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Cyprian Norwid's Thoughts on Independence

ABSTRACT

The presented sketch on Norwid's thoughts on independence takes into account only the statements of Cyprian Norwid after 1864, following the fall of the January Uprising. As a starting point for discussion, the crucial 1869 text for the discussed issues was used: the epistolary essay *Walka-polska* [Polish-fight], addressed to Agaton Giller. The main thesis of this essay is that Poles "know how to do battle" but "they cannot fight" and it is one of the main objectives of Norwid's critical view on the Polish road to independence. Besides this essay, the above sketch brings back other texts by Norwid, important for the issues of independence. It discusses [*Odezwa w sprawie udziału Polaków w wojnie francusko-pruskiej*] [*The call on the participation of Poles in the Franco-Prussian War*] of 1870 and *Odpowiedź Cypriana Kamila N. niektórym obywatelom o stanie rzeczy narodowej zapytującym* [Cyprian Kamil N.'s answer to some citizens asking about the state of national affairs] from the period of Russo-Turkish War in 1877. These discursive texts are completed by a verse from Norwid's poem *Co robić?* [*What to do?*] where the crucial question on the issue of independence is asked: "What to do in the dismembered country." Norwid's comments on the meaning of spiritual independence, the importance of which could sometimes be more important than independence understood only politically close the considerations included in this sketch.

KEYWORDS: Cyprian Norwid, Poland, partitions, enslavement, independence, freedom

STRESZCZENIE

Cypriana Norwida myśli o niepodległości

Prezentowany szkic *Cypriana Norwida myśli o niepodległości* uwzględnia tylko wypowiedzi Cypriana Norwida po 1864 r., po upadku powstania styczniowego. Jako punkt wyjścia rozważań przyjęto najważniejszy dla poruszanej problematyki tekst z 1869 r. rozprawki epistolarnej *Walka-polska*, skierowanej do Agatona Gillera. Podstawowa teza rozprawki, iż Polacy „umieją bić się”, ale „nie umieją walczyć”, jest jednym z głównych założeń krytycznego poglądu Norwida na temat polskich dróg do niepodległości. Poza rozprawką *Walka-polska*, powyższy szkic przypomina jeszcze inne teksty Norwida, ważne dla problematyki niepodległości. Chodzi o [*Odezwę w sprawie udziału Polaków w wojnie francusko-pruskiej*] z 1870 r. oraz *Odpowiedź Cypriana Kamila N. niektórym obywatelom o stanie rzeczy narodowej zapytującym z okresu wojny rosyjsko-tureckiej z 1877 r.* Wymienione dyskursywne teksty dopełnia wiersz Norwida *Co robić?*, w którym pada zasadnicze dla problematyki niepodległości pytanie: „Co począć w rozebranym kraju?”. Zamieszczone w szkicu rozważania zamykają uwagi Norwida na temat znaczenia duchowej niepodległości, której waga niekiedy mogła być istotniejsza niż niepodległość rozumiana tylko politycznie.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Cyprian Norwid, Polska, zabory, niewola, niepodległość, wolność

According to the so-called *Vilnius dictionary* of the Polish language, the term “niepodległość” [“independence” or “self-governance”] is defined as in a broad sense as much as “self-governance,” “non-subjection,” “sovereignty,” “freedom,” “liberty.”¹ These meanings mainly relate to the sphere of the ontology of the state, nation, and society. In the history of the Polish nation, for historical reasons, due to the 123 years of partitions, emphasis was placed mainly on the political understanding of independence.

The importance of independence, the sovereignty of one’s own state, was expressed by Cyprian Norwid in a letter from America to Alexander Herzen, written probably in December 1853. This was during the time of the Crimean War, which was associated with an opportunity to raise the Polish flag:

1 *Słownik języka polskiego*, ed. A. Zdanowicz et. al., p. I-II, Wilno 1861.

I do hope, I believe, and I am almost convinced that soon all the young emigrants in America will be forced to get closer to Europe. None of us in the depths of his being can consider the local position (even the most favorable) as established... and it's not because of the natural *love-for-the-country* (often confused with *patriotism*) but because of a sense of responsibility that is attached not only to the idea, but to the *corpus-delicti* of this idea, to the place, the very war theater. None of us will ever be himself, will not feel free and as a result will not reach his full power, having failed to obtain independence first. And independence for a country, or for man personally, includes an assessment of dependence, is a dream come true.

Therefore, it is absolutely impossible to achieve independence through work in industry and commerce – because work can flourish and be free only within an independent nation, and the energy resulting from fight is then a foundation and cornerstone of prosperity.²

The culminating point on the Polish road to independence is the January Uprising. It complemented a series of unsuccessful uprisings starting from the Bar Confederation and the Kościuszko Uprising through the successive insurgencies of the 19th century. The Uprising started on the January night in 1863 ended with a military defeat and the Polish problem being shelved in international politics. The severity of the repressions following the Uprising increased the heat of the discussion on the advisability of armed struggle for independence.

Agaton Giller, a conspirator, exile to Siberia, member of the Central Committee and the National Government, insistently emphasized in a Paris-published 1867 *Historia powstania narodu polskiego 1861-1864* [*The history of the Polish nation in 1861-1864*]:

It is the duty of everyone with a sober look at their citizen duties to strike against the poor preparation for uprisings, the impatience of the young, the recklessness with which they reach for arms against the powerful enemy, the premature outbreak, the disadvantages and errors of the preparation and conduct of the uprising; but to put the validity of insurgency into question by one-sided demonstration of reasons that have caused it is to make a faulty reckoning with the past; it is a way of granting the enemies the right to rule us by force of rape and violence.³

2 C. Norwid, *Dziela wszystkie*, vol. 10: *Listy 1 1839-1854*, ed. J. Rudnicka, transl. W. Kwiatkowski, Sz. Babiński, Lublin 2008, p. 478.

3 A. Giller, *Historia powstania narodu polskiego w 1861-1864 r.*, Paryż 1867, vol. 1, p. 61.

After 1864, an important text for understanding Norwid's views on independence should be the 1869 epistolary essay *Walka-polska* [*Polish-fight*], addressed to Giller. At the starting point of his discussion, Norwid wrote:

Honorable and Courteous Lord!

If I asked not only chiefs and soldiers, but even such a moderate and enlightened writer and polemicist as you are:

| what is a fight – and what is combat?

| and what does war mean?

– I would receive an answer that different people explain it differently – the answer, which belongs to the history-literature, the history of opinion, but not to the substance of the question.

[...]

I maintain: that the contemporary Poles, for more than 100 years, have known how to make war – to combat – but they do not know how to fight.

*

I find it deplorable for the reason that I know what a battle is, and what fight is. To fight is a normal task of Humanity; and to make war – is not! Yes: the goal is to quite extinguish war through making a perfect plan and conducting the fight.

That is a capital truth, as the strategy has been the same: for more than 100 years our perfect offenses and retreats have been said to bring glory to our war chiefs!... Battles are weighed far less and whichever side wins is almost always (strategically) unknown.

What Poles think is contrary; they almost always win all the heroic battles, but they lose wars, which comes from this what it proves at the same time: that they know how to do battle, but they cannot fight.

*

These things are hidden or little known, or unpleasant to the ear, for the same reason – that is, the reason for the lack of character in Polish journalism, and therefore the lack of a sincere fight – the lack of this without which no one has achieved victory for centuries: the scarcity-belief!⁴

In the above discussion, the key distinction Norwid makes is between the verbs *bić się* [to combat, to make war] and *walczyć* [to fight, to struggle]. According to the already referenced *Vilnius dictionary*, the verb *bić się* is explained as “inflict blows on each other, punish, lash.” The semantic scope of the verb *walczyć*⁵ is wider and described as “do battle, to duel, clash, combat.”

4 C. Norwid, *Pisma wszystkie*, collected, edited and provided with a foreword by J.W. Gomulicki, vol. 7: *Proza*, p. 2, Warszawa 1973, pp. 60-61. Further quotes from the above edition will be marked with the abbreviation PWSz; the first number indicates the volume, the second – the page.

5 Tadeusz Kotarbiński said: “Fight, for us, is any action which has at least two subjects (assuming that a community can be a subject, too), wherein at least one of them disturbs the other”

Continuing his reflection, Norwid reminds us that battles won do not ensure a victory in a war, as a war which has been won does not consist of the sum of winning battles. The Poles, although they won in most battles, were losing wars. They could not utilize the won great battles, and the military triumph of the Polish army was not politically geared. This was the case since the historic Battle of Grunwald [in 1410 – transl.], to the few winning skirmishes of the January Uprising, which not only could not reverse the negative course of military affairs and even win a good negotiating position.

The quoted statement from Norwid, besides an important observation concerning the merits of Polish history, also includes important comments on the functioning of social information. According to the poet, the truth that the Poles “know how to do battle, but they cannot fight” is little known, hidden, and uncomfortable to the general public. This is because Polish journalism lacks strong personalities who would have the courage to speak to society on unpopular and even bitter truths about it.

Further continuing his deliberations around the opposition between *bić się* and *walczyć*, Norwid refers to the following argument:

The very song of the Nation [*Poland Is Not Yet Lost* – transl.] calls:
‘We’ll cross the Vistula, we’ll cross the Warta, We shall be (geographically) Polish,’ but:

‘Will Bonaparte give us the example: How? We should prevail –’

If a man sings in his National Epic that only a foreigner can teach him how to “prevail”? – then, of course, he himself does not know how to produce that result.

*

So, the Constitution is to come from J.J. Rousseau, and Bonaparte shall teach us how she should prevail, and France will pay the disabled first-generation insurgent invalids – and the issue of legislative, financial and knightly be established, it is indeed true that he does not know how to fight.⁶

Norwid’s critical words about the parts of *Poland Is Not Yet Lost*, the later Polish national anthem, are worthy of special emphasis. Here the poet demonstrates the courage to think big, far from the national apologetics. Bonaparte found himself under fire, and it was not so much that Norwid

(T. Kotarbiński, *Traktat o dobrej robocie*, 3rd edition, Wrocław 1965, p. 239). Cf. J. Konieczny, *Cybernetyka walki*, Warszawa 1970; J. Rudniański, *Elementy prakseologicznej teorii walki*, Warszawa 1983; A. Żuk, *Filozofia walki*, Lublin 1996.

6 PWsz 7, 61.

was influenced by the black legend of the famous Corsican,⁷ but to refer to him in the *Song of the Legions* is, according to the poet, an example of Polish secondariness, dependence in thought and action, and lack of originality. The fact that [Józef] Wybicki gives Bonaparte as an example to follow, can be understood as historical conditioning, which was that the Polish legions were created in Italy at the end of the eighteenth century, however, it puts a question mark on the military traditions of the Polish army.

Norwid's wording that "the Constitution is to come from J.J. Rousseau" is obviously an allusion to the well-known dissertation by Rousseau entitled *Considération sur le Gouvernement de Pologne et sur sa réformation projetée* from 1772, as a project of social and political reforms for the declining Polish Commonwealth, that was used in the writing of the later Polish Constitution of May 3. This work by Rousseau was written at the request of a Bar confederate, the Great Lithuanian Chancellor Michał Wielhorski, but the fact of the Poles' referring to it – according to Norwid – is an example of dependence and repetitiveness of our political thought.

As in the epistolary essay *Walka-polska* discussed above, in support of the thesis that Poles "know how to do battle, but they cannot fight," Norwid also reaches for arguments of a military nature; he writes:

And – how to act differently?... – someone can tell me who's sweet and tender.

*

How??... And who won the battle of Sadowa? – indeed, Polish-Poznan cavalry were victorious over Polish-Galician cavalry. And there slaughtered each other also in many months after the last uprising of the Nation!!! Indeed, they can combat, but they cannot fight.⁸

It seems that Norwid's last argument is quite suggestive, but he leaves out the historical conditions. In the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, at the Battle of Sadowa, a bloody clash took place between the Polish lancers from Poznan with the Polish lancers from the Galicia, which can hardly be considered an example of our national stupidity. It is primarily an expression of the tragedy of the nation, whose sons forcefully enlisted to hostile armies were forced to kill each other.

Starting from the defeat of Austria in 1866, the increasing hegemony of Prussia soon led to its war with France in 1870. Among the Polish emigration, acts of solidarity with the threatened French State emerged. In the name of opportunities for the Polish case, also hopes were revived

7 Cf. A. Zahorski, *Spór o Napoleona we Francji i w Polsce*, Warszawa 1974.

8 PWsz, 7, 61-62.

for a joint Franco-Polish alliance.⁹ Norwid, moved by these events, wrote a poem (*[Jeszcze Francja nie zginęła!]* [*France Is Not Yet Lost* – transl.]) and in response to the proclamation of the Interim Commission of the Polish Emigration in Paris, he enlisted as a volunteer for the National Guard defending the besieged capital. At that time, he also directed (*[Odezwa w sprawie udziału Polaków w wojnie francusko-pruskiej]* [*A Col to Poles to Particitate in the French-Prussian War*]). In the face of the French authorities' reluctance to forming the Polish branch fighting under its own banner, Norwid wrote:

If there is no probability to raise the Polish banner, then only strictly the military people and those educating professionally in warfare should and can be a base and top of the formation initiative. Therefore: if France cannot accept a Polish banner, then it is clear that her work is just at the military reality, so it truth is not the time neither for France nor for Poland. And – this being in truth of things – it must be so in all the works of this matter. Not that it means Poland's or France's not-adhesion, but that it means that this is the distribution in their order.¹⁰

Unfortunately, the measures taken by Poles staying in France proved to be ineffective as a result of the action taken by the Russian side. The Temporary Committee of the Polish Emigration in Paris informed their countrymen in a special proclamation:

Today, we will only say that the Polish emigration may not act collectively, that Poland will not be represented on the ramparts of Paris. Even single emigrants wishing to stand in defense of the being and the wholeness of France, which are at risk, including the very capital city, are obstructed from this by the letter of the law, which states that only voters may belong to the National Guard. [...] our compatriots should be warned then, that they may act only individually, according to their conscience and strength, and solemnly declare that although we regret the inability of collective revelation of our fraternal devotion to France as our centuries-old friend, and namely to the Republic of France, the imaginitor of freedom for peoples and progress of the world, it is only because we have a strong conviction about the usefulness of more collective participation of Poles in the defense of Paris.¹¹

9 Cf. M. Złotorzycka, *Próba utworzenia oddziału polskiego w czasie oblężenia Paryża przez Prusaków (1870-1871)*, „Niepodległość” 1935, XI, iss. 3, pp. 325-350.

10 PWSz, 7, 171.

11 M. Złotorzycka, *Próba utworzenia oddziału polskiego*, op. cit., p. 349.

In connection with the outbreak of Russian-Turkish war at the end of April 1877 and similarly during the Crimean War, and the Polish hopes to raise the Polish question, Norwid made a note entitled *Odpowiedź Cypriana Kamila N. niektórym obywatelom o stanie rzeczy narodowej zapytującym* [Cyprian Kamil N.'s answer to some citizens asking about the state of national affairs]. The document begins with general remarks on the history of mainly post-partition Poland. The poet had often pointed out to his fellow countrymen the “untimeliness” and usually premature political actions:

I will not tell you honorable Lords “how to save Poland?”, for which no one will do anything until Poland enables herself to take advantage of her circumstances.

And if anyone does anything sooner, it would turn out bad. I would like to remind you that should any nation in Europe do everything too late or too early for 10 years, it would become fatally addicted to space, because it would have no time. Poland was not only dismantled by the superpowers, but also by the Epoch, but also by time!¹²

The content of the above note was related to the discussions among the Polish emigrants, preceding the so-called Vienna convention,¹³ which was to select a representation of the Polish nation during the war between Russia and Turkey. English and Turkish diplomacy explored the possibility of instigating an uprising in Poland in order to weaken Russia. The Polish side, after the recent defeat of the January Uprising, was against the uprising, but agreed to form a Polish legion in Turkey. Therefore, Norwid wrote in said note:

So I may tell you, Gentlemen. What to do TODAY?...

Great and close things are happening; we have no ambassadors and no fleet; we have an opinion; it is necessary to proclaim national opinion in the matters of the initiated topics with a general manifesto, so that prior negotiations take place and individual Western hands untied, and we have control. Without control and the rudder of opinion, we might be lured into a likeness of a Targowica-Galician-slaughter...

If the Sultan himself is having council concerning the formation of the Polish legion, let it not be the central activity, but under control as our foreign affairs. To that extent, let the Legion be responsible for the importance and dignity of placing the national banner as an independent

12 PWsz, 7, 179.

13 Cf. A. Lewak, *Dzieje emigracji polskiej w Turcji (1831-1878)*, Warszawa 1935, pp. 236-245; W. Pobóg-Malinowski, *Najnowsza historia polityczna Polski*, vol. 1: 1864-1914, London 1984, pp. 146-152.

Christian legion, and let it be given such moral importance that, even in the event of an internal slaughter of Christians (which may happen in the unfortunate case with the Turkish weapon), as Abd-el-Kader in Damascus acted, such should be the Legion's dignity and diplomacy.

The manifesto shall be issued openly and with the excuse of one Poznan MP (from the German Parliament), one Austrian MP, one member of the Warsaw Agricultural Society, one rural teacher, and one farmer. These citizens, risking themselves, can instead go into temporary exile, as we have done, for the few words of freedom.

It has to be done by TODAY – what about tomorrow? – Tomorrow I'll know.¹⁴

The hopes for the establishment of a Polish legion under the national and Christian banner were not fully realized. The great vizier Midhat Pasha agreed to form a small unit that would fight on the Turkish side from June to the end of 1877. This legion, however, could not demonstrate any Christian emblems. On the red background of the flag there was a crescent moon, a star and a white eagle. Emir Abd el Kader, about whom Norwid writes in the above note, was an Arab emir living in Damascus, where he became famous as a defender of Christians during the Syrian massacre of Christians in the summer of 1860. Norwid soon wrote the famous poem *Do Emira Abd el Kadera* [*To Emir Abd el Kader in Damascus*], translated it into French and sent it to Damascus at the address of the noble Emir.

An important text by Norwid on the issue of independence is a poem from 1875 entitled *Co robić?* [*What to do?*]. It was there that the crucial, initial question is asked: "What to do in the dismembered country:"

In Europe, there is no good custom,
In the baptized – What to do in the dismembered country?
What to do? – asks this, and another,
The dismantled country's three heads.¹⁵

The expressions "dismembered country," "dismantled country's three heads" indicate that he refers to Poland, which lost its independence as a result of the three partitions. What is significant about the crime on the living body of the First Republic of Poland took place in Christian Europe, and was committed by countries that had been baptized. Returning after every dramatic attempt to regain independence, the question of Polish patriots on "what to do" did not find a convincing answer. In

14 PWsz, 7, 179-180.

15 Ibidem, 2, 214.

this situation, Norwid, already known for his ultramontane beliefs and his veneration for the pro-Polish Pope Pius IX, points to the analogy between the situation of Poland and the dismantled Church State after its fall. The stripping of the successor of the attributes of power in the Holy See was very poignant:

Look upwards – the altar of nations,
Where the whole army is the guardian of the stairs,
With the holy lights gone from the crown,
You cannot see the scepter, the banners rolled up,
And land snatched from under the foot.¹⁶

Despite the external signs of increasing physical strength of the enemy, there remains faith in the power of the spiritual world. It is even difficult for tyranny to conquer “the trenches of the spirit,” defended by those always ready for martyrdom:

– Did anyone break into the trenches of the spirit?
And did they dare rape in a careless way,
When vigilant suffer – powerfully silent?¹⁷

Referring to the analogy to Poland, Norwid seems to see the hope of saving his enslaved homeland. By joining the Mass-of-History celebrated on the Roman altar, by offering sacrificial gifts (“chain rosary”), the fate of the nations will be changed. The finale will be the state of *communio*, or reunification:

If, therefore, the homeland of yours
Is historical... (and is not, as Troy!)
Let it be like Rome, listen to Mass-of-History,
Like Rome, pearling its chain rosary,
Silent, as they’re silent, persevering, as there are,
While the before the harps are tuned...
Or – if, moving actual patterns,
Homeland is a lacustric swamp –
And to the peoples, bones of mammoth are law,
Then – let them trample it, to rot and be broken!¹⁸

16 Ibidem.

17 Ibidem.

18 Ibidem.

The examples mentioned above, taken from Norwid's work, mainly concerned the politically understood independence. It should not be forgotten, however, that the poet also paid attention to the spiritual side of the issue. As can be assumed, it was often more important for him than the material side. In addition to the aforementioned *What to do?* poem we will find many other examples of Norwid talking about independence understood spiritually. And so, in the poem under the title *Zagadka [Riddle] LIII* in the *Vade-mecum* cycle, Norwid asks:

With all the shackles are? these
Cords, gold or steel?...
Soaked mostly with blood and tear –
Invisible!...¹⁹

It turns out that the non-material, invisible shackles are more dangerous than material ones, e.g. made of steel. It could be about any ties that make limit, bind the spirit, man's *psyche*. In the norwidological tradition of interpretation it is assumed that the *Riddle* is

the first link in the sequence of “dead formulas” or “invisible shackles” (LIII-LVI), whose common determinant is the phenomenon of bondage, understood by the poet as putting “form” (formula, corner, convention, superstition, “old custom,” “letter,” etc.) in place of a “goal” (spirit, content, essence, duty, etc.).²⁰

As it has been signaled earlier, the problem of independence is permanently linked to the problem of slavery and freedom. Norwid did not understand these concepts only in political terms. In his reflection, he penetrated deeper, trying, on the basis of general philosophical reflection, to reach the essence of the matter. Already in his early “rhapsody” *Niewola [Enslavement]* (I, verses 37-38, 53-54; II, verses 44-48), he stated:

Enslavement – is placing form
Instead of goal. – Here's distress...
[...]
Because freedom?... the goal is to digest
The temporal form. Here's liberation!...
[...]

19 Ibidem, 2, 81.

20 C. Norwid, *Dziela zebrane*, ed. J.W. Gomulicki, vol. 2: *Wiersze. Dodatek krytyczny*, Warszawa 1966, p. 803. Gomulicki distinguished four cells of the “dead formulas” sequence in the *Vade-mecum* cycle: *Zagadka, Jak..., Kółko, Czulość*.

In man's essence slavedom's of the flesh,
 If spirit sets it as goal for itself;
 In a nation – from form: even paragon,
 Even if 'tis the best form on the globe,
 If tis' the goal, not the means.²¹

The above considerations could be concluded with an interesting thought by Norwid, taken from the poem *Królestwo* [Kingdom]. A clear personalistic perspective of the poet's reflection shows the relativity of only political understanding of such fundamental categories for man as freedom and slavery:

No slavery nor freedom can
 Make you happy... no! – Thou art a person:
 Thy share – is more! Reign...
 All over the world, and your self²²

The primacy of the human person, as Norwid trusted the *imago Dei*, and the emphasis on the strength of the human spirit constitute the bright side of the poet's reflection. It brought refreshment, in the 19th century, the age of Polish enslavement, and even today it retains its timeless meaning. Sometimes it can be easier to control everything in the world than to control oneself.

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