

AGATA SEWERYN

**“I GLANCED INTO THE NETHER-WORLD.”
SOME REMARKS ON THE TRADITION
OF CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DEAD
IN THE WRITINGS OF CYPRIAN NORWID**

The works regarded as Norwid’s conversations with the dead have already been focused on by numerous scholars. They have been interpreted in isolation, as separate texts, and as a peculiar whole, reduced to one in a generic fashion.¹ Let us start with a brief survey of some of the findings.

The tradition of Elysian dialogues is recalled in the context of three literary texts by Norwid and one engraving. The literary texts are: *Vendôme* (1849), *Do – Henryka...* (*Fraszka*) (1851) and *Rozmowa umarłych: Byron, Rafael-Sanzio* (ca. 1857). Norwid also created an etching entitled “Dialogue des Morts”. *Rembrandt–Phidias* (1871)².

Thus, the corpus is quite limited. The dates are striking: between 1849 and 1871. Norwid kept returning from his early youth to his

¹ See, particularly, Anna Kadyjewska, *Norwidowskie rozmowy umarłych – dialog postaci i epok*, in *Liryka Cypriana Norwida*, ed. by Piotr Chlebowski, Włodzimierza Torunia, Lublin 2003; Agnieszka Ziółowicz, *Romantycy na Polach Elizejskich. Z dziejów rozmowy zmarłych*, in *Eadem, Poszukiwanie wspólnoty. Estetyka dramatyczności a więź międzyludzka w literaturze polskiego romantyzmu (preliminaria)*, Kraków 2011.

² Dates of works’ completion are given after *Kalendarzem życia i twórczości Cypriana Norwida*, Poznań 2007: vol. I / 1821–1860 (Zofia Trojanowiczowa, Zofia Dambek przy współudziale Jolanty Czarnomorskiej); vol. II / 1861–1883 (Z. Trojanowiczowa, Elżbieta Lijewska przy współudziale Małgorzaty Pluty); v. III / *Aneks – Bibliografia – Indeksy* (Z. Trojanowiczowa, Z. Dambek, Iwona Grzeszczak).



[POLONA, Sygn. G.4411/II]

mature years to this genre, which had originated in Antiquity and enjoyed a revival in the period of the neo-classicist Enlightenment. Why should we be using the term ‘reminiscences’, rather than insist upon strict references to the well-known generic tradition.

Norwid himself used the term “conversations with the dead” only to refer to a dialogue of Byron with Raphael and a graphic representation of Rembrandt and Phidias conversing. In this way he referred, in a meta-literary way, to the tradition, and shows his generic awareness. Of

course, the dialogue between Byron and Raphael is written according to the convention of Eleusian dialogues. The generic context in relation to “Vednome” and “To Henryk” was only later observed by Norwid scholars, although, let us admit it at the beginning, it is not indisputable. Anyway, this context should not be recalled without a commentary. For example, it is not unequivocal that the very fact of the “extra-sepulchral poet discussion”, as Kazimierz Wyka put it,³ is enough to talk about strict reference to the classical conversations with the dead. In this case, such a tradition should also be recalled in the context of Słowacki’s lyric poem “Kiedy się w niebie gdzie zejdziemy sami.” (“When We Are in Heaven on Our Own”)

In general, in the texts mentioned Norwid uses the rhetorical, high, solemn style, evoking an atmosphere characteristic for many classical dialogues in the nether world (“O! Shadow”, “solemn shadow”, for

³ Kazimierz Wyka, *Pozagrobowa dyskusja poetycka*, in Idem, *Rzecz wyobraźni*, Warszawa 1997, 516.

example says Napoleon to Caesar in "Vendome"). An atmosphere characteristic for many Eleusian dialogues, because it is well known that as early as in Lucian, the founding father of the genre, the comic streak was quite prominent. And although Norwid seems to be, at times—to use a colloquial expression—more holy than a pope, the generic tradition here has encountered far reaching complications, as it is, anyway, often the case with Norwid, the master of "disturbed forms". Just as Norwid's epigrams and fables are exemplifications of breaking generic norms, Norwid's conversations with the dead, even at first glance—if one remembers conversations with the dead written by Lucian, Fénelon, Fontenelle or Krasicki—appear as shadows of classical dialogue.⁴ Particularly "Vendôme" and "To Henryk...". Zenon Przesmycki's comment that conversations with the dead were "Norwid's favourite type of dialogue" is quite surprising.⁵ However, Kazimierz Wyka's conclusion that Norwid is the master of this form in Polish literature, is even more surprising.⁶ So, not Ignacy Krasicki, but Cyprian Norwid?

Of course, the statement that Norwid did not copy in a mechanical way conventions known from the previous periods, that he did not use the model versions of different genres, is not very revealing, particularly if we take into account all the research that has been accomplished in this field. It would be really surprising if Norwid had followed the norms embedded in classical and neo-classical books of poetics. Therefore, I would like to focus here not so

⁴ Michała Głowiński: *Ciemne alegorie Norwida*, in Idem, *Intertekstualność, groteska, parabola. Szkice ogólne i interpretacje*, Kraków 2000, 281. See also Teresa Kostkiewiczowa, *Oda w czasach romantyzmu (podrozdział Norwid)*, w: *też: Oda w poezji polskiej. Dzieje gatunku*, Wrocław 1996, 257–270; vol. *Norwidowskie fraszki (?)*, ed. by Jacka Leociaka, Warszawa 1996; remarks of Janina Abramowska on *Ostatnia z bajek* (Eadem, *Pisarze w zwierzyńcu*, Poznań 2010, 40–42); Agata Seweryn, *Światłocienie i dysonanse. O Norwidzie i tradycji literackiej*, Lublin 2013, 34–35.

⁵ Cyprian Norwid, *Pisma zebrane*, Zenon Przesmycki, Warszawa–Kraków 1911, 552.

⁶ Kazimierz Wyka, *Pozagrobowa dyskusja poetycka*, op. cit., 516.

much on Norwid's transgressions of generic norms, but on some of the mechanisms connected with these 'transgressions'.

Agnieszka Ziółowicz wrote quite recently, in accordance with the opinions of many scholars, who treat Norwid almost as a late classicist, that references to the traditions of Elysian dialogues point to his neo-classicism.⁷ Yes, if we take the frequency with which Norwid's contemporaries used the convention of conversations of the dead, then we would have to agree with Ziółowicz. Although Horace Walpole's statement that in Romanticism conversations of the dead became dead conversations is an exaggeration,⁸ it is true that Romantics, including Polish Romantics, rarely used this genre. Krasieński as the author of "Rozmowy Napolenoa z Aleksandrem I na Polach Elizejskich" ("Conversations of Napoleon with Alexander I on the Elysian Fields"), Słowacki in "Krytyka krytyki i literatury" ("Criticism of Criticism and Literature)—we will not find many more examples. Norwid is a clear leader here in the sense of frequency. However, it is also worth remembering that Norwid's classicism or neo-classicism can look like the drawing from the last page of *Album Orbis*, on which a gravestone in an Ancient style is decorated with vegetal flagella. Therefore, I am going to treat Norwid's conversations of the dead not as exemplification of his neo-classicism, but—if need be—as the mannerist use of classicist poetics. Norwid's "disrupted forms" go very well in the context of mannerist literary theory. Graciano, Tesauro or Pellegrini, and, in the Polish context, Sarbiewski, all stressed the importance of deformation and "displacement" within the given literary world. If we accept the non-historical understanding of mannerism (a mannerist work is "an excess of autonomous style of a period"⁹ –Norwid, also an author of conversations of the dead,

⁷ Agnieszka Ziółowicz, *Romantycy na Polach Elizejskich*.

⁸ "Dialogues of the Dead" became "Dead Dialogues" – said Walpole (Quoted in Zofia Sinko, *Oświeceni wśród pól elizejskich...*, op. cit., 17).

⁹ Barbara Otwinowska, *Manieryzm*, hasło w: *Słownik literatury staropolskiej*, pod red. Teresy Michałowskiej przy współudziale B. Otwinowskiej i Elżbiety Sarnowskiej-Temierusz, Wrocław 1990, s. 450.

was clearly a mannerist. Some of the aspects of Norwid's conversations of the dead are not only interesting in the context of mannerism, but also of Baroque poetics.

Let us concentrate mostly on the earliest text regarded as belonging to the group of Norwid's conversations of the dead—"Vendôme". Anna Kadyjewska stated in the context of this poem, and generally of Norwid's conversations of the dead, that the novelty here was in the fact that the poet took the dead down from the Elysian Fields to the earth. In this case to the centre of Paris, where Caesar and Napoleon have their "posthumous dialogue".¹⁰ Such a remark seems to be very apt when we realize that it was made in reference to a poet who had translated Dante: „Prócz ciemnych Piekieł – Czyścica pół-ciemności / I blasku Niebios – ach! – Ziemia jest jeszcze...”¹¹ after which he wrote the fourth volume of Dante's *Comedy* (That is the long poem "Ziemia" ("The Earth"), the fragment of which is preserved). But, on the other hand, Norwid wrote in "Zarysy z Rzymu":

There is nothing sadder than dragging maggots from the past in order to make nicer the miserable things of today's life – calling shadows from the spots of silence to clean up excrements from roads is a devilish work indeed! [VII, 14]

So did he perform "the devilish" work himself in his conversations of the dead? I am inclined to state that with Norwid we have the opposite case: it is his protagonists who look to "the nether world" (like Krakus, who asks in pre-Lesbian language: "I looked into the nether world—did graves recollect me?" IV, 178). Norwid "did not take the shadows of the dead down to the earth", but he quite often tended to see the earthly reality as a "kingdom of shadows" and constructed his protagonists as beings similar to Elysian shadows. For example, in "Pompei" the speaking voice says: "It should be enough

¹⁰ Anna Kadyjewska, *Norwidowskie rozmowy umarłych – dialog postaci i epok*, op. cit., 280.

¹¹ III, 29. Apart from dark Hells; semi-darkness of Purgatory/And the light of Heavens, ah, there is also Earth.

if I tell you that I am from a nation,/To whom the life of shadow, in semi-sleep, in no-name/Is not unfamiliar. “ [...]” (III, 21). In “A Dorio ad Phrygium” a serene idyll, this “nominal kingdom” is compared to the atmosphere of the “Ancient Fortune-Island” where “Brutus or Cato shadow/Speaking of Philippi!” appear. (III, 325–326). And finally, in *Quidam* we find many statements like: “Shadows beyond the Styx tell the same! (Artemidor about Quidam; III, 110), “For a shadow from beyond the Styx too much of a coward/For a man too transparent” (about Barchob; III, 120); “The one walking in shadows/With a stick as long as crooked/A servant of Charon’s ship—/How is he?.,- / Jak się ma?” (Caesar about Jason; III, 181). There are many more such examples. For example, Krakus (who has been referred to earlier) asks: “[...]Am I now a shadow/Miserable with miserable reality?” (IV, 178). Sometimes the world of Norwid is like the nether world. In other words, there is no sharp division in Norwid’s writings between “this world” and “the nether world”. At times it is the same world in spatial and temporal terms.

The situation is quite similar in the case of Norwid’s conversations of the dead: “The whole rhythm of things flew into another one” we read in *Vendôme* (I, 112). It seems, however, that even in this poem—opening with these lines:

Cień Julijusza, w złotawej klamidzie,
Jakoby chmura popod księżyc idzie,
By śmiertelnemu, co pogląda z ziemi,
Wydał się światła-szyby rozlanemi,
I u kolumny zawisnąwszy szczytu,
Z obywatelem cichego błękitu,
A panem miasta – podumał – gwarnego,
Z Cezarem drugim świata po-rzymskiego.

[w. 1–9]¹²

¹² “A shadow of Julius in a golden robe,/Moves underneath the moon as a cloud,/Because to a mortal looking from the earth,/It appeared as diffused light-glass,/And being suspended from the top of the column,/With a citizen of quiet blue,/

—"dragging the dead down from the Elysian field to the earth" does not happen. For several reasons.

Firstly, if we read Norwid's long poem closely, it will turn out that from "the nether world" there arrives only "a shadow of Julius", who has come to visit the statue of Napoleon at the top of the Vendôme column. This statue seems to come to life, as so many statues do in opera (particularly in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*) and in literary tradition. Thus, the statue of Napoleon—in the manner of the statue of Commander—springs to life and starts talking. And it is only this "enlivened statue" that refers to his adversary per 'shadow' (while "the shadow of Julius" calls the statue simply 'you'). Therefore, Norwid's have a different ontological status—they are both not—as *decorum* would require—"as noble bodiless beings"¹³ although they both seem "to be covered in blue/With the huge banner of immortality" (l. 17–18). If we really have here a reference to the tradition of Elysian dialogues, it is undoubtedly transformed in the spirit of conceptual poetry.

Secondly, this whole dialogue may be treated as a result of the imagination of the "mortal who looks from the earth" (line 3). That is a wanderer through the streets of Paris at night who has stopped to look at the Vendôme column. This "shadow of Julius in a golden tunic" appears—as the lyric voice states—"as a cloud" lit by moonlight, like a beam, a reflex of light rent in a window glass (I am referring here to the first four lines of the poem). While the light generates movement, change, illusion, it is a factor conducive to the play with the artificial. The recipient mentioned in the third line, this "mortal looking from the earth" on the column with Napoleon's

With the lord of the city—he pondered—the busy one,/With the Caesar of the other, post-Roman world."

¹³ Many years ago Zygmunt Leśnodorski, in the context of the key generic feature of conversations of the dead, wrote: "The Elysian Fields is an ideal place, where everybody is equal, where everything which used to have any value on the earth, except for virtue and wisdom, loses all its weight. Spirits of great men, free from earthly sufferings, and any need, equal in the face of eternity, have conversations and moral discourses, full of philosophical reflections. (*Lucjan w Polsce*, Kraków 1933, s. 46).

statue on the top, may not be certain if what he sees is “an object” or if he is “deluded”.¹⁴ He has to look at things “from a different side” to see them, in a way, in anamorphosis. Therefore, Norwid forces onto his readers the kind of perception that the so called metaphysical poets used to force.

I am referring here to the context of the Baroque also because, plays with light, so conducive to poetic illusion, were so exquisitely used in this period. For example, Bernini was very much concerned with the proper placement, which means with the proper lighting of his sculptures, which thanks to light were, in a sense, put in motion. Krzysztof Mrowcewicz, trying to pinpoint one of the key tensions in the art of the turn of the sixteenth century, wrote about “torment of movement and desire to last”.¹⁵ It is from this perspective that I see Norwid’s description of the imagined protagonists: a shadow, immobilized for a moment, a reflex of light—and an enlivened marble statue. It is static, connected with what is transient, flickering.

In Norwid’s ekphrasis is not only the tension between spirit and matter, but also the dialectic of truth and appearance which rule. Let us say it clearly: “Vendôme”, a poetic reflection written around a famous column in Paris, may be included in the group of Norwid’s ekphrases. And let us note how far Norwid moves away from the tradition of Classical conversations of the dead, in which a reader is immediately introduced, *in media res*, into conversations in the Elysian Fields, carried out with no interference from the author’s ‘I’.

In the Classical cases of this genre we only very rarely get information about the physical aspects of the protagonists involved in dialogues, which would allow us to imagine these protagonists and spaces in which scenes take place. Ryszard Przybylski perceptively noted that, in the case of Krasicki’s “Rozmowy zmarłych” (“Conversations with the Dead”), Elysian dialogues “often have the form of a transcribed

¹⁴ Cf., Mateusz Salwa, *Trompe-l’oeil – odsłony*, in tegoż, *Iluzja w malarstwie. Próba filozoficznej interpretacji*, Kraków 2010, 58–62.

¹⁵ Krzysztof Mrowcewicz, *Atalanta i Narcyz. Udręka ruchu i pragnienie trwania*, „Teksty Drugie” 1995, no. 2, 5–19.

radio programme".¹⁶ Protagonists' presence is marked only through the transcript of a (usually polemical) debate. Let us add in the margin that such protagonists are usually more like types than individuals. The scholars who have written about this genre, Zygmunt Leśnodorski, and later Zofia Sinko, have pointed to the moderation, intellectual distance, essentialism, lack of emotions and objectivity of the Elysian dialogues and representative character of protagonists.¹⁷

It has already been written that it is different in the case of Norwid—who imposed "subjective", "lyrical", "psychological" elements on his dialogues and even projected himself in his dialogues referring to the Elysian tradition.¹⁸ The fact that his conversations are not antagonistic has also been pointed out. It could be added that, at times, these conversations lose the character of a dispute and become lyric monologues. The elements of rhetoric are replaced by longer lyric passages. Norwid's dialogues are not terse and aphoristic, which is usually the case in the stylistics of Classical examples of this genre.

I leave these themes and return to the ekphrasis in "Vendôme"—the appeal mostly to the visual aspect of perception. This attention to scenography is clear in another poem included in Norwid's conversations with the dead—in the epigrammatical "To Henryk..." "Norwid's hand of a director" (to use a coinage struck by Irena Sławińska) tried to pose Caesar in a manner similar to many other literary protagonists of Norwid—for example a lady from "Malarz z konieczności" ("A Painter out of Necessity"). We know about the pose of Caesar, his gestures while he speaks, the way in which he is lighted by stares.

In "Vendôme" theatrical effects are slightly different than in "To Henryk...", and the scenography is constructed in a different manner. First of all, Norwid forces his readers—here as well—to look up to the sky. This is not the case of "shadows of the dead" being

¹⁶ Ryszard Przybylski, *Katabaza Księcia Arcybiskupa Gnieźnieńskiego*, in *Idem te, Klasycyzm czyli Prawdziwy koniec Królestwa Polskiego*, Warszawa 1983, 111.

¹⁷ Zygmunt Leśnodorski, *Lucjan w Polsce*, op.cit., passim; Zofia Sinko, *Oświeceni wśród Pól Elizejskich...*, op. cit.,...

¹⁸ Grażyna Halkiewicz-Sojak, *Byron w twórczości Norwida*, Toruń 2004, 86.

transported to the earth. It is the reader who is to look up to the sky, to hoist his senses about earthly reality: The lines:

Tu się chmurami zakrył szczyt kolumny,
 A bokiem księżyc występował młody,
 Jako atlasu brzeg z zamkniętej trumny,
 I była cichość bardzo przepaścista.
 Od ziemi lekki tuman mgły powstawał,
 Od niebios gwiazda czasem spadła czysta,
 I, jakby czyn się gdzieś uroczy stawał,
 Dobrotliwiało natury oblicze.

[w. 107-114]¹⁹

could be used to confirm Jarosław Płuciennik's assessment that Norwid's imagination tended to be "sublime". Norwid wrote in *Tyrtej*: "Aeropag's quiet wheel, sitting under stars at night, is so deep" (IV, 474). We also, for example, remember Cleopatra when: "she goes to gaze at stars, pray, think" (V, 101).

It is not only that the Vendôme with Napoleon's statue is tall, but that it can be described as "the mast of the quiet blue" as Norwid put it. The imagined shadow of Caesar is also located in vertical space. It appears as if—this has already been revealed—a cloud lit by moonlight. A specific, illusionary *theatrum coeli* is placed in front of readers' eyes. S/he looks up into the starry Parisian night—"into the whirlpool of stars" and sees "signs on the sky": clouds in the shape of a person, at the top of the Vendôme column, which are transformed by a play of moonlight beams into a coffin. There were many such "signs on the sky" in Baroque literature.²⁰

¹⁹ Here the top of the column was covered with cloud,/And from a side the young moon was rising,/As a satin's edge from a locked coffin,/And there was very deep silence./A slight mist was rising from the earth,/From the sky a clean star fell at times,/And, as if some charming deed was happening somewhere,/The face of nature was becoming better.

²⁰ For example, in *Oblężenie Jasnej Góry*: ("The Siege of Jasna Góra") comets, crosses appearing against the sun's circumference, a hand "in armour" holding an apple, etc.

Of course, it would be obvious to claim that placing the protagonist in the vertical perspective is made simply for amplification, apotheosis, because such was the role of celestial similes and the hoisting of protagonists onto the firmament in old texts.²¹ Looking into the sky also had another role in the tradition. I have in mind desires, verbalized in old texts, of *ad astra volandum*. "Tied to the earth but with flying feathers/My tied soul wants to fly high" says, for example Zbigniew Morsztyn in another emblem poem.²² Let us also remember the Baroque iconography of astronomy, so crucial to the period. For example, a fragment from the frontispiece of Hevelius's *Selenography*, where a scarf with a quotation from the Bible is presented: *Attollire in sublime oculos vestros, et videre qui creaverit ista* (lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these?, Isaiah, 40:26, NIV). We know Norwid's statement "man bows when he raises his head" (I, 309).

Am I not mixing different orders? Is it appropriate to recall the Christian heaven in the context of the classical Elysian Fields of the Ancient nether-world? It seems that in this case it is appropriate. Because it is clear that Norwid 'Christianized' the Ancient tradition, as in *Wanda* and in *Krakus* he 'Christianized' Slavic pre-history. Caesar and Napoleon in "Vendôme" also converse about the Christian God, his features, the "anger' of God's Judgement, about a man who should become like a baby in order to enter the heavenly kingdom: "[...] A man more and more like a child,/Till he becomes a baby in apotheosis/On a triumphant wagon of the Kingdom" (.. 54-56). Napoleon even paraphrases the Bible, speaking in the language of Kohelot, and he says, for example, "There is time of giving and taking away/Of leisure and work (I. 85-86).

²¹ Por. Maria Barłowska, *Niebiański punkt odniesienia. O niezawodnych sposobach amplifikacji*, w: *Poezja i astronomia*, pod red. Bogdana Burdzieja, Grażyny Halkiewicz-Sojak, Toruń 2006.

²² Zbigniew Morsztyn, *Wybór wierszy*, ed. by Józef Pelc, „Biblioteka Narodowa”, I, 215, Wrocław 1975, 281.

Kasper Miaskowski, in *Rotuły na Narodzenie Syna Bożego* (*Little Elegies on the Nativity of the Son of God*), made Muses, the companions of Apollo, bow in front of the New Born Infant. Norwid placed these words in the mouth of Raphael:

[...] w Pańskie Imię
 Podbiłem Olimp stary – Muzy zalotnice,
 Nimfy, Gracje zebrałem w przed-chrześcijańskim Rzymie –
 [...]
 Herkula moc w ramieniu, Apolla moc w wdzięku,
 Zwyciężywszy, jak dziecię pogańskie na rękę
 Zaniósłem k'źródłu, które prawdy jest zwierciadłem,
 I pochrzcilem – [...]

[I, 281; l. 60–62, 67–70]²³

Stefan Nieznanowski wrote in the context of *Little Elegies on the Nativity of the Son of God* by Kasper Miaskowski and the tradition of the Counter Reformation about “a baptised myth”.²⁴ In the case of Norwid we can write about the “baptism of Classical conversations of the dead”. Because Norwid, when he made Elysian shadows converse about the Christian God, destroyed the vision of the Elysian Fields preserved in the tradition. He created something akin to a cultural oxymoron. He transformed the Classical tradition in the spirit of mannerism and the Baroque.

²³ [...]in the name of the Lord,/I conquered old Olympus—Muses-suitors/Nymphs, graces I gathered in pre-Christian Rome,[...]//Hercules' power in hand,Apollo's strength in charm/Having overcome, as a pagan child/I took to the spring, which is the mirror of truth,/And I baptised them [...]

²⁴ Stefan Nieznanowski, *O poezji Kaspra Miaskowskiego. Studium o kształtowaniu się baroku w poezji polskiej*, Lublin 1965.