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“Patch and Diamond.” Norwid, Hopkins, Dickinson and Their New Poetics¹

Abstract

The above-mentioned poets are considered to be great innovators in the histories of their respective literary traditions. There are numerous volumes of critical commentaries on their works and their place within modernism. The aim of this paper is not to bring to the fore similarities of the changeable fortunes of their lives and oeuvres. It has already been noted in scholarly investigations that their poetry emerged on the literary map after many years of neglect and served as a sign of aesthetic avant-gardism. My main objective will be to examine how Norwid’s interest in the realm of seemingly banal objects can be contextualized within a broader horizon opened by such poets as Hopkins and Dickinson, who discovered surprisingly fresh, and previously inconceivable, ways of representing their encounter with reality.

Słowa kluczowe: epifania, przedmioty, modernizm, metafizyka obecności

Keywords: epiphany, objects, modernism, metaphysics of presence

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1. Seeing things

Why do I bring together three unique and seemingly incomparable poetic discourses which once were almost disdained, and today mark the beginnings of Polish, English, and Anglo-American modernism? A few answers may be offered in response. Let me begin with the least obvious one. It is the history of modern Polish poetry that encourages me to proceed, not so much its nineteenth-century roots and gradual emergence on the local literary scene, but its later development in the 20th century. This development was significantly shaped by the influence of Czesław Miłosz's poetic universe where, over time, his growing respect for the sensuality of objects and his appreciation of trivial and insignificant events, moments, illuminations, when pieces of reality strongly affect perception to show their material uniqueness and singularity, were more openly and audibly voiced. I would call attention to what he himself called the epiphanic dimension of his multifaceted and rich poetic oeuvre, since it reveals its presence on the horizon of modern poetry written in the English language; a rare and unusual phenomenon, if we take into consideration the history of the literary tradition in Central Europe. This was made possible not only by Miłosz's long-standing activity as a poet in the American academic and literary worlds but also through the influence he exerted upon other great figures of the contemporary poetic discourse. Seamus Heaney, an Irish Nobel Prize winner, translator, literature professor who was initially fascinated by the historic and ethical context of "ironic conceptism,"² was gradually paying closer attention to Miłosz's poetics of the everyday.³ This attitude was repeatedly demonstrated in his writings and public appearances, both in his late book of poetry, *District and Circle*,⁴ and during the subsequent visit he paid to Krakow in 2009 to commemorate one of his beloved Polish poets. Accompanied by Tomas Venclova and Wisława Szymborska, he read *A Confession*, one of his favourite poems by Miłosz, whose opening lines, full of irony and wit, manifest his affection for sensual experience: "My Lord, I loved strawberry jam / And the dark sweetness of a woman's body."⁵ It is worth noting, just to strike the right balance, that the interest in the poetics of the everyday present in Heaney's poems and essays is unceasingly paralleled by

² A. van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm. Nowoczesna polska poezja metafizyczna w kontekście anglosaskiego modernizmu*, Kraków 1998.

³ I provide a more detailed analysis of this issue in "Secure the Bastion of Sensation": *Seamus Heaney's and Czesław Miłosz's Poetry of the Everyday*, transl. T. Bilczewski, A. Marczyk. "Studi Irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies" 2015, No. 5, p. 65–83.

⁴ S. Heaney, *District and Circle: Poems*, London 2006. See also S. Heaney's foreword *The Door Stands Open* [in:] Cz. Miłosz, *Selected Poems. 1931–2004*, Selected by R. Hass, New York 2006, p. XIII–XVI, and his last collection of poems: *Human Chain: Poems*, London 2010.

⁵ Cz. Miłosz, *Selected Poems*, p. 196.

his admiration for Zbigniew Herbert's literary heritage, especially its ethical features.⁶

To some extent, the titular succession of names appears to be an attempt to seek out the sources of these poetics, specifically the tradition underlying its future developments. Miłosz himself pointed to its local beginnings, reading Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* as a sequence of "revelations of the visible particular," independent of its "custom and plot component."⁷ I would not like to ponder the details of the relationship between the component and its ideological background, since we can easily conclude that locating the sources of modern poetics of epiphany in the literature of Polish Romanticism is not a simple undertaking.⁸ English poetry of that period, however, offers more opportunities to identify "the language of the object," to mention only William Wordsworth and Percy Shelley, who described their observations as "spots of time" or simply "moments."⁹

I will focus here on direct successors of the Romantics, namely Norwid and Hopkins, whom I would like to treat as the most important heralds of modern epiphanies, which were instrumental in shaping the works of James Joyce, and went on to appear – both under his influence or independently – in various literary and language traditions.¹⁰ My approach does not neglect issues which may be of particular interest to those inclined to seek direct influences and intertextual relations. Miłosz commented extensively on the role of Norwid in local literary tradition in *The History of Polish Literature*, edited for American readers.¹¹ He also paraphrased, as has been noted, his thoughts in his own poetry, remaining quite ambivalent in his assessment of Norwid, which was particularly visible in his comments when interviewed by Aleksander Fiut.¹² On the other hand, Heaney in his Chatterton lecture *The Fire i' the*

⁶ See S. Heaney, *To the Shade of Zbigniew Herbert* [in:] *Electric Light: Poems*, London 2001, p. 81. In recent years as well, Heaney has demonstrated his admiration for Herbert's poetry and unbroken ethical attitude. On October 16 2008 he commented on his work during a poetry reading organized by Irish Writers' Centre and Irish Polish Society, Ireland-Poland Cultural Foundation and Polish Embassy in Ireland.

⁷ *A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry*, edited and with an Introduction by Cz. Miłosz, Orlando 1996, p. XV.

⁸ The beginnings of this poetics in Polish literature were analyzed by R. Nycz, *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości. Poetyka epifanii w nowoczesnej literaturze polskiej*, Kraków 2001.

⁹ One should also mention here the heritage of metaphysical poetry, especially that of such individuals as George Herbert and Henry Vaughan. See *Moments of Moment. Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*, Ed. W. Tigges, Amsterdam–Atlanta 1999.

¹⁰ U. Eco, *Le poetiche di Joyce*, Milano 1994.

¹¹ Cz. Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, Berkeley 1983, p. 306–322.

¹² A. Fiut, *Rozmowy z Czesławem Miłoszem*, Kraków 1981, p. 85–89. See also Cz. Miłosz, *Poeta polski i... uniwersalny* and *O twórczy charakter recepcji Norwida* [in:] *Norwid. Z dziejów recepcji twórczości*, Ed. M. Inglot, Warszawa 1983, p. 437–438, 340.

*Flint*¹³ precisely analysed and interpreted Hopkins's poetic output, a body of work which escaped Milosz's attention.¹⁴ Emily Dickinson's poetry, however, does not seem to be particularly important to both Polish and American professors of literature, although they must have been familiar with her rediscovery in the 20th century. Why do I place her in such company? As Stanisław Barańczak pointed out in his foreword to the selected translations of her poems, the Dickinson that had for years been regarded as a bashful, sentimental, and provincial missy, "writing poems about birds and flowers in her leisure," was in fact a great innovator of poetic discourse, "bestowed with a profound philosophical mind."¹⁵ These particular characteristics enable me to locate her work on the same plane as Norwid's and Hopkins's.

2. Senses, objects, and the metaphysics of presence

Following Heaney's lecture, I would like to recall the basic features of Hopkins's innovative attitude towards verbal expression, first by reading one of his most famous sonnets, and then by identifying the components that lead us towards the modern poetics of the everyday:

God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
 And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And, for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastwards, springs –
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings.¹⁶

¹³ S. Heaney, "The Fire i' the Flint": *Reflections on the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, London 1974.

¹⁴ See *Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven*, a lecture given in Wolfston College, January 29 2002, Oxford. Polish translation by M. Heydel, *Szósty zmysł, siódme niebo* [in:] S. Heaney, *Przejrzysta pogoda*, Kraków 2009, p. 240.

¹⁵ S. Barańczak, *Skoro nie można mieć wszystkiego* [in:] E. Dickinson, *100 wierszy*, Ed., transl. by S. Barańczak, Kraków 1990, p. 7.

¹⁶ G.M. Hopkins, *33 wiersze*, transl. S. Barańczak, Kraków 1992, p. 54.

This sonnet, supported by counterpointed iambic pentameter, intertwines two contrasting images which divide it, at a certain point, into two parts, as is quite typical for this literary genre. The octave, despite an initial drive to flare up and flash, as in the case of "shook foil" (the two existing versions of the poem sent in a letter to Bridges offer the alternate wording of "shining" and "lightning"), tries to render the hidden light and grandeur of creative energy, which sinks drearily into the dirt of trade and the daily grind ("and all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil"). The march of descendants, depicted in the Polish translation by Stanisław Barańczak as a series of pagan generations, ravages and obstructs this bright potential, permeating the world like oil that accumulates within the olive, awaiting the moment when it may flow out in its clear stream. But instead of dripping oil we see stained, smoky, wilting, sticky nature, and bare soil which can no longer be sensed ("nor can foot feel being shod"). This image of blurred and bleary civilization and commerce (here we feel a conspicuous opposition between urban and rural so close to Norwid's imagination) is contrasted with a freshness that governs the sestet: unvanquished nature, not subject to trade, far from the tyranny of money ("nature is never spent"). The inexhaustible energy inhabiting the core of physical phenomena ("there lives the dearest freshness deep down things") contrasts with the overshadowing power of the sunset, alluding here to Western civilization; in the final image, a brightly-winged dove tenderly protects the nestling of a world overwhelmed by the weight of toil and commerce.

Not everything in Hopkins's sonnet is in keeping with the contemporaneous demands of the literary tradition. In this poem, written in 1877, one can spot numerous traces of the innovatory poetics ascribed to the author of *The Wreck of Deutschland*.

Heaney emphasises its novel appeal by comparing Hopkins's poems to the tradition of English Romanticism, and especially to John Keats. His poetry, flourishing and buzzing with life, charged with emotions, "narcotically rhythmic," is contrasted with a meticulous and elaborate structural concept which transforms the poem into a well-cut crystal or a honeycomb.¹⁷ The striking abundance of musical elements of *God's Grandeur*, evoked by numerous alliterations, rhyming and rhythmic correspondence, unusual lexicon, whose best example can be found in the semantic background created with such expressions as "the world is charged" and "shook foil" (conjuring images of batteries and shining foil pieces) affect our senses through both philological discipline and rhetorical passion. The poem resembles a kind of spiritual exercise, the rhythm demands mental effort on the part of the reader. The Romantic submission to the flow of experience, evocation and illumination is replaced here, in a metaphor reminiscent of Norwid's imagination, by "verbal bas-relief," forged according to a long-developed technique incorporated into a broader theory. For the purpose of this paper I would just like to identify its three

¹⁷ S. Heaney, "The Fire i' the Flint: "...

fundamental categories: “sprung rhythm,” “inscape,” and “instress.” They illustrate not only the poet’s artistic mastery, but also his religious background. One needs to bear in mind that they are part and parcel of Hopkins’s initially underestimated rhetorical experiments, which were largely criticized by his contemporary readers, including well-informed friends such as Coventry Patmore, Robert Bridges, and other individuals who encountered his work during his lifetime. The “sprung rhythm,” a signature of many of his poems, breaks the rules of the isosyllabic prosody based on regular foot division, and can be defined, according to Hopkins, as “scanning by accents or stress alone, without any account of the number of syllables, so that a foot may be one strong syllable or it may be many light and one strong.”¹⁸ These experiments with isosyllabic discipline were accompanied by unexpected combinations of word formations, the accumulation of inner and outer rhyming structures, countless alliterations, blending various levels of verse composition, and were frequently inspired by Hebrew psalmody and Old English kennings. The results offered a rhythmical quality that was previously unknown, in texts that were, as he put it himself, composed “less to be read than heard,” thus creating an “oratorical” effect.¹⁹ His contemporaries failed to recognize the innovative character of the work, an attitude that was to be reversed by the generations of readers to come.

The composition of *God’s Grandeur* can easily be read as the expression of the search for “inscape,” that is, order, principles and patterns existing in the visible and invisible world: “All the world is full of inscape and chance left free to act falls into an order as well as purpose...”²⁰ As he wrote in one of his diary entries: “... as air, melody, is what strikes me most of all in music, and design in painting, so design, pattern or what I am in the habit of calling “inscape” is what I above all aim at in poetry.”²¹ Nature depicted in the sonnet contains the source of all order, and reveals inexhaustible divine energy. Its shapes, colours, sounds, lights, from the smallest inanimate particles to the human being, constitute a unique configuration of elements motivating an artistic creation that becomes a religious credo as well. Inspired by Duns Scott’s philosophy, Hopkins understood the strength of poetry as both discovery and creation of world order. Inscapiness exists in perceived reality as well as in the human mind, which follows the principles of imitation and creation. His poetry thus combines a passion for imitation with a creative act that constitutes a separate being with its own inscapiness. Both his diary notes and poems are full of descriptions of objects, scenes or detailed landscapes. They are at times quite surprising, especially in a linguistic sense, showing an incessant struggle

¹⁸ *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, Ed. C. Colleer Abbott, London 1955, p. 14.

¹⁹ *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, Ed. C. Colleer Abbott, London 1955, p. 46.

²⁰ Written 24 February 1873, *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Ed. H. House, G. Storey, London 1959, p. 230.

²¹ *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to...*, p. 66.

with the materiality of language, a fight to produce a sensual effect to manifest the power of the Creator ("the world is charged"). This power directs us to another key term of Hopkins's aesthetics and world view: "instress." Perceived within the context of scholastic philosophy and Hopkins's commentaries on Parmenides, encapsulated in the sentence "all things are upheld by instress and meaningless without it,"²² it serves as a category describing the force and energy which unifies all beings, bestowing upon objects their unique features. As he once said, it takes on the function of a bridge "between us and things to bear us out and carry the mind over."²³ This strength of "inscape" is particularly potent in *Hurrahing in Harvest* through the epiphanic, ecstatic moment rendered in the sentence "These things, these things were here and but a beholder wanting."²⁴ It can be recognized during an intense, solitary, and undisturbed meditation: "with a companion the eye and the ear are for the most part shut and instress cannot come."²⁵ The force hidden in objects translates into the world of art. Yet poetry seems to be more than a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," it is a vision which is forged by the details of the poetic diction so that it produces its own energy (instress), enabling the formation of a new pattern (inscape). As he wrote in notes prepared for lectures on the art of rhetoric: "Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by the way of hearing or speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning."²⁶

Herein a poem, as Geoffrey H. Hartman maintains, becomes a thing in itself, without losing its ability to mime what it represents. This miming process consists in "entering into things" and speaking from and for nature.²⁷ It is subordinated to the spiritual order, as if stemming from the thoughts of Thomas à Kempis, as it embraces meditation that leads towards the mental *imitatio Christi*. Of special interest to me is the observation that Hopkins's poetry foregrounds the materiality of language in a way unknown to his predecessors. Going beyond Pre-Raphaelite and Parnassian aesthetics, it treats language "as a part of the body of things," evincing its action, demonstrating how it "moves, persuades, and possesses."²⁸ Words draw attention to themselves; they constitute a kind of "vocative style" (Hartman).²⁹ Comprehension turns into "sens-prehension," the poem demonstrates how it comes into being and becomes an event in itself.

²² *The Journals and Papers...*, p. 127.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ G.M. Hopkins, *33 wiersze*, p. 72.

²⁵ *The Journals and Papers...*, p. 228.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 289.

²⁷ G. Hartman, *Hopkins Revisited* [in:] *Beyond Formalism. Literary Essays 1958–1970*. New Haven–London 1970, p. 234–236.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 239.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 237.

The rhetoric and prosodic devices, such as tmesis and sprung rhythm, resemble Norwid's wrestling with the obdurateness of language. Both poets were in dialogue with the Romantic heritage but their search for creative discipline should be traced back to earlier traditions. Arent van Nieukerken read Norwid's ironic poetry in the context of conceptism, Hartman related Hopkins to the *modus operandi* of the pointed style found in Giambattista Marino, Richard Crashaw or George Herbert.³⁰ Let me draw your attention to a particular issue: the fact that the elaborate diction of Hopkins, while not devoid of fresh insight and observation, tries to salvage the uniqueness of sensual feeling and draws upon strata of the everyday experience and idiom, though at times falls into obscurity. Nonetheless, it shows us a world where the strength and dignity of the human being co-habitate with the clumsiness and the fragility of existence. The latter is not to be seen as a pure Baroque-like vanity, since Hopkins's poems, subordinate to the overriding aim of the *imitatio Christi*, voice the marvelous singularity of objects, which the modernist movement would later try to separate from a sacral background, adopting the religion of art. They would become the source of a new epiphany, known from the writings of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, or Hugo von Hofmannsthal. The beginning of the independent modernist life of objects is not clearly visible in Norwid's poetry, although he did assign them a more significant position. I would like to take a closer look at this process, first by reading one of the parts from the cycle devoted to the memory of Veit Stoss (*Wita-Stosa pamięci estetycznych zarysów siedem*), composed in 1856, first sent to Lucjan Siemieński, and subsequently published in the supplement to *Czas*:

Beauty

...God sees all –

“How can

God's eye endure ugliness all around?”

– If you wish to know, with an artist's eye

Look closely at a ruin, at cobwebs

In sunlight, at matted straw

In fields, at potter's clay – –

– He gave us all, even His traces,

As he perceives things, have no envy, have no shame!

Yet there is sun-gilded Pride

Convinced the sun will not shine through her;

She is the end of sight and contemplation,

She is the screen against God's rays,

So that man, the most ungrateful creature in the world,

Should feel extinguished brightness and night in his eyes,

³⁰ A. van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm...*; G. Hartman, *Hopkins Revisited...*

– In every art let all arts gleam, save the one
Through which the work is to be done.³¹

The dialogic element so characteristic of Norwid casts us into the very heart of the tension between the inconceivable power of God's eye and the limitations of human perception. In the fragment that opens the poem we sense the simplicity of the fideistic credo as well as theological questions going back to the Old Testament images of the Lord, who "looks down from heaven" or the evangelical conviction that "even the very hairs of our head are numbered." We also sense more profound issues centered around disputes on theodicy. However, the gravity of the theological backdrop, which could easily dominate the subsequent lines of the text, is balanced by aesthetics, which rapidly set the perspective of God's omniscience, human imperfection, limited comprehension, and the co-existence of ugliness and beauty. What goes beyond man's sight and reason, including this aesthetic *coincidentio oppositorum*, beyond inconsistencies in creation, might somehow be erased by the transformation of perception and sensitivity, which in turn opens the "forgotten eye," to recall Keats's expression. The divine otherness draws nearer through the artist's sensibility. The recurring Romantic motif of, or even obsession with ruin, exuding an aura of mystery and the sublime, as in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, meets the simplicity of nature represented by matted straw and clay, in which biblical dust resonates along with the most basic everyday materials. The dynamics built by word-play and silence leads us to a truth that divides the poem into two separate parts. It reveals – as in Hopkins – the submersion of the visible world in God, the Giver, as Heaney would say. In this world one can apprehend his traces, the emanating power of love (Saint Paul), and the energy that penetrates everything, like light passing through a cobweb. The second part of the poem shows that the light can easily be dimmed and transformed into a false glow, reflecting human hubris rather than divine presence, thus ceasing contemplation and a true sense of observation. Hubris rejects the power of God's ray, whose potential we know from Mickiewicz's *Widzenie (A Vision)*. Here it serves darkness, death and human false-heartedness, akin to trade and toil in Hopkins. The gnomic closure voices the need to liberate art from the vanity of human perception and enlighten it with truth.

Both Norwid's and Hopkins's poems establish the order of things through the metaphysics of presence. This general framework helps to unlock their potential ("there lives the dearest freshness deep down things") and evince their sources ("He gave us all"). Although we are far from the modernist revelation of the object, Hopkins conspicuously invests, as never before in the poetry of the English language, in everyday, banal elements, which were only later to be embraced by the religion of art and empty transcendence dear to many mod-

³¹ C.K. Norwid, *Wita-Stosa pamięci estetycznych zarysów siedem* [in:] *Pisma wszystkie*, Ed. J.W. Gomulicki, Warszawa 1971–1976, Vol. III, p. 524. C.K. Norwid, *Beauty*, transl. A. Czerniawski [in:] *Poems*, transl. A. Czerniawski, Kraków 1986.

ernists. Instead of intellectually and artistically polished verbal compositions, here we are paradoxically dealing with a “vision which tries to seize an object in its immediate and mind-unprejudiced beauty, and makes the act of mere attention a *sine qua non* for knowledge.”³² Compared to a cut crystal, at times it resembles the practices of impressionist art, a sort of “word-painting;” representation unexpectedly turns into presentation, into a poem-event. The word is not so much a medium, but a matter that expresses itself, “sensory adjectives lead to a physical act inseparable from the thing, showing their ‘thingness,’ their ‘deep-down-thing’ freshness”.³³ The eye does not reduce an object’s singularity, but affirms it. We encounter both a study of a phenomenon, its elaborate anatomy, and a record of momentary inspiration or even illumination, revealing its religious substance, as in *The Windhover*. Irrespective of the influence of the Romantics, the most immediate reference point for this type of poetry, a similar creative gesture can be found in Emily Dickinson’s poetic work, which is simultaneously full of meditation and animated conversation with God. She elevates the status of clutter, junk and seemingly insignificant elements of nature, everyday events and activities, as in the poem 1257:

The Spider as an Artist
Has Never been employed –
Though his surpassing Merit
Is freely certified.

By every Broom and Bridget
Throughout a Christian Land –
Neglected Son of Genius
I take thee by the Hand.³⁴

A record of spontaneous observation and experience filtered through intellectual equipment can also be observed in Dickinson. It is a kind of paradox that through a struggle with the language and through the bravery of imagery she draws readers into the very center of the poem-event. Norwid’s poetics differ slightly in this respect; one struggles to find traces or records of unexpected epiphanies of things and events in his body of work. His intellectual poetic compositions, however, often incorporate seemingly unpoetical elements, and as it happens, this approach appears quite innovative against the backdrop of Polish poetic tradition.

It is worth noting at this point two episodes in Norwid’s creative life. The first takes us towards *White Flowers* and *Black Flowers*,³⁵ the second draws

³² G. Hartman, *Hopkins* [in:] *The Unmediated Vision. An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valéry*, New York 1966, p. 64.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

³⁴ E. Dickinson, *100 wierszy*, p. 117.

³⁵ C.K. Norwid, *Czarne kwiaty* and *Białe kwiaty* [in:] *Pisma wszystkie*, Vol. VI, Warszawa 1971.

our attention to such poems as *A Toast*.³⁶ The above-mentioned prose pieces, written in 1856 and 1857, respectively, show a new programme of poetics that, as Ryszard Nycz has demonstrated, stand as an exceptional experiment when viewed in the context of Norwid's previous and subsequent aesthetic practices. This holds true even when bearing in mind his programmatic phrase "a proper word each thing to name,"³⁷ interpreted by Nycz as an expression of the Hegelian concept of poetry, which was Romantic in its own right. Norwid offers a programme of "colourless" poetics, an anti-rhetorical style, which stands in sharp contrast to the tradition of floridity, and, at the same time, purely informative, journalistic commentary. It derives from a respect for things in themselves, and its precise, daguerreotype features focus on the truth of depiction. The so-called "white style" is supposed to safeguard "the authenticity of ordinary things," the dignity of everyday events. Consciously based on distant and banal life episodes, the literary constellation of *White Flowers* functioned, according to Nycz, as a special indexical marker. The marker, as the poet claimed, is a signature of witnesses, of those "unable to write who put their signature in the form of a misshapen cross."³⁸ "Drama and the depth of thoughtless, colourless, and white"³⁹ words, meaning the literal, involuntary, and unintentional, found in those flickers of life, cannot be reduced to a detached concept. They are meaningful in themselves, both inevitable and accidental, "standing in one's way" (*zaszle w drodze*).⁴⁰ They play the role of "a plain parable" (*prostotliwe parabole*)⁴¹ taken from life, illustrating its truth. The common stylistic framework of *Black Flowers* and *White Flowers* consists in recording that which is fleeting, which in itself is devoid of meaning. The key expressions used in Norwid's narrations do not narrate, and are not a proper representation of things, for which "there is no style formula,"⁴² they do not establish adequacy of reference but they rather reveal the contextual immersion of the individuals described. They operate here as an indexical marker of an inexpressible condition, triggering a chain of correspondence and reminiscences that are difficult to conceptualize, setting the stage for the emergence of particular things. This abandoned project, as Nycz remarks, took Norwid towards the modernist epiphanic discourse, which, in its prototype, might be represented by Joyce's work. It is worth noting that the focus on everyday experience also has its parallel in Norwid's poetry, in which we can attempt to identify embryonic epiphanic poetics later known in their fully developed 20th century versions.

³⁶ C.K. Norwid, *Toast* [in:] *Pisma wszystkie*, Vol. I, Warszawa 1971, p. 373–374.

³⁷ See poem *Ogólniki*. *Ibidem*, p. 271.

³⁸ *Białe kwiaty*, p. 191.

³⁹ *Czarne kwiaty*, p. 186.

⁴⁰ *Białe kwiaty*, p. 196.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Czarne kwiaty*, p. 175.

One of the poems deserving our particular attention is *A Toast*, whose surprising choice of images is mollified by the opening label: a “fantasy.” What is this poem all about? We are witnessing a conversation between objects, an argument, to be precise, about the value and superiority of their respective fates, staged in and in front of an antique shop. The witty opening of the poem contrasts table legs and a bust of Apollo, heralding a dialectic of dialogue and silence set in motion by unusual interlocutors: a broom, stick, coat, pot, daggerreotype and a cauldron of beets. The fast-paced dispute is abruptly interrupted (and resolved) by a fire and commotion. The unexpected winner of this verbal duel is a bucket that holds water and thereby manifests its privileged position. The discovery and apology of its content breaks the simple line of conversation. The content becomes a revelation, stolen from the order of the daily routine. It is not just water; it “conceals the blue hues of heavens and lives in heaven.” It is in the flames that it reveals its value, as when water becoming a toast in the eyes of a sailor, or when it is transformed into wine. The poem can be read as indicative of a more general tendency within Norwid’s poetry. Alina Witkowska has pinpointed it: “in Norwid’s poetry there appears a true invasion of “things,” an object-oriented perception of the world, without precedent in our literature of those times, a sort of ascription of citizenship to a piece of clutter, an elevation of everyday things to the rank and dignity of poetic beings.”⁴³ This remark is not limited to pieces of clutter but can also be expanded to other objects, such as Norwid’s beloved oranges, or a spider, so reminiscent of Dickinson’s imagery.⁴⁴ What brings true meaning to the presence of objects in Norwid, Hopkins and “the Eremite from New England” is that they are supported by the invisible hand of the Creator, that they forever remain, as all human beings, within his omnipotent sight. Their singularity that appeals to the senses, their finite and fragile nature, gains permanence in the face of the religious credo. Only in such a perspective does “patch” turn into “diamond,” as described in Hopkins’s poem.⁴⁵

3. A quiet revolution

Norwid’s religious background, much like Hopkins’s and Dickinson’s (who belongs to the Protestant tradition, like the Jesuit poet before his conversion), hardly presages the brave declarations of the modernist movement. On the contrary, it is strikingly anachronistic, as it submits to a rather predictable

⁴³ A. Witkowska, *Cyprian Norwid* [in:] A. Witkowska, R. Przybylski, *Romantyzm*. Warszawa 1997, p. 423.

⁴⁴ See: E. Dąbrowicz, *Pomarańcze w pismach Norwida* [in:] *Strona Norwida. Studia i szkice ofiarowane Profesorowi Stefanowi Sawickiemu*, Ed. P. Chlebowski, W. Toruń, E. Żwirłowska, E. Chlebowska, Lublin 2008, p. 79–96.

⁴⁵ G.M. Hopkins, *That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of Resurrection* [in:] *33 wiersze*, p. 114–117.

religious order.⁴⁶ Its intertwining with novel and experimental poetic language is fairly disarming, and was deeply underestimated by his contemporaries. It is the religious dimension of his poetic oeuvre that weighed heavily on his reception, which situated Norwid closer to obscurantism and pretentiousness than to a renewal of existing literary tastes. Though readily placed in the company of such influential symbolist figures as Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire or Stéphane Mallarmé,⁴⁷ Norwid's religious convictions made him seem to lag behind the new aesthetic tendencies; this was in spite of the fact that he could have competed with their poetic achievements. The comparative perspective that I am trying to outline here aims to show a certain incommensurability between Norwid and the mainstream of European symbolism. His revolutionary potential, though found in the works of the three above-named French poets, remained unnoticed for years, but finally, despite its traditional religious roots, the freshness of literary invention caused it to be brought to the daylight. What this seemingly conservative poetic company sought to achieve revealed itself when the material of the poems started to draw attention to itself in a new modernist way. The poetics, whose main goal was to produce language not only by representing, but also by "pointing at" itself, was verging towards a well-known, and still influential concept verbalized by Archibald MacLeish, which stated that a poem "should not mean/ But be." The modern poet, as demonstrated by all the literary figures in this comparative perspective, is someone who not only elevates the poetic status of clutter and everyday experience, but who also creates a verbal artifact as a thing in itself. This does not mean that the three poets cross the line of pure art philosophy and aesthetics, but that a poem starts both to represent and to "happen" as an event, drawing attention to the external world and to itself at the same time.

The collision of the traditional world view with highly complex language structures resulted in the diminishment and then sudden rediscovery of Norwid, Hopkins, and Dickinson. I call this major delay in reception – marked by constant corrections of their allegedly clumsy poetic diction, which clashed with existing aesthetic models and tastes – a quiet revolution. It brought a somewhat anachronistic religious discourse into the very center of the modern sensitivity. At the same time, let us bear in mind that it was not free of dramatic tension, serious doubts and misgivings, as manifested in Hopkins's dark sonnets or Dickinson's poems written during crisis years. The world of objects in Norwid's poetry merely heralds the explorations of the everyday undertaken by the poets in generations to come. We could perceive it as an introduction to the numerous future variants of the poetics of epiphany, as represented first

⁴⁶ A. van Nieuwerkerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm...*, p. 102.

⁴⁷ See M. Żurowski, *Norwid i Gautier; Norwid na tle porównawczym; Norwid i symboliści* [in:] *Między renesansem a awangardą. O literaturze europejskiej z perspektywy komparatysty*, Ed. H. Chudak, Z. Naliwajek, L. Sokół, J. Żurowska. Warszawa 2007. R. Fieguth, "Vade-mecum" Cypriana Norwida w kontekście Victora Hugo i Charles'a Baudelaire'a [in:] *Strona Norwida. Studia i szkice...*, p. 139–154.

by lesser-known figures, such as Stanisław Miłaszewski, Aleksander Szczęsny or Jan Wroczyński, and later by the elaborate simplicity and the Olympus of the everyday in Leopold Staff. His influence can easily be identified in the heritage of the Skamander poets, especially in Julian Tuwim, who incorporates both unpoetic clutter and colloquial language. The most impressive samples are found in Bolesław Leśmian's momentary beings or, much later, in the indexical forms written by Miron Białoszewski (according to Nycz one can draw a line between Norwid's *White Flowers* and the Białoszewski's verbal experiments). The list is obviously much longer, and the most important place is reserved for Czesław Miłosz, who not only commented on his epiphanic inspirations, but also made epiphanies an important part of his poetic repertoire, a part of experiments with a "more spacious form" and, finally, a source of ideas for Heaney. In a way, by doing so Miłosz was paying off a debt to the poetry of the English language, since, having spoken of Dickinson, I cannot neglect to mention Walt Whitman, one of the patrons of Hopkins, who, as has been demonstrated by literary critics and Miłosz himself,⁴⁸ inspired his turn towards the revelations of the everyday.

In searching for the beginnings of epiphanic discourse in the history of Polish poetry, bringing together Norwid, Hopkins, and Dickinson, I am not seeking to convince anyone that the first is just like or unlike the others. My intention is rather to ponder whether one can benefit from placing Norwid in the context of two other unique poetic innovators who had to face similar obstacles and who articulated their religious beliefs and doubts, renewing existing poetic practices and finding a new place for ordinary objects within their body of work. There already exists an in-depth and well-established tradition placing Norwid within the tradition of European, especially French, symbolism; it is difficult, however, to avoid the impression that the uniqueness of his poetics places all attempts to point at possible intertextual correspondences within the sphere of speculation. Such uncertainties are also present in my analysis, representing a sort of *comparatisme quand meme*. This essay tries to share a personal view of three extremely independent and distinctive poetic voices, and I hope that this attempt is not dominated by a chance and short-lived impression, as there have been others who have already trodden the same path.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ See *A Book of Luminous Things...*, p. XV. M. Skwara, *The Poet of the Great Reality: Czesław Miłosz's Readings of Walt Whitman*. "Quarterly Review" 2008, No.1, p. 1–22.

⁴⁹ M. Żurowski, *Hopkins, Mallarmé i Norwid* [in:] *Między renesansem a awangardą...*, p. 217–224; S. Barańczak, *Nieśmiertelny diament* [in:] G.M. Hopkins, *33 wiersze*, p. 8; H. Leeming, *Norwid's Linguistic Thought and Practice* [in:] *Norwid*, Ed. B. Mazur, G. Gömöri, London 1988, p. 143; A. Czerniawski, *Afterword. Translating Poetry – Theory and Practice* [in:] C.K. Norwid, *Poems...*, p. 129; A. Czerniawski, *Firing the Canon. Essays Mainly on Poetry*, London 2010.

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