

EDYTA CHLEBOWSKA

LOST NEST
NORWID – SZERMENTOWSKI

There is a drawing by Norwid from mid-1870s, known only from a reproduction published after the Second World War with the title *Scena symboliczna – Symbolic Scene*, in a portfolio which holds a selection of the artist's graphic works, on separate sheets filed in paper cover. The portfolio, or rather the portfolios, as three versions were created – with slightly different titles and with different selection of pictures (*Rysunki i grafika Norwida – 27 drawings*, *Rysunki i grafika C. K. Norwida – 20 drawings* and *Rysunki i grafika K. C. Norwida – 20 drawings*) – were published by Jakub Mortkowicz's publishing house¹. The portfolios were prepared based on the reproductions meant at first to be used in the edition of Norwid's *Pisma Zebrane* prepared by Zenon Przesmycki, the publication of which started in 1911. The editor was unable to finalise the venture, however. Out of eight planned volumes, only three were published (vol. A: p. 1 and 2, vol. C and vol. E), with 45 sheets of drawings, called Artistic Additions. The pictures were accompanied by extensive explanations which held much important information on the objects, their physical features, iconography and storage place. The part of the selection of reproductions unused by Miriam was placed in the storage of the Kraków Anczyc printing house (which printed the *Collected Works*). There the drawings survived the Second World War, along with several hundred copies of the unfinished F volume. In 1946 it was decided to release Norwid's work to the book market. Another 29 sheets of drawings² were published in volume F of

¹ The drawing in question was published in: *Rysunki i grafika Norwida*, [Kraków 1946], fig. 10; *Rysunki i grafika K.C. Norwida*, [Kraków 1946], fig. 13.

² The material was selected by pre-war editors, who – in the place of “Descriptions of Artistic Additions” practiced by Miriam – added a “List of Artistic Additions”, with the following note: “In the repository of the W.L. Anczyc i Ska Printing House, beside text, there remained reproductions of many artistic additions copied to use in volume F and other volumes of Norwid's *Pisma Zebrane*. 29 of them are included in this volume. It is, regrettably, not possible to provide a detailed description for each of them (with information about their provenience, technique, etc.) in today's condi-

Pisma Zebrane, with a foreword by Waław Borowy. The remaining reproductions were filed in the above mentioned folders.

Although for the needs of the edition of Norwid's work *Przesmycki* made a copy of the composition concerned, there is not one mention about the drawing in Miriam's manuscript archive, which holds hundreds of descriptions of Norwid's graphic art. What remains is an analysis of the visual layer of the pen-and-ink drawing, sketched in easy, sweeping lines, with a signature and date on the bottom: "C. Norwid 76" (the date is barely legible, A. Melbechowska-Luty reads it as 75³). The subject presented seems a riddle. In the picture's right side, under remnants of a roof of a dilapidated cottage with a tall chimney, there sits a coat-wrapped figure bent over another figure lying on a bed. Towards them, there descends from the left a crowd of angel figures in ethereal robes, drawn in various poses, glancing inside the cottage. When the drawing was reproduced in 2004 in the French edition of *Vade-mecum*, to (probably) explain the obscure iconography it was titled *Angels of Death (Les Anges de la mort)*, corresponding with the mood of disintegration, decline or simply death, prevailing in the drawing⁴. Some time before that, Aleksandra Melbechowska-Luty attempted to examine in her monograph the issue presented in the drawing. She included the picture in the Faust trend represented in Norwid's work with a few graphic presentations. Thus, the author of *Sztukmistrz* wrote:

And one more composition which we believe relates to Goethe's work. It is probably the scene of Faust's burial, where the lemurs say:

Któż taką lichą sklecił chatkę,
Kilofem i łopata?
[...]
Jak już przywdziałeś zgrzebną szatkę,
I tak ci tu za bogato⁵.

In his drawing, Norwid presented the "romantic" ruin of a poor household [...]; from above flow angel choirs which save and carry Faust's soul unto heaven, and among them some demonic apparitions coil – satans? lemurs? [...]⁶.

tions. Out of necessity, we shall confine ourselves to a general list." (C. NORWID, *Pisma zebrane*, vol. F, Warszawa 1911 [recte 1946], p. I).

³ A. MELBECHOWSKA-LUTY, *Sztukmistrz. Twórczość artystyczna i myśl o sztuce Cypriana Norwida*, Warszawa 2001, p. 229.

⁴ C. NORWID, *Vade-mecum*, transl. by Ch. Jeżewski, Montricher 2004, p. 220.

⁵ J.W. GOETHE, *Faust. Tragedia*, transl. and foreword by A. Pomorski, Warszawa 1999, p. 488.

⁶ A. MELBECHOWSKA-LUTY, *Sztukmistrz*, p. 229.

This interpretation of Melbechowska-Luty raises much controversy. First of all, it lacks substantive arguments to support it, which is likely whence the note of uncertainty reverberating in the above quoted fragment comes. What is more, certain elements of the presentation have been misconstrued: the drawing shows a bed, with a cross hanging over the head, and not a grave; in the flock of Norwid's angels of lithe figures and subtle faces, generally outlined as they may be, one cannot see any demonic apparitions the researcher mentions.

Thus a question appears: Is it possible to identify the topic of the enigmatic scene drawn by Norwid, or are we left with the statement that the content of the presentation is unclear and difficult to establish? It is worth noting that in the sphere of visual art – as opposed to literature – such a situation is not a rare one, and history of art offers examples aplenty of series of discordant, frequently even opposing interpretations at such a basic level as recognising the topic of a work. While not laying any claim to solving the above dilemma, the author should like to indicate a certain image which may, in the author's opinion, serve as an interesting context for the *Symbolic Scene*, and maybe indicate a certain interpretational clue.

The image concerned is *Stracone gniazda* (*Lost Land*, lit. *Lost Nests*) by Józef Szermentowski, painted in 1865. It presents a deserted, dismal view of a village near Kielce. The canvas – since 1950 among the collections of the National Museum in Poznań – represents the patriotic trend of the work of the author of *Widok rynku w Szydłowcu* (*A view of the Market Square in Szydłowiec*)⁷, and at the same time definitely fits the fundamental artistic profile of the painter, who is considered one of the most outstanding Polish landscapists. Although the artist spent almost the entire mature period of his activity in emigration, he left a legacy of numerous landscapes of his homeland, as evidenced e.g. by the painting mentioned. One of the central pictorial elements of the work is a burnt country cottage with a tall chimney. Together with the broken wayside cross and ruins of the mansion, it builds a multilayered image of the defeat of the Polish nation after the fall of the January insurrection of 1863. Norwid chose a similar ruin as the scene for the drama in his drawing, with the chimney towering over the rickety, dilapidating cottage. Analogies to the work of his younger colleague seem to exceed bounds of coincidence, for several reasons. Before discussing the issue of visual relations as noticed between those two works, some information on the evolution of Szermentowski's artistic work should be presented⁸.

⁷ Oil, canvas, 42 x 53.5 cm. See: *Malarstwo polskie 1766-1945. Katalog zbiorów Muzeum Narodowego w Poznaniu*, vol. VIII, prep. by D. Suchocka, National Museum in Poznań, Poznań 2005, p. 232, cat. No. 1370, fig. 76.

⁸ A list of the current literature on the subject is provided in the entry on Norwid by Z. Lewicka-Depta, [in:] *Polski słownik biograficzny*, vol. XLVIII/2 (2012), pp. 269-272. Particularly

Born in 1833 in Bodzentyn, Józef Szermentowski was in the care of Tomasz Zieliński, a patron and collector, already as a young boy. Zieliński noticed the boy's artistic talent and helped him get lessons with Franciszek Kostrzewski, who was staying in his Kielce mansion at that time⁹. In Zieliński's home, Szermentowski gained solid basics of artistic education. He was also able to study Zieliński's rich collection of European and Polish paintings (15th-19th c.) of over 400 canvas and establish the first contacts with a large number of Warsaw artists, who were frequent visitors in the collector's house. The next stage of his education was the Warsaw School of Fine Arts, with Marcin Zaleski and Ksawery Kaniewski as teachers, and relations with the Warsaw artistic bohemia. Thanks to his friendship with Wojciech Gerson and Juliusz Kossak, with whom he shared the studio for some time, Szermentowski became a member of a so-called Marcin Olszyński group, which assembled young artists guided by the idea of renewing Polish painting¹⁰. What they had in common was their interest in landscapes and genre painting, including the local colour and the characteristic features of home landscapes which they studied when hiking together and filling their portfolios with numerous life sketches. In 1858, Józef Szermentowski co-organised and took part in the first National Exhibition of Fine Arts in Warsaw. He participated in its later issues, as well. In the first period of his activity, under the influence of the then popular idea of "antiquarianism", he painted numerous architectural landscapes, views of cities and buildings, with added staffage: *Widok Sandomierza od strony Wisły (A View of Sandomierz From the Vistula River, 1855)*, *Ratusz w Sandomierzu (City Hall in Sandomierz, 1855)*, *Chęciny (1857)*. He soon started to explore country landscapes to a greater extent, usually situated in a hilly area, with the motifs of wayside crosses, tiny churches hidden among trees, or country cottages: *Krajobraz letni (Summer Landscape, watercolour, 1853)*, *Widok wsi kieleckiej (A View of a Village near Kielce, 1855)*, *Krajobraz kielecki (Kielce Landscape, watercolour, ca. 1856)*. In 1860, the artist received a five-year government scholarship for a study trip and moved to Paris. While abroad, he continued

noteworthy are many publications by I. Jakimowicz, e.g.: *Józef Szermentowski*, Wrocław 1950 (in the "Malarze polscy" cycle, vol. 13); EADEM, *Twórczość Józefa Szermentowskiego. Ze studiów nad początkiem realizmu w polskim malarstwie pejzażowym*, "Biuletyn Historii Sztuki" 1951, No. 1, pp. 5-54. More recent noteworthy publications include: E. MICKE-BRONIAREK: *Mistrzowie pejzażu XIX wieku*, Wrocław 2001; EADEM, *Malarstwo polskie: realizm, naturalizm*, Warszawa 2005.

⁹ I. JAKIMOWICZ, *Twórczość Józefa Szermentowskiego w kręgu mecenatu Tomasza Zielińskiego*, "Biuletyn Historii Sztuki" 1971, No. 1, pp. 96-99; EADEM, *Tomasz Zieliński: kolekcjoner i mecenas*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk 1973, pp. 111-113.

¹⁰ See: *Warszawska „cyganeria” malarska. Grupa Marcina Olszyńskiego*, prep. by S. Kozakiewicz, A. Ryszkiewicz, Wrocław 1955.

the direction of developing his painting skills which he had chosen, working with landscapists from the Barbizon school, with whom he took outdoor painting workshops near Fontainebleau. Twice – in 1866 and in 1868 – he returned to Poland to visit Kielce, his hometown of Bodzentyn, as well as Warsaw, Kraków, the Pieniny mountains. In the mature period of Szermentowski's painting it was the homeland landscape, with an emotional hue, which remained the most important trend in his work, and most varied as to topics: *Pejzaż z rzeką* (*A Landscape with a River*, 1862), *Studium wioski polskiej* (*A Study of a Polish Village*, 1866-68), *Dunajec w Pieninach* (*The Dunajec River in Pieniny*, 1868), *Droga do wsi* (*Road to the Village*, 1872). The trend dominated over the images of a French province, the branchy oaks and flat meadows near Fontainebleau, which formed the other branch of his artistic legacy: *Jezioro w lesie* (*A Lake in the Woods*, 1868), *Pejzaż z krowami* (*A Landscape with Cows*, 1869), *Bydło na pastwisku* (*Cattle at Pasture*, 1876). When composing homeland landscapes, the painter used both his own landscape studies made when travelling in Poland, and photographs sent by his friends per his request¹¹. One cannot forget the genre trend constantly recurring in the painter's work: *Przed kościołem* (*In Front of a Church*, 1865-1868), *W parku* (*In the Park*, 1873), *Biednemu zawsze wiatr w oczy* (*The Wind in Your Eyes*, 1876).

Although *Stracone gniazda* was painted before Szermentowski visited home, the presentation of Kielce landscape in the small canvas is fresh and does not strike you as a conventional image. In a relatively narrow frame, the painting shows slightly undulating country landscape with a dust road running sideways and then turning into the middle ground. The historic drama was painted by the artist using three motifs symbolising the all-national character of the January Uprising spaced out in the particular sections. Right in front of the viewer lies a smashed wayside cross with its beams thrown across the road. A bit deeper, the right side of the image is filled with the burnt-out ruins of a village homestead, and the background is marked with the ruins of a mansion. As stressed by the artist's monographer, Irena Jakimowicz:

The composition is [...] typical for Szermentowski's Polish landscapes, in particular from the early period of his work, yet the combination of motifs of such dramatic nature [is] highly exceptional with a painter who was fond of serene rustic landscapes. One finds here a season he rarely portrayed – late Autumn, with almost bare trees – and an equally rare time of day – early morning hours when the shy light of daybreak vies with the dim light of the fading moon. Exceptional for Szermentowski, who liked to use the colours of a sun-filled summer day, is also the colouring of the painting, kept in dark blue and grey

¹¹ E. MICKE-BRONIAREK, *Malarstwo polskie. Realizm, naturalizm*, Warszawa 2005, p. 19.

tones transforming in the foreground into an olive grey, brightened solely with the white and violet light of dawn and enlivened with a tiny red accent, so often used by the painter – a few flickers of dying fire in the cinders¹².

The landscape is desolate, with no human or animal figures except for a few birds outlined in the distance against the light of the coming dawn. The artist expresses his emotions and thoughts in relation to yet another tragic turn of Polish history by using simple means of imagery. Muted colours, late Autumn aura, limiting the landscape to just a few basic elements, acute silence of the landscape as it looms in the twilight – all build a mood bordering on despair and helpless resignation, and the tongues of fading fire do not allow to forget the horror of the last moments before the final defeat. It is worth noting that the failure of the insurrection spurt had an additional, personal and particularly painful dimension for the painter. His younger brother Kazimierz, who since 1860 was studying in the Warsaw School of Fine Arts, was engaged in the patriotic activity preceding the national uprising and later took part in the fights, during which he was captured, imprisoned, and in 1865 sentenced to deportation to Siberia. Those events might not have been the direct impulse, as the Poznań painting was completed not later than early 1865 – in Spring it was shown in an exhibition in the Kraków Society of Friends of Fine Arts. That same year, Szermentowski sent another painting, *Poranek po burzy* or *Po burzy* (*Morning after the Storm* or *After the Storm*), to an exhibition in the Warsaw Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts. Jakimowicz suggests that the latter painting was an idealised variant of the composition concerned. The “Kłosa” weekly, in turn, published at that time a woodcut copy of the painting *Stracone gniazdko* (*A Knocked-off Nest*, 1865), in which the above topic was shown by the painter in an allegoric form – as a nest knocked off a tree, with the eggs spilled, and over the nest a frightened pair of birds. He used the idea in a few other presentations which are currently unknown¹³. *Stracone gniazda* from the Poznań museum initiated a patriotic trend in Józef Szermentowski’s work, born directly from the impact of that recent national defeat. As may be judged from the remaining descriptions of the other images, forming the “cycle” of lost nests – both as landscapes and in strictly allegoric conventions – that first painting likely presented the most interesting and most valuable position, also as concerns artistic value *sensu stricto*. It is worth noting, if just for the record, that the topic of the defeat of the January Uprising in the painter’s works was

¹² J. JAKIMOWICZ, “*Stracone gniazda*” Józefa Szermentowskiego, “*Studia Muzealne*” 1(1953), p. 44.

¹³ Variants on the topic were researched by I. Jakimowicz (“*Stracone gniazda*” Józefa Szermentowskiego, pp. 46-47).

not limited to the above discussed example. Noteworthy are in particular such paintings as: *Wspomnienie 63 r.* (*Memory of '63*, 1866), *Stary żołnierz i dziecko w parku* a.k.a. *Pasowanie na rycerza przez dziadunia* (*Old Soldier and a Child* a.k.a. *Granddaddy Conferring Knighthood*, 1869) and the highly interesting portrait – discovered a few years ago and purchased by the Museum of Kielce History – *Rodzina artysty* (*The Artist's Family*, 1875, known earlier as *Lekcja geografii* – *Geography Lesson* or *Wdowa – Widow*), which in a way can be treated as the painter's will¹⁴.

It is time now to return to Norwid and pose the question: Are there any solid grounds which would allow to relate the drawing called the *Symbolic Scene* with Szermentowski's canvas painted a decade earlier? It is difficult to state with any degree of certainty whether the poet was able to see *Stracone gniazda*, which was still exhibited in Kraków back in 1868¹⁵. There is, however, no doubt that he kept in reasonably regular touch with the author of the painting in early 1870s, as evidenced by a brief mention in Szermentowski's letter to Wojciech Gerson in 1871, where the sender "poleca Norwida, który bywa u niego [recommends Norwid, who visits with him]". That is the only trace of their meetings then¹⁶. Only a few years later there is some news of the friendship, this time from Norwid. It concerns, however, the last moments of his younger colleague, who was fighting tuberculosis. At that time, the poet was deeply engaged in the action of helping Szermentowski, organised in Spring 1876 by the painter's friends from artistic circles of Paris. A lottery was organised, with 34 Polish and foreign (French, Russian) painters offering their works (paintings, watercolours, drawings) for that purpose. As a result, the lottery brought nearly 5 thousand francs of revenue¹⁷. Even before the event was finalised, Norwid together with other members of the organisational committee: Aleksander Wojciech Cetner (whose studio held the lottery), Cyprian Godebski and Pantaleon Szyndler, visited Szermentowski to give him 500 francs (which they had actually borrowed), "dlatego że nie można było

¹⁴ Cf. "Spotkania z Zabytkami" 2007, No. 2, p. 32 (editor's note to E. Jeżewska's article *Malarstwo Józefa Szermentowskiego*).

¹⁵ M. BAŁUCKI, *Wystawa Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie*, "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" 1(1868), p. 296.

¹⁶ A lost letter of 27th August, mentioned in: *Materiały dotyczące życia i twórczości Wojciecha Gersona*, prep. by A. Vetulani, A. Ryszkiewicz, Wrocław 1951, p. 57. Cf. Z. TROJANOWICZOWA, E. LIJEWSKA, with M. PLUTA, *Kalendarz życia i twórczości Cypriana Norwida*, vol. II: 1861-1883, Poznań 2007, p. 500.

¹⁷ The lottery programme, preserved in Norwid's archive, was published by J.W. Gomulicki in: C. NORWID, *Pisma wszystkie*, prep. by J.W. Gomulicki, vol. I-XI, Warszawa 1971-1976; vol. X, p. 230 (further as PWsz, with Roman numbers for volumes and Arabic numbers for pages).

czekać na rezultaty naszych zajęć – czasem albowiem tym sposobem ofiaruje się za późno – albo trumnę! Jak u Chińczyków jest zwyczaj [because we could not wait for the results of our activity – sometimes in such a way you give too late – or [give] a coffin! As is the custom with the Chinese]”¹⁸. The fears expressed in one of Norwid’s letters sadly turned out to be justified. Szermentowski died on the 6th of September, before the revenue from the lottery was settled, hence the obtained funds were offered to his family – a widow with two children¹⁹.

The topic of the lottery returned many a time in the then correspondence of the author of *Promethidion*. As late as in 1880, with a dose of irony, Norwid reminded Władysław Zamojski of his purchase of two 10-frank tickets, adding: “Co zaiste, że okazuje, iż przy wysokich i właściwszych, a zapewne mnogich, Jego zajęciach Książę raczy nie oddalać się od udziału pokornych człowieczych mozołów i względów. [Which indeed does prove that with His highly and most proper, and likely numerous activities, His Excellence does not dismiss humble human toil and consideration.]” (PWsz X, 149)

Still under the direct impression of one of his last visits with the painter – “byłem tam (wedle zdania lekarzy) przy umierającym – uściskałem go w łożu – podobno zgaśnie [I was there with the dying man (so the doctors say) – embraced him on his bed – he is said to fade soon]” – Norwid thus wrote to Jan Szwański, to whom he also gave an account of the lottery preparations:

Szermentowski był ku temu zrodzony, aby nie żenił się, ale siedział w Hyčres, Pau, Nice, patrzył na palmy, grzał się na słońcu i malował. Jeżeli społeczeństwo polskie jest Matką, Siostrą, a nie jędzą piekielną, płaczącą nad umierającymi, gdy umierają, i odmawiającą im kruszyny życia i chleba, i uznania, nim umarli.

Jeśli to są ludzie, a nie kamienni głupcy i trzebieńcy wodą święconą pomazani, to tak być powinno. Pan Szermentowski powinien jeszcze dziesięć lat żyć, siedzieć na południu i malować dla chwały Ojczyzny.²⁰

[Szermentowski was born not to marry but to sit in Hyčres, Pau, Nice, to look at the palms, bask in the sun and paint. If the Polish society is a Mother, a Sister, and not an infernal harpy who cries over the dying when they die, and refuses a crumb of life and bread, and recognition to them before they die.

If these are people, and not stony fools and eunuchs anointed with holy water, thus it should have been. Mr Szermentowski should be alive for dozens more years, stay in the South and paint for the Homeland]

¹⁸ C. Norwid’s letter to J. Szwański of April (?) 1876. PWsz X, 72.

¹⁹ PWsz X, 232, 277.

²⁰ PWsz X, 78.

It is not the poet's first sharp criticism of the Polish society, which had not matured enough to properly value the achievements of artists and other outstanding figures, and which did not feel obliged to help them in any manner. Norwid constantly called for decent living and working conditions for artists, the more as he considered Poles to be a nation in which "każdy-czyn za wczesnie wschodzi, / Ale – książka-każda... za późno! [each-deed rises too early, / But – each-book... too late!]"²¹.

Did Norwid value the work of his younger colleague? In January 1876, he wrote to Bronisław Zaleski: "Co sprzedawa p. Szermentowski? – nie wiem, a myślę, że nie kompozycje, z tej przyczyny iż, mimo wielkiego talentu i niepospolitych wdzięków pęzła tego artysty, jest on jak ogromna większość polskich (i niepolskich) artystów poniekąd, to jest: że nawet najmniejszego o żadnej tendencji Sztuki wyobrażenia nie ma. [What does Mr Szermentowski sell? – I know not, and I think these not be compositions, for the reason that, despite great talent and uncommon loveliness of the artist's touch of the brush, he is quasi like the great majority of Polish (and non-Polish) artists, that is: he has not the least notion of any tendency of the Art]"²² That seemingly severe evaluation (one must remember he spoke with similar sentiment about such a painter as Matejko) resulted directly from the theory of art professed by the author of *Promethidion*²³. In Norwid's view, true artistry required strict correlation of pictorial values and spiritual values (the moral tenor of the work). "Artystów poznajemy po ideałach, a mierzymy ich po wysokości ideału," he once wrote to Stanisław Potocki. "Arcymistrzów, jak Rafael, poznajemy po tym," he continued, "że oni są zupełnie tak wielcy artyści jak malarze – tak wielcy artyści jak rzeźbiarze. [Artists we recognise by the ideals, and we measure them with the ideals' grandeur. We recognise grand masters like Rafael in that they are as great artists as they are painters – as great artists as they are sculptors.]"²⁴ Thus one cannot wonder that Szermentowski's landscape painting, without an anecdote of content, was beyond Norwid's main area of interest, although the latter appreciated the talent of his younger colleague and the pictorial values of his work. The views were directly reflected in the artistic practice of Norwid, in which the "human issue" formed the major, central subject, realised in hundreds of variations and modifications. Symptomatically, when he was sending an artistic offer to his friends in 1871,

²¹ *Do społecznych (Oda)*, PWSz II, 182.

²² PWSz X, 70.

²³ E. SZERMENTOWSKI, *Norwid o Józefie Szermentowskim*, "Zeszyty Kieleckie" 1(1971), pp. 72-76.

²⁴ Letter to Stanisław Potocki of 1868, PWSz IX, 349.

recommending his services as an aquafortist, Norwid made a clear reservation: “Nie robię wcale pejzażu.[I do no landscapes.]”²⁵

The author of *Promethidion* was likely well acquainted with the paintings of Szermentowski – he used to visit the painter’s studio in Paris and clearly liked the artist himself. Even if the painting *Stracone gniazda* was not in the painter’s possession at that particular time and Norwid could not have seen it, it is difficult to imagine that the author of the canvas would not share his thoughts on a painting so important in his work with an older colleague. The striking visual similarity of Norwid’s motif of the tumbledown cottage to Szermentowski’s “lost nest” allows to surmise that the author of *Solo* must have seen if not the final work, then at least preparatory sketches for Szermentowski’s canvas. Against all the works of the artist, *Stracone gniazda* undoubtedly takes an exceptional position, surpassing the convention of a realistic landscape detached from any anecdotalism which dominated the artistic profile of his painting legacy. Norwid, in turn, would certainly take notice of the topic of the painting. It would be an overstatement to deem that the composition follows Norwid’s concept of an artwork the value of which is to be measured with the grandeur of the ideal embodied within, but still the patriotic tenor of the work may have earned his approval. It is worth to at least mention that the literature in the subject has indicated the mutual influence of the artists for many years. Among others, it was indicated that under Norwid’s influence, Józef Szermentowski yielded to “mystic and religious impulses” by the end of his life, as expressed e.g. in the canvas *Gwiazda zaranna (Morning Star)*, with Virgin Mary and Infant Jesus sitting on a heavenly throne over Polish countryside landscape²⁶.

How can one thus – in the above outlined context – interpret Norwid’s sketch, known as the *Symbolic Scene* or as *Angels of Death*, inspired most likely by Szermentowski’s *Lost Nests*? Three possibilities might be indicated here, with neither of them privileged in hierarchy. After all, Norwid’s art often poses a riddle for the viewer, with a solution which is difficult or even impossible to find, as excellently proven by the drawing in question. At a time when Norwid’s works were only being discovered, Waleria Marrène-Morzowska thus wrote about the poet’s visual art legacy:

as years went by and his homesickness grew, and especially as the mysticism grew, his drawings became so unclear that it is not possible to correctly guess the thought contained in them. [...] The artist illustrated his own thoughts and dreams in that manner. One would need the key to understand them. [...] People who had access to Norwid and gained his trust said that once he completed the drawings with spoken explanations, the art held deep

²⁵ Letter to Bronisław Zaleski from the end of 1871/beginning of 1872, PWSz IX, 500.

²⁶ E. SZERMENTOWSKI, *Norwid o Józefie Szermentowskim*, p. 74.

meaning. Since the explanations have not reached us, however, we must consider [the drawings] to be hieroglyphics which will likely never be deciphered²⁷.

If the time of the drawing's origin is taken to be 1876, it may suggest a relationship between the topic of the art with the biography of the author of *Stracone gniazda*. Norwid's sketch would have thus been a symbolicised image of the last moments of the painter (Szermentowski died on 6th September 1876) whose existence comes to an end in dramatic poverty and desertion (to recall the above quoted fragment of the letter written by Norwid to Jan Szwański). The crowd of angels descending towards the dilapidating cottage one may see not so as much harbingers of death as indicated in one of the titles given to the drawing, but as rather angels bringing comfort in the man's last hour (perhaps a personification of the group of his friends?).

Another interpretation proposal is partially congruent with the one presented above. One may still see the image of the painter's last days in the drawing; however, here the dilapidated cottage would stand as a symbol of the enslaved homeland. In that situation, an individual's fate could be viewed as an illustration of the lot of a whole generation. Although the sketch is concise and does not register too many details, it is worth taking a better look at the figure lying in bed; the characteristic pose with the arms raised allows to recognise the silhouette of a child²⁸. The size of the feet, too large for a child, can be explained with a mistake resulting from too strong foreshortening. It might be a symbolic image of a beloved son of the homeland, whom the mother (Poland) is unable to provide with sufficient shelter and care; she can give him nothing but her presence and motherly tears, filled with pain and helplessness.

It is not out of the question, however, that Norwid's drawing was created with no relation to Szermentowski's biography, illness or premature death. It may simply illustrate the last moments of a person who after a life filled with sorrow and pain (as symbolised by the dilapidated house) is facing death, and that death is in fact a liberation from the yoke of temporality. In the apt words of Stefan Sawicki, Norwid was particularly close to "authentic Christian thought [...], for which death is the fullest moment of the worldly life, and at the same time a moment which is, existentially, the closest to eternity". The researcher continues that in the poet's view death "leads [a person] into another, more perfect existence, [...] [death] is a consequence of resurrection and a great necessity of Christianity"²⁹.

²⁷ W. MARRÈNE-MORZKOWSKA, *Symbolista sprzed pięćdziesięciu laty. Odczyt publiczny na dochód osad rolnych*, "Wędrowiec" 1900, No. 16, p. 308.

²⁸ Cf. Norwid's "sleeping child" watercolours: *Enfant endormi* (1859, Musée des Beaux Arts, Béziers) and *Śpiące dziecko* (1860, Biblioteka Narodowa).

²⁹ S. SAWICKI, *O "Śmierci" Cypriana Norwida*, [in:] *IBID.*, *Norwida walka z formą*, Warszawa

Following that line of thought, angels haste to the dying person with an indeed joyous message, bringing solace and grace.

The ruin of the homestead brings to mind another visual image of the enslaved homeland painted by Norwid, i.e. a small oil painting *Kościół na Litwie dziś!* (*A Church in Lithuania Today!*) from 1870, thus aptly described by L. Dębicki: “A small church, robbed, with the cross toppling over and broken, and ruins of the parsonage in front of it. The surrounding are empty and grim, the nature communicates some calamity. That is the image of a Lithuanian parish, which can easily be supplemented in the imagination with ashes of the mansion, and often a whole hamlet.”³⁰ In that gloomy landscape, the painter introduces the figures of a sheep with a lamb and a white lily – symbols breaking the tragic aura of the reality. The tendency to give deeper, allegoric or symbolic meanings to the presented images was a constant in the work of Norwid the visual artist. What was extremely rare in his work was reaching for topics relating straight to current events and presenting them in a realistic manner. Among the few existing examples it is worth indicating *Msza św. dla Polaków w Turcji* (*Holy Mass for Poles in Turkey*) from 1851. The drawing, made per request of Władysław Zamojski, presents a field Mass for interned Poles from the Polish Legion in the camp in Widyń, initiated by Zamojski in response to the Turks attempting to convince him to convert to Islam³¹. The work, allegedly praised by Ary Scheffer even before it was finished, as reported by the ordering party in a letter to the poet of 1st February 1851, does not represent much artistic value. It strikes the viewer with awkward composition and figures modelled without a natural air³². Norwid was more willing to illustrate episodes beyond the sphere of official events, episodes relating to private experiences. An example of that is the sketch *Chata na Sybirze* (*A Cottage in Siberia*), offered to Teofil Lenartowicz and presenting fellow sufferers of Siberia deportation sitting in a poor little room, around a samovar. The drawing probably depicts Karol Baliński with Gustaw Zieliński and Adolf Januszkiewicz³³. That modest composition should at the same time be viewed as an exemplification of the fate

1986, pp. 90-91.

³⁰ Z.L. DĘBICKI, *Dwór i plebania*, “Przegląd Lwowski” 1871, No. 15, p. 164.

³¹ Z. KRAJEWSKA, *Wronsciana i norwidiana kórnickie w korespondencji Zenona Przesmyckiego*, “Pamiętnik Biblioteki Kórnickiej” 1973, issue 11, pp. 315-316; J. NOWAK, *Władysław Zamojski. O sprawę polską w Europie (1848-1868)*, Poznań 2002, pp. 122-124; see Z. TROJANOWICZOWA, Z. DAMBEK, with J. CZARNOMORSKA, *Kalendarz życia i twórczości Cypriana Norwida*, vol. I: 1821-1860, Poznań 2007, p. 432.

³² PWSZ XI, 555 C.

³³ All three met and became friends in Ishim in the Kazakh Steppe, during their deportation to Siberia.

of a whole generation of Poles, participants of 19th-century uprisings to fight for independence. It was in that way that the artist expressed his sensibility; also in his literary work he took inspiration most often from small historic events of seemingly little significance, and the perspective of individual fate and personal experience were the closest to him.

Returning to the *Symbolic Scene* – while not resolving in a definite manner on the presented topic enclosed in the enigmatic poetic scene – it may be stated that it is an excellent example of what is characteristic of Norwid’s intimate visual art legacy: the dominance of literary values over the work’s visual merit, a tension of meanings and senses which the modest visual layer cannot fully and aptly convey. Today – definitely rejecting the highly wrongful term of a “writer who’d strayed into drawing”³⁴ once bestowed on Norwid – one recognises the specificity of his visual art. While noting its deficiencies and weaknesses, one is at the same time able to discover the artistic power lying in the modest “karteczki i złamki [slips and morsels]”.

LIST OF FIGURES

1. C. Norwid, *Scena symboliczna (Symbolic Scene)*, 1876, lost, repr. *Rysunki i grafika K. C. Norwida*, Kraków [1946], fig. 13.
2. J. Szermentowski, *Stracone gniazda (Lost Nests)*, 1865, National Museum in Poznań, repr. *Malarstwo polskie 1766-1945. Katalog zbiorów Muzeum Narodowego w Poznaniu*, vol. VIII, prep. by D. Suchocka, National Museum in Poznań, Poznań 2005, fig. 76.
3. *Stracone gniazdo (A Knocked-off Nest)*, woodcut copy of J. Szermentowski’s painting, repr. “Kłosy” 1(1865), p. 121.
4. J. Szermentowski, *Rodzina artysty (The Artist’s Family)*, 1875, Museum of Kielce History, pic. by P. Malecki/AG, <http://kielce.wyborcza.pl/kielce/1,35255,3794225.html>
5. J. Szermentowski, *Gwiazda zaranna (Morning Star)*, 1874, National Museum in Warsaw, repr. *Krajobrazy. Polskie malarstwo pejzażowe od Oświecenia do końca XX wieku*, D. Folga-Januszewska (ed.), Warszawa 2000, p. 33.
6. C. Norwid, *Kościół na Litwie dziś! (A Church in Lithuania Today!)*, 1870, National Museum in Warsaw, repr. A. Melbechowska-Luty, *Sztukmistrz. Twórczość artystyczna i myśl o sztuce Cypriana Norwida*, Warszawa 2001, fig. X.
7. C. Norwid, *Msza św. dla Polaków w Turcji (Holy Mass for Poles in Turkey)*, 1851, Biblioteka Kórnicka (Kórnik Library).
8. C. Norwid, *Chata na Sybirze (A Cottage in Siberia)*, 1855, Biblioteka Naukowa PAN i PAU (Scientific Library of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Polish Academy of Learning) in Kraków.

Translated by Agnieszka Gernand

³⁴ J. WOLFF, *Dwie wystawy*, “Głos Plastyków” 1947, December, p. 84.



1. C. Norwid, *Scena symboliczna* (*Symbolic Scene*), 1876



2. J. Sierementowski, *Stracone gniazda* (*Lost Nests*), 1865



3. *Strącone gniazdo (A Knocked-off Nest)*, woodcut copy of J. Szermentowski's painting, 1865



4. J. Szermentowski, *Rodzina artysty (The Artist's Family)*, 1875



5. J. Szermentowski, *Gwiazda zaranna (Morning Star)*, 1874



6. C. Norwid, *Kościół na Litwie dziś! (A Church in Lithuania Today!)*, 1870



7. C. Norwid, *Msza św. dla Polaków w Turcji* (*Holy Mass for Poles in Turkey*), 1851



8. C. Norwid, *Chata na Sybirze* (*A Cottage in Siberia*), 1855

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BALUCKI M., *Wystawa Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie*, "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" 1(1868), p. 296.
- DĘBICKI Z.L., *Dwór i plebania*, "Przegląd Lwowski" 1871, No. 15, pp. 163-171.
- JAKIMOWICZ I., *Józef Szermentowski*, Wrocław 1950.
- JAKIMOWICZ I., "Stracone gniazda" *Józefa Szermentowskiego*, "Studia Muzealne" 1(1953), pp. 44-49.
- JAKIMOWICZ I., *Tomasz Zieliński: kolekcjoner i mecenas*, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk 1973.
- JAKIMOWICZ I., *Twórczość Józefa Szermentowskiego w kręgu mecenatu Tomasza Zielińskiego*, "Biuletyn Historii Sztuki" 1971, No. 1, pp. 96-99.
- JAKIMOWICZ I., *Twórczość Józefa Szermentowskiego. Ze studiów nad początkiem realizmu w polskim malarstwie pejzażowym*, "Biuletyn Historii Sztuki" 1951, No. 1, pp. 5-54.
- KRAJEWSKA Z., *Wronsciana i norwidiana kórnickie w korespondencji Zenona Przesmyckiego*, "Pamiętnik Biblioteki Kórnickiej" 1973, vol. 11, pp. 191-326.
- Malarstwo polskie 1766-1945. Katalog zbiorów Muzeum Narodowego w Poznaniu*, vol. VIII, prep. by D. Suchocka, Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, 2005.
- MARRÈNE-MORZKOWSKA W., *Symbolista sprzed pięćdziesięciu laty. Odczyt publiczny na dochód osad rolnych*, "Wędrowiec" 1900, No. 16, pp. 307-308.
- MELBECHOWSKA-LUTY A., *Sztukmistrz. Twórczość artystyczna i myśl o sztuce Cypriana Norwida*, Warszawa 2001.
- MICKE-BRONIAREK E., *Malarstwo polskie: realizm, naturalizm*, Warszawa 2005.
- MICKE-BRONIAREK E., *Mistrzowie pejzażu XIX wieku*, Wrocław 2001.
- NOWAK J., *Władysław Zamojski. O sprawę polską w Europie (1848-1868)*, Poznań 2002.
- SAWICKI S., *Norwida walka z formą*, Warszawa 1986.
- SZERMENTOWSKI E., *Norwid o Józefie Szermentowskim*, "Zeszyty Kieleckie" 1(1971), pp. 72-76.
- TROJANOWICZOWA Z., DAMBEK Z., przy współudziale CZARNOMORSKIEJ J., *Kalendarz życia i twórczości Cypriana Norwida*, vol. I: 1821-1860, Poznań 2007.
- TROJANOWICZOWA Z., LIJEWSKA E. przy współudziale M. PLUTY, *Kalendarz życia i twórczości Cypriana Norwida*, vol. II: 1861-1883, Poznań 2007.
- WOLFF J., *Dwie wystawy*, "Głos Plastyków" 1947, December, p. 84.

LOST NEST
NORWID – SZERMENTOWSKI

S u m m a r y

This article is an interpretative attempt of the forlorn drawing made by Norwid in the mid-1770s, entitled *Scena symboliczna* [A symbolic scene] (also known as *Aniołowie śmierci* [Angels of Death]). The drawing relates to a painting by Józef Szermentowski, entitled *Stracone gniazda* [The Lost Nests] (1865), which presented a gloomy vision of a village in the region of Kielce and which was an allegory of the defeat of the Polish nation after the collapse of the January Uprising. The comparative analysis of both depictions allows pinpointing the interdependences between the two works, which shed more light on the meaning of Norwid's highly enigmatic composition. The analysis also takes into account the personal relationship between the two artists, who came close in Szermentowski's late days. The article pursues three potential interpretation paths, relying on the assumption that Norwid was inspired by the younger colleague's work. Yet, none of the three is pinpointed as privileged so that, ultimately, the question of the topic of Norwid's depiction remains open. It is observed, at the same time, that *Scena symboliczna* is a regular example of Norwid's scarce plastic legacy in that it favours literary values over plastic mastery. The work shows evident tensions of senses and meanings, which cannot be either satisfactorily or satisfyingly conveyed via the drawing techniques employed by Norwid.

Key words: Cyprian Norwid; Józef Szermentowski; 19th-century Polish painting art; 19th-century Polish drawing art; January Uprising.

Słowa kluczowe: Cyprian Norwid; Józef Szermentowski; malarstwo polskie XIX w.; rysunek polski XIX w.; powstanie styczniowe.

EDYTA CHLEBOWSKA – art historian, Ph.D., employed at the Institute for the Study of Cyprian Norwid's Literature, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. Address: ul. Chopina 27, p. 550, 20-023 Lublin; e-mail: edytowo@gmail.com

Publication financed within the programme of Minister of Science and Higher Education under the name of 'National Programme for the Development of Humanities' in the years 2016-2021.