme could be realised by the first generation of Polish Romantics [such as Mickiewicz, Słowacki and Krasiński...] in a manner different to that in which it was by the second romantic generation, to which Norwid belonged. [...] The former were still capable of truly grand romantic voyages — one example of which is presented by the second act of *Kordian*: Italy, Rome, London, Mont Blanc. [...] The Romantics at home in Poland could not indulge in such journeys because of political concerns — ever-present police observation, the necessity of obtaining a foreign passport, and also monetary worries. [...] All that remained in place of this was to

wander about the country. [...] A trip through Poland, however, had its own justifications and nomenclature. Because Romanticism awakened lively interest in the historical past of the country as well as the material relics and other testimonies to that history — called *the fatherland's antiquities* — these journeys were known as ‘travels into antiquity.’¹⁴

No other region of Poland presented the ‘traveller into antiquity’ with so many witnesses and relics to the historical past of Poland than Kraków. The mediaeval core of the city, crowned by Wawel, that royal necropolis and treasury, as well as traditions such as the Lajkonik, impressed Norwid to such an extent that, in Wyka’s estimation, he becomes the first of a long line of Cracovian poets, including Wyspiański, Czyżewski and Gałczyński, who poeticised the city and its celebrations.¹⁵

Among the relics in the region of Kraków are the ancient mounds of Krak and Wanda. These neolithic tumuli have been associated from ancient times with the pre-Christian rulers of the Wiślanie: Wanda, who rejected the hand of a German prince in order to guarantee the national autonomy of her people, and Krak, who founded the city that bears his name after overcoming a dragon laying waste to the surrounding countryside. These mounds inspired Norwid so, that he not only created two of his most successful, and complete, dramas, *Wanda* and *Krakus, the Unknown Prince*, but dedicated the first, in gratitude — not to any person, but to the mound of Wanda itself! This very fact opens our eyes to his spiritual kinship with Wyspiański, who also testified to his love of the ‘stones’ of Kraków. As Wyka points out, ‘After all, both of these compositions close with an apotheosis of place, apotheoses played out in a manner that cannot but have attracted Wyspiański, as they are in such great agreement with his own theatrical imagination.’¹⁶

14 Wyka, pp. 35-36.

15 Wyka, p. 24. Wyka also reminds us that had Wyspiański succeeded in obtaining directorship of the Municipal Theatre in Kraków, he planned to inaugurate his initial season with none other than Norwid’s *Wanda* (p. 86). Of course, the great poet of Young Poland also created his own plays based on the Wanda myth: *Legenda* and *Legenda II*.

16 Wyka, p. 82.

Who can say if Wyspiański's great theatrical triumph *Acropolis* — in which there are no human characters, but only vivified statues and tapestries from the Wawel palace and cathedral complex, to say nothing of the enlivened tomb of St Stanisław, which (or 'who?') falls upon King Bolesław Śmiały in Wyspiański's retelling of that conflict — would have come about, if it were not for the anthropomorphosised characters of the Threshold and the Spring, who play such a key role in the mystical scenes of *Krakus*?

This play, which, as Norwid himself notes, forms a dramatic diptych with *Wanda*, provides us with a glimpse into the poet's theoretical musings. In his introduction to *Krakus*, Norwid defines tragedy thus:

As far as I am personally concerned, I believe tragedy to be *the making apparent of the fatal nature of history, society, the nation, or the age proper thereunto*. Consequent to this definition, it plays an auxiliary role in the progress of morality and truth. For this reason, it is no wonder at all that tragedy could, and indeed had to, be possessed of an almost ritual gravity.

These words should be borne in mind when considering Krakus' triumph over the dragon — defined by the elderly Hermit (a nod, again, towards Słowacki's *Balladyna*) as a progeny of 'the first snake, by Virgin's foot / [...] crushed; / your dragon's merely an offshoot / Of that first evil', where, it is not with steel, but with grace and virtue — and song — and truth — that the victory is won:

KRAKUS

Song.

Come forth! Now! By the faith of faiths
I conjure you, who gnaw the soul —
Your spell is gone with your last breaths;
My spell, it is no spell at all!

God knows how much sin, foul and black
Impels me here to sling this word

Into your face — my only sword
This lyre; this song — my only act —

My song is now no song at all!

Although this play is set in the ancient pagan past, and we do not witness Krakus' baptism, it is the 'faith of faiths' — Christianity — that triumphs over the enemy of all mankind, the devil; Rakuz, who remains in paganism (even after the victory over the dragon) is not only impotent in face of the evil, but *becomes* the evil after the death of the dragon by his jealous murder of his own brother. Krakus, who slays the snake, triumphs as a Christian hero.

Likewise, Wanda, a princess of an even earlier age than Krak, does not merely commit suicide in order to avoid an unwelcome marriage; in Norwid's retelling of the story, at the key moment of the drama, she is granted a vision of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary, and this indicates to her what she is to do. Her death is not a suicide, it is a sacrifice on behalf of the good of her people, and thus raises her to the dignity of a Christian martyr:

WANDA

My good people — I've seen above our land
God's immense shadow, like a straight road, run;
It was but the shadow of His hand,
And that hand — pierced — for through the palm the sun
Shone unimpeded... Staring like a bird
Flying in darkness toward that chink of light,
Suddenly, something in my spirit stirred
To a sure knowledge of what I must do...

*She takes a candle from the hand of Piast, and ascends the pile.
Then, more quietly:*

The knowledge that I must now... die for you...

I don't think we'd be going too far if we were to suggest that her dramatic, fatal plunge into the Vistula, as presented in Norwid's play, could be read as a sort of baptism.

At any rate, considering Norwid's definition of tragedy as the '*making apparent of the fatal nature of history, society, the nation, or the age proper thereunto*,' we would be hard pressed to find better examples of the philosophy behind Norwid's poetics: his conviction that the nature of his nation, Poland, is Christian — and that that Christian nature of the country should determine the behaviour of Poles, in all situations with which they are faced, at all crossroads, where they are to take a decision.

IN THE WINGS; TYRTAEUS

Formally speaking, Norwid's *In the Wings* is arguably his most ambitious stagework. In an oeuvre dominated by disguise and hidden identities — let us add to the catalogue the King and Szołom's various disguises in *Zwolon*, employed to facilitate free movement among circles inimical to them, and Krakus' disguise as the 'hooded saviour' upon his incognito return to Kraków — *In the Wings* takes questions of hidden identity to an extreme. The play is set one evening during a masquerade, where everyone is disguised and not necessarily recognisable to one another; it is set in a Poland dominated by various secret societies and competing police agencies, all of which have their spies circling among the crowd, dressed as waiters; finally, there is the matter of *Tyrtaeus* itself, presented as a play by an anonymous author (which turns out to be Count [again, a Count!] Omegitt), within the context of the masquerade. So, in the audience, we are watching a play unfold on stage (the masquerade), during which the characters move off to another hall to watch the play *Tyrtaeus* (and so, where is reality in this *mise-en-abîme* of stages and plays?). As if this were not confusing enough, when we ourselves finally see a fragment of *Tyrtaeus* played out before us, the characters of Omegitt's Greek play enter the stage when Omegitt, exhausted, lays down to rest in the early morning. And so, one more Chinese box: are we watching a play, or witnessing a character's dream? To muddy the waters further, Omegitt's servant seems to have taken note of the presence of these ancient characters, too...

In the Wings is a problematic work, not only because it is unfinished. It seems as if here Norwid's reach exceeded his grasp, and, failing to create the gigantic, epic masterpiece he envisioned, what remains is less successful than had he parcelled out his ideas into a few, smaller works of less ambitious scope.

That said, even the less successful products of genius are well worth our regard, and in this implied questioning of reality and pretence we find something truly remarkable. That Norwid intended to confront his receptors with the matter of what is true and what is fool's gold in us and in our world can be intimated from the opening introductory scenes, where Quidam (a sage guide not entirely unlike Zwolon) uncovers to the 'Traveller's' eyes (Omegitt) the shabby truth that lies beneath the gaudy exterior of things:

TRAVELLER

What do you mean, modern? Modern, how...? This multi-coloured African marble, the slim Lombard columns? They don't make any more marble like this...

QUIDAM

Indeed they do. That's nothing but brick plastered over and painted.

TRAVELLER

That rectangular capital, carved with pious chisel by some master stonemason of the twelfth century?

QUIDAM

Was poured of zinc, one of a mass of factory-produced copies from the same mould, and subsequently gilded by a galvanising process. A structure such as what you look upon is built, these days, in the space of eight months.

'Is there no longer man or woman here, but mere phenomena of coincidental custom and the technical balance of the senses...?' Omegitt cries, at a key moment in his play. Thus, *In the Wings* can be considered a play of uncoverings. I would rather use the word 'discoveries' here, but one of the things we come away with upon finishing our lecture of this unfinished play is — the layers have not been peeled away sufficiently anywhere, to uncover an unvarnished truth to our eyes. Omegitt's question remains unanswered. Are all the people he deals with throughout the evening we witness, mere behavioural automatons, programmed by cultural mores? Or are there at least some real 'men and women' among them?

One of the ‘peelings away’ happens very much in the vicinity of Omegitt. At the beginning of the play, he is to be engaged to Lia. At the end of the play, she returns his ring to him and marries someone else — what’s more, a Russian. Has she made a mistake, or was the ‘reality’ of Omegitt revealed to her eyes so, that she can now wipe the sweat from her brow at the bullet of fate missing her by centimetres? We cannot know — and never will, since the work is unfinished. One would not wish to consider Norwid a proponent of modern ideas such as the relativity of truth, or the impossibility of man to arrive at any objective knowledge. However, in its present form, *In the Wings* seems to suggest just that: we cannot know anything for sure. On this earth, at least, we are always ‘in the wings,’ never at centre stage, under the harsh glow of truth.

THE DRAWING ROOM PLAYS

Thus, generically at least, would we group the finished *Miłość czysta u kąpieli morskich* [Pure Love at the Sea-Baths] and *Pierścień wielkiej damy* [The Ring of the Grande Dame], two works revolving around the proper crystallisation of male and female attraction, the course of which, as the saying goes, never runs smooth. However, in both plays, everyone ends up where they ought to be, at least ostensibly, and here we run into a little problem. For, while *Pure Love at the Sea-Baths* is subtitled by Norwid ‘A Comedy’ — as indeed it is, in both an Aristotelian sense, and in the modern sense of a work producing smiles, if not belly-laughs, with *The Ring of the Grande Dame*, Norwid wished to create some new genre for the stage, which he calls a *biała tragedia* — a ‘white tragedy.’

How this work might be considered a ‘tragedy’ at all is a quandary. The lovelorn Mac-X achieves his goal, at last, of betrothing the Countess Harrys (Yes. Another peer); he does *not* shoot himself, as he had planned, and Count (how tiresome) Szeliga, who was also obsessed with Countess Harrys, finds happiness in the end with her companion Małgorzata, who, it turns out, was a kindred soul to him all along. Even Judge Durejko, who seemed rather a money-grubbing villain in the earlier parts of the play, and the persecutor of poor Mac-X, turns out to be a rubber-toothed cur, and even a likeable one, who takes credit at the end (the subtitle is, after all, ‘Durejko ex machina’) for conducting it all to a happy end. Well, in his very long introduction to the play, Norwid describes the genre in this fashion:

I believe that this genre, for which we do not have an adequate term in Polish (as the *thing itself* has not yet appeared amongst us) is — *la haute comédie*. It is that which lays open, mainly, the field to edifying drama in our Christian society. At least it seems that it should be so, since this is to be a period of *societal-self-reflection* as a whole, of self-examination, I say, from the highest summits.

The whole of society!... I say, for it is here, and not in the comedies *buffo* (such as are masterfully sketched by the pen of Count Fredro), where one social caste examines another, discovers its ridiculousness, but as such acts as a civilisational-societal whole, as if a reflection of the universal conscience, examining itself.

This is an archly-difficult task for this reason, that the great, naked *Serious* here takes the place of those sensitive moments which tragedy is capable of drowning in blood, palpable and red. In accord with such a mood, all shadings must be indescribably subtle.

And so, the ‘tragedy’ does not lie in the dramatic movement of the main character from good fortune to bad, as on the Greek stage, but rather in the ‘seriousness’ of the subject, which does not preclude a happy end. Hence the one term he finds most suitable: *la haute comédie*, in which ‘comedy’ is used in the French sense of a serious stagework, or, as Norwid goes on to say, in the Dantean sense of the *Divine Comedy*, which has nothing funny about it at all, and — in its deepest sense — is to convey a very serious message to the reader. (It is in this sense — the *Divine Comedy*, as a writing that we know to be fictional, yet the aim of which is not to entertain, but rather to awaken us to the most important ontological truths of human life: sin and repentance, Heaven and Hell — that Dante’s great work defies generic classification, and can only be compared, as far as purpose is concerned, with Holy Scripture. It is in this sense too that Norwid’s writing, as we alluded above, is like unto Dante’s. Norwid sees literature as a vehicle for Christian truth, not as an end in itself, and in this didactic approach to art he is, again, far from the Romantic norm). The only question that remains is this: what is the serious message that Norwid is trying to convey in *The Ring of the Grande Dame*?

There may be more than one answer to this question. I would offer the following, from the very end of the play. Mac-X, hopelessly in love with the Countess since the death of her husband, hears, at last, the words he has been longing to hear: Countess Harrys proposes marriage.

And yet, why is she doing this? Does she really love him? Or is this just her solution to a problem that has suddenly cast a shadow on both Mac-X, and the reputation of her own house? So the response of Mac-X is surprising:

No, Madame, I'd be leading you astray.
Perhaps I'd even become a liar, like
The fellow who claimed to be a great marksman,
Finding a hawk stretched dead upon the ground,
Felled by a lightning bolt, by chance, after he
Shot, and missed the mark! Ah no, my noble cousin!
You err sublimely, but even so, you err.
What we call the sublime is so for this reason:
Sublime, in that it is above all hap.
It spills forth from a heavenly fountainhead,
Everywhere self-inspired, and always free.
Can one be coerced to magnanimity
Without once playing false to one's own will —
Which, in revenge, will deceive one too, in time?
The sort of man who would accept so great,
So tempting an excess of such a heart
Would be a cunning fellow merely. I,
In this age, in this nineteenth century,
Would rather not be skilled in cleverness.

What, in short, is the truth of her feelings? What do we find when we 'peel back' the drastic offer (for marriage is a drastic thing) of herself to Mac-X? This is what Mac-X needs to know, and this is the heavy message that Norwid wishes to convey via his 'white tragedy' to the society he forces to look upon itself in this dramatic mirror. It may also be found in a brief exchange between the Countess and Mac-X right before this long reply. Wishing to repair the damage done to Mac-X's public reputation by his false arrest, the Countess proposes: 'I'll submit your name / To the committees, and you'll be inscribed / A member of the board — a permanent one — / In our Society of Mercy!' to which Mac-X replies, without the slightest tinge of sarcasm: 'I'm one already. / I'm a Christian.' If tragedy, 'white' or otherwise, is to set a question before the society it wishes to challenge, in Norwid's work, once more, society is challenged

to consider the worth of the social veneer it so prizes — the avoidance of the ‘blot on the escutcheon,’ to which one of the police officers makes reference during the arrest scenes — in reference to something human and real, such as love. Nature must be followed, not convention.

And what is convention anyway, if not self-absorption? What is any sense of disgrace and propriety, but a sick concern with oneself, and how one is seen? In this very brief treatment of the play, we seem to be making a hero out of Mac-X. But it’s worth remembering a conversation he had early on in the play with the kind, simple housekeeper Salome, who asked Mac-X to put in a good word with the Countess for her son, who is far away in Japan with the navy. Although Mac-X promises to do this, his own love-problems are so all-encompassing that he forgets, as soon as the scene ends. Three solutions to his problem present themselves at various parts of the play, all three of which he seriously considers adopting: suicide, emigration to America, and marriage with Countess Harrys. Had he gone through with either of the first two, his promise to Salome would of course have gone unfulfilled. In the end, it turns out that the last, happy, possibility will be embraced after all. And now it is his own fulfilment that stands in the way of his helping the kindly old woman. And so — is this the subtlety that Norwid was referring to? So subtle as to be unnoticed by the reader, forgotten by the playgoer, the real message that makes all of the other, ‘bigger’ issues just red herrings? — what about that ‘Society of Mercy?’ How much of a Christian is Mac-X, really?

CLEOPATRA AND CAESAR

I would like to spend a little more time on Norwid’s unfinished Shakespearean drama, because it was the motor behind this entire project.

To set her in the context of Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, since that is unavoidable, we see that Norwid’s heroine is a tragic figure because she is, above all, not solely a queen, not even a woman, but a girl — a young, attractive, normal girl in search of the most basic fulfilment of all: love. She is not Shakespeare’s Cleopatra — one of the Bard’s ‘strumpets royal’ as Charles Beauclerk¹⁷ puts it perhaps a bit too harshly; she is a chaste,

17 Charles Beauclerk, *Shakespeare’s Lost Kingdom. The True History of*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821 – 1883) is known as the ‘fourth bard’ of Polish Romanticism (along with Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Zygmunt Krasiński), a title he was accorded only in the twentieth century when, after the manner of Gerard Manley Hopkins and William Blake in England, he was discovered by a new literary generation. Previous to the ‘Young Poland’ period of the early twentieth century, Norwid’s penchant for coinages and dense philosophical verse was received less enthusiastically, although he did have his admirers, such as the novelist Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, who called him a ‘dislocated genius’ [*zwichnięty geniusz*]. Norwid was born in Warsaw. On his mother’s side, he is descended from one of the greatest Kings of Poland — Jan III Sobieski, who delivered Vienna from the Ottoman siege of 1683. Norwid was a multi-talented artist. Some of his lyrics, such as ‘Fortepian Szopena’ [Chopin’s grand piano] and ‘Bema pamięci żałobny rapsod’ [A rhapsodic lament in memory of General Bem] are among the best known works of modern Polish verse. Besides his poetry, he authored works of prose fiction and short aesthetic sketches, as well as eleven works for the stage and six minor dramatic pieces — all of which are found in the present volume. Norwid was a talented graphic artist. Following his emigration from Poland, he supported himself in France and Great Britain, as well as during a short stay in the United States, as an illustrator. He died in Paris, in virtual poverty.

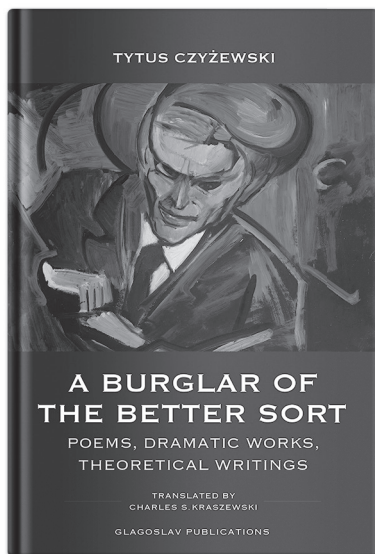


ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Charles S. Kraszewski is a poet and translator, creative in both English and Polish. He is the author of three volumes of original verse in English (*Diet of Nails; Beast; Chanameed*), and one in Polish (*Hallo, Sztokholm*). He also authored a satirical novel *Accomplices, You Ask?* (San Francisco: Montag, 2021). He translates from Polish, Czech and Slovak into English, and from English and Spanish into Polish, including classics such as Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* and experimental poets of the modern period like Tytus Czyżewski's *A Burglar of the Better Sort: Poems, Dramatic Works, and Theoretical Writings*, both published by Glagoslav. He is a member of the Union of Polish Writers Abroad (London) and of the Association of Polish Writers (SPP, Kraków).

A BURGLAR OF THE BETTER SORT

by Tytus Czyżewski

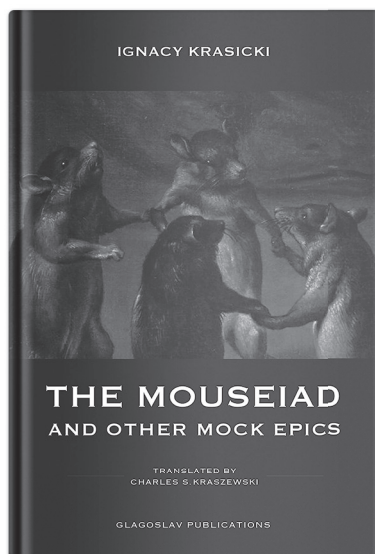


The history of Poland, since the eighteenth century, has been marked by an almost unending struggle for survival. From 1795 through 1945, she was partitioned four times by her stronger neighbours, most of whom were intent on suppressing if not eradicating Polish culture. It is not surprising, then, that much of the great literature written in modern Poland has been politically and patriotically engaged. Yet there is a second current as well, that of authors devoted above all to the craft of literary expression, creating 'art for art's sake,' and not as a didactic national service. Such a poet is Tytus Czyżewski, one of the chief, and most interesting, literary figures of the twentieth century. Growing to maturity in the benign Austrian partition of Poland, and creating most of his works in the twenty-year window of authentic Polish independence stretching between the two world wars, Czyżewski is an avant-garde poet, dramatist and painter who popularised the new approach to poetry established in France by Guillaume Apollinaire, and was to exert a marked influence on such multi-faceted artists as Tadeusz Kantor.

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The Mouseiad and other Mock Epics

by Ignacy Krasicki

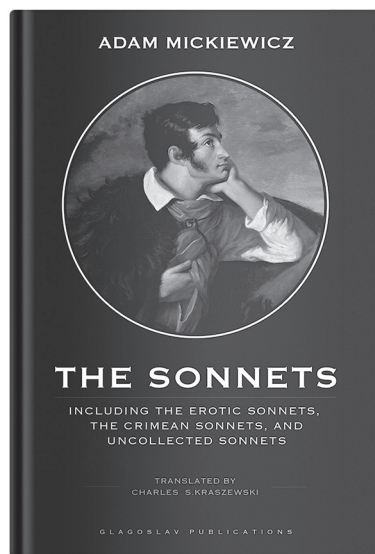


International brigades of mice and rats join forces to defend the rodents of Poland, threatened with extermination at the paws of cats favoured by the ancient ruler King Popiel, a sybaritic, cowardly ruler... The Hag of Discord incites a vicious rivalry between monastic orders, which only the good monks' common devotion to... fortified spirits... is able to allay... The present translation of the mock epics of Poland's greatest figure of the Enlightenment, Ignacy Krasicki, brings together the *Mouseiad*, the *Monachomachia*, and the *Anti-monachomachia* — a tongue-in-cheek 'retraction' of the former work by the author, criticised for so roundly (and effectively) satirising the faults of the Church, of which he himself was a prince. Krasicki towers over all forms of eighteenth-century literature in Poland like Voltaire, Swift, Pope, and LaFontaine all rolled into one. While his fables constitute his most well-known works of poetry, in the words of American comparatist Harold Segel, 'the good bishop's mock-epic poems [...] are the most impressive examples of his literary gifts.' This English translation by Charles S. Kraszewski is rounded off by one of Krasicki's lesser-known works, *The Chocim War*, the poet's only foray into the genre of the serious, Vergilian epic.

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The Sonnets

by Adam Mickiewicz

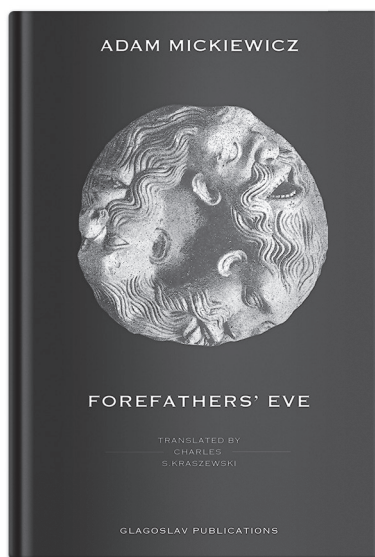


Because the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz is so closely identified with the history of the Polish nation, one often reads him as an institution, rather than a real person. In the *Crimean and Erotic Sonnets* of the national bard, we are presented with the fresh, real, and striking poetry of a living, breathing man of flesh and blood. Mickiewicz proved to be a master of Petrarchan form. His *Erotic Sonnets* chronicle the development of a love affair from its first stirrings to its disillusioning denouement, at times in a bitingly sardonic tone. *The Crimean Sonnets*, a verse account of his journeys through the beautiful Crimean Peninsula, constitute the most perfect cycle of descriptive sonnets since du Bellay. *The Sonnets* of Adam Mickiewicz are given in the original Polish, in facing-page format, with English verse translations by Charles S. Kraszewski. Along with the entirety of the Crimean and Erotic Sonnets, other “loose” sonnets by Mickiewicz are included, which provide the reader with the most comprehensive collection to date of Mickiewicz’s sonneteering. Fronted with a critical introduction, *The Sonnets* of Adam Mickiewicz also contain generous textual notes by the poet and the translator.

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FOREFATHERS' EVE

by Adam Mickiewicz



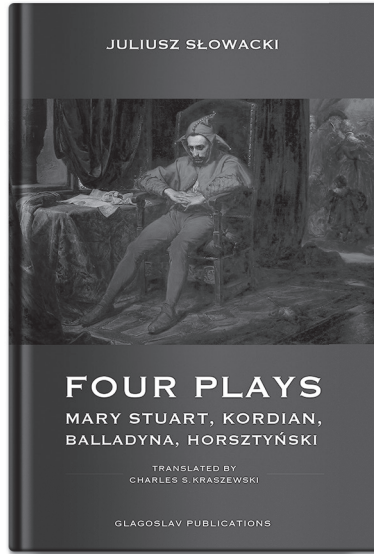
Forefathers' Eve [*Dziady*] is a four-part dramatic work begun circa 1820 and completed in 1832 – with Part I published only after the poet's death, in 1860. The drama's title refers to *Dziady*, an ancient Slavic and Lithuanian feast commemorating the dead. This is the grand work of Polish literature, and it is one that elevates Mickiewicz to a position among the “great Europeans” such as Dante and Goethe.

With its Christian background of the Communion of the Saints, revenant spirits, and the interpenetration of the worlds of time and eternity, *Forefathers' Eve* speaks to men and women of all times and places. While it is a truly Polish work – Polish actors covet the role of Gustaw/Konrad in the same way that Anglophone actors covet that of Hamlet – it is one of the most universal works of literature written during the nineteenth century. It has been compared to Goethe's *Faust* – and rightfully so...

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Four Plays:

Mary Stuart, Kordian, Balladyna, Horsztyński



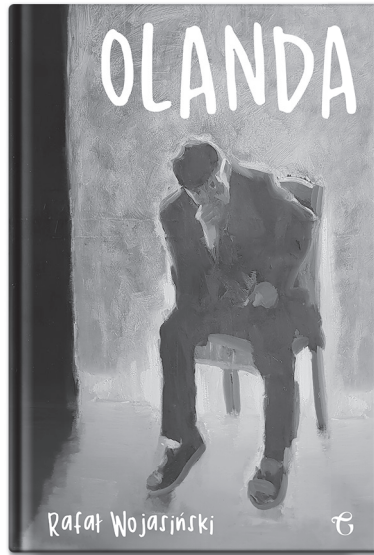
The dramas in Glagoslav's edition of *Four Plays* include some of the poet's greatest dramatic works, all written before age twenty-five: *Mary Stuart*, *Balladyna* and *Horsztyński* weave carefully crafted motifs from *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in astoundingly original works, and *Kordian* — Słowacki's riposte to Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve*, constitutes the final word in the revolutionary period of Polish Romanticism.

Translated into English by Charles S. Kraszewski, the *Four Plays* of Juliusz Słowacki will be of interest to aficionados of Polish Romanticism, Shakespeare, and theatre in general.

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Olanda

by Rafał Wojasiński



I've been happy since the morning. Delighted, even. Everything seems so splendidly transient to me. That dust, from which thou art and unto which thou shalt return — it tempts me. And that's why I wander about these roads, these woods, among the nearby houses, from which waft the aromas of fried pork chops, chicken soup, fish, diapers, steamed potatoes for the pigs; I lose my eye-sight, and regain it again. I don't know what life is, Ola, but I'm holding on to it. Thus speaks the narrator of Rafał Wojasiński's novel *Olanda*. Awarded the prestigious Marek Nowakowski Prize for 2019, *Olanda* introduces us to a world we glimpse only through the window of our train, as we hurry from one important city to another: a provincial world of dilapidated farmhouses and sagging apartment blocks, overgrown cemeteries and village drunks; a world seemingly abandoned by God — and yet full of the basic human joy of life itself.

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'Perhaps some day I'll disappear forever,' muses the master-builder Psymmachus in Cyprian Kamil Norwid's *Cleopatra and Caesar*, 'Becoming one with my work...' Today, exactly two hundred years from the poet's birth, it is difficult not to hear Norwid speaking through the lips of his character. The greatest poet of the second phase of Polish Romanticism, Norwid, like Gerard Manley Hopkins in England, created a new poetic idiom so ahead of his time, that he virtually 'disappeared' from the artistic consciousness of his homeland until his triumphant rediscovery in the twentieth century. Chiefly lauded for his lyric poetry, Norwid also created a corpus of dramatic works astonishing in their breadth, from the Shakespearean *Cleopatra and Caesar* cited above, through the mystical dramas *Wanda* and *Krakus, the Unknown Prince*, both of which foretell the monumental style of Stanisław Wyspiański, whom Norwid influenced, and drawing-room comedies such as *Pure Love at the Sea Baths* and *The Ring of the Grande Dame* which combine great satirical humour with a philosophical depth that can only be compared to the later plays of T.S. Eliot. All of these works, and more, are collected in Charles S. Kraszewski's English translation of Norwid's *Dramatic Works*, which along with the major plays also includes selections from Norwid's short, lyrical dramatic sketches — something along the order of Pushkin's *Little Tragedies*. Cyprian Kamil Norwid's *Dramatic Works* will be a valuable addition to the library of anyone who loves Polish Literature, Romanticism, or theatre in general.

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