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THE TIME OF THE “BLACK SUN”

Piotr Śniedziewski, analysing examples from French, English, and Polish literature, described the birth of catastrophic imagination; imagination related to the end of the world understood as the dissolution and decomposition of reality, chaos, and dystopia.¹ It is an interesting subject. The author proposed many exemplifications, but my attention was drawn to a marginal – even though present throughout the entire book – issue of a specific perception of time by the Romantics. Their fear of the inevitable and sudden end of the world (deriving from their biographical experience) was the central point of Śniedziewski’s interpretation of, among others, Mary Shelley’s book *The Last Man*. Its plot is set in the 2090s – during the destruction of the world. As the author of *Czarne słońca romantyków* [*The Black Suns of the Romantics*] rightly noted, it is not a gripping book because Shelley did not offer the reader a vision of the past, but rather relocated – in her imagination – the world that she knew into the remote future where a raging pandemic decimates humankind while nature loses its balance and plunges into the gloom of the black sun.

Shelley’s book, despite being futuristic, comes across as somewhat rickety. The author of *Czarne słońca romantyków* has a similar impression. However, I think that it can constitute a stimulus to “update” our perception of Romanticism. Consistently following his chosen methodological path, Śniedziewski was inspired to write a catastrophic text inspired by Shelley’s personal experiences: traveling with her husband – Percy, and his subsequent death. Thus, he began his lecture by sketching the biographical background of the work as well as the psychological motivations based on the author’s introduction to *The Last Man*. He tried to recreate the way of understanding and using the “black sun” theme in a novel which

¹ P. ŚNIEDZIEWSKI, *Czarne słońca romantyków*, Warszawa: Sic! 2018.

is formally futuristic, but actually relates to Shelley's contemporary situation, determined by the events of the not-so-distant past („[...] whereas she treats the very work on the novel as a form of therapy which would help her come to terms with the loss of her husband [...]”).²

Śniedziewski focused on the melancholic, paralysing fear of the ultimate end of the world, i.e. the experience which is one of the main themes of the contemporary humanities. In a multitude of definitional and methodological ways to analyse the experience, there is at least one, which – I think – can help “update” the Romantic way of speaking about the past. Frank Ankersmit, offering his method in *Sublime Historical Experience*, decided that it is best – because of being most suggestive – to build a narration about the past in such a way as to reveal the author's emotional attitude about the events described. For this reason, he described this approach as „neo-Romantic.”³ In fact, Ankersmit did not write about melancholy, but about another ambivalent emotion – elevation. Before I refer to him, I will stress that this aesthetic category used to be linked to melancholy. It needs to be emphasised, though, that this is one of the possible relations because elevation is understood as a specific experience. Its specificity is due to the definitional indeterminacy – it is a condition in which terror blends with pleasure and ecstatic elation with the (apparent) purity of thought. This condition initiates sensual experiences accompanied by the awakening of the imagination and finally, an attempt to understand this process. Because the object which creates this sensation exceeds with its force (might, power, grandness, inevitability) the addressee, the addressee's intellectual effort cannot yield a satisfactory result. However, this sensation is so strong and the conclusions so significant that it is a great theme for artistic creation. Indeterminacy of sensation, however, as well as the lack of adequate means of expression, are depressing. Elevation was thus associated with melancholy (and elevated works, especially since the beginning of the 19th century, are characterised by “negativity,” apophaticism, aporia). Because of these features, Ankersmit saw elevation as a tool for expressing the experience of the passage of time and decided that elevation understood in this way is similar to the feeling of forgetting the past linked to the necessity to accept changes in reality. The Dutchman likened this process to trauma; a sensation that lingers and involves both remembering and denying an event at the same time. Shelley's text can be considered a written description of working to harness such trauma (“[...] writing helped her to work through the loss, return to life, or better still – be born

² Ibid., p. 35.

³ F. ANKERSMIT, *Sublime Historical Experience*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 7; cf. E. DOMAŃSKA, *Wstęp*, [in:] F. ANKERSMIT, *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie. Studia z teorii historiografii*, edited and introduction by E. Domańska, Kraków: Universitas 2004, p. 73.

again [...],” p. 36). Other versions of melancholy: Théophile Gautier’s, Gérard de Nerval’s, Victor Hugo’s, are analysed by Śniedziwski in a similar way – as a life burdened with trauma. Obviously, it is not just about the fear of the impending end, but about the unwanted and yet impossible to assuage vision of the dystopia he would witness.

I agree with the author about the meagre value of Shelley’s novel; I am wondering, though, if relocating in *The Last Man* of one’s own reality into the future (which, I agree, does not make the plot any more attractive), cannot be considered in the context of Ankersmit’s trauma of time passing. What is more, I think that one of the important variants of the Romantic “metaphysical anxiety” expressed in the motive of the “black sun” can be described in this way. Śniedziwski showed that this motive accompanied the catastrophic visions of eschatological nature. Whether these literary visions lead to a scene of the definite end of the world or turn out to be just a dreamy vision (like in the case of, for instance, Jean-Paul Richter’s *Speech of the Dead Christ*, which is a *leitmotiv* in Śniedziwski’s book), the main message concentrates on the situation prior to the finale. The chaos, which surrounds the subject, causes melancholy, metaphysical anxiety, state of uncertainty, a kind of incapacitation, suspension, and despair that is impossible to end. Suicide – like in the case of young Werther – could be an answer to it, but the mature Romantics – as Śniedziwski calls them – either had enough experience to value life (even despite this experience), or understood the creative material that they had at their disposal, or even being cynical and sad (the author was choosing such ones) they decided that the theme is relevant. Even a cursory review of literary works and visual arts, as well as cultural events characteristic of Romanticism shows that placing protagonists in extreme situations and leaving them in suspension was considered more interesting than providing definite endings and closures. Suffice to illustrate it by, among others, the conclusion of the Great Improvisation (in Adam Mickiewicz’s *Dziady* [*Forefathers’ Eve*]) after which Konrad levitates beyond time and space (although not for too long). In line with the convention of elevation, the life of protagonists in such works is subject to direct danger, however, they do not die – they always find themselves on the borderline, helpless in the face of danger but still alive.

Dead Christ, from Richter’s novel, is the only exception that comes to my mind. He does, however, make a speech. If we analyse this character more closely, he turns out to be a model (and at the same time – original) example of the characteristic placement of Romantic characters in extreme situations (as well as space and time) that can be described as “in-between” which does not relate only to the placement of characters of lofty works. The English phrase “in-between” best describes the meaning of this concept. It emphasises not only being in a certain

“space,” but also being a part of it. Christ is, obviously, an intermediary between God and people; however, in Richter’s novel, in the narrator’s dream, God, regardless of pleas and multiple attempts, does not reveal himself to his Son which makes the latter conclude that God does not exist. Christ considers not sharing this information with people to protect them from losing faith in salvation and the afterlife (in the face of the impending end of the world). Christ’s “in-between” is thus clearly defined. The absence of The Father means that Jesus is not the Son, so he cannot be the redeemer. By not revealing this fact to people, he remains the undeniable promise of the afterlife. The moment of making this decision is critical, the end of the world is approaching, reality is crumbling before Christ’s very eyes and his silence is extremely important because there will be no Last Judgement. Christ is thus – according to the religious tradition – in-between transcendence and human reality. In Richter’s novel, though, he himself is a “mediating space” and appears on the verge of the final time. There is another interesting time perspective which is relevant in this story. Only a fragment of the Richter’s novel gained particular fame in 19th century Europe. It became popular due to its translation into French, which appeared in a collection of literary and philosophical novelties, entitled *D’Allemagne* by Madame de Staël. In this translation, the dream ends with a cosmic catastrophe, whereas in the original text of *Siebenkäs* (1796-1797) the vision is a story within a story: the protagonist wakes up to realise the order of the reality remained unchanged. This enervating dream was supposed to be an eschatological warning which ended in a return to the safe present guaranteed by a timeless, eternal plan. In the French translation there is only one protagonist – it is Christ, left in the “in-between” space. Shelley’s futuristic vision is also a borderline reality: a repetition of the past in the future. The new order (especially after the French Revolution) created the fear of radically disrupting the previous order.

The triumphant procession of photography in the 19th century caused similar concerns. Allan Sekula summarised the opinions of contemporary gloom-mongers as follows: “Photography promises the most perfect taming of nature and, at the same time, threatens with conflagration and anarchy; it constitutes a charge capable of wiping the existing cultural order off the face of the earth.”⁴ Apocalyptic visions affecting the known reality could not overlook the motif of the destructive power of the sun, even popular rhyming poems started to appear shortly after the official announcement of the invention in 1839: “Oh, Mister Daguerre, are you aware of / The destruction that you cause? / With the ray of the sun you will burn

⁴ A. SEKULA, *Spoleczne użycia fotografii*, ed. K. Lewandowska, trans. K. Pijarski, Warszawa: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art and Warsaw University Press 2010, p. 136.

the Thames, you will destroy the National Gallery.]”⁵ This verse does not, in fact, mention the „black sun” because capturing images on photosensitive materials was associated in the collective awareness with energy, rather than melancholy. Nevertheless, the faithfulness with which photography reflects objects was perceived as a „murderer” of the nostalgic feelings related to reminiscing about the past.⁶ In the collection of poetic representations of the “black sun,” Śniedziewski also found one which links both perspectives; it is related to psychology and, at the same time, resembles the poem cited above. The scholar, searching for sources of inspiration for this motif in one of Victor Hugo’s verses in *What the mouth of darkness says* (*Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre*, 1855), referred to Paul Valéry’s opinion: “Impossible to conceive, this wonderful negative.”⁷ While deciphering Valéry’s aphorism, the book’s author considered the poetic representation of the “black sun, a black source of power” from Hugo’s poem to be a kind of oxymoron. In turn, the scholar from Poznań linked it to the concept of negativity borrowing an accurate interpretation of a poem of a different poet:

The oxymoron is a reflection of mental anguish, a painful vision of the universe, a loss of light which now becomes absent. [...] It points to a wound caused by absence as well as an unfulfilled desire for completion. It implies [...] untold netherworld, but does so referring to a loss: in this way the oxymoron has gained a negative dimension.⁸

Here, Śniedziewski mentioned the beginnings of photography, but later he dropped this subject. However, I suggest looking into this issue because it helps see the problems mentioned above from a different perspective: time passing, melancholy and being placed “in-between.” First, Valéry’s use of a comparison to a negative probably resulted from his interest in photography which at the end of the 19th century turned into a real fascination. As Paul Edwards – a scholar researching the link between the French literature and photography in the 19th century – notices, the poet was interested in the psychological problem of time perception. His attention was drawn to photographic experiments (especially Étienne-Jules Marey’s) which were supposed to be “visual models” of time.⁹ In his

⁵ Ibid, p. 135.

⁶ W. BENJAMIN, *Charles Baudelaire, un poète lyrique à l’apogée du capitalisme*, Paris: Éditions Payot 1982, p. 198.

⁷ P. ŚNIEDZIEWSKI, *Czarne słońca*, p. 117.

⁸ J.-P. JOSSUA, *Aimer Nerval*, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf 2014, p. 219 – cit. after: P. ŚNIEDZIEWSKI, *Czarne słońca*, trans. P. Śniedziewski, p. 118.

⁹ P. EDWARDS, *Le soleil noir. Photographie et littérature des origines au surréalisme*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes 2008, pp. 110, 113, 115. One of the subchapters, in a modified

book, Edwards subjectively juxtaposes works from different areas, although he points to a (non-elaborate) catalogue of similarities of formal solutions (these are simple associations) and a convergence of intellectual bases of artistic endeavour. The scholar treated 1839 as an approximate date for the emergence of a new way of describing the represented world; it was when the photographic technique started to inspire writers. It is a well-chosen date because at that time François Arago presented Louis Daguerre and Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's invention called the daguerreotype before the French Academy of Sciences, announcing – pompously – his country was offering this invention to the world. In this way, he initiated a sudden interest in photography.

According to his division, Edwards interpreted Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (created in 1836) as an example of imagination which did not succumb to this influence (he called it “pre-daguerreotype”). He said that the author of the novel created foggy landscapes immersed in moonlight in Chapters XI and XVI. There might be some inspiration found in photography, but their visual obscurity and limited light make it impossible to link the two directly.¹⁰ It is an interesting interpretation, but I find it more convincing and useful to juxtapose the photographic technique with literary descriptions of chiaroscuro contrasts, the play of light, and the combinations of different shades of black, white and grey. Also important are his elaborate and well substantiated considerations about (as Edwards puts it) “the immobilisation” (*l'immobilité*) of movement – temporal plans, subjective perception of the passage of time.¹¹

A reader looking for poetic examples of such “photographicity” of description in the Polish literature may certainly think of Mickiewicz's *Nad wodą wielką i czystą* [*Over the Vast and Pure Water*]. But was this kind of inspiration even possible? The poem belongs to a group of Lausanne Lyrics created in 1839-1840, and thus it exceeds the indicative date proposed by Edwards. I am not sure if Mickiewicz, during his stay in Lausanne, was interested in the then still fledgling photography, but there is some circumstantial evidence for it. The Polish poet had been giving lectures at the local university since October 1839. He was well-received not only by his fellow lecturers but also by important people in town. He belonged to a group of friends of Juste Olivier – a writer, poet, journalist, university employee, an influential man among the local intellectual and social elite. This much we know, but I will allow myself to reconstruct the rest. Charles

form, was published [in:] IDEM, *Paul Valéry et Étienne-Jules Marey: de l'instantané à la durée. e-Bulletin des Amis de Marey et des Musées de Beaune – Villa Médicis*, 2014, no pagination, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01504256> [accessed on 28 December 2018].

¹⁰ IDEM, *Le soleil noir*, p. 126.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-118 (Chapter VIII: “Le symbolisme et la chronographie”).

Secrétan, a lawyer, theologian, university professor from 1839 to 1840, member of one of the most prominent families in Lausanne, was Olivier’s student and friend. The Secretan family (Charles slightly changed the spelling of the surname) belonged to the city’s elite. Several persons with this surname were the city’s officials from 1802 to 1842 (Charles, Victor, Charles-Frederique, Louis), and two others held important positions: one Secretan (Samuel-Henry), was a member of the municipal construction supervision, another (Henri) – of forest administration. On a listing of the city’s important people there were also two lawyers (Charles-Isaac and Eduard) and one – as it is written – representative of science¹² – Marc, who in 1838 became the head of the mathematics department at the university. He was also an optician and from 1840, together with Frédéric Martens and Samuel Heer, was working on creating photographic cameras and photosensitive materials. By the way, Martens became a well-known landscape photographer; he would photograph, among others, the Chillon Castle at Lake Geneva, but unfortunately – later than 1840. Recapitulating this overview of Swiss pioneers of photography (who were known more widely for their inventive activity and commercial spread of the effects of this activity, as well as for publications, and also – simply – for the change a place of residence), I can say – even though we cannot be sure if Mickiewicz was interested in photography during his stay in Lausanne – the conditions for developing such an interest were favourable.

In the poem *Nad wodą wielką i czystą*, the motif of the “black sun” is absent, but the poet saw “black faces” in the mountain peaks and “black clouds” above them. I will repeat here that Edwards proposed to talk about the influence of photography on landscape imagery in literature when it suggests immobility, characteristic monochromaticity, stark chiaroscuro contrasts, shades of grey, and the control of light. In this poem there is immobile water and mountains, as well as blackness and sudden brightness. If we follow the “photographicity” trope in this poem we can see that the first three verses resemble a sequence of consecutive frames even though a repetition of the two lines (the second one is prolonged to the beginning of the following one) in each of these verses indicates that the view remains unchanged, as if the camera were directed towards the panel of water. It mediates the perception of the environment as a mirror or a photograph; a similar mediating role is played by the observer, as indicated by the repetition of the same word: “I woda tonią przejrzystą / odbiła [...]”, “I wszystko wiernie odbijam” [And the clear depth of water / reflected (...); And I reflect everything faithfully]. The last line again evokes the association with a mirror or a photograph, although

¹² *Lausanne à travers les âges*, M. van Muyden et al., Publié par la Municipalité de Lausanne, Librairie Rouge, Lausanne 1906, https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Lausanne_%C3%A0_travers_les_%C3%A2ges/Texte_entier [accessed on 2 January 2019].

the latter appears to better explain this imagery because a “faithful reflection” refers to capturing an image which is also an element of memory.

As mentioned above, Edwards described Valéry’s fascination with the relativity of time perception. The French poet contrasted the time measured mathematically with “mental and psychological time” and claimed that if its passage is subjective, then it is a certain state of consciousness.¹³ He was also inspired by the findings of psychology, a rapidly developing scientific discipline,¹⁴ in which he found the confirmation of his intuitive interpretation of Marey’s experimental photography from the 1880s. Marey was then taking pictures of, among others, birds in motion. These pictures resembled time-lapse photography which was made with such frequency that an (almost) uninterrupted sequence of changes in the animal’s shape was captured. Edwards writes, citing Valéry at length, in this type of photography the writer was fascinated with capturing the passage of time,¹⁵ whereas in Marey’s works – let me remind – he saw “visual models” of this phenomenon. The futurist painters as well as poets from the beginning of the second decade of the 19th century dealt with this issue in an almost identical manner (for instance, Duchamp’s famous *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* from 1912, and *Nude* with the subsequent number which was created in 1916 as a manually coloured gelatin-silver print). However, I do not attempt to include the examined Mickiewicz’s poem in this literary tradition.

Valéry was making these speculations at the beginning of the 20th century, much later than the Polish poet’s poem was written. I think, however, he is giving one more hint at linking *Nad wodą wielką i czystą* with photographic imagination. In this poem, different groups of objects seem to be functioning at different times. The permanence of the mountains and water, emphasised by repetitions, is a stable point of reference both in space and in time. The speaker observes the phenomena of aggressive nature. Phrases used to describe them indicate the rapid (unnatural, i.e. contrary to experience) pace of their course and change: “przebiegły czarne obłoki” [black clouds ran across], “błysnęło wzdłuż” [lightning flashed along] (linking time with space). The observer is thus situated between two different “temporal spaces,” in a third “unhasty” one, as it is indicated by the repetition of the word “płynąć” [to flow] at the end of the poem. Śniedziwski read Nerval’s sonnet *El Desdichado* in a similar way: “It is exactly here that the two significant problems that Nerval has to face are hidden: the first one is the question of identity

¹³ P. EDWARDS, *Le soleil noir*, pp. 113-115.

¹⁴ Cf. M. KIMURA, *Le mythe du savoir : naissance et évolution de la pensée scientifique chez Paul Valéry (1880-1920)*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang 2008, pp. 242-245.

¹⁵ P. EDWARDS, *Le soleil noir*, pp. 113-115.

(who is "the self" in the poem? What do they feel and what are their bonds with the world?), the second one is the experience of time."¹⁶ The author of *Czarne słońca romantyków* analysed the linguistic layer of the text and found cases where Nerval treated creative work as an asylum and, at the same time, as a battlefield for the fight with his disease. Śniedziewski conducted an analysis which links biographic perspective with the Romantic problem of the passage of time. His observations were based on the analysis of the grammatical tense used in the utterances in the poem.¹⁷

The motif of the "black sun" is an important element in the visions which express the problems that bothered the Romantic artists: the passage of time, subjectivity, identity, as well as perception and the ways of expressing it. These issues were very often linked together but organised around the individual experience of time. The difference between the time "felt" by the protagonist and the "external time" is clearly visible in, for example, *Speech of the Dead Christ*. The destruction of the world is fast and the protagonist utters his considerations as if he was found in a different – even though not isolated – reality where time passes more slowly. The protagonist's "personal" space is situated "in-between" different, clearly delineated spaces. The character, left in such suspense, determines their "position" relative to these spaces, constructing or verifying their self-image in this way. Acquiring self-knowledge is the general motivation characteristic of the Romantics. As indicated by Richter's *Speech...* or Shelley's *The Last Man*, the authors of the works created at the beginning of that epoch were returning from the indeterminate space "in-between" the known, ordered world (in the former case – a dreaming person wakes up, in the latter – the future is a copy of the past). In this regard, these works are different from the works created in the period of mature Romanticism – these express the sad, mature, and brave acceptance of the irrevocable passage of time.

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¹⁶ P. ŚNIEDZIEWSKI, *Czarne słońca*, p. 88f.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

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THE TIME OF THE “BLACK SUN”

S u m m a r y

The text concerns the literary presentation of experiencing time that was characteristic of Romantics. In his latest book, Piotr Śniedziewski repeatedly mentions time as a problem considered by 19th-century artists. The article presents this issue using the current reflection on the experience (Frank Ankersmit’s “historical sublime experience”) and the findings concerning the impact of photography, which has been developing rapidly since 1839, on the way the represented world is shaped in literature, as well as the use of photography as a tool of analysing time (“the visual model of time”).

Key words: time; passing; experience; elevation; melancholy; daguerreotype; history of photography; photography and poetry.

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