TADEUSZ ROZEWICZ

my short poem
sometimes elongates
drags
slips from my grip

so I trim it
usually at the bottom
rarely the top
because the top is all light
sky
clouds

they're problems endings
a poem doesn't want
to end
it keeps going

bores stalls
multiplies words
puts the end off

what can one do with the end

drown it in darkness
like Celan
or tie it up in a bow
pretty as a butterfly

or bring it to a point
and abandon it
as bait

(Translated from the Polish
by Barbara Bogoczek and Tony Howard)

BOGDAN CZAYKOWSKI

The Poet as Christian Socrates

On Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821-1883)

There lived in Paris...a Polish writer little known in his own country, an artist known even less, a strange poet, a hieroglyph-stylist, whose every poem has to be read syllable by syllable ten times over....His ideas, despite his profound learning and detailed familiarity with the achievements of contemporary knowledge, move in a diametrically opposite direction to that of the modern philosophical current.

But he was not a dilettante, and certainly not a visionary, a mystic, or a lunatic....He knew how to uncover in every thing such a relation of it to other things that it would become so original as to appear almost unrecognisable....

He carried his soul around with him as if it were some kind of a numismatic rarity, unknown to anyone, unwanted, useless. Of less than middle height, lean, though shapely, with intelligent eyes.... he had in his manner the assurance and suavity of someone who had been in good society, and in his thoughts and words the roughness of ore burning with an inner fire. He resembled a stone salvaged from some marvellous edifice, which somewhere, sometime had burnt down completely.

—JÓZEF TOKARZEWICZ (1884)

Truth embraces life and is therefore obscure, because it embraces a dark thing.

—C.K. NORWID

Of the things of this world
Only two will remain,
Two only: Poetry and goodness—and nothing else.

—C.K. NORWID

I

The Cold War made Eastern Europe an area of particular interest to West European nations, and the implosion of the Soviet empire has made it possible for a more extensive bridging of long-standing cultural as well as purely political divisions. A new configuration of a canonical character, drawn from disparate yet related traditions, all of which have at least indirect roots in Greco-Roman and Judæo-Christian cultures, is gradually emerging. Much of this is being achieved by means of, to use Seamus Heaney's apt phrase, "translated literature". Donald Davie, Michael Schmidt, and others, have pointed out some of the superficialities accompanying this process in regard to poetry: of "talismanic presences" unsupported by real readership, or of contemporary translated verse floating on the fluctuations of political interest and ideological punditry in complete detachment from its traditions, as if it were preceded by a void. Yet readership of an inter-cultural character has been building up, and the voids are being gradually filled.

In the case of the Polish poetic tradition we have seen in the last few years the publication of four new translations of the masterpiece of sixteenth-century Polish Renaissance poetry, Jan Kochanowski's *Treny* [Laments], by Adam Czerniawski (revised version just published by Legenda in Oxford), by Seamus Heaney and Stanisław Barańczak, Barry Keane and Michał Mikoś, and the appearance within the space of fifteen years of two volumes of translations of Cyprian Kamil Norwid, the most original of nineteenth-century Polish poets (the 1986 edition of Czerniawski's translations, published bilingually in Poland, and more recently Jerzy Peterkiewicz, Christine Brooke-Rose and Burns Singer's versions, published in 2000 by Carcanet in its Poetry Pleiade series). Given the fact that both Peterkiewicz and Czerniawski are thoroughly naturalised British Poles, that both have translated Polish poetry and written extensively about it in English, a good way to begin a presentation of Norwid to readers unacquainted with his work, is to ask what were the reasons that made these two distinguished poets, critics and translators decide that Norwid's work should be added to the common treasury (as a nineteenth-century writer might have put it) of poetry in the English language.

Both translators had been attempting to break into the English readership with Norwid for a fairly long time. Peterkiewicz's first

translations of Norwid appeared as far back as 1958 in *Botteghe Oscure*, a sumptuous though little-known magazine sponsored by Marguerite Chapin; Czerniawski's first translations appeared in a British school magazine as far back as the mid-1950s. Since those first publications both translators have kept on translating Norwid and publishing their translations intermittently in various periodicals and anthologies, and that despite the fact that Norwid's poetry is probably the most difficult a translator could face in any language. Clearly, their commitment says something about their fascination with Norwid's poetry.

In his introduction to the selection of Cyprian Norwid's *Poems—Letters—Drawings* (2000), Peterkiewicz focuses first on the poet's life. He makes much of its vicissitudes and his rejection, as poet and artist (Norwid was also a painter and an interesting draughtsman) by the intellectual and literary Polish milieu of his time, a theme by now somewhat hackneyed in Norwid criticism, despite its validity. Indeed, Norwid's life was in many ways pitiful, and it ended in total neglect and oblivion in a Polish charitable institution near Paris. Perhaps the greatest pain of his life, apart from the increasing deafness to his poetry, and his acute realisation of the extent to which material circumstances prevented him from fulfilling his intellectual and literary potential, was the fact that he did not find a woman willing to share his life (and he considered women to be the measure of a society's worth). His literary career, however, had begun with great promise in Warsaw around 1840 and continued in this way for a few years after he had to leave Warsaw for the West in 1842, having been associated with a circle of young conspirators who plotted against Russian rule over Poland. Those early years, when Norwid was considered by a small group of Polish aristocrats and literati almost a man of genius, ended in rejection and bitterness. In 1852 Norwid travelled via London to America in search of employment, only to return, again via London, to Paris in 1854. There he tried for the rest of his life to convince readers that he had something important to say, and that his poems charted a new direction in Polish poetry, as he claimed in a preface to his *Vade-Mecum*, a collection of a hundred lyrics. But the volume was not published until 1953 and, to augment the irony, not in Poland but in Tunbridge Wells. It was not until the early 1900s that Norwid's poetry was rediscovered and pronounced at least equal to that of Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, the two other major nine-

teenth-century Polish poets. That rediscovery set the tone of much of subsequent Norwid criticism, as it made him into a symbol of the artist as victim of philistine society. Peterkiewicz makes much of Norwid as the rejected artist, without really grasping the true nature of Norwid's fate and character. But it is clear that one of the reasons for his sustained attempt to make Norwid known in English is the desire to be an instrument of what Norwid himself had hoped for: the correcting hand of time.

Peterkiewicz's other justification has more to do with Norwid's poetry. He describes him as a great innovator in Polish poetry and a profoundly original sensibility. He grants that there is "some inherent obscurity" in Norwid's work, but suggests that it "results not so much from the allusive and metaphoric congestions of his style but rather from the didactic emphasis which, aiming inward, almost ceases to be didactic". What he finds especially innovative and valuable in Norwid's poetry is the fact that Norwid reversed

> the usual didactic practices by imposing a poetic sequence on a moral and not vice versa....[T]he imposition is such that the reader has no alternative but to accept the hidden message, whereas one merely acknowledges with a nod a moral tag attached to an eighteenth-century poem.

Though Peterkiewicz comes close to the mark here, he does not explain how Norwid achieves "the reverse" of traditional didactic verse. And his insistence on treating Norwid as primarily a didactic poet misrepresents in a significant way Norwid's "Socratic" temper, his desire "to uncover in every thing such a relation of it to other things that it would become so original as to appear almost unrecognizable". Norwid was a questioning, non-conformist, "sincere" poet (in Verlaine's sense of the term), and he tried to emulate not only Socratic virtues, such as his civic courage and integrity, but also what he took to be his method of dialogic subversion of received or unexamined opinion. At the same time Norwid's questioning was, as it happened, rooted firmly in the teachings of Christ, something which Peterkiewicz does not mention.

More anglicised than Peterkiewicz and very much aware of the need to go beyond a mere assertion of Norwid's stature, Czerniawski brings a new perspective to the evaluation of

Norwid's work. In his "Afterword" to his translations of Norwid's poetry he asks a pertinent question (while taking for granted the assumption it is based on):

> How can a translator verify Norwid's genius? Norwid is a nineteenth century poet as well as a precursory author. How then can one introduce the work of a poet, who is simultaneously grounded in nineteenth century traditions, and who at the same time shatters them?...How to convey then to the English-language reader of the late twentieth century, that the poet he is reading is not only expressing the consciousness of the second half of the nineteenth century, but also proclaiming the poetry of the twentieth century.

And he answers himself: "One should reveal Norwid's originality". Norwid, he adds, "cannot appear as a second-rate Hopkins, Browning, Clough; or as an imitation of Emily Dickinson...".

Czerniawski chose these names with reason; there are indeed some parallels between Norwid and these writers. But these parallels do not get us very far. Norwid is a different poet from Hopkins (which Czerniawski points out himself), so that the only significant similarities (apart from both of them being viewed as pre-moderns) are their religious orthodoxy and the successful way in which they stopped their poetry succumbing to the dangers inherent in that fact. As for Browning, the similarity can only be between the two poets' longer poems, and this is slight. There are perhaps parallels in some of Norwid's poems with Clough's heavy-duty lines, but there is nothing in Clough that would make anyone want to compare him with Emily Dickinson, whereas Norwid has been compared to her by more than one critic, and this time with some justification. Norwid is as laconic and elliptical as Dickinson, and occasionally there are uncanny analogies in the effects he achieves by condensation. A further similarity is Norwid's mastery, in many of his poems, of traditional form, which is not only Dickinsonian but almost Poundian in the energy with which rhythm, metre and syntax both carry and contain compressions of thought (perhaps the closest parallel is "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley", and perhaps one of the influences in both Norwid's and Pound's instances is Théophile Gautier). In an excellent Norwid poem, as in the case of an excellent Dickinson poem, distillation of thought and distillation of form seem to coalesce, become one.

Czerniawski uses the example of Norwid's "Out of Harmony" to point to the completely unrelated yet striking similarities between a Dickinson and a Norwid poem. In his introduction to the anthology *The Burning Forest: Modern Polish Poetry* (1988) he quotes a passage from Dickinson:

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated—dying—
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

In reading this poem, he says, "one has the uncanny feeling that one is reading English-language equivalents of Norwid's poems", for this poem "is equivalent in tone, style and imagery to Norwid's 'Out of Harmony'". Indeed, it is:

Round God's manger
The chosen sing;
But others at the door
Silently catch their breath...

And what of those
Just entering the town
Where the ear still rings
With innocents' cries?

Sing you! Who are chosen
There where he was born;
My ear is pierced
By the pursuing horn...

Sing in triumphant chorus
Your praises unto God—
I?—could spoil your song:
I have seen blood!

(This, and all subsequent translations, are by Adam Czerniawski.) Granted the similarities, there are also significant differences between the two poets. Norwid is a poet who has not only experienced history, but his thought is largely historicist and shaped by an acute awareness of civilisational and social factors. His notion and use of irony make of it more than a figure of speech; it is, for him, being's inseparable shadow, a mode or condition of all human endeavour. His use of genre and form in the shorter poems is richer, and reflects a familiarity with the gnomic, classical, Renaissance and baroque traditions.

Another difference is that Dickinson, of course, did not write long poems, as Norwid did, nor did she write plays, which Norwid also did, displaying his originality there, too. Their innovative character can perhaps be best conveyed by saying that, while owing something to Shakespeare, they resemble the drawing-room plays of T.S. Eliot (while being poetically more exciting than Eliot's), the symbolist plays of Yeats, but with perhaps a stronger intellectual theme, as well as some modernist drama, in which little seems to happen, and yet a sort of revolution in consciousness and sensibility is achieved. He also wrote short stories and prose pieces, which he called "Black Flowers", that constitute a separate minor genre (Norwid's use of genres is, in fact, quite unusual), of which a particularly fine example is his piece on Chopin. Moreover, as far as poetry is concerned, Norwid did not confine himself to lyric verse, but wrote both discursive, narrative and essayistic poetry, some of which is very fine, while some is fragmentary and at best puzzling. His range is thus much broader than that of Dickinson. Another important dissimilarity is Norwid's use of colloquial language, which puts him closer to Laforgue, one of Eliot's models, and to Eliot himself. One of the effects of this feature is the achievement in Norwid's verse of what might be termed "formal dissonance", aided by Norwid's peculiar use of punctuation, which at times, instead of helping to order the sequencing of meaning, disrupts the flow of verse so that the written, structured language is transformed into articulated speech, as if the author were delivering his poems to an audience, and dramatising for emphasis or irony. A further interesting aspect of infusing the conventional, formal scripted work with the oral is Norwid's use of pauses, which reflected his view of silence as a part of speech and of meaning (when the reader or listener becomes more of a participant in discourse by no longer lis-

tening, or reading, but being delivered, as it were, to his own thought). Norwid was thus highly conscious that by rejecting mellifluousness, melodiousness, unity of tone, the poeticisms and bardic high style, he was subverting the models of Polish lyrical verse. "Perfect lyric poetry [he wrote] should be like a plaster cast: those rough edges where forms cross each other and leave cracks should be left intact and not smoothed over...." Although he was a great admirer of Chopin's music, championing him, for instance, in his poetic treatise "Promethidion" as a supreme example of a great artist, who "lifted the folkloric [national] to the universal" through his art, he nevertheless often thought of poetry in sculptural (even lapidary) rather than in musical terms. That the two forms of art have a profound element in common (which, if one thinks of it, is not at all counter-intuitive), is perhaps an idea that informs Norwid's lyric "Lapidaria":

Sculpture's
Whole secret:
A spirit—like lightning
In gesture caught—

Marvels and wonders
And lifts its tiny palms
From this world's cradle
Towards the still uncaptured
In infinite space.

Only she who nurses
And he who's held a chisel;
Only she who dances
And he who's held an arm:
They only—and the earth's
Bosom sensing rain
Move the spirit's veil
—Into a thrilling swirl!

II

> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind—
> —EMILY DICKINSON

Just as, according to Empson, there are at least seven types of poetic ambiguity, so there are many kinds of poetic obscurity. The problem of Norwid's obscurity has been a persistent one, and cannot be simply wished away. It must be tackled head on, if we are to take true measure of his achievement. Norwid was more than aware of what was being said and written about him, both in print and in private correspondence among his "friends". At one point he responded to it in "Obscurity":

> He complains my speech is dark—
> Has he ever lit the taper?
> That remained his servant's task
> (The many reasons hid from us).
>
> The spark ignites the wick,
> The melting wax engulfs the flame,
> Its star-light slowly drowns,
> Its sheen now bluish, on the wane.
>
> You quickly think it lost
> In the consummating flow—
> Grant it faith, not just sparks and ash:
> With your faith... see how it glows?
>
> You, who grudge a wretched moment—
> Know the nature of my songs:
> Their sacrificial flame will blaze
> When the epoch's chill is gone!

If we do what the poem tells us to do, it yields a clear meaning. It asks for a reading that runs counter to reading "in haste/ under the rule of Print-Pantheism". And it asks for trust. It promises a reward for trustful, attentive and participatory reading. That reward in Norwid (and he knew about it) is more than just a meaning. That reward is a thought that makes a difference to how

we view ourselves and the world. And which at the same time recognises how difficult it is to be meaningful.

There are in Norwid numerous observations of a hermeneutical, semantic, almost semiotic character. He thought of himself as a reader of signs, of traces left by God for human beings to recognise and decipher. His longer poems and dramas both grope for a meaning that is elusive, yet important, and create a movement towards it, a sort of argument that the reader participates in throughout. This is particularly striking in a group of shorter poems in which a recasting of meaning occurs when you have read the last line. This recasting results in a re-interpretation of the meaning of earlier lines, so that the end of the poem induces a retrospective movement of thought. A good example is "The Sphinx":

The Sphinx barred my way in a dark cave
Ever hungry for truths
Like a taxman, beggar or knave
Molesting travellers with cries of "Truth!"

*

"Man?... he's an ignorant callow
Priest..."
I replied

*

And marvelling saw
The Sphinx pressed against the rock:
I slipped past alive!

The action which the poem describes results in a new, and ironic, interpretation of man's reply to the Sphinx, who accepts the statement as true. And this in turn reflects on the first stanza and re-evaluates the concept of the Sphinx. Indeed, the mystery of the world demands answers of man, but his answers are far from satisfactory. A closer look at "The Sphinx" reveals still another characteristic feature which is crucial in understanding Norwid's poetry. Clearly, the poem is a parable. In fact, the parabolic character of Norwid's writings, including his shorter poems, is one of its most important generic and formal aspects. And it is the nature of parabolic writing or speech that it requires the listener or reader to participate in the construing of its meaning and furthermore,

that it aims at questioning and subverting views and opinions that have broad currency and acceptance, and in effect seeks to change them.

Norwid's poetry, whatever the analogies with other poets, is sui generis. And so was Norwid himself, a wholly idiosyncratic person, who cultivated idiosyncrasy not because he wanted to, but because it was thrust upon him by his marginalisation and his angle of vision. And it was precisely this angle of vision that lay at the bottom of his ironic mode, in fact, of his poetics. Norwid was a Catholic through and through, and yet the intellectual position that he found for himself within that orthodoxy was very much at odds with that religion's shallow and obfuscated praxis. The paradox is explained by Norwid's conscious imitation of Christ:

> Read what your Saviour said to the Pharisees...and you will see that you will not find a more colossal irony anywhere, either in the past or now. Even the form, questioning rather than asserting, is purely ironic! Yes, my dear, I am not ashamed of irony, for it is enough for a servant to be like his Master, and for the disciple to be like his Teacher. I won't correct the Saviour, that I won't.

Norwid's Socratic Christliness enabled him to put in perspective, in its proper place: evil, death, sickness, irony, beauty, prayer, and originality, which last he defined as "being incrementally faithful to one's sources". Faithful he definitely was, both in his view of humanity and of the historical moment in Western civilisation into which he was born and which he viewed from the perspective of an apparently superfluous man (the "supernumerary actor", as he called himself), and in terms of his poetics.