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ROMANTIC REMEMBERING OF EUROPE: MICKIEWICZ – SŁOWACKI – NORWID

Abstract

The present analysis focuses its perspective on the symbolic geography of Polish Romanticism decoded from works by Adam Mickiewicz (*Paris lectures*), Juliusz Słowacki (*A journey from the Holy Land to Naples*) and Cyprian Norwid (*My homeland*). The main thesis rests in answering the question: Does Romantic communal thinking present in the literary output of leading poets of the Polish Romanticism aim at mental constructions taken over from the mnemotopoi of the European heritage?

Key words: Central Europe, Polish Romanticism, Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, Cyprian Norwid

Introduction: Central Europe as a memory place

In research on literature Central Europe can be treated like a spatial theme (Głowiński, 1992: 196-221), referring to the previously undertaken spaciological categories which allow, among others, to precisely describe the location of the represented world. However, even then, maybe even exactly then, we are unlikely to evade the ambiguity of description stemming from the obvious fact that Central Europe understood as a spatial concept is a part of a human *universum* – it denotes not only a space, but also religion, ideology, axiology, morality (Głowiński, 1992: 198). To put it in different words, Central Europe is a construe of a spatial use of metaphors, for its spatial sphere belongs to the realm of religious, moral and ideological notions.

These spatial features of the world of Central Europe allow locating memory and transforming the connection between memory and a place into what Pierre Nora called “a memory place” (memory places – *les lieux de memoir*). This connection is always sanctioned by being a part of a joint experience of community, being recognized as a community on the basis of these “memory places”. In reference to this Jan Assmann mentions “commemorative landscape” and “mnemotopoi” (Assmann, 2008: 91).

Polish literature is characterized by a multitude of such mnemotopoi, many of which are attributed to the period of Romanticism contemporarily perceived, and rightly so, as the key tradition for the national culture in Poland (Trybuś, 2011). Mickiewicz’s Lithuania, Malczewski’s Ukraine, Słowacki’s Targowica and Bar, Norwid’s Rome, Krasiński’s Trenches of the Holy Trinity are only a part of a literary map of memory still present in the contemporary writers’ and readers’ minds. The same can be said about bigger fragments of that map – the Great Emigration, Russia and Siberia. The contours of Europe (back then – the world) found on this map store the traces of memory (as well as oblivion) of vast spaces of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth which was subject to the historical catastrophe of partitions. Although they contradict the 20th century images and spatial representations of Central Europe, they surprisingly anticipate the trend of a regressive utopia of discovering the forgotten land which is very present in the contemporary mythologisations of Central Europe¹.

1 Among many publications on the topic of the myth of Central Europe, in reference to the Balkans, see B. Zieliński (2002: 39-60).

Mickiewicz's Slavic Europe

Adam Mickiewicz, the most significant poet of the West Slavs is perceived as the forefather of the present-day united Europe. His literary output treats about freedom – the most crucial idea of the 19th century. Mickiewicz investigated the notion of freedom on two facets: individual and communal. With his famous question “Human! If only you knew what your power is!” to be found in *Dziady part III* drama, Mickiewicz anticipated Dostoyevsky’s reflection of the same nature expressed in *The Brothers Karamazov* and other writings of the great Russian writer. When reading Mickiewicz one can have the impression that he unveils the history of the 19th century Europe understood as a triumph of freedom. Perceiving the history of Europe in much the same way is characteristic of an Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce². Mickiewicz and Croce – the views that they had in common rest in the ethical fundament rooted in the liberal trend of European Romanticism.

The vision of Europe presented by the author of *Dziady* assumed lifting political borders and formation of voluntary affiliations of free nations. The poet used familial metaphors when describing the relations between countries – for instance France was the sister of Poland and Israel was Poland’s elder brother (Bachórz, 2003: 125-144). Did Mickiewicz’s idea of “familial Europe” refer to the noble roots of Polish national culture which was the culture of heraldic families linked by blood ties and common familial remembrance? His work *Pan Tadeusz*, a kind of a national epic of noble culture, suggests that he did belong to this culture.

Mickiewicz’s Europe built its identity on the bases of the Greek-Roman heritage. The phenomenon of the romantic concept of province proffered the discovery of the centre of the world within the Homeric universe of timeless meanings. The aesthetic utopia of the rebirth of tragedy and the return to the mythical beginnings of the Slavdom were attempts at reshaping his time, surpassing its historical horizon. It was an endeavor to oppose the Europe of the Holy Alliance as well as an endeavor to sketch the map of European peoples that were forgotten and enslaved. Mickiewicz’s literary topography, though linked to a concrete biography, is in fact an example of geopoetics teeming with spatial magic. In one of his lectures on the Slavic literature the poet himself points out to the Danube as the river that separates the history and a land of a fairytale (Mickiewicz, 1955: 41-42):

2 These views are presented in *Croce’s History of Europe in 19th century* published in 1932.

each time the Western, Greek, Roman soldiers or even armies of crusaders crossed the lower Danube they immersed into the land of fairytales and folk tales. Contrarily, the leaders of the barbarian tribes, chiefs of nomadic hordes, as long as they stayed on their side of the Danube, remained known only by hearsay, but the moment they crossed the Danube, they entered history and became fully-fledged historical figures. [...]

This Slavic area separating the reality from the fairytale, the history from hearsay stretches between the lower Danube, northern Greece and the Carpathians. It goes as far as the Adriatic Sea and it is the only Slavic land known to the ancient Greeks and Romans. In Greek books, descriptions, in Roman monuments one can find several names, a few dates: these are the only ancient monuments of the history of Slavic peoples.

These scraps, carefully gathered, studied and explained by modern science constitute a transition from the history of Slavs to the history of peoples from the West. These are the links that tie our history with the history of other European nations.

In this fragment Danube is the mythical brother of Leta; it separates memory from oblivion. According to Mickiewicz, who calls South Slavs “the Danube Slavs” it is memory that is the defining feature of their cultural stability. The gift of memory, inborn in the Slavs, demonstrates itself in its immense durability and it is the factor contributory to the genesis of the most vital form of literature – the epic poem. Mickiewicz maintained:

“Without the durability of memory one shall not comprehend the making of the epic poem among the peoples”.

Accentuating the exceptional roles of memory and the epic poem enabled one to find a wondrous sphere in the primeval nature of the Slavic tradition. It additionally created a chance of finding a moment of epic poem’s turning point in the history of Slavs in Mickiewicz’s times. The writings of that time followed that particular idea – *Dziady* as a kind of a Slavic drama structurally following the patterns of the epic poem serve a role similar to Petar Njegos’s poem *Górski wieniec* (*Mountain wreath*) and Vojdan Cernodrinski’s drama *Makedonska krvava svadba*. Even until present days are we constantly witnesses of reappearances of these pieces in cultural (and political) landscapes of recipients of various national origins.

Mickiewicz and other emigrant poets of Polish Romanticism created a sort of a symbolic code invoking the memory of communal existence which helped the enslaved nations in the Europe of the Holy Alliance define their identity. In the 19th century this type of actions, integrating political intentions with the memorative symbolism of memory gave rise to a phenomenon which we contemporarily call the policy of remembrance.

From the point of view of the enslaved nations of Europe the central issue in the reflection on the European order was expressing the attitude towards Russia and defining its place on the map of the continent. Mickiewicz did not adhere to the opinions of the opponents of Russia's presence in Europe. He did not share the viewpoints of other Polish Romantics such as Maurycy Mochnacki or Zygmunt Krasiński, who claimed that Russia's place is solely in Asia. Mochnacki (1987: 471-472) would write:

“As long as Moscow is in Europe, Poland that is free and intact will never exist. [...] The west of Europe has to finally understand that tolerating Russia's expansion is a deadly threat to the West itself”.

In his lectures on Slavic literature Mickiewicz spoke on behalf of all the Slavs. He pointed out that Russia in fetters of autocracy shared the fate of the enslaved Slavic nations. He spoke to the audience gathered in College de France (Mickiewicz, 1955: 432-433):

“We, who come from the nation that exploits its powers in the struggle against Russia [...] had the courage to state that we do not nurture hatred towards Russia. Russia needs us, Russia will never be able to overthrow its yoke without Poland [...]”.

This alignment of Russia as an integral part of the Slavic world with the rest of this world, combined with defining the southern European interior of marginalized civilizations whose evolutionary continuum was constantly being interrupted as the centre of the Slavic world, essentially meant strong opposition to Russia's dominance. The map of Europe presented by Mickiewicz in *Paris lectures* was a successful attempt at deconstructing the East-West opposition. At the same time, it was a rectification of the Mediterranean myth which had far-reaching consequences for European literature. The quest to the sources of the Danube taken by the poet suggests such attractive for the contemporary literature recognition of the idea of Central Europe as the Danube civilization. It seems that the melancholic geography present in the novels of Andrzej Stasiuk, a contemporary Polish writer, originates in these Romantic quests made by Mickiewicz (Wiegandtowa, 2007).

Słowacki's heroic Europe

The East-West opposition so crucial for the history of the 19th century Europe was mirrored also in the literary output of Mickiewicz's poetic antagonist – Juliusz Słowacki. His poem *A journey from the Holy Land to Naples* is a biographical reflection of the poet's "eastwards journey" as he called it himself. The poem, written simultaneously with *Poetic letters from Egypt* attempted at recognizing the cultural memory of Europe of Słowacki's times. It was a journey in time to the beginnings of the Mediterranean tradition: Roman, Greek and Judaic. The Eastern trail of this journey proved to be the trail leading to a metaphysical initiation, a marine trail – from Virgil's grave in Naples, through the Mediterranean Sea and Greece to Alexandria, to the pyramids of Egypt and to the Holy Land with Jerusalem and Christ's grave. Recognizing the cultural memory takes the form of making the Judeo-Christian civilizational circles spatial, assuming their position in the represented world as mnemotopoi.

This eastern direction of travel does not overlook the political reality of Europe contemporary to Słowacki. This is attested to by the presence of a range of personifications constituting the map of Europe, which is essentially imaginary (Słowacki, 1949: 10):

If Europe is a Nymph – Naples
If it's Nymph's light blue eye – Warsaw
Heart – thorns in the leg Sevastopol,
Azov, Odessa, Petersburg, Mittau –
Paris its head – London its starched collar
And Rome its scapular.

The recollection of the myth of Europe-Nymph kidnapped by Zeus to Crete sanctions the cultural direction of this journey in time, leading to Homer's Greece, knightly Hellas whose presence allows the traveler to pay a visit to numerous places of memory, such as Agamemnon's Grave. In Słowacki's poem the entire Greece seems to be a place of memory for the ancient world and makes it possible for the poet to recognize the time which researchers of the beginnings of the European civilization denote as "axial time" (Assmann, 2008: 301-303). The key element for this notion of time was the creation of Homer's epic poem formerly functioning as the memory of a myth. Homeric poems as founding

texts denoted the process of codifying the memory of the past, while, at the same time, making a permanent reference of cultural memory of this part of Europe to the scope of knightly communities. This perspective is utilized by Słowacki in his poem to present an insight into not only the Mediterranean world but also the world in a wider European scope of identification with reference to the poet's contemporary times.

This sort of verification of the contemporary times through referring to the ancient norms of heroism was a part of neo-Hellenistic tendencies which proliferated in the first half of the 19th century owing to Byron's poems which shaped the viewpoints of poets of Polish Romanticism. Byron's standpoint by which he sided with Greeks fighting the Turkish hegemony shaped the ideal of a poetic activity extolling the fight for freedom of the oppressed nations.

The fight for freedom, once started,
With father's blood is inherited by the son,
A hundred times a year weakened power
Shall end up in victory.

This strophe from *Giaur* (Byron, 1954: 205), expressing an imperative of the process of inheriting freedom, demanding to remember about the achievements of one's forefathers will become an essential notion for Mickiewicz, Słowacki and Norwid. It becomes a variant of collective memory taken over from familial memory. The Greek past evoked in Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* centered on places of heroic memory – Salamis and Thermopylae – foreshadow the triumphant return of freedom.

The represented world in *A journey from the Holy Land to Naples* created in such a manner locates its geographical contours around the same places – Salamis, Thermopylae and Chaeronea through which one can notice a pre-sight of Maciejowice – the place of a memorable battle in which the Polish insurrection against Russians in 1794 was defeated. The map that is created includes cultural syncretism of un-forgotten places and it can be treated like a memory simulacrum of the past reality, which never ceases to last in the mourning of a poet-wanderer. This historical and cultural syncretism of the traveler's map in Słowacki's poem owes much to the "syncretism of substance" of the Greek borderland, co-establishing the multicultural nature of the Mediterranean world, including the Balkans. Similarly, the "upper" part of the peregrination,

marked by the mountain-grave of Virgil in Naples, the mountainous landscape of Greece, the pyramids of Egypt, as well as the opposition to this “upper” journey, whose role is fulfilled by the desert as a negation of loci, an area indicated by the devil, constitute a parallel of the basic antinomy of the Balkan interior – the metaphysics of the world of lonely mountain villages in the centre of the peninsula and the evil springing up on the plains reaching the sea, open to the world and everything that this foreign and unknown which the world brings (Miodyński, 2008: 53-70).

Several years after completing *A journey from the Holy Land to Naples* Słowacki returned to the spectral map of the Greek heritage and found on it the Slavic world, which he treated about in his mystic epic poem *Król-Duch* (*King-Ghost*). In it he speaks of himself as “the son of slaughtered peoples”.

Rome as the world according to Norwid

The strongest message of Norwid’s poetry is the belief that the center of European civilization used to be and still is in the South. It usually assumes the form of a spatial topic – the eternal city patterned on the ancient Rome at the moment of becoming the World is the represented world in most writings of this poet of late Romanticism. Since the beginning of his literary journey unveiling outside his homeland, the recipient deals with something that can be called sacred geography:

“/.../ This Rome, the place, so little, almost not possessing any sensual place or character – Rome is the center, a point almost mathematical – Rome is a column on an ancient forum which stated distances to towns, countries, that is the world...”(Norwid, 1973a: 11)³.

Norwid strove to find the pattern of this town-world everywhere and always. In every “here and now” of his existence he exhorted chaos by determining the sacred center in the inhabited space. Norwid wrote:

“Among peoples there was faith sketched mythically in every introduction to history according to which the homeland was in the center of the world – indeed, the first homelands did not have borders /.../” (Norwid, 1973: 9).

What was expressed here was certainly not only the need to put down roots, settle on a foreign land, but also the desire to liberate oneself from the fate of an

3 I wrote more widely about the meaning of Rome in Norwid’s poetry, see: K. Trybuś (2000: 67-112).

exile. Hence, the constant attempts at reshaping one's world, always, however, based on the mythological pattern best depicted by Rome. Hence, the constant presence of the ancient world as a spatial parable of the world as such, including the world contemporary to Norwid – the 19th century Europe. This fact is attested to by both, smaller writings like the poem *Spartacus*, as well as the ones referring to great romantic forms, for instance the poem *Quidam* which is an in-depth study of the multifaceted past of the Mediterranean cultures – Jewish, Greek and Roman. *Quidam* is at the same time a story of exclusion of a protagonist of Slavic origin from the Roman society. It is also a story about erasing of the memory of the one who's the literary doppelganger of the poet.

Norwid's quests into the depth of time, to the origins of civilization were always preceded by the choice and indication of a place. The poet who spoke of himself the following (Norwid, 1973b: 336):

No nation has redeemed me or created me,
I remember primeval eternity;
David's key opened my mouth,
Rome called me a human.

had a clearly specified idea of his homeland, not only in the intellectual sense, but also in terms of space and geography with a clearly indicated place of birth. The strophe quoted above comes from 1861 poem *Moja ojczyzna (My homeland)* which crowns the poet's earlier ruminations in which following the paths of Mickiewicz and Słowacki, Norwid looked for his own form of poetry contrary to the ethnocentric messages of Romantic heritage. The attempt at experiencing the tradition of the South individually, which is conveyed in the poem leads to a dispute about the memory of places – in the same poem Norwid writes (Norwid, 1973b: 336):

My homeland is not here;
My body is from over the Euphrates,
And my spirit from over the Chaos came;
I pay the rent to the world.

Norwid keeps finding the perennial memory of Rome tinted by ruin which concerns both the historical capital of the Roman Empire as well as the political and cultural structures dominating in the 19th century Europe. These “sketches of Rome” found in the world contemporary to the poet paradoxically evoke the space without a centre, a form of a labyrinth without a clear beginning and ending, immeasurable and borderless. This is the case of *Quidam* as well as other Norwid’s poems. The situation is no different in a poetic cycle *Vade-mecum* in which a weird *megalopolis* seems to engulf the entire world. At the same time, the world is its own boundary and the city that represents it plays the role of its own periphery. It bears resemblance to the scandal of a town without the centre as portrayed by our contemporary writer Italo Calvino talking about Pantazylea in the 9th book of *Invisible cities*.

The feature of Norwid’s spatial imagination is constant shifting of horizontal perspective combined with finding stable points in the vertical perspective. The spatial interpretation of human’s historical situation bestows on it an image of ruin-memory situated, as one can read in a poem called *Memento*, “between Asia’s breath and the West”. Only by returning to the South will one be able to leave the realm of being in-between.

Instead of recapitulation: The South of Polish Romanticism

The landscapes of memory of Polish Romantic poets have visible contours of the European cultural heritage – they reveal the artists’ striving towards the South. It includes the Greek-Roman heritage of myths, the opposition of center and periphery originating in the Antiquity, as well as the idea of republicanism leading to the destruction of the imperial order. There is also the universal cult of Homer, Petrarka and early Mickiewicz, as well as the worship of Italian Renaissance in Norwid’s works. While all Romantic poets admire Dante and Tass, Norwid and Krasinski particularly worship the mixture of pagan and Christian image of Rome. Finally, Słowacki is in love with “Sunny Jerusalem”.

This shift towards the South did not however run counter to the aesthetics of the North, which, paradoxically, was present among the Romantics looking for ideal landscapes, already non-existent and impossible to be found in the 19th century literature. The choice of the South was an attempt at nullifying the East-West opposition which was oppressive for the Poles, as it condemned them to living in the shade of Prussia and more importantly, Russia, maintaining the atrophy of the old disputes about foreignness and familiarity. The common ground

for Polish Romantics was personal experiencing of the memory of the South in the process of looking for a spiritual homeland. And even though mnemotopoi of the South representing that Europe compete with each other in Mickiewicz's, Słowacki's and Norwid's poetry, their recollection in the broad panorama of the history of Slavdom constitutes a modification of the Mediterranean myth inherited from the past. It is a successful attempt at putting down roots in it.

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ROMANTIČKO SJEĆANJE EUROPE: MICKIEWICZ – SŁOWACKI – NORWID

Sažetak

Trenutna analiza usredotočuje svoju perspektivu na simboličnu geografiju Poljskog romanticizma dekodiranog iz radova Adama Mickiewicza (*Pariška predavanja*), Juliusza Słowackog (*Putovanje iz Svete zemlje u Napulj*) i Cypriana Norwida (*Moja domovina*). Glavna teza počiva u odgovoru na sljedeće pitanje: cilja li romantičko zajedničko mišljenje prisutno u literarnim prinosima vodećih pjesnika Poljskoga romanticizma na mentalne konstrukcije preuzete iz mnemotoposa europskog nasljeđa?

Ključne riječi: Središnja Europa, Poljski romanticizam, Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, Cyprian Norwid